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HUPE

in the

Story

Land





**NATIONAL SHORT
STORY WRITING
COMPETITION**

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Dear readers,

We are thrilled to present to you the entries of our recent story competition for children. We were blown away by the exceptional creativity, imagination, and writing skills displayed by the young authors who participated in this competition. We would also like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to their mentors who supported and encouraged them throughout the process. Their commitment to fostering a love of language and storytelling in their students was evident in the exceptional work produced by the young writers.

The stories submitted by these talented young writers were diverse, insightful, and deeply moving. From stories of courage, adventure, and discovery to tales of love, loss, and self-discovery, each entry demonstrated a remarkable level of maturity and depth.

It is a true joy to witness the power of storytelling in action, and we believe that these young HUPE writers have a bright future ahead of them. We are proud to feature their works in this issue and we hope that their stories will inspire and delight our readers.

HUPE would also like to thank our Executive Boards in three categories this year for their time and expertise in selecting the winning stories. We are grateful for their contributions to this competition and their commitment to promoting literacy and creativity in young learners.

Once again, congratulations to all the winners and participants of this competition. We look forward to seeing more of your wonderful works in the future.

Anita Žepina
HUPE Publications Editor

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PRIMARY

SCHOOL

5TH AND 6TH GRADE

mentor: Tanja Pokupić*institution:* OŠ Miroslava Krleže Čepin*Nera Bolšec*

WATER BOTTLE

I come from the oldest market in London. My name is Water. My owner bought me for school. My owner's name is Luke. Luke named me Slavko. I don't like that name; I like my real name - Water. My dream is to travel around the world. Luke doesn't want to travel around the world. Also, he is incredibly quiet at school. One day, Luke's mom took me from his schoolbag and threw me in the trash.

As if he knew about my dream, and as if he wanted to save me, Luke took me out from the trash and threw me into the river.

At first, I was trying to swim like crazy. Then I realised it made no difference and I let myself go. I swam for days. When I woke up after five days, I saw a little girl with brown hair. She held me until the boy came and took me away from her. The boy ran to his house. He put me on his desk. There was a laptop on his desk. There were also some tacos. TACOS!!! It took me a couple of seconds, but then I realised! "I AM IN MEXICO!"; I yelled in my mind. Then I saw other bottles. One of them was red, very handsome with a stylish Coca-Cola name written in the middle. I have heard of her, of course. We got to know each other well, and somehow, we managed to escape. We travelled all over Mexico and after a couple of months, we arrived in Japan. JAPAN! That was very cool! Coca-Cola loves Japan. I don't really like it. But Coca-Cola is my friend, and she is happy here.

I love my home in London and I miss my home very much. Never mind. My friend is with me, and we are travelling the world. What more could I want?

We are in Europe now...Italy, Portugal, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium... Croatia... It is great here. It looks like a nice place to live. Although a little bit crowded, if you ask me. We met many other plastic bottles during our adventure. They act as if they are going to stay here for hundreds of years. They are not as adventurous as the two of us.

I still miss my home sometimes. But life is short and there are many more places I want to see, visit and experience. That is why I look at the sky and the stars and I think, "I am home". This beautiful world is my home.

*mentor: Sandra Brcko**institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb**Lara Novoselec*

MAYBE, JUST MAYBE...

Della was running. Around her were the old walls of the halls in the castle, which reflected purple light. She was scared and confused, with little hope of getting out. The only person that could help her was herself. Della was an adventurous kid who liked to explore old abandoned places. She'd entered this castle to explore it, but she had not known that this place would lock her up.

After entering through the door, she heard a lock click, and she knew she could not get out. Behind her a room was filled with gas that did not look friendly. She started running. After a couple minutes the gas was out of sight, and she stopped. She'd heard a legend that an evil queen lived here and left behind all her jewels. There were two things she was certain about: she needed to find a way out and she was not alone. There was no way that door had locked on its own. In front of her, there was a small cupboard with something that looked like an altar. When her emerald eyes scanned the room, she saw something unusual. In the room there was a made bed and lighted candles. The candles could not be lit for a century, which meant someone was here. In the room there was a smell of ash. Della found it peculiar that in a cupboard, in a castle that nobody had entered for two hundred years, there was an altar.

When she took a closer look, she saw there was a picture of a tall elegant woman with somber hair and emerald eyes. Her face, illuminated by candlelight, made out the words: "Is that my mother?" Della's mother died right after she was born, so she only saw her mother's pictures that her father had showed her. Why would anyone have an altar to her mother? Was that really her mother? So many questions came to mind that she just stood there frozen, trying to figure out what this place had to do with her mother and who had locked her up. But she could not stay in that room forever. The castle looked like a maze; nobody could navigate it. How would she ever get out of here?

After hours of walking, she broke down and sobbed. Her watery eyes looked before her and saw just another hall that went on forever. This hall was different, the carpet was wet, the wallpaper was torn and there was a bizarre smell.

“Can I help you?” said a voice of a juvenile child.

Della jumped in surprise and saw a little girl with long golden-brown hair and green eyes just like hers. “Yes, I need a way out of here” she answered.

“Oh, you can’t get out. My mother owns this castle and she decides if you can go or not. Come with me.” the little girl responded.

“What?!”

“Yes, could you please follow me now?”

It turned out that the girl’s name was Liezel, and she lived in the castle. Della tried to ask about the altar, but Liezel cut her off. They went through halls, dance rooms, the armory... Finally, they arrived at a throne room where the shade was covering the throne, so you could not see who was sitting in it.

A few seconds of silence had passed before a thundering voice said: “Why have you come here?”

Della stood there horrified, too scared to answer. When the woman came out of the shadows, both Della and the woman made a surprised expression. The woman was Della’s mother. Liezel was Della’s sister.

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, Della’s mother said in a reserved voice: “You should go, Liezel will show you the way.” Della followed her sister out of the castle without a word and halfway there fell and hit her head.

She woke up in her bed with a bandage on her head. It was a Monday and she had to go to school. When she came downstairs, her dad acted as if nothing happened, made her breakfast as usual and sent her to school. Her dad was not affluent and she went to a big public school where a lot of kids did not like her. Had she ever visited that castle? She had more problems to think about than her bullies.

School went by fast that day and coming home was a relief, so now she could think about what had happened. Della was too scared to go back to the castle. Was the evil queen her mother?

She decided to visit her mother’s grave. Once she arrived, a wave of sadness came over her; her mother could not possibly be alive. That must have been just a dream, a very odd dream. But how did she end up having a bandage on her head? Maybe, just maybe... it wasn’t a dream...

*mentor: Anita Baranašić**institution: OŠ Sesvetska Sela, Zagreb**Greta Hrastović Grabarević*

HOW THE PANDA GOT ITS RED COAT

Once long ago, deep in the Himalayas, there lived a little panda. He was as ordinary as all the other little pandas. His two big ears, his four furry feet and his cute round nose were all frosty white. In fact – he was completely white from head to toe. All the other pandas were cheerful and content, however the little panda was just down in the dumps. He was feeling blue because he was just too plain. He wanted to be distinctive, special and unique.

The little panda had a really distant cousin, the giant white panda who had ink black patches on his eyes, ears and limbs. One day he decided to go to ask his cousin in how he got his heavenly pitch-black patches. So, he hurried to where his cousin lived and asked him. The giant panda said that he was very hot one day so he rolled in some mud to cool down. He didn't expect any misfortune, but the mud stained his porcelain white coat. The giant panda was upset because he looked filthy! After hearing his distant cousin's story, he got discouraged. The little panda turned around and sadly plodded home.

On the way home, he saw some enchanting crimson feathers. Filled with curiosity, he went to see what this mysterious crimson red creature was. It was an elegant Himalayan pheasant. The little panda was in awe! Hesitantly, he asked the pheasant how he got his scarlet red feathers.

The pheasant politely replied that he loved to eat wild red berries so his feathers became a fiery red because of it. The little panda immediately came up with a new scheme – he decided to eat some of the bright red berries.

The little panda changed his path and scurried straight to the nearest berry bush. He greedily started eating mouthfuls of juicy red berries, but he immediately spit everything out because it tasted horrendous! They were so bitter that he couldn't swallow even one berry. Despairingly – he slowly proceeded home.

It was dusk when he finally got home. He was exhausted and hungry. He sloth-

fully climbed to the top of his favourite bamboo tree and snuggled into its branches. Then he saw something peculiar from the corner of his eye. It was a small delicate, red flower. Its sweet fragrance filled the air. It made his mouth water so much that he tried to eat one – it was divine! He soon ate all the blossoms that he could see. He was still very tired so he quickly drifted off to sleep.

The next morning was a sunny day with clear skies. The little panda woke up and felt much better than the day before. As usual he went to have his favorite breakfast – bamboo shoots. At breakfast he saw his friends, the other pandas. They were all enthusiastically talking together. The little panda was confused and asked what was going on. His friends started laughing and said: „Look at yourself!“ The little panda looked down at himself and saw that he wasn't a white panda anymore! His furry paws were jet black from walking around in mud while visiting his distant cousin, the giant panda.

And his fur wasn't plain white anymore either – it was crimson red! The little panda was beaming with joy. He was finally distinctive!

*mentor: Gordana Živković**institution: OŠ Nikole Hribara, Velika Gorica**Mihael Ervaćanin*

PETER, THE ACCIDENTAL PARATROOPER – THE NORWEGIAN SNOW

My name is Peter Beckett. I'm 21 years old and live in London, in a tiny flat above an old lady and her four cats. I work at the Post Office in the city center, sorting letters and packages. The work is sometimes boring, but the boys are very funny so I like it.

Last week started off depressing because of news of the German invasion of Poland. We were all very worried. On Monday I came to the Post Office, clocked in for my shift and got to work. There were less customers, which surprised me. After work I went home, just to find out I was drafted to the British Royal Airforce. I packed my things and went to bed. I was too stunned to eat so, as I said, I skipped dinner and just got into bed.

A car picked me up the next day and drove me to the air base. When I came they explained where everything is and that training starts the next day. I headed to the barracks where I met one of my usual customers Mike who told me lunch time was right around the corner so I walked with him. Lunch was not that good, but it wasn't that bad. I was hungry. During lunch I sat down with Mike and the rest of the guys from our barracks and we introduced ourselves to each other. There were six of us in total: me (Peter), Mike, Ivan, Andrew, John and Luke. After lunch the training started. It was pretty rough. The drill sergeant was constantly yelling at us. After the training I returned to the barracks. I was told that the range day was the next day. I was confused as I didn't know what that was. Mike entered the barracks in panic. I asked him what the matter was. He then proceeded to tell me that we were meant to become a bomber crew of a Halifax.

Range day came and I got a British Besal, a machine gun I had never ever used before. It was heavier than I expected. We were told to open fire at the targets. I think

my shots were decent, but I still knew the target I shot at was standing still. I knew it was going to be worse in the air. As range day came to an end, I was tired and looking forward to go to bed. I started falling asleep when the alarm was sounded. I grabbed my British Besal and a backpack and ran to the airfield. On the way I met Mike. Once we got there, we entered the plane. The rest of our crew was already inside. We got another member and that was the pilot. He said his name was Sergeant Gustav. He started the plane and it started shanking as two engines came to life. I was admiring the ground as we took off. The plane started rumbling. I asked Sergeant Gustav about it and he said we were just catching speed and accelerating. We were almost there. The sound of the plane engines sounded like a broken microphone, but louder. As we were approaching our target, the worse happened. Another plane got on our tail. Our tail gunner, Luke... wait, this part isn't for you, I'll skip it for now..

Andrew, Mike and I jumped out of the plane. As I was jumping, I looked back at the plane. For a second it looked normal, and then it went up in flames. The bombs inside got triggered by the fire, exploding one by one. The explosions sent debris falling on me so I pulled my parachute. I landed on a tree, so I cut off my ropes and fell in the deep and soft Norwegian snow. I came to my senses and grabbed my machine gun and backpack and started searching for Mike and Andrew. Then I heard a tank. It wasn't alone. There were at least one hundred infantry men. I positioned the gun and started firing... well, I'll tell you the rest when you grow up.

I knew I had to get to an airfield. I had a map with all of the British positions marked. I went in direction of an airfield. The walk was long and cold. I saw a German antiaircraft position and marked it on my map. As I was making my way to the airfield a German soldier shot at me. I took out my pistol and aimed, but I missed the first shot. The second shot was better. I took the German soldiers map and went on to the airbase. As soon as got to the airbase I reported the German soldiers map and the position I marked. They assigned me to another bomber, a repaired Halifax. I entered in as soon as I could. Inside I met with Mike and Andrew again. There was no time to talk as we took off from the runway. We were approaching our target when another plane approached us and I shot in its engine. It caught fire and crashed on our target. Luck didn't last long. The bomb stash door we didn't repair got stuck and our plane went up in flames. Again, I had to grab my machine gun and parachute and jump out. As I touched the ground, I cut the ropes and hid. I heard the enemy take down even more of our bombers. I ran away and didn't look back. I ran for at least two kilometers before I stopped for a breather. I looked over a pile of snow and I saw an advancing tank division coming my way. I let them go past me. When I was

sure the coast was clear I pulled out my map and walked to the airfield. When I came to the airfield, they told me to get on a plane that was on the runway. I entered the plane and it started the engines. When we landed, we got onto a boat and I fell asleep. I woke up in England. I let out a sigh of relief and took the bus to London and back to my house. It was just how I left it.

And that, kids, is how I served in the British Royal Airforce – said grandpa Peter with a sarcastic look in his eyes.

Grandpa, is this story true? – asked his grandson James.

No, of course not. This is one of the many stories I wrote when I was your age, to pass the time – said grandpa Peter.

*mentor: Amela Ojdanić
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka*

Laurent Radić

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I have always wondered at what point it all started, what moment we can trace it back to. Whenever I asked my grandpa, he would just shake his head and say I was too young for that story. I enjoyed observing him in his laboratory, wondering what he knew and did not know when he was my age. Finally, he decided that I was ready to hear the story about his experiments which only imitated the experiment of life, as he called it. Now, I am ready to share my grandpa's story with you.

There is nothing static in this universe. Everything is moving at some pace. It is like a strategy game in which each new step means that you must move every piece where pieces are everything in the universe and steps are small fractions of time. Some things are slow, some are fast but mostly they are boring.

'Our universe isn't interesting enough without some action', thought a few particles. So, they got together to make a lifeform. They decided that Earth was the chosen one because it was the least hostile planet among their options. Then, they grouped into chains of DNA code. Chain after chain and the first lifeform was born.

It was nothing special, just a cell. After the first success, many cells started their lives, the first prokaryotes. But they did not realize that life was an expensive sport. It required a special kind of currency - energy. At first, the cells had a hard time finding it, but they eventually found a way to create a molecule called ATP. It was like an energy storing package that could release energy when they needed it. They used a complex process that did wonders. Nobody knows how the cells discovered it, but we are thankful that they did, otherwise we would not exist. The cells also discovered glucose, a container of energy that can power ATP. Now when all obstacles were tackled the cells could finally thrive. The empty abyss was filled with life, blooming like a tree in spring.

But the cells did not know what they were missing out, a giant furnace that shone like trillions of nuclear bombs, a goldmine of energy... the Sun. The cells kept thriving. Everything was good, but it was about to get better. They finally realized what a goldmine they were sitting on. The first photosynthetic cells were created. They

found a revolutionary way to eat the Sun. At first, the pigment they used for photosynthesis was purple. Can you imagine? If the cells did not change it to green, all plants would be purple. But after some tests and tweaks they found green chlorophyll, which they use to this day.

The lifeform on Earth was at its peak, cells reproduced fast. Everything was sailing smoothly, but then... the biggest betrayal of all happened. Some cells realized that they did not need to make energy for themselves. They were already surrounded by free energy bags... other cells. So, they began eating other cells for energy. The first hunters were created, the first war ever on Earth started. It was a constant stalemate, no one was winning. No one was evolving either, energy-producing cells were limited, because they constantly had to avoid hunters who seemed strong, but they were limited too, because every time a cell ate another cell potential energy was lost. The war lasted for generations, life on Earth was slowly collapsing. But little did the cells know that one of the biggest betrayals would result in a change that pushed the lifeform towards progress. One day, a cell ate another cell, and it did not kill it. At first, nothing special, but then they realized that the cell inside could make energy out of glucose. The bigger cell could protect it and collect glucose for the cell inside, also, the outer cell could get the remaining energy, it did not need to hunt anymore. The cell inside was the first mitochondria. The unit was the first eukaryote. This became a trend, and most cells copied it. Some even advanced to the very cells that build our body, that have multiple organelles. Evolution is amazing and when it finds a strategy that works, it pushes it to the limits. If cells could work together to form a unit, why could not they do it on another level. So, the first multicellular organisms were born. Then, they did it on the next level and the first social animals were created. The humans and ants mastered the art of socializing. The first symbiosis happened, and the rest is history.

We can all trace it back to the time when simple molecules grouped together. If that did not happen, we would not exist. Even I would not be telling you my grandpa's story, and you would not be reading it.

If anything, this shows how working together does wonders. And that is how we got here. Are we going to stay here? A tough question, isn't it? I bet even my grandpa the scientist would not know the answer.

mentor: Lidija Šaravanja

institution: OŠ Vladimir Nazor, Čepin

Ana Dorušak

ODE TO SLAVONIA

One quiet night, when the sun went to rest for the last time, the moon looked sadly at the streets of my foggy village of Čepin. The echo of bells could be heard through the streets, calling everyone home, but only the moon was not going anywhere. The moon just hung sadly in the sky painted with stars. Remembering all those wonderful days when tamburitza would play with bells, when you could hear joy in every small corner of the Čepin. But now everything has disappeared into oblivion. Only the small house at the end of the village remains as before, under a small linden tree through which starlings pass. Sometimes, it seems that through the window you can still hear the crackling of the old oven, grandmother sewing gold embroidery and the children listening to grandfather's story.

"Those were good times, I'm glad they're done", says an old woman sitting on a chair in front of the old wardrobe, looking at the old pictures of her husband Ivan playing tamburitza with his old friend. Ivan sighed, looking at the old bass-prime tamburitza on the wall. "Crazy old woman", he added, "have you forgotten that that tambura brought us life? Because of that tamburitza, we have what we have, a healthy family, some livestock and a debt-free life."

"Tamburitza was a life for itself, and now it's behind us," added the woman, angrily throws the photos and wants to sweep the yard full of colourful autumn leaves. While grandfather Ivan was looking through the eyes full of tears at that wall with the instrument on it, while his memories return all the way to the time when he played the tambura for the first time long ago, 1937, in

"Čarda at Gembeš".

There, tamburitza players and violinists played for the bosses every night, and the rest of the world would sit on the side-lines listening and indulging their souls. Whatever was being played, the whole village would be there until morning. Children would hang from the window of the inn or be on the road just to hear the musicians. They say it was bringing happiness to the children, watching tambura players, and imagining themselves on their place. Don't think that Ivan's every gig would

end happily. Anything could happen. Sometimes, his mother would hit him with a slipper if he came home late or he would run into his father.

And there he remembered Đođa Maršalek. He said to Ivan's father, "Let the little one go, he will be a good musician one day". Đođa's wife, Ana, was a virtuous woman. The village talked about her sweeping skirt; they say, if she turns twice, the whole yard is clean. She used to yell at Đođa that he was an "old devil" who is never home - from morning until tomorrow, as long as the tamburitza is playing. Once, it was rumoured in the village that the Maršaleks were fighting over the tamburitza again. So, out of anger, Đođa threw his instrument on the floor and it fell to pieces. After some time, the same thing happened to the bass player, Mata. And just when the strike team was left, without a source of money or instruments, the old man, Šima, organized the wedding for his firstborn son, Marko.

But, who will play when everyone has run out of instruments? That evening they were also left without a bass-prime player. His wife informed them that he had a fever.

So Đođa's friends were in panic. They had a prima and a violin. But not the bass-prim tamburitza. Đođa suddenly remembered little Ivan. He hurried to his house at the end of the village to see his mother sitting on a bench in front of the house, looking at the small linden tree which her father had planted yesterday afternoon. "Where is the little kid??", says Đođa. "Oh, he is in the house, come inside and have something to drink or eat," says the woman as she goes into the house with Đođa. And when they entered the house, Đođa saw the old grandmother sewing gold embroidery. Grandfather Iva, after whom Ivan was named, was telling Ivan stories. He heard the fire cracking in the old oven, and three golden quinces on the table.

Looking at those three quinces, he didn't even realize that Ivan's mother was calling him. "Feel yourself at home", the woman says putting some gibanica on the table.

Đođa happily asked little Ivan after a short time of silence, "Tell me, that night when I saw you with that gig, he showed you how to play the tambura?", Đođa asked curiously.

Ivan blushed and, after a short circuit in his brain, answered, "Well, look, sir...I...I know how to play...", Ivan said with a shy tone in his voice.

Finally, he says proudly, "That guy from Jovanovac showed me. I picked up a little, but I'm not so sure of my skills. "While Ivan was talking, a smile formed on Đođa's face.

"Then, my musician, be ready at dawn tomorrow. There shouldn't be any problems with your father, I'll talk to him, and you'll get the instrument on rent from me for a night."

It was as it was said. Đođa came to pick up little Ivan as soon as the sun rose, maybe a little too early. In his hand he was holding that bass-prime tamburitza from that sick musician that can't go to the wedding. Ivan was already ready and waiting on the stairs. He didn't even sleep much that night because of the excitement. Dressed in little traditional Slavonian shirt, black pants, boots and a beautiful cap decorated with asparagus and the Croatian tricolour of red, white and blue.

"Excuse me sir, have you seen that musician who lives here?," says Đođa jokingly.

"Mr. Maršalek, I don't want to joke with you, I have important work to do today", says Ivan boldly, looking like a real little musician going on a tour.

Đođa was glad that the child was not taking this job so lightly, but while he was thinking about it, Ivan's grandmother interrupted him. "When will my grandchild come home?," his mother interjected, "Don't let him do something he shouldn't, you have some bread in his bag so you don't stay hungry there!", then added the grandmother again, "He needs to be good, and if he's not, he'll be in a big trouble, did you hear me Ivan?" Ivan, who was already bored, kept tugging Đođa's sleeve.

Finally, when the women said what they had to, Đođa and Ivan went along the dirty roads to a small house near Čepin, where the wedding took place.

Ivan played the tamburitza all the way there, he felt like a star of the whole Slavonia, and not just that one kid from Čepin.

And when they came to the yard of the house, there was the big table with pretty white flowers and baskets with rosemary. The musicians were already there, they were all waiting for Đođa and Ivan to go to the bride's house. They played all day and night without stopping. And for Ivan, it was one of the most beautiful nights in his life out of many. He followed Đođa's footsteps and played and even when he was so to say, retired. He taught my father, Đođa's great grandson, to play the tambura in 1990. My aunt saw all his love for tradition in him. She also fell in love with music. Then I did, and after me and my example, my brother and sister and it hasn't stopped. Now we are all in love with the sound of music, especially the sound of tamburitza.

For me, this was not a bedtime story or a fairy tale, this was an untold story about how the melody of tamburitza can still be heard at Đođa's house even now after 123 years,

in my family's house,
in the same place where my heart is,
in my motherland.
My Slavonia!

mentor: Suzana Tolić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno Brijesće, Osijek

Luka Holec

FAIRY AND GIANT

Once upon a time, in a fairy-tale forest far from everyone, there lived a fairy and a terrible, sullen giant. The fairy lived poorly while the giant was rich and greedy. He did not share his wealth with anyone. One day the fairy knocked on the giant's door. The giant was not welcoming and kind and slammed the door in her face. The fairy was sad because of the giant's behavior. Returning home on the way, she found a small chest that was very heavy. On it was written "Property of the giant Mark the Crimson". She tried to ignore it, but she was curious, so she opened the chest anyway. There were 200 gold coins in it. It was the giant's entire fortune. Since the fairy was kind-hearted, she decided to return it to the giant. She knocked on the giant's door again and before he slammed the door, she showed him the chest. The giant's eyes immediately lit up - It's mine! - shouted the giant - Thank you fairy, I've been looking for that chest for days. I thought it was lost. - The fairy laughed and handed him his chest - I hope we can explore the forest and climb the mountain together sometimes - said the fairy. The fairy wanted to tell him that before when the giant slammed the door on her. The giant was ashamed of his behavior and greed. His icy heart melted and softened. He shared his wealth with the fairy so that I would have equal. Since then, every day they saw each other, talked, and climbed the mountain. One day they realized that they loved each other. They got married and lived with their family in a distant fairytale forest under the mountain happily ever after.

*mentor: Amela Ojdanić
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka*

Paula Grahovac

KEEPERS OF THE MAGIC SECRET

The story began in their office. The office is located in Candar, a small village near the city of Alohamera. The Office is maybe in Candar but it is a secret where in Candar it is. Secret, secret, secret..... Hmm, where do you think it is. In this building? No, it is too small for a place like office.

As I said, the story began in his office. BOOM! He fell off his chair. He, of course, had a cup of coffee in his hand. The coffee was very hot.

‘Ouch!’ said Mark.

‘You are clumsier than my brother.’ said Tracy.

‘Am I?’ Mark asked.

‘Yes, you are!’ said Tracy with a smile.

Let me describe Mark and Tracy. Mark has got short blonde hair, brown eyes and he is about 185 cm tall. Tracy, on the other hand, has got long dark hair, blue eyes and she is about 165 cm tall. They are both 25 years old. The job was done for today. Mark and Tracy left their office. They went for a long walk, to discuss something.

‘Did you hear that?’ asked Mark.

‘Hear what?’ said Tracy, a little bit annoyed.

A loud strange noise came from the woods. Tracy suddenly turned her head to the woods.

‘Mark?’ said Tracy, frightened and confused.

Trying to sound brave, Mark said something but his words ... did not come out of his mouth. Some red-green lights flashed from the woods and Mark and Tracy had different emotions. Mark was scared, even terrified, but Tracy was almost happy. Something interesting was happening, finally. Mark thought that she did not actually see those lights.

‘Mark, this is our chance!’ said Tracy joyfully.

‘What, what chance?’ asked Mark looking at Tracy completely confused.

‘To prove that MAGIC exists!’ Tracy was happier than ever.

‘Are you sure you know what you’re talking about?’ he said irritably.

Mark slowly turned his head towards Tracy, but.....there was no Tracy.

He screamed Tracy's name, hoping that she would answer. Somebody did answer but it wasn't Tracy.

'We are here.' said a voice.

The light came from the forest and Mark followed it. He knew he would find Tracy there. Find Tracy... yes, where else could she be if not there? Magic? What a silly idea. There she was, he saw her next to a bush.

He slowly approached her ready to start yelling at her for playing these silly games. He did not like them, he was too down to Earth, while she liked talking about magic, secret skills, mental training, magic wands, that kind of stuff.

'Tracy, for God's sake, why are we playing this stupid hide-and-seek? You know...'

Wait, wait! It was not Tracy. It was a man with a scar across his left eye. He was so tall and so, so old. Two metres tall? 2000 years old? Was that a magic wand in his hand? Mark's body was petrified, but his mind was trying to process all the information.

'I'm Wikion, you can call me Wiki.'

I don't care who you are, what a stupid name by the way, thought Mark, but he did not say it loudly. He just wanted to find Tracy.

'Well, I know you don't care who I am, you just want to find Tracy.'

Was it an echo in his head? Or did he actually hear Wikion repeat his thoughts.

'Yes, that was me, I repeated your thoughts because I can read your thoughts. It took me a long time to learn that skill but with the power of magic everything is possible. And a wand helps, of course. And I like it, by the way. My name, I don't find it stupid.'

Mark looked at him in awe. Was Wiki smiling? Grinning? Laughing at him. Whatever was the case, he felt better. Much better. He decided to ignore him and go back to the road. He turned and started walking slowly expecting Wiki's hand to grab his neck.

He saw Tracy standing not far away. Was it Tracy? Was it Wikion again?

'Oh, there you are.' he heard Tracy. 'You just disappeared, man.'

'Let's go home, it's late.' said Mark. See you tomorrow at the office.

He opened his office next morning. He could hear Tracy, she was on the phone. A cup of hot coffee was there, waiting for him. He decided not to mention Wikion, the woods, anything.

Tracy finished her phone conversation saying goodbye to Mr Wikion. Ignore, ignore, thought Mark. He took his coffee and then he saw it, a wand was on Tracy's desk.

'Ouch!' the coffee was really hot.

mentor: Gordana Grgić

institution: OŠ Dragutin Tadijanović, Slavonski Brod

Maja Gerčko

THE 5'S (+1)

It's the start of a new school year. The bell rings, everyone has already packed their bags and they're walking out of the classroom. 5 Students are patiently packing their bags and waiting for each other. They are the members of a group called „The 5's.“ Eric, is a tall, intelligent guy with black hair and brown eyes. He is the popular boy in the school. Or, in the other words, *the attraction for girls*. He is the leader of the group. Then, there's Willy. He is quite short and chubby. His hair is ginger and his eyes are blue. He's a bit shy and clumsy. After him, there's a really pretty girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. Her name is Jasmine. She is really kind. Jasmine likes to read books. She has got *a soul of an Angel*. She's the prettiest girl in school. Everyday, she hears boys *whisper about her* as she walks past them. The 4th member of the group is Bertha. She has got brown hair and green eyes. She is really smart. The smartest student in the whole school. And the last member of the group is Shawn. Shawn is a tall, skinny guy. He is also pretty clever and is into technology. He can work with computers and all sorts of programs and never make a mistake.

„Guys, I'm so bored! I don't know what to do at home.“ Said Willy talking on the phone with the members.

„You can...read books!“ Jasmine replies.

„Ugh, but that's so boring! I wanna do something...something adventurous!“ Willy said.

„Hm...oh...I know what we can explore.. but it might seem a bit...scary.“ Bertha asserts.

„Scary? What can possibly make me scared“ Will said with full confidence.

„Maybe a...**HAUNTED HOUSE!**“ Bertha announces the surprise which causes a big silence on the phone call.

„What? Is it that shocking?“ She breaks the silence.

„Oh my!“ Eric shouts. „**THAT'S THE BEST IDEA EVER!**“

„Uh..well maybe that's not everyone's opinion.“ Willy mumbles with a shaky voice.

„Oh, Willy, are you scared?“ Bertha replies making fun of the poor boy.

Willy tried to defend himself but Bertha didn't want to stop. „Alright then. Let's explore the *haunted house* tomorrow at 7 o'clock!

„Okay...I have my dad's ghost equipment.“ Willy replies.

The rest of the group agreed with Bertha's plan.

TOMMOROW, 6:50PM. The 5's are in front of the haunted house.

„Alright guys, let's go in!“ Said Eric approaching the doors with caution signs all over them.

They go in...as soon as they walk through the entrance they feel the chills go through their body.

„It's so creepy in here..“ Jasmine said while looking at some old pictures covered in cobweb.

„Watch this guys!“ Eric pulls a lever.

For some time, it went *silent*, next thing you know, a secret room opens in front of their eyes!

„Woah! This is so cool! Let's go inside the secret room!“ Willy says walking up to the door.

On the door there is a note with a message saying: „ONCE YOU ENTER YOU CANNOT LEAVE.“

That scared the group, but it was too late. Something pushed them inside the room and they all started screaming.

„Hahaha! You guys should've seen your faces!“ Said....

„Who are you?“ Shawn asked.

It went dark.....suddenly, there was a girl standing in front of them with very light skin, long hair and a ripped dress.

„Hello! I'm Valerie, *Valerie the spirit*. Nice to meet you all!“

They were all staring at her with shock.

„Oh come on guys! It's not like you saw a *ghost* or something!“

„Uh.. I think we just did.“ Shawn says barely having confidence to speak.

„Oh yeah...right...I am a ghost. Silly me!“ She answers.

„Are you going to kill us?“ Jasmine looks at her with her poor, scared eyes.

„Well...“ She stops talking „Of course not! Why do people think all ghosts are bad.“

The 5's got along with Valerie. They were often hanging around at the haunted house since it's her home.

„Hi guys! Good to see you again!“ Valerie welcomed them.

„Hi Valerie! We've got a problem and we need you to help us.“ Eric says.

„Sure! What’s up?“

„Our school has this bully...and...well... Willy got in a fight with him.“ Jamine explains. Valerie got worried and asked if he’s okay.

„Well...he is injured.“ Shawn said.

„Ugh, I hate those bullies! Alright, if he wants trouble, he’ll get it.“ Valerie said confidently so she made a plan on how to punish the bully.

IT’S THE NEXT DAY, The 5’s came to the bully’s house and his parents were home. They explained them what happened while Valerie was distracting the bully. He got grounded and didn’t come to school for a month-he was suspended!

SOME DAYS LATER..

„Hi Valerie, we have some news for you!“ Eric asserts.

„Oooh! Tell me!!“ Valerie said with excitement.

„You’re now part of the group! We’re now called The 6’s!“ Willy announces the big news.

„OH MY!! Thank you guys so much! You don’t know how happy I am!“ Valerie shouted.

The 6’s we’re all hanging out with each other in private. They loved and helped each other even when they were at their worst. But when the school year ended... something weird happened. One day the members wanted to visit Valerie, but she wasn’t home. They started looking for her but she never appeared.

„Where can she be?“ Bertha got worried.

„Oh look! There’s a note on the table!“ Jasmine said.

The note: *Hi guys. I’m sorry to dissappoint you but I made a mistake. I usually have to leave when hot days start because I’ll fall apart. Well...I was too late. But remember, I’ll always be watching over you.*

-Valerie the Spirit.

The group was shocked, all you could hear was sobbing noises. They were so sad from the news.

From that day, when Valerie left, the group was named *The 5’s (+1)* and to this day, not a lot of people know the secret legend of Valerie the spirit.

mentor: Adriana Kranjac Mišković

institution: OŠ Rikard Katalinić Jeretov, Opatija

Tia Finderle

AN ALIEN WITH THE HUMANS

The funny thing about human civilization is that they think they have it all, that they are the smartest beings and great creatures. They really are not. Humans still have wars and fights, and they still don't have the intelligence to even clean up after themselves. I'm Tiare, a writer from the galaxy Sindela. We are a civilized community with 10 planets in our galaxy. I live on planet Mrelee and I'm one of the first ever writers to go to planet Earth. You see, a group of writers were sent to different planets with diverse cultures to study what they look like and write a diary from our experience. This is my diary and how my time was on planet Earth with the humans...

I first arrived in a Mrelee space pod disguised as a plane I saw lots of blue and green, but I decided to land on the blue parts of Earth, never again am I swimming that much. I thought an island wouldn't give me too much information, so I didn't go to one. If you're wondering how people didn't look at me weird because I'm an extraterrestrial, well, we mostly look similar to humans, but I did put a disguise on. From the information I had on Earth I managed to find a restaurant; I had some money that we printed out on Mrelee. I was in a place called McDonalds and it was like I was eating cooked dead animals and overly seasoned potatoes. After a while I found a hotel and stayed there for the rest of my trip. I managed to find out I was in America, New York. At night I couldn't sleep because it was so bright and loud. Later I found out that the loud noises were people singing at a concert, horrible. Everywhere I went I saw what I believe is called trash, no one seemed to mind.

I do have to say that some stuff wasn't all that bad. Some people had very artistic styles and techniques we don't have. I was impressed with their music and art and how they express different feelings towards each other. Another thing I noticed is that some people can be close and not that hateful towards each other, laughing together and talking. You see, on Mrelee we decided to have peace but the only way we did (achieve) that was by not having many people we are friendly with, nobody has a lot of friends on Mrelee so we don't fight. People on Earth weren't like that at all, they were warm and loving. The feeling of having a friend is like that. Every morning

I would go to this small coffee shop where I met a guy called Kyle, the nicest person I met, he worked there. He would always bring me a drink they serve there, coffee. After his shift, he would sit with me, and we would talk for hours. He called me his friend. It was the first time in my life that I felt warmth in my heart, he was very sweet and made me feel that warmth of having a friend. He did think I was weird; I did have a phone but I didn't know how to use it and so he did get suspicious after some time. One time he invited me to his apartment, and it looked so nice and well decorated, it fit his personality. Kyle was so nice, he introduced me to some of his other friends, Marley and Lin. Marley was like one of those artists and she had very nice paintings. Lin was a very sporty guy; he played basketball and showed me how to play too. I also did some painting with Marley. Kyle showed me how to cook and we baked cookies together. Earth was really fun but after a while I had to leave. I told Marley and Lin I was going home and that I was just on a nice trip, but Kyle didn't believe me. I had to tell him about the writing trip and Mrelee and everything about my secret. That's the thing about friends, you can always count on them to help you or keep your secret, just like Kyle.

When I got to Mrelee they of course took my diary I made and reviewed it, they got angry with me saying that I shouldn't have hung out with other people and make friends and that my job was to write about the planet not the people. I told them that the people of Earth were part of the planet itself and they also came with the world, the bad and the good things happen mostly because of them, and the term friends was one of the very important things that Earth can bring you. They got so angry that they kicked me out and said that I should live on Earth as opposed to my diary. To be honest I was happy about that, that meant I could be with Kyle and his friends again. My parents didn't really care that much about me and so it got very boring. Kyle, Marley and Lin were so happy to see me, I got a job and lived with Kyle until I could afford an apartment of my own. Two years later, I have many friends and my own place to live and a good paying job. I couldn't be happier; I did have to get used to all the bad stuff, but I try to help where I can. There are these small humans called kids and they are so adorable. I met different people and have lots of friends, I couldn't be happier where I am. My conclusion is that every place has its downsides and upsides, but there's always a place just for you. Not every place is the same though. Goodbye creatures all around the universe.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko

Dora Štefančić

MAGICAL FOREST

Once upon a time, there was a little kingdom hidden in the green woods far, far away. Greendom was its name. Many villagers lived in the kingdom, ruled by a powerful and cunning King Agmon. The King had a daughter of heavenly beauty, and her name was Siona. She was a curious child while growing up. And then the child became a courageous and fascinating young girl.

Every day, she would go to her father, the King, and ask the same question: *Why is my name Siona and where is my mother?*

She kept asking the same question repeatedly.

But one day, while she was annoying her father, he suddenly sighed and said: *You're so irritating, child! Let it be as you wish! I will tell you what you ask me! But remember that this was supposed to be a secret...*

While she was waiting, confused and excited at the same time, different thoughts came to her mind. And the most important question of all - *Why was that a well-kept secret?* Her father told her what had happened many years ago in the Magical Forest. One day, many moons ago, she went missing in that monstrous forest. When others heard that, they were terrified and unwilling to make a tiny step in that direction... let alone enter the wild dark woods. The King had a choice – to go or not to go into the Magical forest. He decided to go as any father would. But while he was on the forest's edge, Siona magically appeared in front of him. She didn't say how she got there, nor he understood what had happened. But from that day on, she could not go out alone anymore because her father was afraid his daughter knew where the entrance to the forest was and that she might disappear again. She did know the way and the access to the woods, but she pretended not to know it. Days passed, and her 10th birthday was there! The King asked her what she wanted for her birthday. She wished to go out again, run with the wind and feel the raindrops gently touching her face. The King refused, so she stayed in the castle.

The desire to go into the Magical Forest once again awakened her in the middle of the night. Since she had no ladder, she used the bed sheets, which she tied together,

making a rope strong enough to hold her weight while climbing down the castle walls. She took a sword as well to be able to defend herself if in danger. When her feet touched the ground, she ran as fast as possible to the forest. When she was on the kingdom's border, she realized a gigantic stone wall was surrounding the castle that she didn't know of before. Then and there, she saw a boy standing there. His ears looked strange, and his legs were weird, too. He wore an unusually formed crown on his head.

She said shyly: *Hello!*

He said *Hello* back in an unexplainably hypnotizing way.

What's your name?, she asked. *My name is Siona!*

When the strange-looking boy heard that, he approached her.

She was taken aback by his move but bravely remained in the same position.

He stuttered: *S-Siona?*

A bit confused, she replied: *Uhm, yeah?*

And then he vanished into the mist with a happy smile.

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to convince herself that the boy was just her imagination playing tricks on her. So, she strolled to the stone wall. When she saw a door, she opened it. It was then that she saw a magical forest around her. She immediately knew she was home. She didn't know how or why but she felt safe there because she belonged to that forest.

Suddenly she saw a giant shadow staring at her, which scared her a bit.

But, as you know, she was brave and walked towards it. It was the same boy she had seen in the kingdom. He said that he was the Prince of the Magical forest. She didn't know what was going on, and then he spoke in a kingly manner: *You are your mother's daughter, Siona! My little princess!* And he kneeled before her. With shock clearly seen on her face, the boy took her by the hand. They were teleported to the very heart of the Magical forest, where she saw a lady dressed in white and golden clothes. The lady came to her, and Siona knew in her heart that she was her long-lost mother. At that moment, the Queen of the Magical forest spoke in a beautiful melody: *I finally found you, my little princess!*

Siona stayed in the forest with her mother, the Queen, her fairy brother, Zion, and all the other magical creatures waiting for King Agmon to open his heart to magic and welcome it to his kingdom.

*mentor: Katija Tefik-Baćac**institution: OŠ "Ivo Lola Ribar" Labin**Nora Belušić*

THE PURPLE CRYSTAL

Hi, my name is Grace. This is a story about my life. I am a fairy. I live in a fairy town called Crystalgarden. A long time ago the fairies were scared because they didn't have where to live, but now we do, we live in the forest between two big trees and we are safe.

When fairies turn 15 they get their crystal colour, before that they have clear crystals. I am 14 and my birthday is in a week and I am nervous to see what colour I will get. Everyone is talking how one fairy of this generations is going to get the purple crystal. The purple crystal means that you have all the powers: the earth, the water, the wind and the fire. A week has past and I woke up on my birthday I was happy. My mum said to me: „Be in the center town at half past ten and the ceremony starts at eleven“. „I will be there“ - I said. At ten o'clock I got dressed, I choose a beautiful dress and a flower crown to match. Soon after the ceremony started, we were all standing in a line waiting for the fairy king with his special big crystal to come and to choose our crystal colour. I was the last in line. All my friends got their crystal. The king gave me the crystal, I was holding the crystal in my hands, then my crystal started to change colour and then it was red. I was really happy with the red crystal because it was the fire power. Everyone wanted to go home, but then the king said: „I am so sorry everyone, there has been some changes“. Everyone looked at each other. Then the king called my name. I was so nervous. The big crystal was in my hands again. I felt weird for a moment and then my crystal started to change colour and then it was purple, I was so happy. The king said to me: „You should celebrate today and tomorrow come to my castle at eleven o'clock in the morning“. Next day I came to the castle, the king was waiting for me. When he saw me he told me to follow him. We were walking for a minute. Then he told the guards to open a huge door. When the guards opened the door, I felt like there is a whole new world in front of me. There were a lot of lights in different colours. So many different flowers and so many pictures of fairies that got a purple crystal. The king showed me a picture, the girl that was on the picture looked familiar. I asked: „Who is this?“. The king said: „This is a

girl that saved us from people. She showed us where we are safe from people and she showed us the Crystalgarden. The girl's name was Clara. She looks familiar because she is your grandma. Unfortunately people caught her and took her with them. We never saw her again. I couldn't believe my grandma was the savior of all the fairies. Suddenly there was a loud explosion. Me and the king looked at each other. We were flying to see what happened and we couldn't believe it. There was a large army of our enemies. They said they are here to conquer this place and live here. The king and the guards were already fighting, I knew I had to do something. I flew to my friend who is really good at making potions and I asked if he could make me a potion so the enemies could fall asleep and then listen to us what will they do. He looked at me. He was surprised and asked: „What enemies?“. I said there is no time for an explanation but I need the potion. He opened his big book of potions and found the right potion, he said: „I have everything except the crystal flower. We could only find the crystal flower in the cave under the big tree in the central park“. I said: „You start making the potion and I am going to search for the crystal flower“. I was flying fast and after a while I found the crystal flower. I was flying back with the crystal flower when one of the enemy's soldier stood in front of me and asked: „Where do you think you are going?“. I didn't know what to answer so I just stood there looking at him. I don't know how but my friend saw this and new something was wrong, she used her wind power and pushed the soldier to the floor. I flew the fastest I could, I came to my friend who was making a potion, he put the crystal flower in the potion and gave it to me. He said that only one drop of the potion could make ten soldiers asleep, He wished me good luck and after that I left. I came to the castle where the fight was and flew up high, I said as loud as I could: „Hi everyone this isn't a way to fix this, let's sit down at the table and talk about this situation“. I don't know how but all of them agreed. The king looked at me confused. I winked at him and kept flying. We were all sitting around the long table and talking. Soon the drinks with the potion came out. All the soldiers drank the drinks. After five minutes all of them were sleeping. When they woke up I told them to leave and they did.

We all got together and waited for the king to tell us what happened, he came and told us that the enemy leader was his brother who didn't want to live with him and then moved away long time ago. He wanted this place where we are. After that he said: „But thankfully he didn't win and it was all because of Grace. So let's thank Grace for saving us and Crystalgarden.“

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Ana-Marija Putnik

CRIMSON JUSTICE

London, a place where only the aristocrats, nobles and patriarchy have it well. A place where the poor are left on the streets to freeze to death. A place where kids of a lower status get stones thrown at them. A place where the average civilian must work 15 hours a day and is yet barely able to afford rent. A place filled with crime, a place where you can smell murderous intent in the air.

Murderers freely walk around the city, bringing yet another corpse to be found. Most of those cases lead to the respected noble men who think they're entitled to murder a poor soul for one's own entertainment. Who is allowed to judge them anyway? They're the reason for the improvement of the city, after all, they paid for all the work put towards the modernization of London. Well, that would've been the case if it wasn't for Juno Allen and Victoria Moore, the two most trusted detectives. They started off in an agency, however they quickly came to realize that as women, they wouldn't succeed as is. The low pay rate, stolen credit for solved cases and discrimination got to them quickly, so the pair decided to go private.

The two girls started their career young. They met when Victoria was around 17 while Juno was almost 16. Despite their completely different personalities, they warmed up to each other quickly and have stuck together ever since. By the time they were 22 and 21 they started their own business. At first, their clients were people they knew personally, fortunately, they grew with time and became the first people contacted as soon as a corner became crimson colored. Nobles are on top of the country, you cannot arrest a noble now, can you? An average detective could not, but Moore? The girl has noble blood, meaning she can do whatever she pleases. The girls were able to solve cases that had not been solved or handled in ages.

However, the killers belonging to aristocracy have not stopped their crime. They still believed that their wealth could keep them innocent. Of course, sometimes it was able to keep their hands clean, but instead of serving in jail they served 6 feet underground.

A new criminal has appeared. "No worries, Juno and Victoria will take them

away” is what everyone thought. The catch is, they had no leads or clues whatsoever.

He, or she, whoever it is (not that it really matters to them), drove the girls crazy. How is it possible that someone is that careful and able to leave no clues. Although, it is not entirely true that they had no clues. Truth is that the killer was careful. The killer only murdered the rich. However, not just any noble, only the ones who they deemed deserving of it. However, they were not careful enough to make sure they had no witnesses. It’s not that they weren’t careful enough, but because they couldn’t care less. They knew their identity would not be revealed. According to witness statements, they’re active only at night, are of average height, muscular build and are extremely agile. The attire worn was entirely black. As for their preferred method of killing, they used something sharp, most likely a dagger or sword, or they would beat their victims to death.

After countless nights of stressing, Juno and Victoria simply decided to go investigate at night, it was pointless to investigate during the day when all evidence had been erased.

“Say, Vic, do you think they know we’re coming?”

“That is a possibility to consider, since they have been trying to track and predict our every move.” Victoria answers as she continuously kicks the rock she had found in front of her feet.

They didn’t converse much during investigations, mainly for the sake of focus, but also to make sure they don’t scare the criminal away. The pair has been walking for a while now, following a certain path that hadn’t been there for more than a week, going through already known information in their minds. Their process of thought had been disturbed when they heard a loud noise coming from a few feet away. They looked at each other, gave a quick nod and headed towards where the noise came from. When they arrived, all they saw was glass.

“Tch! Damn it. Really got my hopes up there. ‘Twas probably just an old drunk.” Juno groaned in frustration.

“Not necessarily” -the older girl added “There’s no signs of a bottle and the glass is way too thin to be of one.”

Juno sat down, back against the water fountain, admiring her partner for her ambition. If it wasn’t for Victoria, she would’ve probably dropped the case already.

Victoria takes a few steps back; she slightly tilts her head and excitement suddenly appears on her face with a small grin on the side of her lips.

“Juno,” she calls out “come stand here”. Unwillingly, Juno gets out of her comfortable position and does as Victoria told her. “Tilt your head a bit.” Juno tilts her head, and her motivation reappears.

“A glass path!” -she happily yells out.

“Juno, quiet down!”

“A glass path!” -she happily whispered.

“This may as well be a trap so make sure to be careful. If they happen to be lingering around and notice us, we might as well just kill ourselves.” Victoria warned

Juno furrowed her brows: “Why would we do that?”

“Cause if they catch us, were going to end up as dead meat anyway, so it’s better if we just do it ourselves.”

“Oh. Yeah. That does make sense indeed.”

The girls started following the path, both walking on their toes to make as little noise as possible. You would think the killer wouldn’t do anything to them, since they’re both against the nobles, but one must consider the facts that the girls are detectives that get rid of criminals and they’re going to ruin the killers plans if they catch him.

Suddenly, they caught a glimpse of a tall dark figure running past them, so quickly they didn’t even notice. They could’ve been killed just now, and they wouldn’t have been able to react. They once again exchanged a quick glance and started running after the figure.

They stopped when they realized they were on the path where they started their investigation on that same night.

“Lord help me!” Victoria begged as she tried to catch her breath.

“These games,” Juno huffed as she collapsed to her knees “are going too far.”

Victoria nodded in agreement.

“You know what? Let’s just part ways and meet up here in 15 minutes.” Suggested Juno after regaining her ability to breathe.

“First smart thing you’ve said today.”

“Shut it.”

The girls split up in hopes of finding the killer that night. It would’ve been easier if they had seen which way he went, unfortunately they weren’t that lucky.

Seven minutes have passed and both hope that the other got the killer. Juno is a petite girl, she’s aware of the fact that she wouldn’t be able to take on a guy like that, so she’s silently praying for Vic to run into them.

15 minutes passed, they met up at the spot they left at, just as planned.

“Juno! Did you have any lu- “

Victoria screamed.

Someone appeared behind her and sucked her into the darkness of the alley she was in.

“VICTORIA!” Just as Juno was about to run after her, she was pulled back and poisoned by chloroform.

The following morning, Juno woke up. Without any injuries, completely safe in her and Victoria’s shared apartment. She refused to believe that last night’s event had even happened. As soon as she woke up, she called for Vic. No response. She checked every room, went as far to trash the apartment just to find a sign that Vic left to get breakfast. She didn’t find anything; everything was left the same way it was the night prior. The wall was still covered in the same red strings, the plates were still in the sink, the same box of cigarettes still lying on the table and every single one still there. Juno was out of her mind. Thousands of thoughts running around her head, blaming herself, trying to make assumptions about where Victoria could be, horrible images flashing through her mind and Victoria’s body lies lifeless in every single one. Oh, how much she wishes they never separated ways.

Juno’s mind went blank. She’s a detective, she can find her. And Victoria isn’t dead, her combat abilities could land 6 men in a hospital at once, why would she underestimate someone so dear to her like that?

Without contemplating, Juno stormed out of the door. Once again following the clues she already had and adding last night’s event to them. She followed the alley Victoria disappeared in. The alley leads her to the prettiest part of London, the one which the Thames flows through. Such a beautiful view, just to be surrounded by bars and drunken men.

At this point, Juno was so deep into her thoughts, she didn’t realize how dark it was getting. The streets were empty, it felt like a dead city, a forbidden one even. An unsettling aura was constantly following her, and her chest never felt this heavy. The air has become so thin, and she just now noticed the lack of oxygen. Or was she just so out of her mind she forgot to breathe? She didn’t really know where to go, she ran around the city like a lost mouse. She was not in control of her body; her body was in control of her and led her anywhere it could think of.

A loud scream came from the bridge. It wasn’t Victoria, she knew that, but she still followed, she knew the town’s mystery was there.

And indeed, when she arrived, a tall figure dressed in black attire was standing in front of her with their back turned away, a bloodied sword in their hands, and a dead man in front of their feet.

She cocked her gun, ready to shoot.

“Where is she?”

The figure slowly turns around.

Juno's heart is pounding, either she is about to win the game, or she's about to lose her life.

And she did.

Her whole life was lost when she saw Victoria, with a bloodied sword and bloodied hands in front of her.

She dropped the gun.

Her heart dropped; her soul shattered.

They say the eyes are the window to the soul, and her eyes resembled crystals. Beautiful, but fragile.

Victoria gave her a soft smile.

"I needed to find a way where I can leave you. Leave you in a way where you do not have to suffer as much, where I do not have to feel as guilty."

"Why?"

Moore held the façade for a long time; however, nothing lasts forever. She parted her lips and took a sharp breath, she tried to be strong, but her eyes rattled her out.

"Please hate me."

"How could I ever do such thing?"

"Juno, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Victoria shakes her head as she brings the sword towards her neck.

"Vic... Vic it's okay, lower the sword."

"Juno, please." She sobbed.

"Victoria, we can sort this out, don't be stupid."

Victoria cannot do anything but look at Juno with guilt and sorrow. She stands in the middle of the bridge, tears streaming down her face. And she knows she's guilty, and she knows she's being selfish, and she knows how much Juno is suffering because of her.

"How am I supposed to live without you?"

"Can't you at least curse me out in my last moments?" she softly smiled at her partner one last time.

Juno's eyes widen.

"VICTORIA NO!"

But it's too late.

Turns out she was right.

She did see Victoria's body lying lifeless in front of her after all.

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Zara Capan

THE CALLING

Recently there was a shy girl named Alexandra, but everybody called her Alex. She had short black hair and blue eyes and was different from her peers. She believed in ghosts, the sixth sense and magic. No student in her school knew her voice because she never talked. She meditated every evening. She was voiceless but clever and fearless. Keep on reading to find out what I mean by that.

At school, there were bullies who hated her because she was smarter than anyone. She had the biggest IQ and she had a photographic memory. Bullies used to hurt her every day but Alex would always find a way how to run away. She lived with her mom because her dad died in a car accident. The bullies were called Jamie, Nick (aka The Boss), Adam, John and Rick. They called themselves *The Bad Bosses*. They were bosses for bullying.

Alex had only one friend, Samantha, whose nickname was Sam. One day the bullies made a trap for Alex. When Alex came to school, the bullies were avoiding her at first. Alex knew there was something suspicious. When Alex started looking for Sam, she found her in an empty classroom. Alex asked: "Why are you here?" and, at the same moment, the bullies came out and Nick said: „Well, well, look who finally said a word." Then Jamie pulled out some scissors and Alex screamed: "HEEEELLLLLLP!!!!!" The principal came in and saw Jamie with the scissors. "*The Bad Bosses* will get expelled. They deserve it!" Alex thought.

For some reason, Sam was mad at Alex and started to yell at her. She offended her and wanted to hit her: "This is all your fault! You will pay for this!" Alex was confused: "What is going on, what is wrong with you?! I've just saved you!" Sam became even angrier and said: "They will be expelled because of you!! You will pay for that!!" At that moment Alex realized that Sam was not her friend at all! Sam was not even on her side! Sam was one of the Bosses! Alex was stunned, all her emotions got mixed up and she just burst into tears and ran away.

The next day she didn't go to school. She blocked Sam on her social media and never wanted to talk to her ever again. Last year, on her birthday, she made a wish

to have a stronger mind, to be more powerful so that no one could hurt her again. The next day Sam came to Alex and said: "Hey loser, why are you sad? You can't go and cry to your daddy? Ha, ha!". Alex became furious. She wanted to slap Sam but, instead, she just stretched out her hands and screamed: "AAAAAHHHH!!"

At that moment, the electrical current came out of her hands. Sam fell to the floor. Alex was shocked and started to run as fast as she could just to get home and to be safe and alone. After she got herself together, she tried to stretch again and it worked again. She was exhausted. She remembered her birthday wish. "It came true!" thought Alex, "What should I do now?". That was her last thought before she fell asleep.

The next day she came to school and Sam came to Alex and tried to say something. Alex gave her the look that nobody could forget so she ran away. After school she tried to find her, to make friends with other kids but she couldn't. It was very difficult for her to trust anybody ever again.

A week after, when she was going home to rest, Sam and her minions attacked Alex. Just to explain, Sam's minions are Anne, Sheila, Sarah and Dakota – her new friends. Sam said: "What are you going to do now, huh?". Then Dakota grabbed Alex's arms and folded them behind her back as Sheila held her legs. It wasn't all because Anne suddenly pulled out a pair of scissors. Sam's command was to cut her hair, but Alex stretched her arms and electricity strongly repulsed the bullies, every one of them except Sam. Sarah, Dakota and Anne ran away. Sam said: "Sheila, attack her!", but Sheila frowned, kicked Sam's leg and ran away.

Sam pleadingly looked at Alex and said: "Alex, I'm sorry, you are my only true friend, help me!". Alex was disappointed and replied: "You cheated on me, you tricked me, I saved you and you were making fun of me and bullying me. Now you want a truce! No, Sam. It's not gonna work. You're not worthy. I'd rather be alone than with fake friends. BYE!"

And since then, Alex has turned to helping others who have been bullied so they would never feel alone and abandoned. She truly is a superhero to many of her newly found friends. She feels like she is saving the whole world when helping a single friend. She has found her voice – and her calling.

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Antonia Križaj

FIRE AND ICE

It was a cold night; the full moon was shining in the sky. There was a pack full of wolves. The alpha female was about to have a cub, but that wasn't an ordinary cub. That cub had the power of ice. The alpha named her Moon because she was born on the night of the full moon. Three weeks later Moon developed her powers, and the rest of the pack didn't want her anymore, so they kicked her out.

Moon was looking for a place where she could live. She was hunting animals with her ice powers. One day, Moon found another lone cub. She followed him into the dark forest where he lived. She slowly approached him.

He saw her and then he asked her: “Why are you following me?”

Moon told him: “I was kicked out of my pack, now I need a new one.”

He told her: “Please leave me alone, I'm going to hurt you because I can't control my powers.”

Moon told him: “I have ice powers.”

He told her: “I have fire powers; my name is Ash.”

“I can't believe that someone had powers too.” They said at the same time.

Ash said: “It's sunset. Do you want to go hunting animals with me, but with powers?”

Moon said: “Sure, I would like to.”

They were hunting rabbits, and Moon told Ash to catch a rabbit with his fire ball.

He caught it and then they ate it, but that wasn't enough, so Ash said: “Moon, could you catch a rabbit with your ice breath?”

She did what he told her, but the rabbit was running towards Ash. The ice breath hit him in the leg. His leg was all covered in ice, but luckily, he could melt it with his fire breath.

Moon was very scared she could hurt him again, so she told Ash: “I'm so sorry.” and she ran away into the woods.

Two years later, it was a frosty winter day, and Moon was an adult wolf. She was very beautiful. She was all covered in ice, her eyes were blue like the sea and you

could see the glowing ice in them. She was hunting a big boar that was on her territory. She hunted it with her ice breath, but when she caught it, she saw something slimy coming out of the boar. When she came closer to it the slimy thing jumped on her. Moon was so terrified, but she couldn't scream for help because that thing was on her head. She couldn't breathe. Moon closed her eyes and waited to die. She heard a howl from the mountain, opened her eyes and saw him. That was a big black wolf, his body was covered in fire. He threw a fire ball at the slimy thing, it burned, and Moon fell on the ground. She couldn't get up because she was very exhausted. The wolf came to her, and he took her to his home so that she could rest. When she opened her eyes, she saw a beautiful den with orange glowing mushrooms. It was gorgeous; she was amazed by the beauty of that den. Also, fireflies all around her were shiny and cute. When she saw her savior, she ran to him and to thank him, but when he turned around, she felt that she knew him from somewhere.

She was confused, and she called him: "Ash?"

He was confused too, and answered: "Moon?"

Their hearts were beating fast, their eyes were full of tears. They asked a lot of questions because they were curious about what had happened those two years ago.

Then Moon asked Ash: "Do you know something about that slimy thing that attacked me?"

Ash answered: "That slimy thing that attacked you was a virus from a slimy forest created by a slimy dragon named Buco. He is 85 feet tall, and he is covered in black slime; when the animal touched the slime, it became rabid, and it couldn't control itself anymore. Also, when that animal bites other animal it spreads the virus on them."

"We swear that we will kill Buco and bring peace to the world." They said at the same time.

They trained for one month, they were so strong that they could crush any animal into pieces with just one blow. The time had come to defeat Buco. It was a frosty winter night. Snow was falling when Moon and Ash came to the slimy forest. They wanted to wake up Buco, so they howled. Their howling caused an earthquake, and the cave where Buco was sleeping began to shake.

Buco woke up and he yelled: "Who woke me up from my pretty sleep?"

Then Buco saw Moon and Ash and he was very furious; he began to throw slime fire balls at them. Moon and Ash fought extremely hard, but one of the slimy fire balls hit them. The virus spread through their body; first, they began to growl at each other, then they were trying to kill each other. The sky became red, there was a

bloody moon in the sky. Moon and Ash stopped fighting. They began to merge, now you could see a big 80 feet tall wolf, the wolf that was half ice and half fire. The wolf jumped at Buco and started to tear him apart. The sky was full of clouds, the beginning of a new day, all the slime was gone, and the Buco was swallowed by the earth. Moon and Ash separated, and they were very happy that they had brought peace to the world.

Two years later, Moon and Ash had a cub named Blood Moon, because she looked exactly like them when they fought Buco in the night of the bloody moon. The world was a happy place. But in the distant, cold, tall mountain there was slime crawling from the darkness...

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DIAMOND TO DIE FOR

Imagine me looking through the window, hoping Miss Lester is coming in with a new case. Can't help noticing the sky covered in clouds, one of them sparkling like a true diamond. How marvelous!

On my desk, there is a golden plate with my name on it; detective Arthur Cannister. Next to the golden plate stands an old telephone. My assistant, Miss Lester, enters my office saying the police want to speak to me. I lift the telephone handset. "Detective Cannister, this is Sheriff McClide. There has been a murder downtown and Scotland Yard's director specifically wants you to investigate this particular case. Come to 13 Blackhammer Street." "Okay, see you in ten." – I reply.

I took my coat and left in a rush. Blackhammer Street was an old street. It had a lot of balconies filled with flowers. There was a car parked in front of every house, but the house I was looking for had the number 13 on the door. In front of the house, there were a lot of police officers. One was with the neighbors, the other interrogating the girl who had found the body, and the third was helping the CSI unit. However, one of them was acting a little bit suspicious, but I thought it was me. Detectives are always doubtful. I approached Sheriff McClide. "So, where is the body?" – I asked.

The sheriff dragged me inside the house. The house was nice and modern, everything being in its place.

Of course, forensics officers were checking the dead man first. The victim was a male in his early thirties. He was killed with a knife stabbed right through his heart. He died approximately between 7 am and 8 am. Cops were looking everywhere trying to find the murder weapon.

I went to the lady who had found the body. Her name was Sally Muron. First I started with simple questions:

"Do you know that man?" "Yes. That was my boss, Jack. I work at a nearby restaurant as a cook and he was the chef." – she replied. "What was he doing in your house?" – I asked her. "I don't know" – she replied –

“Usually, we end at 4 pm. Sometimes he gives me a ride home, but today he wasn’t at work so I got worried.”

“Okay, thank you for your time. Please call me if you can think of anything that could help us,” I gave her my phone number and left.

First I went to the restaurant where Jack had worked. His employees were not much of a help so I headed for his apartment. But first, I called Miss Laster to check if the CSI unit had already found anything useful. His apartment was on Unicorn Street. Wow, his apartment was so big it even had two floors. I started to look for some unusual things. I looked behind every sofa and wardrobe, and then behind the paintings.

Bingo! Behind the painting with flowers, there was a safe. After some time, I finally found a big key. It fit perfectly and I opened the safe. In the safe, there was a little bag and in it was the biggest and probably the most precious diamond in the world. I was about to take it when suddenly someone hit me in the head and everything went dark. Soon, my eyes opened and I found myself duct-taped to a chair in a dark room like a garage. I found myself abducted by a strong-looking guy. On his left arm, there was a colorful tattoo. It had a skull and around it were a lot of daisies. Then it hit me; back at the crime scene in the living room, there was a painting that looked the same as the man’s tattoo.

“Where am I? Who are you? Where is the diamond?” - I asked. He just smirked at me and replied: “You think that I’m going to tell you that?” That guy looked familiar but then I remembered the officer that was acting a little bit weird at the crime scene. Bingo, again! The man was standing in front of a metal table, holding some wires and, guessing from my experience, making a bomb. Next to the tools, on the table there was a knife. I couldn’t see very well, but I think there was blood in it. I bet it was Jack’s blood. All of a sudden, two other guys entered and they had the same tattoo as my kidnapper. They were fiercely arguing about Jack. Then I figured it out: Jack was a part of a group that was dealing drugs. I heard them talking about how my kidnapper had killed Jack because he wanted to tell the police about their plan to steal the diamond, which was practically priceless.

Then they came to me, but before they could say anything, we heard a loud knock on the door. It was the cops. Probably Miss Laster had found out something and tried to call me several times. She was worried so she and some officers went to Jack’s apartment. They searched the whole building and now they were looking in the building’s garages. One of the officers broke the door and they entered the garage where I was. The police arrested my kidnapper and one of his accomplices. Miss

Laster freed me, but the first thing on my mind was to warn the police about the third guy who had just escaped with the diamond in his backpack. The next thing was that we were both going to my office because I had to do some unavoidable paperwork. On our way, we met Sally Muron who seemed to be in a big hurry. “That diamond cloud is still there”, I thought to myself, “and the sky looks so dazzling”. To my regret, there was no time to rest. We still needed to get a hold of the diamond to live for.

*mentor: Božana Čičak**institution: OŠ "Retfala" Osijek**Dora Jelošek*

STEP ON THE DRESS

March is the time of the year when rain and sun take turns every few hours. The weather changes affect people's mood, especially when you are homeless. You just want to go back in time and start over. However, there aren't many possibilities when you are an orphan. I can't worry now, I need to provide shelter for myself, because a raindrop just hit my nose. The part of the city where I am from is the Ertas- dirt and poverty everywhere. I would really like to visit the rich, Vitae part, but the poor aren't allowed to go there. The city is divided - the beautiful, stunning, green hillside and the flat and anything but special other side. You can easily tell which side is which.

My mood today was the usual, March, grumpy, changing mood, until somebody stepped on my dress. "I apologise", a gentle voice muttered in a rush. "Ay! Where d'ya think ya' going? You ain't getting away with this that quickly!" I bursted out in anger since that dress was the only one I owned. "I'm terribly sorry, miss"- a guy with black wavy hair came back to apologize for the second time. He looked right into my dark green eyes with his charming blue eyes. "Miss"- he said- "I want you to come with me. " He didn't even wait for my response, he took my hand and led me into a very shady and dirty corner of the street.

"My father owns a perfume company and he is having a hard time finding the right model for his next advertisement. He is really picky and has high standards, but I think you are the one. I came into these Ertas parts looking for a model. Is that fine with you? "

"But"- I stuttered- "the only things I possess are a carton box and this filthy dress!"

"I'll take care of that", he said calmly. „ Now, again, is it fine with you? "

"Will I make money? " I asked.

"Yes", he said.

"I'm in! " I replied.

Then he proceeded to take me into a nice car. We sat down. I don't remember the last time when I was in a car at all. When we entered the car, we introduced ourselves. The driver started the car and we set off on our journey to Vitae. Soon after that I started seeing mansions, luxurious gardens and trees. I knew we entered

the Vitae. The car stopped at the highest point of the Vitae hill. In front of me there was this enormous, white, shining mansion with a beautiful green garden. I couldn't believe my eyes. Why is this happening to me? His butler opened the door for me. We entered the mansion. I got some dirty looks from the maids, but at that moment I didn't care. I was so excited. Just then I realised how huge the mansion really was. As I started zoning out, Alexander asked me: "What is it? You haven't spoken a word since we came. We are almost in the girls' bathroom. Take a shower and a maid will give you some proper clothes. You will hear the rest when you get ready." He suddenly stopped in front of a door. A maid passing by opened it for me, before I could reach for the handle. A giant bathroom with seven mirrors, seven sinks, three bathtubs and shower cabins. It was spotless and gold plated. After I got ready for the make-up and styling, a maid came and led me into a gigantic styling room. A stylist was already waiting for me. "Hello! You must be Anne?" - she said with a smile on her face while thick black curls blocked half of it. "Anna" - I corrected her. "Oops, my mistake", she smiled. I sat in a cosy chair while she was trying to comb my hair. "I didn't get your name", I muttered. "Amelia", she said while trying to brush my hair gently. "Sorry if it hurts", she said. "It doesn't, just some curly hair problems. I see you have them, too", I said. Amelia smiled. Soon after that my hair, nails and face looked awesome like I wasn't living in the streets just a while ago. "Finally", Amelia said, "time for the outfit! My favourite part!" Amelia opened a closet full of beautiful gowns. "Wow", I gasped, "Alexander's mum must love all this!" "Alexander doesn't have a mom. She died when he was born", Amelia whispered. She handed me a short emerald green dress that matched my eyes. When I put it on, I felt amazing, ready to see Alexander's dad and get that modelling contract.

A maid came and led me to the auditioning room. It was a big white room where other ten beautifully dressed girls were already standing. I was terrified for a second, but then my confidence came back when I saw Alexander walking into the room and smiling at me. His dad was really short and grumpy. He was really picky and I don't know how I ended up in the top two girls. The other girl was prettier than me, I suppose that's why she got the lead role, but I got the supporting role. I was a bit disappointed, but Alexander still offered me to sleep in their guest room. The girl who got the lead role broke her leg during the shooting and I got her part after all. These days went by quickly and they were the best days of my life.

For the first time in my life I got to live my dream. A week ago, I was lying in the street while the rain was pouring all over me. But, somebody helped, Alexander helped. Coincidences happen. They can be negative, but positive too. Life is full of surprises and you never know when or how a surprise will knock at your door, or better said, step on your dress.

mentor: Tajana Kradija

institution: OŠ “Tin Ujević”, Osijek

Lana Kvesić

AMONG THE STARS

My life is so boring. Every day is the same. Nothing special. I want an adventure. Sometimes I wish I could live on other planets. Maybe Mars, Saturn or something hotter like Venus. Well, these are just my silly thoughts. I have to go back to reality. But I will never stop daydreaming. Maybe my wish will come true...

It's been several days of the same, boring life. That Sunday I was taking a walk. It was dusk. Stars were already set in the sky. They were magical. At one moment, I saw a blinking star. I had no idea what it was. It looked like it was getting closer. It was blinking. One moment red, and another white. It was getting so close, I could see every detail. You would never believe what it was. A giant UFO ship!

I didn't know what to do. I was standing and looking. I thought I should run. You are probably thinking that this was what I wanted - an adventure. But, you know what, I've changed my mind. I was running as fast as I could. I thought I was safe, but why would things ever be as simple as that?

Suddenly, everything around me was black. Something from the UFO must have put me to sleep. I slept for a while. When I opened my eyes, the first thing that I saw was some creature. I screamed as loud as I could.

“What are you!?” I asked after I stopped screaming.

“I'm an alien. My name is T'tam. And yours?” he replied in an unusually friendly voice.

But I was still terrified. Can you imagine that some alien is standing right in front of you? I just kept looking at him.

“Why are you afraid? Please, don't be. I won't hurt you.”

“I'm not afraid of you, I'm just afraid of where you're taking me,” I answered in a calm voice.

“I heard you would like to visit all planets of the Solar system. Am I right?” he said with a smile on his face.

“How do you know that?” I almost screamed again.

How did he know that? I think I never said that out loud, only in my mind.

“Each one of us gets one person from Earth to watch over and help them. I got you. I know everything you are thinking,” he told me like it was some random fact. I was worried because he knew everything I know.

“So, you know I want to see every planet and you just wanted to make my wish come true?” I was happy but confused.

“Yes, that is right. Are we going or not?” he asked.

“I mean, this is a chance of a lifetime. Yes, we’re going,” I answered with a smile.

“Our first destination is Mercury. And you don’t have to wait long. We are almost there,” he told me happily.

I couldn’t believe this was actually happening. This was a dream come true.

“Mercury is the closest planet to the Sun. It’s almost three times smaller than Earth,” he told me while we were looking at our first planet.

“It is so beautiful!” This was the only thing I could say back then. Now I could barely see it.

“Next stop, Venus!” he told me. Several hours later we arrived at our second destination.

“Venus is the hottest planet in the Solar system. One fun fact you probably didn’t know. On Venus, days are longer than a year,” T’tam taught me.

“Really? I didn’t know. But as they say, every day you can learn something new,” I answered politely.

I was watching Venus in all of its glow and, all of a sudden, I couldn’t see it anymore.

“Next is Earth, but I think we can skip it for now. Is that ok?” he asked.

“Yes, it is,” I responded.

“Then, next planet – Mars! My home planet.”

“You are from Mars? Really?” I was thrilled as we approached our next planet.

“Mars, also known as the Red Planet, is the fourth planet of our Solar system. Once it had water, so maybe, humans could live there in the future, as our neighbours,” he expressed his wish.

Mars was so amazing, and it wasn’t as red as I thought. It was more brown.

“Now, we’re about to see the biggest one, Jupiter!” T’tam announced it.

As soon I’ve seen it, it was soooo big.

“Jupiter is our biggest planet. And what you probably didn’t know, the weather on Jupiter is very similar to the Earth’s weather!” he told me.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Saturn is out next destination,” he answered.

“Really? Saturn is my favourite planet,” I responded.

As we were getting closer, I was feeling even more excited.

“Saturn is famous for its rings, which are nothing else but dust,” he taught me.

I couldn’t believe this was happening! I was seeing Saturn with my own eyes. Unfortunately, we had to move on.

“Uranus, here we come!” T’tam informed me.

We came near Uranus. In front of us stood a big, blue giant.

“Uranus is spinning so fast that it is flattened a bit,” he said quickly and continued about our final stop. “We’re off to our last destination - Neptune!”

“Neptune is the last planet, and the favourite one among Martian women because of its famous diamond rains!”

That was the last thing I learned from T’tam.

After some time, we came back to Earth.

“You are home. I hope you have enjoyed our trip.”

“Thank you so much. It was the best time of my life,” I answered and hugged him.

“Goodbye T’tam!” I said and heard, “Wake up! You are late for school!”

It was my mother! What happened? Wasn’t I with T’tam just now? It was obviously just a dream, a dream that I will never forget. A dream that made my wishes come true.

mentor: Davorka Nekić*institution:* OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko*Dora Mance*

MAGICAL ADVENTURE

Once upon a time, there was a place where witches and wizards lived. The site was bordered by a thick magical wall, and they could not leave. But a group of rebellious witches decided to see what was beyond those walls. The ruler warned them not to go because it was dangerous, but they didn't listen. There were four of them. Ziki was the oldest one. There were twins Dorothea and Lilly. The youngest one was named Phillipa. They were not ordinary witches as the people imagined them. They were the most beautiful and magical witches in the whole wizardry world. And so, they set off on an adventure.

They agreed they would leave during the day when nobody suspected anything. The moment they left the castle, they felt completely free. They headed towards the stream on the top of the magical hill they admired from a distance. When they reached the top, they enjoyed a beautiful view until they saw that a part was utterly black. As dark as night. The Forest was dying there. They decided to go to that part and try to heal the Forest, but the night caught them in its veil, so they spent the night nested at the bottom of the hill. When they woke up, they were surrounded by strange creatures called goblins. They were small and not dangerous as the witches imagined. The goblins asked them what they were doing there because they were the first witches they had ever seen. Ziki answered that they had had enough of their restrictive life and decided to go out in the world. Goblins warned them about the ruler of the Dark Forest. Still, they said they weren't afraid of anything and headed bravely in that direction. Phillipa was worried they might miss the Forest, so she asked the goblins to take them there. Goblins accepted with great joy, but they warned them one more time. The witches were sure of their decision. The Dark Forest was the way they wanted to go. On the way, they saw sparkling unicorns that they had only heard stories about. They also saw beautiful mist fairies dressed in colorful airy dresses. They decided to spend the night in that place called Wondertown. When they woke up, they had to leave immediately because they were behind the planned schedule. Dorothea suggested that they ride on unicorns. The goblins agreed, but first, they had to go to the evaporating lake because they were thirsty.

When they came to the lake, they saw a gigantic, scary-looking red dragon. They were scared at first but greatly relieved when they saw a funny elf fly toward them. Goblins repeatedly warned the witches that they didn't want to take them to the Forest, and the Dark Forest king would get angry at them. Lilly suggested that the elves take them to the Forest. Ziki disagreed because she was afraid that the elves would mess things up by being playful and cuddly, but she gave in. The night caught them on the way to the Forest, so they had to spend several hours on the edge of the Forest. Elves told them that the Forest is dangerous, and many scary creatures lived there. When they finally stepped into the Forest, they sought caves to hide and make fire. They did find a big shelter, but it was all dark inside, so they lit a fire. When the fire started burning brightly, they saw huge, brown eyes. It was a cyclops, a dangerous creature from stories untold and deeply hidden in libraries worldwide. But this one wasn't scary. He even offered them food and accommodation. Still, he warned them they had to be very quiet after midnight, and they had to hide. Dorothea was curious and asked why, and cyclops said that his brother would come after midnight hungry and ready to eat anything, even witches and elves. If he scented them there, he would devour them because he didn't eat for two days. Witches thought he was joking because he wanted serenity, but he was telling the truth. After midnight his brother came, but the witches and elves listened to the cyclops and stayed safe. Early in the morning, they went deeper into the Dark Forest. When they came to the heart of the Dark Forest, the elves let their dragons fly home. The Forest was full of dark trees. When Lilly touched one, it became a beautiful singing oak. And so, the witches turned dried plants and trees into glittering flowers and mesmerizing oaks. But then they heard the threatening voice of the lord of the Dark Forest, who sounded angry. He knew their location and flew swiftly to them. When he appeared in front of them, the witches heard a big thunderstorm, followed by a cold feeling. He was furious and told them to not touch anything that wasn't theirs. He even took Lilly's powers and told them to quickly move from his territory, or he would take all their magical powers. Unfortunately, with the dragons gone, they were left in the Forest without a fast way out. Suddenly, one dragon hiding behind the most enormous dark tree appeared. It was the master dragon who had a bad feeling about entering the Forest from the start but luckily, he was the one who saved them.

The dragon took the witches to their castle, where nobody expected them to return but celebrated their reunion with their magical brothers and sisters. Despite what had happened to them, they encouraged little witches and wizards to go out and see the world because there's beauty and adventures to be experienced...and dangers to be avoided.

mentor: Gordana Grgić

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Mia Kolobarić

THE PATHS FINALLY MEET...

The days flew by, the seasons didn't even bother to stay. You can never have enough time to leave something for tomorrow. One thing I know for sure, that was definitely true for Antoni. Antoni worked for a company whose main priority was tourism. His boss was a workaholic, and by that, he gave everyone piles of documents to work on, too many smaller jobs that only one like him could manage to finish in time and caused lots of breakdowns and stress. That was one of the only reasons why Antoni didn't have time to do all the things he wanted and wished to. Most of Antoni's co-workers stayed in the company just because the salary was too good to just quit the job because of the boss.

Antoni didn't have a partner, but he did want to spend time with his family more often than he actually could. His parents and siblings lived in Krakow, just like Antoni. They didn't live too far away, but Antoni would always go there by his car. He got so used to being in a rush that he forgot how it feels to have nothing to do and relax. Antoni didn't have a lot of days off because the business grew over the holidays. But when he did have days off, he would spend them taking long walks around the city of Krakow.

One day he decided to go to a local pub that he's never been to. On the way there, he bumped into a woman that seemed familiar. All the way to the pub he thought to himself, who it could be. Then he remembered. It was one of his aunt's friends' daughters. He saw the woman at a family gathering last year. He talked to his aunt about her, he got a hold of her name, then he came to a realization that she was working in the same company as him.

A few weeks passed, and he forgot about her, until he saw Zuzanna one day at work. This time, unlike the first one, he found her extravagantly beautiful. Since Antoni was no shy man, he decided to talk to her. It looked like she remembered him from the gathering too. They talked for a bit, and then exchanged numbers. After that they went to grab a coffee, went to the theatre, and got to know each other. Keep in mind that they had the same workplace so they could spend more time together.

That was no ordinary love story. This time, they weren't oblivious, and it was very clear that they were interested in each other. Eventually they started dating, and a couple of years later they got married, aged 27 and 25. To get married at such a young age, you have to be mentally and emotionally prepared for everything that comes in a package with marriage. And they felt they were.

Unfortunately, in their moments of happiness Zuzanna's mother, Antoni's mother-in-law, passed away. Not even a single thing in their lives mattered to them anymore. They were terribly sad. Their boss gave them a whole month off, surprisingly. That was the only time they were both at their lowest, at the same time...

It was very hard to get back to their routines after their loss. The work their boss gave them kept them occupied in a way. They never realized how they changed each other. Antoni became more relaxed and didn't have the feeling like he was on needles all the time. As for Zuzanna, she was motivated to go to work every day, and she did a much better job than before Antoni appeared in her life. Antoni liked his job, but Zuzanna lost her interest in tourism over the past few months. She opened a small retail business. The business was going very well, she sold jewellery such as rings, earrings, necklaces and bracelets. Zuzanna opened an online shop too, that's also why the business grew bigger each day. Antoni, on the other hand, got a promotion he's been wanting for a very long time. A few years passed. And every year on anniversary of Zuzanna's mother's death they would leave black roses on her grave. Black roses symbolize optimism and hope. Other people left red roses on the grave. Red roses symbolize love, passion and romance. Zuzanna liked gardening, so she knew what the colours of roses symbolize. With black roses she wanted to show what her mother taught her when she was a little girl – always have hope and be optimistic, if possible.

Zuzanna was a beautiful lady. She had smooth dark hair and brown eyes, and she was short, slim and fit. Antoni was tall, had hazelnut brown hair, brown eyes and was fit, too. They continued enjoying their life together, even after the unexpected loss of Antoni's mother-in-law. They, unlike most people, did something to achieve their goals, feel comfortable in their own skin and be happier.

Eventually, they were ready to start a family. They ended up with 2 children, a girl and a boy. The kids grew up in a safe and loving household. Siblings often get into fights, just like Antoni and Zuzanna's kids did, but that's completely normal. Especially if they are brother and sister. The kids grew up into fair and kind people, just like their parents. Now you may think that Antoni and Zuzanna had a perfect life, but people conclude that only by reading this story. They got through so much

together, and showed the world around them that all of the obstacles life put ahead of them were not impossible to overcome. People just need to believe that it is possible and have a loved one beside them.

mentor: Katija Tefik-Baćac

institution: OŠ “Ivo Lola Ribar” Labin

Mei Močinić

THE NECKLACE

Once upon a time there lived a boy named Jake. When he was 5 years old, his grandmother passed away and gave him a strange necklace with 3 holes for diamonds. That necklace had 3 holes for three diamonds but two diamonds were missing. He is 14 years old now and he still keeps his grandmother's necklace. When he was 10 years old, he was playing outside and somehow he lost his necklace. When he lost it everything was calmer in the house and there were not so many disasters in his life like always. One day he helped his dad. They were cleaning the basement. When they moved a lot of boxes and old blankets, they found the necklace. They wondered how it got there because the last time he had seen it was outside. That was the day Jake knew something was wrong with that necklace.

One day Jake was going to school as usual and he crossed the crosswalk. He saw that a car was going very fast towards him. He didn't know what to do so he started to panic. But then something pulled him to the other side of the road. He saw that he had come to the other side of the road, but he didn't know how... He thought that some force pulled him, but that was impossible. He decided not to worry about that because he had to worry about school now. When he arrived at school, the first thing he did was greet his friends. He didn't have many friends, but his friends were very good. Their names were Lucy, Mark, Emma and Liam. Everyone was very kind and always ready to help. When they gathered, they decided to go to the classroom. Their first lesson was science. Emma loved science unlike others, she was even their teacher's favourite student. As they were talking about science, they heard some strange noises outside the school. They thought that some kids were joking around, so they didn't worry that much. When they left the school they saw people. Strange people... They were behaving differently and looked like they hadn't slept in hours. Lucy was very scared so they left immediately. They thought it was just a coincidence and that these people were surely here for a reason. When everyone arrived at their homes, Jake and Liam wanted to know who those people were and why they looked like that. Jake told everyone to meet in his basement because that's where they always

meet. When they all arrived in his basement, they decided to check if those people were still there, so they headed towards the school. When they got to where they had last seen those strange people, they found nothing but trash and some torn clothes. When they searched a little better, they found a small green diamond. They didn't know what it was for, but they took it home to examine it. They decided to take the diamond and all those torn clothes home and look at them a little better. When they got home, they put all the clothes and things on the table to look at them better. Mark noticed that some of the clothes were the same as his dad's, and Lucy noticed that there were a lot of clothes like her grandmother's. At that moment Jake remembered that he had a necklace with two diamonds missing, he was still wearing it. He told his friends about the necklace, so they checked to see if the diamond fit into the hole in the necklace. It fit perfectly. Of course, they wondered how that diamond got to those strange people so they decided to investigate it a little bit. The first thing they did was ask Jake's mother where Jake's grandmother got that necklace and how the diamonds disappeared. His mom told them that she got that necklace in a jewelry store across the street from our house and that grandma just woke up one day and those two diamonds weren't on the necklace. After that, Jake and his friends went to the jewelry store. When they arrived in front of the jewelry store, they saw that it was closed and that it looked very old. They were confused and asked some people why it was closed. People said that that jewelry store had already closed 5 years ago and that no one had been in it since then. They were a little bit disappointed because they couldn't find out more about that necklace, but they couldn't do anything about it. The next day after school lessons finished, they continued to search the entire school because yesterday was not the first time that something strange had happened. When they got to the maths classroom, they started searching all the desks and closets. When it was time to search the teacher's desk, they found a blue diamond in the drawer and everyone immediately thought of Jake's necklace.

When they tried to put the diamond in the necklace, it fit perfectly again. The necklace shook and fell to the floor. Everyone was frightened when the spirit of an old lady came out of the necklace. That old lady was Jake's grandmother, actually it was her spirit. "Grandma!" Jake shouted with joy in his voice. "I thought you had left us and that you were no longer with us". "Oh, I never really left" Grandma whispered. "But now we don't have time for fooling around. I have to tell you something you've never really heard before. You have a sister. Her name is Sophia. Your parents have been hiding her from you all this time so she wouldn't tell you the truth. Your parents aren't really your parents. Your sister tried to tell you this many times but

she couldn't because the people that pretended to be your parents wouldn't let her

"Grandma said, hoping that Jake wouldn't be too sad or scared. "But Grandma, why did they do that?" Jake asked with tears in his eyes. "Because they wanted to protect you from your real parents." said grandma. "Your real parents are bad people, Jake. Your real mum was in jail for doing bad things, and when she got out she wanted custody of you but none of us thought it was a good idea because she might do some bad things to you" said grandma. "Jake, don't be sad, please" told him grandma. "It's ok grandma." said Jake with very calm voice. "Real parents have to take care of their child. My real parents didn't do that, did they? They are actually not my real parents then." Jake spoke with a smile on his face. "Parents are not the ones who gave birth to you, they are the ones who raised you and took care of you..." Jake said in a calm voice and started running towards his house. When he entered the house, he went to the kitchen to hug his mother. "I know the truth about everything, Grandma told me everything..." said Jake while hugging his mother. "I'm so sorry Jake, for everything I've done" his mother told him as she almost started to cry. "It's okay mum, you did it to protect me" said Jake. "Yes, to protect you..." said his mother. They stayed in the kitchen for a long time. That day, Jake discovered the truth about his life but also learned that his parents would do anything for him.

mentor: Anita Baranašić

institution: OŠ Sesvetska Sela, Zagreb

Karla Rajković

THE STORM

One rainy evening when Kelly and Jonathan were having dinner at their favorite restaurant, JUDITH'S, Barb and Lin found a body covered in rags. They were excited. Kelly is a writer and in her books she talks about her detective work. Barb is one of the companions in her books, and in the first book, as she says, the body must remain intact, so they left the umbrella they had over the body. But, unfortunately for them, the umbrella was struck by lightning and the body split open. This will make the work of forensics very difficult. They called Dr. Kelly and her team, so they picked up the remains and started researching. First they surveyed people who found the body because they were so excited to find it.

- So you are the ones who found the body. I'm surprised. Most people are disgusted.

- Yes but not us.

She said excitedly because she is a big fan of Kelly's work.

(Lin then Barb)- Could you sign this for us after this. You know, we are big fans of you and your work.

- I'm glad you like it, but we have to get this over with.

"Let me talk a little." Jonathan said to his chin.

As soon as he got some space from Chattering Barb, he started with the real questioning.

- So you found the body? Was the face of the victim known to you?

- Not to me, but to Lin it is. That's why he wasn't as excited as me. It's his niece...

- My best friend's niece. She disappeared a few days ago while he and his wife were on the road. Her things were missing, so they thought she had gone to spend the night with her best friend Martha, our daughter. But when she didn't come back... They suspected the worst.

- He doesn't know yet, I thought I'd let him know but...

- Wait a minute. You could confirm whether she was or not with you.

- Yes, but we weren't in town either, only Martha and Lili.

- Who is Lili now? -Jonathan asked.
- Oh yes, we forgot to tell you. Lili is Ed's niece.
- And who is Ed? - Kelly asked confused.
- And Ed is my best friend.
- And Lili's mom and dad? What about them?
- Oh, they were killed six years ago. Since then, Lili lives with them.
- Does Lili have a brother or sister?

- She has both. Brother and sister are older, both are seventeen. Lili was fifteen but she was more famous and had a little more savings than them. The brother was a little jealous, but the sister supported her in everything. Their names were Liam and Annie.

- Hey Kelly, I need you alone for a while! Don't you think both murders are connected?

- I don't know, I'll ask Julia.

- Okay, I think we're done here. Kelly, sign what you need. I'm waiting for you in the car.

They headed to the lab. All the time Kelly thought about how Lila's own brother was jealous and that gives a good motive. As soon as she arrived at the lab, she immediately rushed to Julia's office to look for what he told her. Jonathan told her to do a data reconstruction to see what happened in the attack on the Wilson family.

Meanwhile with the forensics:

Dr. Nicol, Dr. Roy, and Dr. Lia tried to join the body parts to better identify the injuries and fractures, but first they had to remove the skin and muscle tissue to better study the bones. Dr. Kelly joined them. As soon as Dr. Roy removed the bones, Kelly immediately put them under a magnifying glass. She noticed a large crack on the skull and quickly brought Julia to try to find the weapon that caused the crack. While Kelly and Julia talked about it, Nicol, Lia and their new student Tony look and study the rest of the bones. They found a broken arm. They took that to Julia. She identified both weapons that caused these injuries. She worked with Roy, who deals with reptiles, insects and particles found in the body. They found pieces of wood in the tissue sample from the broken arm. And that piece of wood belongs to a baseball bat. They also found pieces of fake field grass. But it takes a certain amount of force to break an arm, so the man who broke Lili's arm had to know how to use a club.

- And the head? How did that injury occur?

Kelly asked excitedly.

- It was created by something a little harder, like a stone, but we cannot confirm

that. - Dr. Julia said

Then Lia entered the office and asked Julia to reconstruct the possible attack. Then, as Jonathan sat in his office he remembered that he hadn't questioned Lila's brother and sister yet. He brought them into the examination room and Kelly helped since she knows more about the injuries.

- Do you know anything about...

- About the murder of our Lili? Uncle Lin told us.

- So he told you.

They started with the story of the murder, but the sister shed a tear at Lila's picture. Jonathan whispered something to Kelly and they continued their interrogation.

- Do you know anything about the murder?

- No, we don't.

- Did Lili have enemies?

- Not really. But at the last American football game, she got into an argument with a player.

- Really? With who? What's his name?

- His name was Carlos. Carlos Beyond. He and I trained together.

- Okay. Thank you.

While they were driving, Jonathan and Kelly talked a bit and she texted Julia to identify the player who attacked Lili. Julia replied to her message and sent the address where Lila's attacker lives. They arrested him and took him to the station.

- Okay Carlos, we hear you're attacking young high school students now.

- Firstly, call me Blaze. Everyone in the team calls me that. Secondly, I do not attack high school students.

Carlos said angrily and shakily.

- So you didn't attack the high school girl who came to the last game of the season?

Carlos began to sweat lightly.

- No, of course not. I would never attack a colleague. Even though they are younger than me. Here I have access to all cameras. I am the principal's assistant.

And nothing really happened. But then the timer on the screen reminded Kelly that she still had to ask Roy about the time of death, so when they left she immediately called him. Roy cleaned the bones himself so he could study the tissue and by all indications of the tissue the time of death was around nine to eleven o'clock. She thanked Roy and remembered that the timer showed the end time of the match, which was around eight o'clock.

Kelly rushed to Julia's office and told her to do some research on this "Blaze" guy.

- It turns out that he is very popular at that university and that he really easily attacks the recruits. Accused and guilty of some small crimes like petty theft and assault but nothing major. That is until now, if we can prove that he is guilty. - said Julia.

- I knew he was hiding something! - Said Kelly and quickly asked for his address. This time she called the whole team and they headed towards Stonebridge Street where he lived. The parents introduced themselves as Ritta and Rick and let them in but warned that Carlos was asleep. They let them into the room and Carlos woke up. Then he exclaimed:

-WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY ROOM!!!

- We are here to search your room.

They literally turned the whole room upside down and Carlos was sweating like it was 50°C outside. He said that they wouldn't find anything and that they could give up now, but Kelly still found something, Jonathan arrested Carlos and they headed to the labs. When she arrived Dr. Roy told her she had bled to death.

- But that doesn't explain the crack on the head. - said Nicole. Meanwhile under investigation Jonatan was pressuring Carlos to show him the whole video and suddenly he cracked under the pressure and showed the video. The video shows only him hitting Lili with his helmet, causing her to pass out. Carlos then stopped the video and said- I didn't know what to do with her, so I went to look for help, but when I came back, she wasn't there....

- And you expect us to believe you? - Jonathan said.

- Don't believe me, watch the video! - And he really left, but before he came back, someone killed Lili with a baseball bat. Jonathan rushed to Julia's office to sharpen and brighten the picture. It was Lila's sister Annie. Kelly rushed to the house where Lila's brother and sister lived and arrested Annie and took her to an interrogation room.

- Why did you kill your own sister?

- Because it's...Uh...

- Is what, say it!

- She was mean to me because everyone loved her and she kept rubbing it in my face. She treated me like I was the last trash in the world. And mom and dad didn't see what a monster she was and they always did what she wanted. they weren't fair so - I...

- So you what? Wait, you killed them too?

- Yes - then Annie burst into tears. She was not of legal age, so she could not go to prison yet, but she will be kept in the correctional facility for only one year, and then she can go to court.

mentor: Mariza Hrvatin-Mahmutović
institution: OŠ “Ivo Lola Ribar” Labin

Noa Martinazzoli

PARALIE

There was a 15-year-old girl named Mia. She lived in a town called Greenvale which was also the name of the country. In her world everyone talked to their parallel selves. Then, one day she discovered...

Mia meets her parallel self at 10:00 am every day. They talk for hours. Mia has a brother Leo. Their parents Shon and Beth are with their parallel selves all the time, so Mia's grandmother looks after the children. Mia's friends are John and Lisa. They see each other every day.

It was 10 o' clock that day. Mia went to her parallel self and as usual it advised her what to do. Mia2.0 (Mia's parallel self) is not like Mia. Mia is patient, but Mia2.0 is impatient. Still, one can't live without the other. Every day they talk about different things: girls' stuff and other secrets.

Mia attended Jonathan High School. Her favourite subject was Paratravelling where the students learn about theories of travelling into a parallel world. She always enjoyed meeting Mia2.0, but Lisa and John thought that was boring.

One day she found out that Mia2.0 was missing. Mia thought that Mia2.0 was just late so she waited for her. But Mia2.0 did not appear. So Mia headed home and went to bed. The next morning her grandma woke her up. She had just baked cookies with chocolate chips. Mia and Leo adored them. Leo pounced on them, but even though Mia usually eats them all, she didn't taste one. Her grandmother realized something was wrong. "What's bothering you, dear?" she asked her. Mia told her that Mia 2.0 wasn't there and she worried something happened to her. Grandmother told her to have breakfast first and then to check if Mia2.0 was back. Mia agreed.

She didn't see Mia2.0, but she saw a paper glued to the mirror. On the paper it was written that Mia2.0 went to spy on the government because she thought that parallel worlds actually did not exist and that it was all just a government trap.

Mia called Lisa and John to come to her room. She showed them the paper and they were shocked. Mia wanted to go to the "Parallel" world and she remembered her teacher's theory. The theory goes that you have to create a bunch of energy in

front of the mirror and the portal will open. So she did. She created energy with potatoes and treadmill. Mia, Lisa and John all met their parallel selves which told them that Mia2.0 was lost in the vent and that they should rescue her. They made a plan and went to rescue Mia2.0. They called Mia2.0 on her mobile phone to check if she was OK. Mia2.0 said that the government lied about the parallel world thing. The children felt scared about the government's intention, and wanted to warn everyone about it, without the government knowing it.

They decided to go to the government building with a map of the vents. Mia2.0 must have fallen into the lab and the government caught her. They struggled to get through the vent as it was really tight. They arrived to the place where Mia2.0 was, but couldn't get her out.

The children rushed out of the vents to create another plan. Lisa was a genius so she created a weapon that can blind anyone. When they crawled into the government building again, they got into the lab and saw scary things (skulls and toxic trash). They heard footsteps and a voice...there was a scientist talking to somebody about erasing Mia2.0's memory. They also heard that the people in the building had transferred Mia2.0 into a secret room in the basement. Mia, John, Lisa and their parallel selves decided to blind the scientist and get Mia2.0 out. They named themselves The Dimensional Crew. They followed the scientist to the secret room in the basement. The Dimensional Crew blinded everyone in the room except Mia2.0. The Crew stole the keys and broke Mia2.0 out of a cage. Mia2.0 told them what she had heard: that was all a trap and there was no parallel world – it was just a usual town which the scientist divided into two parts.

“My name is not Mia2.0 – it's Rose. Lisa2.0, you are Mariah and John2.0, your name is Mike“, she said. “The government wants all the people in the town dead so they could build the biggest lab in the world“.

The Crew had a plan to stop the apocalypse. The other day The Crew went door to door handing out leaflets telling the people what was going on. Everyone went back to his or her part of the town and did the same thing. Both parts now created a bunch of energy so they broke the scientist's invention. The town was united.

Lisa blinded the people in the government and made them sleep. While they were sleeping, the children erased their memory and then handed them to the police. People took torches and burnt the government building.

Greenvale turned into an ordinary town again. In the place where the government building used to be, people built a big school with a swimming pool and playgrounds. Teachers removed the subject about parallel worlds and added new ones about kindness and how to be a better person.

The Crew built their hideout in a treehouse. They have been best friends ever since. Everyone has got new passions. Mia started singing for musicals. Lisa enjoys doing experiments with baking soda and vinegar. John and Mike have joined a football club and Rose has learnt knitting. They are the best team. Everyone wins prizes in competitions. They also compete about who is going to have more trophies. Sometimes they fight about an issue and don't talk to each other for some time, but then they apologize and the Dimensional Crew is back again.

mentor: Maja Mitrović Laškarin

institution: OŠ "Antun Nemčić Gostovinski" Koprivnica

Maria Milanović Vugrač

MY BESTIE AND ME

One sunny day a new girl came to our class. She was tall and slim and she had long blond hair. Her name was Mary and she was very shy. Mary was a little worried about coming to a new school. But I liked her at first sight because she was really nice and sweet.

In form class our teacher said, „Today we have Mary with us.“

“Welcome to our class, Mary!“, we said.

“Maria!“

“Yes, teacher?“ I said.

“Can you show Mary our bathroom and the library?“

“Yes, I would like that!“

The bell rang for the end of class.

“Where is the library?“ Mary asked me.

“Here, I’ll show you. First you go left and then straight and there’s the library. It’s open now. It closes at 6 pm.“

“Thank you very much!“, Mary said.

“You’re welcome! Oh, yes, I almost forgot! The bathroom is across our English classroom.“

“Now I know, thanks!“

“Have fun, bye! See you, Mary!“

When I was walking home I saw Mary again.

“Hey, Mary! What are you doing?“

“Oh, Maria, my little puppy Max ran away yesterday and I’m worried!“

“No way!“

“Yes!“, Mary cried.

“Just a minute! Is your puppy brown?“, I asked.

“Yes, he is.“

“He is right here! Look!“

“You are the best, Maria! Thank you so much!“

“Well, actually he saw you so he found you! That means you are a really good owner!” I said.

“Maybe...”, Mary said.

“You are!”

“I’m glad to hear that. Maria, do you want to stay for a glass of juice?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t. Mom is waiting for me because we are going to visit my aunt.”

“OK. Bye!”, Mary said.

Next day at school Mary and I sat together and it was amazing, the best! We laughed in the 15-minute break.

But, around a month later, I told Mary we were moving. I didn’t know where, but it was difficult.

One day Mary said: “We are going to drink that juice today!”

“Yes, sure! Finally!”

We were drinking juice and talking about school and how to stay such good friends like now.

“I think we are moving to another city,” I said.

“Come on!” Mary was surprised.

“I’m not sure, I’ll know more tomorrow.”

“OK. And when are you moving?”

“In June,” I replied.

“So soon? In six months?”, Mary asked.

“Yes... But we are going to be just fine, you and me!”

Time was flying like crazy! Month after month, May came.

“Maria, I never asked you again, where are you moving?”

“Well...to...”

“Tell me already!”, Mary said.

“To your neighbour’s house, Mary! We are going to be even closer now! I’m so, so happy!”

“Me too!!!”, Mary screamed.

School was almost done, and Mary and me were even better friends! Almost best friends. Mary’s birthday was in two days, and I had just a perfect present!

That was one beautiful necklace. Actually, there were two parts and when they are matched it says: U are my bestie!

The day Mary celebrated her birthday was amazing! And Mary was so happy!

“Here you go my bestie!”, I said.

“No way! My God! I wanted this necklace! How?... How did you know?”

“I did not, I just thought that’s good idea.”

“I think that is my second favourite present,” Mary said.

“What is the first one?”

“Well...”

“Come on, tell me, Mary!”

“OK, OK! My mom told me I’m going to be a...”

I couldn’t wait for Mary’s answer. “What? A... What?!”

“A big sister! She told me today! I am so glad! I can’t believe this! I have a bestie and I am going to be an older sister!” Mary said.

“Do you know if it is a boy or a girl?”

“It is...”

“A boy? A girl?” I asked again.

“A boy!” Mary said.

“Wow! I can’t believe it!”

“Me neither! This is the best year of my life!”

My bestie and me lived in one beautiful world full of happiness. We found out that life can be sad too, but we need to be positive and find happiness in friends and family.

*mentor: Marta Barišić**institution: OŠ "Jesenice", Dugi Rat**Klara Cvitanović*

THE SCHOOL CHRISTMAS SHOW

The school Christmas show was approaching. Me and my friends were attending extracurricular English class when the teacher showed us a script for a school play that we could perform at the Christmas show. We read it and we all liked it very much.

The name of the play was: "Christmas Around the World". We decided who would play the roles: my friend played mum, me and the other girl were going to play daughters and two other girls, and a boy were going to play puppets. In the play children think that you can't have Christmas without snow, reindeer, and Christmas carols. Mum explains them they can do that if only they have love and faith.

We all took our scripts home and started practising. We were reading it and learning by heart. We were meeting up for practising at school. Every day we were getting better. We were laughing a lot, too. Sometimes we were even practising it in the staff room! It was a real fun. Sometimes we fooled around and laughed a lot, but we tried to learn our text as well as possible.

There were only a few days left until the event and we were all super excited! We practised speaking our text expressively. We tried to learn it well so as not to forget it on the stage. And the day of the Christmas show finally arrived! We were waiting for our turn to come out on the stage. Everybody was excited but also afraid that we would forget something or make a mistake. Fortunately, all were encouraging us, so we calmed down a little bit.

It was time to show up on the stage. We came in front of the students and teachers and started reciting. Suddenly a girl forgot her line and there were a few seconds of complete silence. Some kids in the auditorium started laughing, which made me angry. My friends and I helped her to continue. In the end there was a huge applause. We left the stage and the girl who made a mistake started crying because she was very upset. We all comforted her and told her that she was great. Even the teacher said that our performance was excellent.

It's okay to make mistakes. We learn from them, and we get better. The point is that we need to have fun in everything we do. We must remember that, and it is the most important thing to learn.

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

Zita Bajić

CLEAR LENSE

Water was dripping... It smelled horrible.. But it looked normal? Miley was at home, the birds were chirping, and it was still spring. When Miley got up and looked around, she saw her glasses were out of their case. The case was on the other side of the room; as Miley grabbed her glasses and started towards it, she gave up halfway there. The case was so far away and she was too tired and couldn't breathe, so she grabbed her inhaler off the desk and placed her glasses down. After she inhaled, she put down the inhaler and sat down, as she realised something was off. She didn't have a dripping tap and she'd taken out the garbage this morning, so what was it that was dripping and smelled so bad? She ran to the desk to take her glasses and inhaler, so that she could go to her room. Running, she bumped into something, but nothing was there... She didn't flinch, in fact, she just continued to her room. Her room was messy and unorganized, but she didn't mind and she sat down on her bed to think. She kept thinking, thinking, thinking, until she gave up. Her glasses were in her hand and she looked at them like a poor puppy on the street. She decided to put her glasses on.

"What is this?!" swiftly she threw her glasses at the wall. "Why is there a zombie in my room?!"

Her inhaler was thankfully next to her. She kept inhaling because she was in a state of shock. Her glasses didn't break and she was surprised; she picked them up to see if she was dreaming. She wasn't. Petrified, she ran outside with her glasses and inhaler to find answers. Outside it was warm and sunny, it smelled terrible and the air was hard to breathe. Her glasses were in her left hand and her inhaler in her right hand. As she put her glasses on, she had her eyes closed, and she said, "I don't think I'm ready for this."

About to give up, she heard somebody yell, "Help!"

She turned around to see what was happening and, to her surprise, it was a young man her age being chased by zombies.

"Please, help me!" he screamed once again.

Not knowing what to do, she threw whatever was in her right hand and ran in his direction to help him. She grabbed him under his arms to drag him to safety.

“Can you tell me what’s happening?” she asked, trying to catch her breath.

Weakly, he tried to say something, but ended up just muttering, “Meh... help... me... blue... bottle.” His face was turning pale and he looked fairly weak.

Miley believed he wanted water, so she ran to get some, but she found just... blue bottles. She didn’t know the difference, so she took one and ran back to the man who was pointing at his neck that had a bite mark. Instinctively, Miley splashed water on his wound and hoped that it was the right thing to do. Thankfully, he got his color back and started breathing rapidly, to catch all the air he could. Still curious, Miley repeated her question:

“Can you tell me what’s happening?”

“Can you let a man breathe, please, I almost died!”

“Sorry, I forgot I saved your life,” said Miley with frustration.

He looked at her and gave her a short and irritated smile. “There’s an apocalypse! Happy?!” he said to get it over with.

“Thanks for all the useful intel,” Miley blew him off. “Can you tell me something that isn’t obvious?”

“That’s all there is to know!” he yelled, scratching around the wound.

“Can you at least tell me what bit you?” she said, wanting to know more.

“What do you think?! I was being chased by zombies and I fell, so, please, connect the dots.”

They turned their backs on each other to show they were mad. Miley realised both of her hands were empty; she had dropped her inhaler...

“Please, help me whatever your name is!” she said, holding back her tears.

“My name is Charles and what do you need help with?” knowing he owed her a favour for saving his life, he had to help her.

“I dropped my inhaler while saving you! Also, I’m Miley.”

The conversation was just getting interesting, but then a zombie broke in!

“GLaWhh” the zombie moaned.

“Run!” as Charles said that, he swiftly picked Miley up, put her on his shoulder and carried her to safety.

Miley took off her glasses and realised everything was normal. It seemed as if her glasses were magical. To check, she put them on again and it was disgusting; she took them off and everything was normal. The glasses didn’t break when she threw them and she could see the real world when she took them off. Looking at her glasses, she

realised they were a bit dusty, so she used her shirt to wipe them and then put them back on.

Butterflies flying, birds singing, flowers blooming - it was perfect! Questioning everything that had happened and was happening, she decided to slap herself because Charles was looking at her weirdly, as if she'd blown him a raspberry. She decided to see if this was real, so she took her glasses off again, only to see the real world. Miley realised her glasses showed the perfect reality when cleaned and a terrible reality when dirty.

Cheerfully, she tried to hug Charles, but he left. Miley went home not suspecting a thing, yet Charles followed her.

"I've found her. She's the one," he said.

mentor: Marija Jukić

institution: OŠ Ivane Brlić Mažuranić, Koška

Tea Martić

THE MYSTERY OF MARSELLIEN CITY

Once upon a time, there lived a girl. Her parents were the owners of the largest company in the city. One day, they had to go to a meeting on another continent. She had to stay all alone with her two little brothers.

After they left it started raining and the storm descended on the city. Her brothers were scared and then the power went out. Then there was a loud crash of thunderbolt. Little brothers started screaming. She tried to silence them, but they didn't listen. The main door opened and the aliens entered. Brothers screamed from all the voice, but the aliens just walked past her and knocked her to the floor, and took little brothers with them. She screamed and tried to grab her brother's leg, but she failed. She started yelling for help but no one heard her. She cried and cried for hours but it didn't help. She fell asleep on the cold floor all in tears.

Tomorrow morning she woke up and realized that one of the aliens lost one of their walkie-talkies. She tried to use it but it had too many buttons. She tried to remember the code aliens had on their boots because she thought that was their secret code, but she couldn't. She tried to call her parents but they had no signal. At that moment she saw alien footprints. She started following them and they took her to the forbidden forest. At the entrance, she saw a few aliens walking past her, but they acted like they didn't see her, or maybe they didn't see her at all because they had something black covering their eyes. She tried to come closer to the middle of the forest where she assumed was a spaceship. But at the moment she came into the circle which belongs to aliens and the alarm activated. She ran the fastest she could but the king of aliens caught her. They put her in jail. She tried to scream but her voice just disappeared. She couldn't believe what was happening. But then unexpectedly Superman came through the ceiling and tried to break into the jail but the aliens started shooting at him. He stopped all the bullets and unlocked the door of the jail. He saved her. But not her little brothers. She asked him can he help her save her brothers but it was too late, the spaceship was already going back to Mars. She cried and Superman surprised her by saying that he also owns his flying spaceship

but that it was not finished. She followed him to his base and there he gave her food and drink. He told her that his spaceship was supposed to be ready in two days. She couldn't wait till then but she knew how to find her brothers. Both of them had smartwatches that had real-time locations. They were in some place called Marsellien City.

In two days the spaceship was ready and they started their flight. When they landed on Mars the alien army started shooting at them. Superman knew the alien language so he told them that they came all the way there to save her little brothers. The king laughed at him and told him that they did not want to kill her brothers but they wanted to bring her brothers to be part of their alien school. She was shocked only because of such confusion. She told them that she would give them everything just to get her brothers back. They wanted to keep her brothers but Superman had a better idea. He gave them two robots that looked like normal people in exchange for her brothers. They liked the idea and accepted it with ease.

She was so happy to see her brothers. They all said goodbye to the aliens and got in the spaceship... at that moment she heard someone calling her name. She woke up and realized that all was just a dream. The brothers called her to come closer to the window and look at a miracle...they saw a flying spaceship by the moon. "So was this really a dream?" she thought and got back to her brothers.

mentor: Tajana Kradija

institution: OŠ “Tin Ujević”, Osijek
(učenica je odselila u OŠ Pakoštane)

Mia Kurtov

FLOWERLAND

My name is Fay, and my name means “fairy”, so you can easily guess that I am a fairy. I live in Flowerland with my brother. In the land of the fairies, there is a tradition where siblings live together, and their parents live alone in another house. This tradition prepares kids for the future life with their family.

Flowerland is placed on an unexplored island, in the middle of an ocean. Humans haven't found us yet, although we have been here for thousands of years. The whole Flowerland is surrounded by a meadow and flowers, so that's why it's called “Flowerland”. An average fairy lives for about fifty years. As we know, humans discovered only 5% of the ocean, so I hope they still won't find us. All the fairies have wings and they can fly. All the fairies have different powers. Some powers are helpful and some powers are not.

I will tell you a story about what happened to us, something that I will never forget. One day, a loud noise woke me up early in the morning. Somehow, I knew that Flowerland is in the danger. I got dressed and then I left the house. I saw a huge boat coming near Flower Island. I woke my brother up, we packed our things and left the house. So many fairies fled to many different directions, but which one was the safe one? The fairies started looking for a new home. My brother, our family and I traveled together. After a few days of traveling, many fairies started flying together, to protect each other. We fled, and fled for weeks, but we still couldn't find a new home.

One day, it was raining like crazy. Suddenly, one of my fairy friends saw an island. All the fairies started flying to that island. That island was undiscovered. Since my dad was a good builder, he built my family a wooden house there. I wanted to explore the island, but I waited for the rain to stop.

The night came really fast, and the rain didn't stop. I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, I told my family that I was going to look for food. The island was not so big, so I couldn't get lost easily. I walked through the forest. I walked for a

few minutes, when I saw a house. The house was small. I was curious, so I explored it. There was nothing in that house, except for a bookshelf. And there was only one book on the bookshelf. I opened it. The only thing that was written in it was “Flowerland will be attacked by monsters, not by humans. This island will be attacked by the same monsters.”

These words made me speechless for a moment. Since I have a healing power, the war with the monsters may end up with our win. I am a fire fairy, so my fire powers may help us, too. My brother is a nature fairy. He can talk to animals. My dad is a sea fairy. My mom is a butterfly fairy. She can talk to butterflies. She is basically one of them.

I heard some strange noise, so I started flying home. I got home fast. My family and friends waited for me impatiently. Our family friend said that she saw a green little monster. My dad said that we had to pack our things. It was too late. The monsters started attacking us. Since my aunt has the same powers as me, I went to the house where I found the book. When I arrived, I opened that book and started reading it. The book said that monsters’ weaknesses are butterflies. That was great, because my mom is a butterfly fairy. Sometimes, she could turn into a butterfly. I closed the book when I was done with reading. I came back home. My mom was hiding in the house because she used to think that her powers would be useless in this situation. I told her that she was wrong.

My family, family friends and I started fighting with the monsters. The monsters were small, but there were many of them. The butterflies couldn’t kill the monsters, they just made them run away. Since my brother had nature powers, he could make a cage for the monsters. I made a plan. I told my brother to make a cage using his powers. But he had to close the cage when all the monsters were in it. My brother did what I said. My mom somehow forced the monsters to get into the cage. She used her butterfly powers.

My plan worked. Not exactly how I imagined, but it worked. One of the monsters’ leaders was injured. I healed him using my healing powers. The fairies and the monsters made a deal that they would never fight again. The monsters also fixed Flower Island. They are great builders, like my dad. They have a lot in common. My dad built them houses. The monsters were deadly afraid of my mother because she was a butterfly.

That same day, my family, family friends and I came back to our real home, to Fairyland. The fairies became friends with the monsters and they never got into a fight ever again.

*mentor: Božana Čičak**institution: OŠ "Retfala" Osijek**Petra Muha*

LILY AND THE DINOSAURS

One day a girl named Lily was going to the history museum. That day was the BEST day of her life! She discovered something that no human even dreamt of!

Lily's diary: the fourth of March

Tomorrow I am going to a history museum. I hope it's not going to be boring! I can't wait to see the fossils of dinosaur but I don't know if I will be able to see T-rex because they found one more of his bones.

-Lily! Hurry up!-

-Coming mum!-

Lily packed her bag and ran down the stairs.

-Woof! Woof!-

-You can't go Ruby. You know that dogs can't go to a museum.-

Her mum and dad were already in the car.

-Lily, your father and I need to go to the store to buy meat for lunch and some dog food for Ruby. Do you want me to stay? Will you be ok on your own?-

-Yes mum, I will be fine. Don't worry.-

-Ok. Bye Lily!-

-Bye mum! Bye dad! Ok, so where are the dinosaurs? Oh, there they are!-

Lily found a big closet, but she thought that was the door. When she opened the closet, she found a time machine. She pressed a button and the minute she pressed it, she disappeared.

-Where am I? Aaaaaaaaaa!-

A T-rex came to Lily and pushed her in a corner.

-T t t... T-rex?-

-T? It's just Rex.-

-A! You can speak?-

-Yes. Why not?-

-You 're an animal.-

-So what?-

- Ok Lily, you are back in time. Wait. What did you say your name is?-
- Rex.-
- Hi Rex, I'm Lily. Please don't eat me!-
- I won't. You are too small! Even for smaller dinosaurs.-
- Ok.-
- Wait, what's that smell? What's in your pocket?-
- Lily opened her pocket and took out a dog treat.
- It's a dog treat. Do you want to try it?-
- Yes!-
- Here you... A! Ouch! You almost ate my whole hand.-
- Sorry! But this dog treat is the best thing I have ever eaten!-
- Ok. But...-
- Do you have some more?-
- Yes but first, what's for lunch? I maybe have some cookies...
- The T-rex was holding a Pterosaur.
- What's that?! And wait, it's still alive! You are not going to eat him right?-
- Well...-
- Drop him. Drop him right now! I will give you a treat.-
- Rex dropped the dinosaur that was a lot smaller than him.
- T t t thanks.-
- No problem. What's your name?-
- Lola.-
- What's that sound?-
- It's a triceratops.-
- Let's go and find it-
- OK!-
- They followed the triceratops to the lake.
- Hi!-
- Hi? Who are you?-
- I'm Lily and these are Rex and Lola-
- Nice to meet you, I'm Tracy.-
- Tracy Triceratops.-
- What?-
- Oh nothing! I wanted to tell you that all of you will die if we don't stop a meteor that's coming from space!
- What's a meteor and what's space?-
- No time to explain what space is, but a meteor is a giant rock. It's that thing in the

sky. The glowing ball that's falling.-

-Wait, if we don't die how will humans live? We don't have time Lily, we need to get you to a time machine!-

-But I don't know where it is.-

-I know! I saw it when I was flying.-

-Great, let's go!-

They had to go through jungles, over lakes, they had to fight dinosaurs and find their way to the time machine. But the worst comes last, they had to get past a volcano and lava!

-How do you get across a lake of lava?-

-We can go on that rock.-

-Great idea, let's go!-

-The meteor is close! Hurry up! Let's go!-

Rex and Tracy pushed the rock in the lava and they all jumped on, except Lola. She was flying. They got past the lake of lava safely.

-We have to hurry!-

-I know!-

-Lets go.-

-There is it.-

-Lily, hurry, get in!-

-But I don't want to go!-

-You have to!-

-Ok. But I can visit you, right?-

-Sure, just not right before the meteor falls. Ok?-

Lily ran to hug the dinosaurs and then to the time machine.

-Bye!-

-Bye Lily!-

-Bye!-

Lily pushed the same button like before she got back in time and in the same minute she was in front of the big closet.

-Hi Lily!-

-Mum! Dad! You're back!-

-Yes. Did you learn anything?-

-Yes! Two things! Never touch big closets in museums and T-rex loves dog treats.-

Lily's mum and dad were watching her like she is a dinosaur for a few minutes but then they all just forgot she told them that. Lily never told her story but she was very happy to meet real living dinosaurs.

mentor: Tatjana Kristek

institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek

Irena Dinjar

BIRTHDAY MIRACLE

It was not that long ago. A little girl named Anna lived in London with her parents. Anna was eleven years old, and she was a nice and sweet girl. Every summer she would go on vacation with her family. Summer was her favorite season of the year. She would enjoy long night walks, swimming in the sea, and loved to play with her friends. Everything in her life was perfect until a horrible thing happened. A car accident. That was the worst day of her life. Unfortunately, she ended up in a wheelchair. She was even more worried because her birthday and summer were in two months.

Time flew so fast. For her that two months was like two minutes. Summer came and she was so sad. That was strange for her because, as I said, summer was her favorite season. They soon went on vacation but this year a bit earlier because of Anna's birthday. Her wish was to celebrate it at the seaside. When they finally came, Anna went into her room. Her grandparents lived at the seaside so every year they would go to the same town. Anna was so happy because she finally saw her grandparents. She started to unpack things and when she was finally over, she sat next to the window and watched the beach. The view was beautiful. But then all the happiness in her disappeared when she saw the kids playing. The tears started falling like rain. The pain in her was giant. She wiped off her tears and promised herself that she would try to be brave.

A few days later it was her birthday. The day was sunny and warm. She was so happy. She got lots of presents. She opened the first one. It was a present that her parents gave her. It was a beautiful gold necklace with an amethyst crystal. Anna loved crystals and the purple colour, she was incredibly happy and grateful for it. The next present was from her grandparents. They gave her a beautiful white dress. It was a white dress with dark red roses all over it. Her favorite color was dark red, and she loved roses so that was a perfect gift. She was done with opening presents, so it was time for a cake. Anna loved cakes. Especially when her grandmother made them. It was a nice chocolate cake with raspberries on top. That was her dream cake.

Everyone tried their best to make Anna happy because of the accident. When Anna saw the cake, she was thrilled. Her smile was bigger than ever. The family started singing her a birthday song, but she did not listen to them because she was thinking. She knew that when the song was over, she needed to blow out the candles and make a wish. She wanted to be able to stand on her legs again, but she knew that was so stupid to wish for something like that because it was impossible. She felt like her disability was stopping her from having fun. Then she realized that the song was already over. She decided to wish to stand on her legs again. At least one week, day, minute, or even a second would mean so much to her. When she blew out the candles everybody started clapping and cheering. The rest of the day she spent with her family. She even made some new friends that accepted her. She was sad because she could not run or walk with them, but they were nice, and they helped her out with everything she needed. The day was coming closer to the end. The moon was up, and the sunset was adorable. The day was over, and they got back home.

Anna ate dinner with her family and then she went to sleep. Before she could fall asleep, Anna was rethinking that marvelous day. This time she was mad at herself. One of her favorite parts of birthdays was making a birthday wish and now she was thinking how the stupid idea was to wish for something like that. In her position, it was just dreaming. Unrealistic! All that ended soon because she fell asleep like a baby.

The morning came fast, and she woke up. She felt different that day. It was like something happened in her sleep. It was not a terrible thing for sure, but she did not feel like herself. It was like she was healed. Anna started laughing because she hadn't even had the courage to think about it. It is impossible! Even doctors told her that her disability cannot be healed. But she was aware of how she felt. Stand-up! was the only sentence in her mind. She listened. Then she put her foot on the floor, tears started to flow down her cheeks. She started calling everyone in the house. When they came, they were shocked. Her mom started crying with her too. Her grandparents just stood stunned. Anna's dad hugged her and with him everyone else. They were so happy for their little girl. Mom ran to grab a phone and call the nearest hospital in town. When they got to the hospital everyone was shocked. The doctor said he had never seen anything like this in his entire life. They started to search for anything that could help them to explain this, but truly nothing like this ever happened in the history of medicine. There was no good explanation for this.

Anna was so excited to walk again. There are no words in this galaxy that could express her happiness. All the doctors started asking her how this happened, but

she obviously didn't know. She started to think a bit and then she remembered her birthday wish. She was even happier now. She told her parents, and they didn't know what to say. Everything was a big mystery unsolved. But I know the secret. It was just a birthday miracle.

*mentor: Tea Horvatić**institution: OŠ Strahoninec**Saša Andrašec*

MONDAY

It was just another Monday, or I thought so. We had chemistry first. My friend Jessica and I are both in same class, but when I walked in, she wasn't there. I thought she was just late, but she didn't show up. The bell rang. I still had hope that Jessica would come.

As the day went on, I still thought that she would come but there was nothing. I walked home, like we would do every day, but I couldn't enjoy it as much as when she was there. I walked past her house and what I saw in front of it shocked me. There was a big truck. Just as I came by the house, it drove away. I saw a guy putting a big sign in front of the house that said "on sale" and it had a phone number, so I wrote it down.

When I came home, I was sad. Last time I heard from Jessica was Friday. I was confused why she didn't tell me anything about leaving. I called her for hours, but nobody answered the phone. That's when everything started to go downhill. My grades dropped; I just didn't have the energy to do anything. I slept a lot because at first, I thought I was just tired, but as weeks passed; I realized that something inside me just isn't the same anymore. The tiredness that I felt wasn't physical, it was mental. I didn't want to tell anyone, especially not my parents because I didn't want to make them sad, so I smiled every day, even though I didn't feel like it. I couldn't stop thinking about everything that happened and because of that I couldn't feel happy anymore. The person that made me the happiest suddenly just left and I didn't know why. I was really hurt; it felt like something inside me died.

A few months after she left, my parents kept realizing that something was wrong, so they talked to me about the grades and about the fact that I was always in my room. They asked me how they can help, but I just told them I was tired. They didn't even realize that Jessica had left. Soon people at school started realizing the same thing. My other friends wanted to help me, they knew that Jessica and I were very close. One time the teacher called me to ask me about the grades because I used to be the perfect student who knew everything, did every homework, and studied for every test but now, the best grade I could get was C.

I kept living like that for years. Everybody told me that time heals everything, but it didn't. It was almost the end of the school year, the year I had to graduate, and I just couldn't accept that I would do it without my best friend. I tried to find where Jessica was; I looked and looked for a few weeks, but I couldn't find anything and that's when I lost hope. I felt like I just had to accept the thing that she isn't with me anymore; I had to move on.

The final week and the last Monday of my high school began. It was hard because of all the exams which I had to study for if I wanted to go forward in life. I walked into the classroom, and I felt different this time. I felt like something was about to happen. Something good this time. As I walked in, I looked over to my desk, it was empty; but someone was sitting at the desk next to it. As the person raised their head, I saw a familiar face. And when they finally said something, I realized it was Jessica. I dropped my books, and I couldn't believe it. I thought this was all a dream and I waited for the moment when my mom would wake me up but, that didn't happen. Jessica stood up and walked to me, pulled me into a hug. I suddenly felt happy again because I was going to graduate with my best friend. I thought she was gone forever but now I see her again. That moment changed my life.

Jessica and I talked a lot. We had a lot to catch up on. She also told me the reason why she left and where she was. It turned out that her aunt had cancer. She lived in California (which is far away from South Carolina, where Jessica and I live). They were in a hospital for a long time. The hospital bills were expensive, so Jessica got a part-time job at the store. She wanted to help as much as she could, so she also sold her phone and that is why she did not answer my calls and messages. Her aunt is now cured of cancer, and we are all happy for that. We had a whole week just for us. One day we went to the cinema, another day to a café. I don't even remember everything because I enjoyed the moment. Then, everything was back to how it used to be. My grades were back to normal, I didn't have to fake a smile or lie about how I felt. I was truly happy again, but the most important thing is that Jessica is back.

Now, I am surrounded with people that I love and that love me. Respect the time that you spend with special people, because you don't know when it or how it will end.

*mentor: Nataša Grubišić**institution: OŠ Sesevetska Sela**Maksim Babić*

GUARDIAN OF AROIA

Aroia is a world filled with magic and mystery, where ancient forests and snowy mountain peaks meet sprawling cities and sandy beaches. It is home to a diverse array of creatures, from humans and elves to dragons and griffins.

At the heart of Aroia lies the great city of Arin, a hub of trade and culture where all manner of beings coexist peacefully. Arin is ruled by a council of powerful mages, who use their magic to keep the peace and protect the city from threats both within and without.

Beyond the city walls, Aroia is a wild and dangerous place, filled with ancient ruins and hidden dangers. Many brave adventurers seek their fortune in the untamed wilderness, braving the elements and facing down fearsome monsters in search of treasure and glory.

There are also many different factions and groups vying for power and influence within Aroia. The powerful four clans hold sway over the forests, while the dwarves have carved out a kingdom in the mountains. The nomadic halflings roam the grasslands, and the merfolk rule the oceans. Despite the many dangers and conflicts that plague Aroia, it is a world full of wonder and opportunity, where magic and technology coexist and anything is possible.

One day, as Ai was out gathering berries, he stumbled upon an ancient tome hidden in the roots of a tree. It was a book of magic, filled with spells and incantations that could bend the very fabric of reality. Ai was fascinated by the book and spent hours pouring over its pages, learning all he could about its secrets. And as he read, he began to feel a strange power growing within him. It wasn't long before Ai discovered that he had a natural talent for magic. He began practicing the spells and incantations, honing his skills until he was a master of the arcane arts.

With his newfound powers, Ai set out on a quest to save Aroia from the hux. Hux are big wolf like creatures with big teeth. Ai was a skilled hunter, renowned throughout the kingdom for prowess in tracking and killing dangerous creatures. When the king heard of a pack of hux terrorizing the countryside, he called upon Ai to rid the land of the threat.

Ai set out into the dense forest, his bow and arrows at the ready. He stalked the hux, studying their patterns and movements. When he saw an opportunity, he struck, unleashing a flurry of

arrows that took down several of the beasts. The remaining hux tried to flee, but Ai was faster. He chased them down, his sword flashing as he slays the remaining hux. In the end, the pack was defeated, and the people of the kingdom rejoiced at the news of their victory.

Ai returned to the castle, where the king rewarded him with gold and honors. But Ai cared little for such things. For him, the satisfaction of a job well done was all the reward he needed. As Ai's fame grew, more and more people came to him seeking help with various problems and challenges. He became a respected figure throughout Aroia, known for his bravery, intelligence, and powerful magic.

But even with all his success, Ai never forgot his humble beginnings. He used his wealth and influence to help those in need, using his magic to heal the sick and protect the innocent.

One day, Ai received word of a great evil threatening to destroy Aroia. It was a powerful sorceress, bent on enslaving the entire world and ruling with an iron fist. She had already conquered several neighboring kingdoms, and was now turning her sights on Aroia. Ai knew he had to stop her, but he couldn't do it alone. He gathered together a group of skilled warriors and mages, and set out to face the sorceress and her armies. The battle was fierce and brutal, with both sides suffering heavy losses. But in the end, Ai and his allies emerged victorious, defeating the sorceress and her minions.

The people of Aroia rejoiced at the news of their victory, and Ai was hailed as a hero. He was given the highest honor in the land, and became known as the protector of Aroia, a title he wore with pride.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Tonka Podrug

MY DREAM ABOUT BECOMING A MERMAID

Turtles are my favourite animals, so one night I dreamed that I had a magic necklace with which I could turn into any creature, but I had to see it.

And so one summer I travelled to a lonely island. I was there with my parents at the beach. I was bored of sunbathing, so I went to the sea and saw a sea turtle. I wanted to become a sea turtle named Kora. When I dived, I suddenly understood all the other sea turtles. That was strange to me because I understood animals that normally don't vocalize at all. They took me to the reef and the food. There I saw a being that many people think is only in fairy tales. It was a mermaid. My heart was beating like crazy because my dream had finally come true. I quickly turned into a mermaid (the turtles looked at me with astonishment) and approached her. Her name was Una. She took me to her mom the queen of the sea. Una, me and her friends had fun for a long time, and then I heard my parents calling me from the shore.

I quickly said goodbye to Una and the others, then hurried to the surface. I surfaced near the rock and turned into a normal little girl as I entered the sea, and swam to my parents. They interrogated me without too much pressure, but I kept the real truth about the underwater world to myself as a secret because there is no way they would believe me.

mentor: Adriana Kranjac Mišković

institution: Oš Rikard Katalinić Jeretov, Opatija

Neva Kulišić

A FUN LITTLE ADVENTURE

It was a snowy night. Ophelia was sitting in her bed staring at the window. The snowflakes were so enchanting. Almost as if they are dancing. She was drinking hot chocolate and watching Netflix.

„Ophelia, your friend is calling you on the phone!“ her aunt Rachel shouted from the kitchen.

You see, Ophelia was staying at her aunts house in a little village in the middle of the forest. She was enjoying it there, peace and quiet and the best thing? No one was judging her. There she was in shorts and a her aunt’s old shirt, running downstairs with Christmas socks that were ripped at the ankle because she fell the day earlier.

„Alright, I’m here. Oh! By the way did you make pancakes?“

„Not yet, I still haven’t made the batter, but I think I’m going to make gingerbread cookies instead.“

„Aw, man I really wanted pancakes.“

„Eh, too bad, now answer the phone.“

Ophelia picked up the phone. Going upstairs, she took her headphones from the desk in the hallway.

„Hey, you called?“

„Yeah, wanted to ask you if I can stay at your aunt’s house because my family is going to my

grandma’s house and I really don’t want to go and since your aunt’s house is close to my grandma’s is it possible that I stay for a few nights?“

„Yes of course!“

„Thank you so much, I really wanted to visit.“

„See you on Friday then, bye!“

„Bye!“

Ophelia resumed the Netflix series she was watching. She was really excited that she gets to spend her winter holidays with her bestfriend Caroline.

Caroline and Ophelia met at the lamp post near the forest pathway. That lamp post was the only source of light at night, aside from lights in cabins.

„Hey, I’m so glad you came!“

„Yeah, me too.“

„Yeah so, first we’re going to have lunch, and then we are going to go sledding, and the best part?

Monica is also coming!“

„Seriously?“

„Yes, but let’s have lunch now i’m starving.“

Ophelia and Caroline entered the cabin, filled with the sweet smell of gingerbread and hot chocolate.

„Come on in girls!“

„Wow, it smells amazing Miss.“

„Thank you Caroline, and please, call me Rachel. You two can go watch a movie, and I’ll bring you lunch. It’s snowing a lot right now, but when it stops you can go outside and play.“

„Thanks a lot auntie!“

Ophelia and Caroline headed upstairs, as they did the attic stairs creaked.

„Hey Caroline?“

„Yeah?“

„We should watch Coraline, it’s really cool, and also a little bit creepy but perfect for winter.“

„Yeah sure, but didn’t you watch it, like a hundred times with Monica?“

„Yeah, but it’s amazing, trust me.“

„Alright.“

Just as Caroline said alright, the doorbell rang.

„Oh, that’s Monica.“

Ophelia said, opening the door.

„Hey guys, nice to see you!“

„ Monica!“

„ You came earlier than expected, isn’t it a storm outside?“

„It stopped actually.“

„Well, since it the storm stopped, let’s go sledding now!“

„ Sure, but weren’t we supposed to watch Coraline?“

„Yeah, but since the storm stopped now, let’s go now, we can watch the movielater.“

„ Yeah I can’t wait!“

Monica, and Caroline were already dressed, but Ophelia had to go dress appropriate for the weather. They went to the forest since it was the best place for sledding,

there was a frozen lake in the forest for ice skating, but the ice was too thin this year.

The girls had a lot of fun, but the sky was getting dark quickly, there was definitely a storm coming.

“Hey, we should go back, it’s getting dark.”

Ophelia looked at the sky, then looked back at Monica.

“Yeah, let’s go get Caroline.”

Caroline was downhill, with the sleigh, that was now broken.

“Hey Caroline we need-” “What happened?”

“I accidentally bumped into a tree, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Hey, it’s alright, are you okay though?”

“I have a cut on my forehead, but I’m alright, thanks.”

“Oh no.”

Monica looked worried. “What’s wrong?”

Ophelia and Caroline looked up, and there was a huge tree that fell down and was blocking the path that they were going to use to get back at

Ophelia’s house.

“What should we do now?”

“I don’t know, that’s the only way to my house, and I don’t know any other way, plus the tree is way too big, so we can’t just jump over it and it’s too slippery for climbing, but we can just try to find a way through the forest.”

“That’s way too risky, and it’s getting dark.” “It’s the only plan we have right now.”

“Caroline, what do you say?”

“I think it’s best to follow Ophelia, I mean she knows this area better than we do.”

“Alright then, go on.”

They started walking through the forest, soon enough it started raining. They covered their heads with jackets.

“Hey what’s that?”

Caroline pointed at something in the distance. When they got closer, Ophelia realised it was her treehouse that she built with her aunt during a summer.

“Why didn’t I think of this before, we can hide in the treehouse and call my aunt, there’s a telephone inside and I have the keys.”

They got inside, and while Caroline and Monica were laying on the sofa Ophelia called her aunt. Even though they got a lecture, she did pick them up. However they did have to wait until the morning because Ophelia’s aunt couldn’t drive so late at night.

When they got back, they finally watched the movie and ate a bunch of gingerbread cookies.

*mentor: Ana Katruša**institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice**Ema Hanižjar*

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

It was winter, my favourite season, and almost Christmas, my favourite holiday. All Christmas decorations were out, and all of them found their place in my room. One night I went to bed and something strange woke me up. I heard someone screaming my name. When I came to the kitchen, where I heard the scream was coming from, no one was there. I thought I have just imagined the voice because it was late at night, so I went back to sleep.

Few days later I heard the same thing and again no one was there. The voice kept on screaming night after night. I was so tired and one night I decided to solve this puzzle. I hid in the kitchen and waited. At first, I thought nothing was going to happen, but when I was about to go to my room, I heard the voice. It said: "I think you are ready." Then, in a blink of an eye, I was in a whole other world. I could have never imagined a place like this one. So beautiful, sparkly, colourful, fun, like a dream. Considering everything, it was also a bit strange, but I was curious and went for a walk.

I saw many strange and magical things, like cookie eating itself, milk drinking itself, Santa, Rudolf and the other reindeers, some sweet toys... WAIT!!! Have I just seen Santa and reindeers? I had to talk to them. And guess what! I actually talked to Santa!!! He was really nice, and we talked about his hometown, snow, toys and I told him how magical his reindeers are... He told me: "Thank you very much, that is really nice of you, you are probably the girl John sent me". I wasn't sure what he meant so I asked: "Is John the one with the voice that kept me up for weeks?" Santa said: "Yup, that's the one". I asked: "Well, why did he send me here?" He told me: "So, here is the deal. Grandma Claus usually travels with me during Christmas, but this year she is making magic Christmas cookies you saw earlier - for our elves. It should be their present for Christmas, but she won't make them on time if she goes with me and I can't travel alone because someone has to wrap up the gifts and keep me company. So, I decided to send Christmas spirits to find someone who has a warm heart, isn't scared easily, and loves Christmas. They brought you, and I can see why." I was

really happy when I heard that Santa wants ME to keep him company, so I simply said: "It will be my pleasure!". We talked about all those things Santa had to do before Christmas Eve. Then, he sent me home. He promised to pick me up on Christmas Eve, and I had to promise our secret was safe with me. Now when I think about it, it was some kind of a test.

Next morning, I woke up. It was a day before Christmas Eve. I thought: "Was it all just a dream?!". I came downstairs and saw my grandma. She comes every year at Christmas time and stays couple of days to celebrate with us. Grandma is really caring. She made me cookies and warmed up some milk. Oh, I love this time of year.

Christmas Eve came sooner than I thought. Somehow, I knew what to do. I put my jacket on and was ready to go. I told my grandma I am going to visit a friend and went outside. Santa was already waiting for me. Now I knew it wasn't a dream. Santa, Rudolf, all the other reindeers were ready for a trip around the world. When we went up in the air, I started feeling funny. Not because we were above the planet Earth, or because I saw the moon cow, it was because it's one in a million chance to fly around the world with Santa Claus. It felt like a dream.

We finally landed to the UK. Kids were so nice there: they left him notes, cookies and milk. The same thing in the U.S.A.! When we landed to Croatia, everything was beautiful. Children have decorated their own Christmas trees. But there was one child that had no tree. His family had no money so they couldn't afford one. But he left a beautiful note for Santa and wished him a safe trip. This was so moving, and we decided to give him and his family the most beautiful Christmas tree that ever existed. It lightened up the whole room.

We visited so many countries, seen so many pretty and not so pretty things, and after finding the right place for every present we had, we got back to the North Pole. When we finally arrived, Grandma Claus gave me one of her magical cookies. It was delicious and... suddenly I wasn't tired anymore.

And then it was time for me to go back home. It was really hard to say goodbye to this magical place. Before sending me home, Santa offered something special. He asked if I would help him every year around Christmas. "Of course, I will". Next I remember, I woke up. I was so happy. I couldn't remember everything, but something was warm around my hart that made me feel good.

Almost a year has passed since then. Was it a dream? I really can't tell for sure. But something tells me I'll find out soon enough. Christmas is almost here.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Lili Musinov

A FAMILY SECRET

It is a hot summer day and my cousins Luca and James with their mum Julie just arrived to Šolta. There are staying at our house in Nečujam. We are swimming in the sea and having fun all day.

My mum says it would be a good idea to visit our great-grandma Maria and invite her to lunch at Friday. Great-grandma has an old house in Grohote where she lives alone. So my sister Sarah and I (Lilly), my cousins Luca and James and our dog Charly went to Grohote. After 45 min of walk we arrived. This old stone house in front of us is my great-grandma's house. My great-grandma Maria is very happy to see us. She wants to know what are we doing in Grohote so we tell her we invite her to lunch at Friday she is very happy to hear that and she brings cookies for everyone. Her house is very lovely and great-grandma is telling us stories about her and great-grandpa's journeys. We are looking at old photos of them. Great grandma says that we must be hungry and goes to kitchen to cook something for us. We are looking at some old books and suddenly one book falls on the floor and a small piece of paper falls out of it. There is a message on it that says: go to the attic and find old chest with the letter T and follow the instructions!

We are all confused but also very curious we climb the old stairs and open the door, which creaks a lot. The attic is dark and dusty and has several chests but none of them have a letter T on it. Finally, Luca sees the right chest. There is a new message in it: this key opens the blue door in aunt Sophie's house where you will find the secret.

We have a little problem, none of us know who is aunt Sophie is. So we go back to great-grandma's house to look at the old albums again and found aunt Sophie. After 30 min of searching. We finally found aunt Sophie, she is mi great-grandpa's sister. Her house is right across the road from us. We have a small problem because her house was sold, and new people live there with a big dog. We can't enter the house, so we sit on the stone wall behind the house and think what to do. Suddenly Sarah says: look at that carved stone covered with ivy!

We moved the ivy and discovered the same letter T and blue door. While no one was looking, we opened the door and entered a small room. There was an old wardrobe and box in it. When we opened the box there was some letters and an unused ticket for the Titanic in it. The ticket belonged to our great-grandpa John. And in letter he explained why he didn't go on Titanic.

Nobody knew about that story, if great-grandpa John has boarded the Titanic, our family, would not even exist now!

*mentor: Danijela Erceg
institution: OŠ Manuš, Split*

Antea Ković

THE CONFESSION UNDER THE CHERRY TREE

It was Sunday morning. I yawned and looked out the window. It was raining again. I got out of bed. I sighed. It was one of those lazy mornings, where you just want to wrap yourself in warm blankets and drink hot cocoa. I plugged my headphones in my phone and put my favorite playlist on. It was quite late in the morning, but I still felt tired. I curled up next to the fireplace. I wanted to drown in the soothing sounds of *their* voices. But that didn't happen. Suddenly, my thoughts flew towards *him*. Ugh! I closed my eyes, trying to think about anything, anything that could stop me from thinking about *him*. *I hate to admit it, I still miss you*. The music playing in my headphones was quite fitting. But to no avail. I sighed, defeated by my own mind. I decided to daydream for a while, even if it was about *him*. After a while, I decided to get ready for school. It was tomorrow, but I decided it's better to prepare at once as I won't have time in the morning. Just as I wiggled out of the pile of blankets, I heard my phone ring. It was a message.

I will try to get off work earlier today. If I don't make it, lunch is in the fridge! Love, Mom.

I smiled weakly and put my phone in my pocket. I went to get my bag from my bedroom, my cherished safe space, where I could hide from reality and daydream as much as I wished. I quickly put the books I needed for tomorrow in my bag and picked out an outfit from the closet. *Buzz buzz!* I heard my phone.

I can't make it early 😊 see you home at 5! Love, Mom.

Great, I thought. When I heard my stomach rumble, I realized I still hadn't eaten. It was too late for breakfast now, even brunch, so I opened the fridge and took the pot outside. Inside was soup and boiled meat. I ate only a spoonful and a small piece of meat, as I didn't want to ruin my appetite for actual lunch. I read a book, as I was bored. Before I knew it, it was already 4 PM. I then ate the soup and meat. Of course, I left some for my mom. I heard the doorbell ring. That was unusual, mom always brings her keys with her. I checked the camera we had on the porch. It was her, so

I unlocked the door. She forgot her keys. We changed into our pajamas and talked until late night. When we realized how late it was, we quickly brushed our teeth and went into bed. School was in the morning, so I needed to go to bed earlier.

I didn't do much in the morning. I never do anything; I don't have time for it. I don't have enough time to eat anything. I quickly got dressed and after that I grabbed my bag and brushed my teeth. I ran outside and I jumped in the car. My mom came along. We drove to school. I went inside, went to my locker... and in it I found a note. *Meet me under the cherry tree after school.* The **cherry tree**? The school cherry tree was quite unusual, as it bloomed early summer and cherries grew in autumn. There was a myth that everyone that confesses love under the cherry tree will live a long and happy life with the person they confessed to if the tree was blossoming. I didn't believe it. But everyone else did. I didn't know who put the note on my locker, but I thought to myself, why shouldn't I? I have nothing to lose. So, after the class, I went under the tree. It was blossoming, and flower petals were falling on the ground. It was quite a beautiful sight. I waited a while, and, just as I was about to leave as no one showed up, I heard a voice, *his* voice, shouting, 'Hey, wait up!'. I stopped in my tracks, my heart was racing, and my face was turning red. The sizzling, early-summer sun was heating my back, and it shone on his face as he smiled at me. I was still too stunned to speak. I didn't even know he was *aware* of my existence! He took my hand, his expression still the same. My heart was pounding. He began talking, but I couldn't understand a word he said. All that was on my mind asked, *Am I dreaming?* I snapped out of it when he asked me a question.

Uhm, c-could you, uhm, repeat the question? -I asked, stammering.

I said, uh, do you want to go to the movies tomorrow? - Felix repeated the question. I tried to keep my cool, but this was too much.

Of course! Uh, I mean, yeah, whatever, I guess. - I replied, maybe too eagerly. He laughed. I laughed, too.

I have to go. - I said.

I got to go as well, see you at school tomorrow! - he replied, slowly walking down the hill on which the cherry tree grew. I plugged my headphones in again and remembered; summer break starts in two weeks. Most of my classmates, including him, will go to the sea for the break. My mom and I will stay here, with no sea, no lake, no pool to cool yourself in. But that's not the only terrible thing. Will Felix forget me and our newly founded relationship, will my chocolate-brown eyes get replaced by the deep blue eyes of the sea? Will my golden bird-shaped earrings get replaced by the seagulls? Will he forget me while diving? I'm being paranoid. He will remember me.

Break free from the voices in my head, the music was strangely fitting the situation.

mentor: Mia Dević Mandura
institution: OŠ Jelenje - Dražice

Mia Jantošik

CHILDHOOD

As a toddler I have spent a lot of time at my great grandparents home because my mother had to work. It wasn't half bad there. I had a dog, lots of cats and a whole street of friends. That's all I needed.

Every night before bed I asked my great grandma to tell me a story of when she was a child. She talked about how she went to collect snails with her deaf uncle. When it started raining he used to put her in the sack full of snails, so she wouldn't get wet and pick up a cold. It took them three days to clean her from the snail mucus (or at least she said it did). I loved animals so much I had a dream of becoming a veterinarian. My mom was one just like my grandpa. So I opened a clinic in the garden. I took care of every animal I found nearby, such as frogs, lizards, turtles, spiders, butterflies, cats, even flies. Many strange things happened in the clinic. I kissed a frog! Cooking was also one of my favourite things to do. There was a restaurant/café in the vet clinic. My usual customers were my great grandpa, great grandma and an old lady my great grandma took care of. The two of them would get served cognac while great grandpa was served half white wine, half water in his special mug. In town there was a nearby zoo. Going there was so fun. Such a small zoo in such a small town with so many animals. My favourites were snakes. When I grew older the owner let me hold one of the snakes. I was so jolly. Visiting that zoo today is just as fun. Another fun adventure I had was "night patrol". Our cat had a litter of kittens. There was a small shed in the garden. She slept there with her kittens. We kept the window open so she can go out. But there was a mean and old male cat in the street who tried to go through the open window and hurt the kittens. Luckily grandpa gave me his spare syringes (without the needles). My friends and I filled them with water and chased him out of the yard spraying him with the water. Those were some amazing years.

I moved really far away from my hometown but I visit during summer break. When I visit I remind myself of all the great memories I made there. And I hope to make even more the next time I come around.

mentor: Suzana Tolić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno Brijesće, Osijek

Roko Bilić

MY CLASS IS COMPLICATED!

It was the beginning of the second term. I entered the classroom. Boys were screaming, girls were laughing and talking. Everything was normal for the 5th grade in Elementary school Flora. Except, the lights were off. I came to the switch and tried to turn on the lights. But something grabbed my hand.

It was the girl called Anamaria. She is OK, but she can be very, very, very annoying. I asked her why she didn't want me to turn on the lights. Then, I realized that she and her friend Dina have mobile phones in their hands. They don't want the lights on because they can see the screens better this way. Although the whole class wanted the lights on, they didn't care. They have the phones, and TikTok is everything that matters. They said they will turn on the lights when the teacher comes. I've sat down on my chair, prepared the books, and waited for the teacher to come. The same happened the other day. And another. And another. And one day, the boy called Natko, got into an argument. The girl called Hana was talking to her friends in class about that he has got anger problems. They were fighting, mostly psychological, until the duty teacher came, and separated the two.

Then he got in the argument again, but now with the boys, I think it was about who is better at football, but if you are in my class, you just know that that arguments ends the worst. Then on the PE class, we were practicing volleyball. I hate volleyball, but better than football. I don't like the way how the boys are playing football in my weird class. They are just too aggressive. Two months ago, one boy Artur sprained his leg in the football match, and he had a cast for several weeks. Little after that a boy Duje smashed the bell with the ball by accident, and almost killed the girl called Marta! That same day, that same hour, she almost died. Again! I don't remember how it happened exactly that second time, but it was funny seeing her face after that. Remember the argument with Natko and Hana? Even though me and my classmates talked with our teacher about the fact that Natko has a short fuse and shouldn't be provoked, she now did even worse thing. She came to her girlfriends in the 6th grade, and she told to everyone about his anger problems. If she was talking

about me, of course I would get mad. And so did he. He started to push her away of them, then she started to push him, then the Croatian teacher came and separated them. After that, they were sent in our class teacher's office.

And now it is the weekend. I can relax from all that stuff in school. But on Monday, well, let's see what kind of catastrophes will happen. But until then, let's enjoy the day while we can. My class is just complicated, and I can't help with that. I just need to stay normal before someone tries "to summon the Devil" during lunch break time. If somebody really does that, I honestly wouldn't be surprised. But no matter how much my classmates are crazy and insane, that makes our class special. There are some kids that are so-so normal. I have friends, and that is everything that matters. I can't write anymore, I need to chill. So, for now; goodbye.

mentor: Katija Tefik-Baćac

institution: OŠ “Ivo Lola Ribar” Labin

Petra Ugrin

MARY'S SECRET

Mary was a bright little girl, she lived in an orphanage because her single teenage mum couldn't take care of her all by herself. Everyone kept calling Mary a freak because she could do everything perfectly. When she was only four years old, she could even speak perfectly while other kids that were her age kept struggling to say a basic word. As she was growing older, kids kept bullying her because they thought she was perfect, and that made them really jealous. Well at least that's what they thought...

Mary was terrified of the dark, especially because she had a huge secret. Nobody knew about it. Her eyes glow in the dark! Everytime she went into a dark room her eyes would flash brighter than a lamp and they would start glowing in a purple colour! The orphanage she was staying in had loads of nuns. There was also a nun called Sarah, she always knew there was something special about Mary. Sarah loved her! They had a special bond nobody could break. Sister Sarah saw Mary playing hide and seek. Mary was the seeker, while she was counting, the rest of the children that were playing with her, blindfolded her and locked her into the closet. Mary took the blindfold off because she didn't know where she was and her eyes started glowing! The children saw a purple light coming out of the closet and they got scared so they all ran away. Thankfully, sister Sarah saw the whole scene and she rushed over to unlock the closet Mary was in! Mary couldn't stop thanking sister Sarah for helping her. It was starting to get dark so Mary went into the room that she was sharing with a boy named Thomas. They only had a bunk bed and a desk with a chair in their room. That was more than enough for Mary because she was grateful to have a place to stay in. Mary didn't like Thomas at all. He would always tease her and chase her in the hallway. They used to give each other nicknames. Mary used to call him "smelly pants" and Thomas called her "nerdy Mary" because she had a special passion in writing. Mary loved visiting a library that was in the orphanage, it was very peaceful. She enjoyed writing stories and reading books in the library. She even enjoyed eating lunch in the library. She always had lunch with sister Sarah and she would often read stories that she wrote to sister Sarah. While Mary was peacefully reading

a book and sitting outside she saw a lovely couple that entered the orphanage, Mary seemed unbothered because she knew they weren't adopt her anyways, well atleast that's what she thought. Sister Sarah called Mary and told her that she is expected in the office, Mary thought she did something wrong... When she came into the office, she saw that lovely couple that she saw earlier. She asked Mrs.Edwards if she did something wrong, Mrs.Edwards explained to her that Mr John and Miss Lauren are interested in adopting her. At first, Mary was shocked but a few minutes later she got excited and she agreed to join their family. She officialy changed her full name into Mary Buffey. She packed her stuff and said goodbye to everyone. Before she left she gave sister Sarah a big hug and thanked her for everything. As she was driving to her new home with her parents, they told her that she can call them however she's comfortable with and they told her that she dosen't have any sibblings. They showed her Mary her new room and she loved it! Mary got used to her new way of living and she was so grateful to have loving parents. She loved going on adventures and exploring new places with her parents! As she grew older, her parents eventually found out about her "secret" but they didn't mind, they thought she was unique and they supported her no matter what! As time passed by, Mary moved out and went to college. She studied Academic writing. She published her first book in 2016 called "Yours truly", she gained loads of good reviews on the book and she even earned some fans! Her fans started encouraging her to write more books and Mary was so happy! As she was walking through the neighbourhood she has moved into, she bumped into a stranger. Mary started apologizing to the stranger and she helped him get up. The stranger said "Wait, you look familiar..." Mary gasped in shock, "Thomas, The smelly pants?!" He was shocked and asked Mary if he's really talking to "Nerdy Mary". They hugged each other and they talked. Thomas gave Mary his number so they could talk more often. While they were chatting, he told Mary that he read her book but just didn't know she was the one who wrote it because of her last name. Thomas also has his own programming company and a beautiful daughter named Aurora. Her mother sadly passed away when she was born. Thomas was late for work so he had to leave. Mary went home and as time passed by, Mary and Thomas started having feelings for each other. They got engaged and they moved in together. Mary kept publishing books and she became a celebrity. Mary was starting to lose inspiration so she decided to write a book called "Mary's secret". Her book gained more fame than "Yours truly", Mary even got an offer from an acting agency if she wanted to turn the book into a movie! Mary accepted their offer and signed the contract. The movie gained loads of fame! Mary attended her movie premiere and

she wore a beautiful purple dress to match the colour of her glowing eyes! After a few months she published more books and got invited to an interview about "Mary's secret". She attended the interview and she revealed that she was always insecure about her glowing eyes. That's why she kept that as a secret but now she considers it as a gift from God. She is really grateful for all of her supporters! She considers her fiancé and her parents as her biggest supporters! After a year, Mary got married to Thomas and she found out that they were expecting twins! Mary gave birth to two beautiful boys and she named them Jason and Jayden!

When her fans found out about that, it broke the Internet! Mary is more than grateful to be where she is now!

*mentor: Katija Tefik-Baćac**institution: OŠ "Ivo Lola Ribar" Labin**Mei Močinić*

A LITTLE DRAGON

Once upon a time there was a little dragon who lived in a cave with his big family. He was different from his siblings because he was blue and they were green. Their mother died when they were babies. Evil humans killed her because they thought she would kill them. From that day on their dad didn't let them leave the cave so they didn't see evil humans.

One day the brothers were playing and running inside the cave and they pushed a little dragon out of the cave by accident. The cave was on the mountain. The little dragon fell from the mountain. He didn't know how to fly but he didn't want to fall to the ground and get hurt so he started flapping with his little wings. Luckily he managed to fly and landed softly on the ground. The little dragon couldn't find his cave anymore. He looked for it everywhere but he couldn't find it. It was night outside and he had to look for place to spend the night. He walked and walked and finally found a small house where he could spend the night. When he entered the house it looked abandoned and old. But he decided to enter and rest. In the morning he woke up and he heard quiet and soft flapping of some tiny wings. He thought that a fly had entered his room, but it was a colourful little fairy. The little fairy asked the dragon what was he doing in her house and the dragon explained to her that he was lost and couldn't find his cave so he needed a place to stay. The fairy said that there is no cave near and that he will not find it, but she said he could sleep in this nice and cosy little house with her until they find his cave. He agreed. A little fairy said that she explores forest and neighborhoods every morning so she asked the dragon if he want to come with her. As they were walking they came near the house with a big family. With parents and four children. The childrens names were: Veronica, Erica, Jane and Mike. While Jane, Erica and Veronica played with dolls in the house, Mike had no one to play football with, so he decided to go for a walk alone. While he was walking the little fairy and the dragon decided to follow him to see what evil things humans do. As they followed him, they saw him stealing apples from someones garden. Mike saw them and wanted to offer them some apples but the dragon

and the fairy were afraid because they thought the boy would harm them. Mike said he wouldn't hurt them so the dragon and the little fairy took few apples because they didn't eat anything for hours.

They became friends and every morning they hung out together and ate apples in the garden. When they were hanging out they would say something that they wanted to happen in their life. Mike always wanted to become a famous football player, the little dragon always wanted to see his mother again and the tinny fairy always wanted to go on the moon. That was her only wish. One morning when they wanted to eat apples as usual, there was not any apples on the tree. The dragon and the fairy were sad and didn't know why they were gone so they waited for Mike to come so they could search for apples. When Mike came they told him what happened and he told them that it was normal because in the autumn apples fall on the ground and in the spring they grow back again. But on the ground there was no apples. What happened to them? They thought some animal had eaten them or some people had picked them. They decided not to worry about it. They were bored so they decided to go to the forbidden forest. They knew they were not allowed because many enchanted and magical plants grow there. The legend about that forest says that a long time ago it bewitched the people who entered it and those people created an army that attacked the whole city. But it's just a legend right? When they entered in the forest, it didn't look magical at all so they thought the legend wasn't real and decided to explore the rest of the forest. When they walked a little longer they found Mike's house which looked identical but was darker and different. They explored more, and the forest looked exactly like the whole city. That was a little worrying but when they heard strange noises they got even more worried. They needed something to follow them with. Then Mike remembered that there were four bikes behind his house, his and his sisters. When they went to look for them, they weren't there, so they had to find something else to ride on. The little dragon then remembered, he had recently learned to fly, so they climbed on the little dragon and flew. As they were flying Mike accidentally stopped holding on to the little dragon and fell into some deep hole. The little dragon and the fairy immediately went down to the ground to see if Mike was there. He was in the hole but he couldn't get out so the little dragon flew into the hole and took him out. When they finally started following the sounds again, they felt a little dizzy. As they got closer to the sounds, and the sounds got louder and louder. When they landed where they heard the loudest sounds, everything went quiet. All you could hear was heavy breathing. When they turned they saw a monster bigger than them. It was obvious that it wanted to harm them. The monster started hitting everything around him.

The monster hit the little dragon and he fell down on the floor and was unconscious. After that he tried to crush the fairy but failed because she was very fast. Mike was very angry now so he found an iron bar and started hitting the monster. The little fairy was distracting the monster while Mike was hitting him so Mike accidentally hit fairy and she fell to the ground. After that Mike got more angry he channeled all that anger into hitting and killing the monster. He hit him so hard that he fell on the floor and never woke up.

Mike ran to see if the little dragon had woken up and if he was good. He was lying on the floor injured and they both knew he would not survive. He asked what happened to the little fairy and why she was lying on the floor, so Mike said that there was a small accident but that she will be fine. The dragon said : “I will miss her. Tell her please,, said little dragon. After that Mike whispered “oh I’ll tell her ,, “Oh and, take her to the moon for me, okay? ,, Said little dragon. That was the little dragon’s last wish. But he was not so sad that he was leaving because his wish would finally come true. He will be with his dear mother again. They haven’t been together for a very long time. Mike took fairy and they started running. When they came out of the forest they saw that it was not a very good idea to go to the forbidden forest.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Maria Šego

THE MAGICAL FAIRYLAND

Once upon a time there was a five-year-old girl named Bella who loved fairies and elves. One day Bella came home from a walk with her mom and when she came home her favourite fairy changed her life forever...

Bella was just a normal girl living with her mom, dad and brother in a house. She only loved fairies and elves and wanted to be magical like them. All her birthdays were fairyland themed. One day Bella came home from a walk with her mom. She couldn't wait to play with her fairies and elves. When she came home, she went straight to her room to play with her fairies and elves. When she sat on her bed, she heard a sound coming from her fairies. Bella ignored the sound, but she was concerned. Little did she know that mysterious sound was her name. Bella was scared. She came to her fairies and grabbed her favourite fairy that she named Iris. When she grabbed her favourite fairy, the fairy repeated: 'Bella! Bella! Click this green button that I'm holding if you love fairies!' Bella has just now seen the green button. But she loves fairies, so she decides to click it. She spawned in a magical fairyland. Bella was speechless, confused and happy. 'The place is so magical' Bella says to herself. She saw that all her fairies and elves came to life. Her favourite fairy Iris welcomed Bella to the fairyland. She came in happily. When she came in Iris said 'Welcome to our fairyland! The first step is a magical tea party! We have a very special chair for you. Go ahead enjoy the tea party' Bella was so happy but one thing was bothering her. She felt different but she ignored it and focused on the tea party. Bella was so happy to be with the fairies and elves. The tea party was amazing. Iris said to Bella: 'The tea party was great don't you think Bella? Now it's time for the second step. Follow me!' Bella was so confused when the fairy says 'Step'. But Bella was with fairies, so she ignored it. Bella saw her favourite pet unicorn. She was so excited. So the fairy asked Bella: 'Do you want to fly? If you do, hop on the unicorn!' Bella would love to fly on her favourite pet, so she hopped on the unicorn. Out of nowhere the unicorn started to fly high in the sky. Bella was so happy that she technically flied. The sky was full of diamonds, shiny hearts and candies. The unicorn carefully landed. This was the

best day of Bella's life. Iris welcomed Bella with lots of candy in her arms. Bella said: 'Yes! Thank you, Iris you are the best!' Bella ate every candy that Iris brought. Iris said: 'Okay Bella you can go to rest or don't if you don't want to. You can do whatever you want!' Bella wanted to sleep a bit but again she was feeling different and wasn't tired. But again, she ignored it. Iris knew what was going on and knocked on Bella's bedroom door. Bella opened it and Iris said: 'Ready for the third step?' What are those steps Bella asked herself. Iris was waiting for her in the same area where she fled with a unicorn. She knew that the , , third step" was something about unicorns. Bella thought: 'How is this fairyland so magical?' I can't wait to tell my mom, dad, brother and my best friend Ella about this.' When Bella came Iris said: 'Welcome to customize your unicorn challenge! You can dress up your unicorn and name it! Enjoy!' Bella picked a small unicorn. She picked white skin, green eyes, purple bow on her neck, pink hair, two braids in her hair too! She even named her Pinky. Bella was so happy. She fled in the sky with her, told her favourite colour, food, drink, pet. . And just like the previous unicorn, Pinky landed carefully too. Iris and all other fairies and elves welcomed Bella with surprises. Iris welcomed Bella with her dream makeup set, other fairies and elves with unicorn toys, barbies, candy, teddy bears and mini toy version of Pinky. Bella was speechless and crying tears of joy. She hugged every fairy and elf. Iris said: 'I am glad that you are happy! Now it's time for the fourth step! It's a makeup challenge. We will give you a theme. If you do it well, you will get awarded. The theme is: 'My favourite colour 'Starting now!' Bella's favourite colour was pink. She did her makeup like any other five-year-old kid would do. She said: 'I am done, Iris! And I think I like it!' When she turned around everyone gave her a round of applause. Iris said: 'You have won! Now go sit on your throne to be given your medal!' As soon as Bella sat on the throne and touched the medal, she spawned back to her house...

Bella spawned back to her house. She was glad because she missed her family. Even though it was very fun in the magical fairyland. She did say a couple times that she had weird feelings. She told everyone she knows about that amazing fairyland dream. Bella will not forget about that amazing dream.

mentor: Tanja Pokupić

institution: OŠ Miroslava Krležje Čepin

Zvonimir Buljić

ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

The zombie apocalypse started in Beijing.

One day, a scientist Kim Chong conducted a study in his laboratory called “How intelligent are zombies?”

Through this research, Kim Chong and other scientists learned that zombies know how to use guns. One of the zombies started to break the glass, but the scientists did not see it because they were only interested in their results. The zombie broke the glass and bit Kim Chong and other scientists, thereby transmitting the infection to the scientists.

Soon the zombies came out into the street and attacked other people and infected them. The President of China declared a state of emergency and sent the army to Beijing. During that time, an infected man flew from the Beijing airport to Berlin.

And with that, the infection was transmitted to Europe. People in Berlin began to panic, but the army general said that there was no need to panic, that it was just a few zombies.

The contagion was now on two continents. In China, the situation did not improve, but there were already around one hundred thousand people infected there, and the army was now weakly resisting the zombies because they managed to take firearms. After a few days, the situation in Berlin worsened because several thousand people were infected, and the army general sent soldiers to Berlin. In China, one million people have already been infected, and the infection has spread to the surrounding area of Beijing. Soon the Chinese president asked Russia for help. Russia accepted the call for help and sent twenty thousand soldiers to China.

Meanwhile, another infected plane flew from China, but this time not to Berlin, but to Los Angeles. When the Americans found out about the zombies in Los Angeles, they sent several thousand soldiers to help. In China, zombies reached Shijiazhuang. Fortunately, there were no more than twenty thousand newly infected people because most people had already been evacuated. Things didn't go well in the

US as the soldiers fell into a zombie trap. The zombies slowed down the defences and sped up the advance towards San Francisco. The worst was in Germany. Zombies from Berlin spread throughout the territory from Hamburg, Leipzig and the Polish city of Szczecin.

NATO had to call a meeting in New York. At the session, they declared a world state of emergency and created a mission called “Destroyer”, which talked about rocketing zombie areas and quick attacks. The next day, both in the USA and in Germany, rocket attacks on zombie areas began. Massive zombie attacks began in China. China set up barricades to slow down the zombie attack so that they could kill all the zombies in one attack.

The American lines were very well guarded in the area of Las Vegas, but San Francisco was in the hands of zombies. The Poles were losing against the zombies and lost another larger city called Poznan. The Germans made a good result for the first time.

They took Hamburg back into their hands and were already planning an attack on Berlin and the surrounding area. The Chinese started their attack, but they did not expect such a great resistance from the zombies because they did not manage to conquer even half of their confiscated territory, and they already needed soldiers and tanks. Russia again sent soldiers to China, but with even more tanks and they attacked from the opposite side of the Chinese army thus managing to fool the zombies. In the USA, the situation was improving, even though about two hundred thousand zombies were still alive. The Americans were getting closer to returning San Francisco, and with rocket attacks on Los Angeles and the surrounding area, they were preventing the progress of the zombies. Poland could not get its territory back, so it called the UK for help while the Germans took back Leipzig and surrounded Berlin, where there were only about thirty thousand zombies. In China, the Russians and Chinese were making great progress, and they only had three larger cities left, where there were about 150,000 zombies. People in the USA are overjoyed with soldiers because they are taking their country back with their tank attacks and have brought back San Francisco where they kept a large number of rocket launchers. The British dropped soldiers in ships on the coast of the Polish city of Szczecin, and the Poles pushed the zombies back to Poznan. A large tank attack is being prepared in Germany and China, in which at least 50% of the territory will be returned. In America, people celebrate and cry with happiness because there are no more zombies, and the president of the USA thanks everyone who participated in the defence. The British entered the city of Szczecin and thus cleared the city of zombies and went to help the Poles in Poznan. The Germans launched an attack on Berlin. In Berlin,

the zombies suddenly attacked the Germans and lost almost all the zombies. The rest of the zombies were found only in the houses, and they were killed. More zombies remained only in China. Russia started on Beijing, and China on the other two cities.

In the end, they didn't find any zombies either in the houses or in the streets, so the whole world lifted the state of emergency, and everyone celebrated. The whole world did not know that the zombies had gone to Mongolia and were hiding in caves and would not attack until their leader recovered. The entire world is happy and does not know what the future holds...

mentor: Amela Ojdanić

institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

Karla Radić

MY WINTER HOLIDAYS

I got sick. It was a few days before Christmas. Now, I cannot go skiing and that is why I am sad and feel bad. A runny nose, headache, high temperature, great Christmas presents. Thank you, Santa. This is my first Christmas in bed. All my friends are out and that is another reason why I am sad. My family is around the table, but I am not. I am in bed. My mum comes into the room and asks me if I would like to celebrate New Year in Slovenia. Of course I would, but I still do not know why in Slovenia. Mum explains that my aunt, who lives there, invites us to be their guests. Oh, Santa obviously is trying to please me.

There is one more stop before Slovenia, I am standing in a long line at my doctor's waiting for him to check my lungs and say if everything is alright with me. It is, everything is fine, and we are buying bus tickets for 31 December. I brush my teeth, put on pyjamas, and go to sleep. The bus leaves early in the morning. There are not many people on the bus, the ride goes well, and we cross the border without stopping. We come to Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia. The weather is not the best, but it is okay. My cousin and my aunt are taking us for a walk around Ljubljana. Ljubljana is beautiful, the cloudy sky cannot hide its beauty. Walking makes you tired and hungry. Ljubljana gets even more beautiful after the delicious pizza.

At my aunt's house we are getting ready for New Year. To be honest, I am a little bit tired, and I would not be too sorry if New Year decided not to come tonight but on TV they say that it is on its way, it is determined to show up at midnight. So, we are playing bingo, eating snacks and listening to bangers in the neighbourhood. New Year is almost at the door. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! HAPPY NEW YEAR! We are out. There are fireworks all around us. Shiny and noisy, it looks nice.

It is morning. I am ready for a new round around the town and another delicious meal. And a dessert. After lunch we visit Aboreto, the twinkling place where everything is decorated with lights. The next day is my last day in Slovenia but it is not the last day with my cousin and aunt. We are going to visit my grandparents all together. They live on Pelješac. My mum goes back to Rijeka It is time to hit the road again.

It is a long drive, but the Krka Falls are in our way, so we decide to stop there and enjoy the beauty of the waterfalls. Driving along the coast keeps you busy, the road seems to play hide and seek with the sea. I am never too tired of looking at the sea. Suddenly, I can see what I was waiting for to see. Pelješac bridge is in front of me, long and attractive. It is getting dark, but I can see white triangles above the sea. The lights on the bridge can also be seen in the sea, the best New Year decoration for sure. I am happy to see my family, my grandparents and my dad who also lives on Pelješac.

The next day I get up at 10 o'clock. My friends are already waiting for me. Days pass by quickly and it is time to start studying for the maths exam. The exam is right after the holidays. I would exchange my Christmas flu for the maths test. But nobody offers me a deal. So, I have to sit and go through the boring maths patterns and rules.

Three days before school starts my dad takes me back home. I am sad again, just like at the beginning of my winter holidays, I want to stay on Pelješac. The journey home goes through Rogoznica where my other grandparents live. I promise them to come in summer and stay for a few days. Finally, I see the lights of my hometown, mum and sister are waiting for me. I miss them as well, but I cannot stay long because duty calls, my friends want to see me, we have not seen each other for two weeks.

Winter holidays are coming to their end, the sense of regret and excitement are mixing again. But, I am ready.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Antea Srdelić

PECULIAR WORLD

Once upon a time there was a world called “the weirdcore world”. It has many weird and creepy creatures. The world itself was disturbing. There was a lord of this world who was responsible for its creation. Their name is Eclipse. They’re the ones making everyone suffer! A lot of humans got stuck in this world and not even one got out. Humans were in a state of sleep because a lord put a spell on them in order to win a war a billion years ago. This leads us to a little boy named Lunar. He was the first human in a million years to wake up from a spell that Eclipse put on humans. Maybe he can free them all! He only needed one thing – “the Newton star”. The Newton star is a key that can open the portal so that everyone can be free! But it was hard... The lord had it. Now it’s all up to Lunar to save them. But...will he succeed? We’ll find out.

Lunar woke up near a strawberry house. The place was really colourful. The grass looked cartoony, like something that would be used in a children’s TV show. Lunar didn’t remember anything. He just remembered passing out. He was terrified. He saw some sort of creature. It was a clown with a white face, doll eyes, red, messy hair, and very colorful clothes. Lunar decided to walk over to the creature and politely ask it to tell him where he was and how to get out. The creature sadly didn’t know the name of the place. All its memories were wiped because of the lord. It also said that it doesn’t know the way out. Lunar was scared and wanted to go home. The creature started comforting him. It did something that he never felt before. Lunar started questioning the feeling and described it as funky. The creature introduced itself as Reia, and then Lunar told her his name. The adventure began. Reia suggested they should go into the strawberry house because it could have clues, so Lunar agreed. When they got to the house, they found a portal. Reia wasn’t sure if the portal was safe, so she told him that she would go first. Lunar agreed and waited. A few minutes have passed, and Lunar started to get worried. He eventually decided to go through the portal. The room he was in had yellow walls. It looked like 1900s walls. There was a paper that said “backroom.” It was written with blood. Lunar had trouble reading it

but he eventually figured out what was written. After all, he is only 6. Soon enough, Lunar heard Reia's voice. After some time, he finally found her. She was covered in black liquid. It looked like ink. Lunar asked if she was okay but... there was no answer. He started getting anxious. Lunar tried to call her name but, again, there was no answer. It got to the point where Lunar started sobbing. He didn't understand what was happening. In the distance, there was a tall black creature. Lunar saw it and was terrified. He started running. Soon, he found a portal and run through it. Lunar was back in the weirdcore world. However, it just wasn't the same. Reia gave him a feeling he never felt before. He was confused, sad, mad, and scared at same time. He just didn't understand... As he was crying, Lunar heard some music. He was confused at first, but then he started feeling nostalgia, happiness, and sadness. Another creature appeared. They told Lunar that their name was Cecilia. They don't have a gender. They're non-binary. Cecilia led Lunar to a place that looked like heaven. Lunar was amazed. Cecilia told Lunar that they knew the way out. Finally, Lunar cheered up. They (Cecilia) told Lunar to close his eyes. When Lunar closed his eyes, he felt a pain in his chest. Lunar immediately opened his eyes and saw blood everywhere. He felt extreme pain throughout his whole body. He felt like his body was burning because Cecilia put a spell on Lunar. As he kept repeating "it burns," his vision started getting blurry. Lunar started feeling tired and closed his eyes. He fell asleep. As soon as Lunar fell asleep, Cecilia started transforming into their true form. Their faces were completely black with sunlight surrounding them. Their bodies were long with four arms and two legs. They looked truly vicious. As Lunar's breathing slowly faded, Eclipse let out a terrifying villainous laugh. A few seconds later, Lunar stopped breathing. It was the end. A bad ending... I meanit is's not surprising. After all, life has no happy ending. Sure, there can be happy moments, but we'll still die one day. It's just how the world works. We cannot change it... sadly.

mentor: Tanja Pokupić*institution:* OŠ Miroslava Krležje Čepin*Mihael Čizmok*

JUST ANOTHER SCHOOL DAY

It's the start of a new school day and week after a short weekend. Peter has woken up at half past 6 in the morning. He brushes his teeth and gets ready for school. On the way to school, he sees his friend Jacob, so he runs to him and goes to school with him. They had miss Daisy the first two school hours. Miss Daisy is known for being the strictest teacher at the school, she never lets students have a break and always makes them do extra homework. It's not even because they're bad, because they always listen to her but she's always in a terrible mood.

-Have you done your homework, Peter? -Jacob asks.

-I sure did, but I didn't quite understand the math homework, it was complicated.
-says Peter.

-Oh well, since the first two school hours we have miss Daisy, you'll be fine, at least if she doesn't turn English into math. – adds Jacob, having a slight grin on his face.

They arrive to school and enter the classroom where miss Daisy is ready to shout at someone.

-Who didn't do their homework?! – shouts miss Daisy.

The whole class is looking around, confused and shocked.

-Jacob, was there any English homework for today? – whispers Peter.

-No, there wasn't, for all I know. – whispers Jacob.

Peter raises his hand, and miss Daisy barely looks at him but tells him to speak.

-Miss Daisy, you haven't assigned us any homework for today though. – says Peter.

-Oh really? - angrily asks miss Daisy.

-Yes, really. – somewhat sarcastically says Peter.

-Don't talk to me in that tone, mister, and don't talk back to me. – says miss Daisy, a bit angered by Peter's response.

-Alright, miss Daisy – says Peter, being a bit embarrassed.

The class is silent. It looks like miss Daisy is fuming with anger, since nobody did their homework. The thing is, she didn't actually assign homework, she just pulled out a paper with an assignment on it and all of a sudden it was homework. After two long school hours, they can finally go.

It was lunch time. They were finally having a break from that chaos, but at lunch, it was even more of a chaos.

-Let's just move somewhere else to eat our lunch in peace, shall we? –Peter suggests.

-Yes, we shall. – Jacob approves.

They go to a corner and eat there. The bell rings and they have math class. They all sit down and prepare their books.

-Good morning children! – shouts miss Evans at the door.

Miss Evans was their math teacher at the time.

-Good morning, miss Evans! – they all shout in one voice.

-Open your books and notebooks, books at page 57 and notebooks at the nearest blank page. While you are doing that, I'll prepare today's presentation. – says miss Evans.

Miss Evans, their teacher, was borderline lazy and borderline hardworking.

She was nice, but she demanded work to be done.

After a short presentation, the class starts writing notes that the teacher tells them to write.

Their classmate, Alex, or his nickname, Smarty, raised his hand.

Smarty or Alex was named after the sweets, Smarties.

-Speak, Alex. – says miss Evans.

-Do we have to grade our homework? – asks Alex.

The class clown, Matthew, sees this as an opportunity to make some people laugh.

-No, Alex, we have to grade it. – says Matthew, on the edge of laughing.

The class erupts into laughter, even the teacher starts laughing. Everyone except for Alex, who was glaring at Matthew in frustration.

Then it was just math, math, math, math, more math, some more math, some even more math, it was extremely boring for most of the class, since math was too easy for them.

The bell rings, everyone sprints out of the classroom. At the time there were new football cards, so they traded with them.

The bell rings, announcing the end of the small break. They get back to their classes.

The second part of math they just played games to “learn” but it was basically just playing it for fun, nobody actually learned anything from it. They go to PE class after that, they had quite a lot of things to do in PE.

-Peter! – shouts Jacob, while being out of breath.

-Yeah?! – Peter asks.

-The next obstacle course will be harder! Prepare yourself! – says Jacob.

- Oh no. – says Peter.

Peter, being as clumsy as he is, falls at the last obstacle of the course.

The PE teacher, mister Thomas lets them home early.

-That was tough, wasn't it? – says Jacob.

-Stupid tough. – adds Peter.

-Anyways, I'll get going now, bye Peter! – says Jacob and leaves.

-Bye! – shouts Peter and leaves, too.

They both get home, do their homework which WAS assigned and go ride their bikes for the rest of the day. They go home afterwards, eat dinner, and go to sleep.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Lucijana Čvrljak

BROKEN SYSTEM

Once upon a time there was a girl. She was different . Her mom was a siren, her dad was a werewolf and most important she was a vampire. She couldn't tell anyone that she is a vampire because vampires were extinct for past million years. You may wonder how siren and werewolf have connection with vampires? Well, there is no connection. There is system that chooses your mythical creature. This girl is going to learn more about system and will try to fix it but no one can know she is a vampire. Let's start at the beginning...

-Hi my name is Victoria. Tomorrow I'm turning 14. I'm so excited because on your 14th birthday you get your creature! Poor Victoria was so happy but she didn't know what was waiting for her. The system was ruled by witch. She wasn't the friendliest witch. Victoria jumped off the bed and couldn't find selection button. When you wake up on your birthday there supposed to be a button in the air. Victoria was confused. She had her private library in the house and ran towards it hoping her parents wouldn't catch her. Victoria looked through books searching information about system but the page that supposed to tell her what happen was ripped off. Victoria was even more confused.

She said: I think this is a setup or maybe the system is broken after all. Why would anyone rip that important page? She looked through more books and couldn't find anything. The rest of the day she had birthday party, and it was fun afterall. When it was five minutes until midnight out of nowhere black button appeared with message: Press it. Normally the button would be red. Three minutes before midnight she remembered story of her aunt. She got black button as well when she was 14 years old. Her aunt didn't press it and disappeared at 1 a.m. She knew it was a sign and couldn't risk it .She pressed the button! The selection line came up. She was so excited. She got vampire. They are extinct because they were too dangerous and impossible to kill. There were only 10 of them in whole world. Witch removed them from Earth, so no one knows where they are now. In the morning she greeted her parents and had to lie about what she got until she figure it out. It was winter break. She ran through the

door into the forest. In the forest there was secret lobby where witches' workers meet and go to secret control centre. She was sneaking around the forest. In a blink of a eye she was kidnapped and appeared in the flying bubble. Two persons were driving it. Victoria wasn't at all scared and she actually enjoyed the ride.

They landed at this magical place. She never saw anything that beautiful in her life. Witch came out of nowhere. Victoria nervously said: Hi! Witch explained to her that system wasn't broken afterall. It was all planned by this secret organization. We all vampires. Witch said. 10 more persons walked in and Victoria was shocked . She couldn't believe her eyes. Witch had offer to her that she can join because she is the chosen one. After 10 million of years which supposed to die and this was her last year. Victoria would be new witch, but she needed a lot of preparation to rule the whole world. As the year passed Victoria become better and better. After a year Victoria become new witch. For the next ten million years Victoria ruled the world until next chosen one came...

mentor: Adriana Kranjac Mišković

institution: OŠ Rikard katalinić Jeretov, Opatija

Gracija Kalaba

MURDER OF THE ROYAL FAMILY

It was Christmas Eve. The royal family was decorating their castle. When they were done they all went to sleep so they can be ready for Christmas.

While king Charlie and queen Eliza were sleeping their children princ Jonathan and princess Emily were still awake. Out of nowhere they heard steps that were coming from outside of the castle. Their guards were sleeping because it was 1:00 AM. Jonathan and Emily came down to wake up their guards so they can see who is walking towards the castle. When guards were finally awake they stepped outside to see who is coming, but they didn't see anyone. King and queen started hearing those steps too so they came down to check if everything was okay. Jonathan and Emily started whispering about what they heard and how they were awake the whole time. Charlie and Eliza didn't know where to start. They said that they also heard those steps and that there is nothing to worry about. They all went back to sleep. In the morning children were opening their presents when they heard those steps again but this time they were louder. Guards came to the living room and said that there is someone in front of the doors. Charlie came to see who is that but there wasn't anyone. Guards started talking about how they think that someone is pranking them but they didn't know who. As Eliza held her children, those steps were coming out of the attic. Guard Noah started to lose his mind because those steps were always somewhere. Guard Ronald came to the attic and there was a box moving. He went to check the box but there was just some old creepy doll. As soon as Ronald saw the doll he rushed down. Children asked what was wrong but Ronald passed out on the floor. They immediately called 911. After Ronald was taken to the hospital Noah was so worried that he wouldn't see Ronald again. The royal family went to visit Ronald. The doctor said that the reason why Ronald passed out was that he was really scared. After two days Ronald was back. Noah missed him so much that they both cried their hearts out. Those steps went on for days until one day they stopped. Children were so happy so they went to the playground. They didn't know what was going to happen until they came there. There was a strange man covered in black tattoos. That man took Jonathan and Emily and he let them go in the middle of nowhere.

One hour later unknown number called Charlie and Eliza. It was the man that took Jonathan and Emily. He said that if they want to go get their children, they needed to pay him a million dollars or he would go get them and kill them. Eliza started crying so much that she couldn't even breathe. Charlie pulled himself together and said that he would pay anything just to see his children again. The man said that they have one week to pay him or else.. After their children came back Eliza said that she wouldn't let them outside ever again. One night Jonathan and Emily heard their mum scream. They came in as fast as they could. Their mum was covered in blood. Their dad was crying like no one could when he saw his dead wife. After that, Charlie invited everyone to come to the funeral. After that the royal family was never the same again. Years passed by and the murderer of the queen was never found. Jonathan and Emily soon had their 15th birthday. Charlie wanted to throw them an amazing party but he was not letting strangers in his castle. Jonathan and Emily begged him to throw them a party but just with a few close friends. Charlie finally agreed. Party was going so well until all guests started screaming. Charlie rushed down to see what happened and he saw something that he thought he would never have to see. Jonathan and Emily were on the floor with their heads cut off. It was a nightmare. Charlie asked everyone to leave so he could call 911. He was over the moon when he saw that Jonathan woke up but his life came crashing down when the doctor said that Emily was dead. He invited everyone to the funeral. After the funeral Charlie had a breakdown because he lost the two most loved women in his life. Charlie started searching for the murderer but soon enough he let the police help him. A year passed after Emily died and seven years after Eliza died. It was his first birthday without his sister. He missed her so much that the party theme was Emily. Everyone wore something that reminded them of Emily but for Jonathan he dressed as Emily. He even bought two cakes- one for him and one for Emily. Birthday party went so well because no one got murdered. Years passed and everything was good but Charlie and Jonathan missed Eliza and Emily even more. Not one day passed that they didn't think of Eliza and Emily. One day Charlie got some very good news. The police found the murderer that murdered Eliza and Emily. It was the man with black tattoos from all those years ago.

After five years Charlie passed away and it was time for Jonathan to get the crown and become a king. He made sure that everyone was comfortable in their houses. He even gave food to the homeless people in their country. Maybe Jonathan was lonely but he always thought of his sister and parents. Even Noah and Ronald were still the guards and became his family.

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

Jakov Švarc

THE WRONG LIST OF THE FAKE SANTA

Every Christmas, children look forward to the arrival of Santa Claus because that means only one thing: presents! Gifts almost always include favorite toys, books and picture books, video games, candy, and clothing. But this year was somehow different.

Santa chose his best helpers and gave them an important task. They had to visit busy city locations every day - squares and streets, Advent houses, shopping centers - and collect the Christmas wishes of the children they met. They would write down the wishes on a sheet, which they then sent to the North Pole. There, the elves packed the children's wishes into boxes, wrapped them in nice paper and put a big bow on each one.

All the 'Santa Clauses' did their job perfectly, except for one. He did not write down the wishes, nor did he talk to the children. They got on his nerves and he considered them mean and spoiled.

After a few days, he sent his 'list' to the North Pole. When he saw it, the real Santa was shocked. The list read: for Ivica - some coal in a sock, for Maja - old socks with holes, for Luka - rotten apples, for Vlatka - a black radish, and so on.

However, Santa had no choice but to pass this strange list to the elves and put those odd gifts in his bag. Like every Christmas Eve, he started his journey and the children around the world followed him on the app and were very much looking forward to his arrival.

On Christmas morning, shock again! Instead of joy and laughter, children from the strange list were all in tears. All the houses in one whole street received unwanted, ugly presents and children were angry and disappointed.

They decided to write to Santa and ask him to explain this absurd situation. Santa answered as soon as he got their letter - he informed them that it was all a big misunderstanding and that he had fired his naughty helper. He wanted to make it up to those kids and asked them what they really wanted for Christmas. Soon they received the real presents and they were happy again.

Santa learned a big lesson – he should always check on his helpers thoroughly and be sure about their intentions. And the children? They are still playing with their new toys.

mentor: Sandra Brcko

institution: OŠ Hugo Kon, Zagreb

Cvita Talajić

PERFECT LIFE, LONELY HEART

Once upon a time, in the center of Madrid, in the happiest part of the city, there was a girl named Euridicy. She was a beautiful girl with long dark hair and orchid-blue eyes. She was going to the best university in town and had the richest parents in Spain. But something in her life was missing. She had friends who seemed to be worth gold, but they were just friends with her because of her money. She had a very kind boyfriend, but he liked her for the same reason as her friends. She could never do what she wanted because of her parents, who wanted her to be perfect. She was miserable her whole life. But she was at least happy at school because she had lots of friends and a kind boyfriend, or at least she thought so.

One day she overheard her friends talking. "Ugh, she's so annoying! How long do we need to pretend to be her friends? I'm so tired of her boring life stories!"

"Don't worry girls, we will pretend until she gives us money, after she does that, we will abandon her right away."

She stood there stunned. She rushed to the bathroom. While she was trying to calm herself down, she realised that she had to confront them. So, that day she went to each of their houses and gave them huge amounts of fake money. When she got home, she felt like she'd done the right thing. After all, they were just using her for her money. But the next morning she heard her boyfriend saying the same horrible things about her as her friends had previously done. This time she ran away as fast as she could. She just wanted to go away and disappear.

She stopped running when she reached the closest airport. There she just sat down and started crying. A nice-looking man tapped her on the shoulder and asked, "Why are you crying, miss?"

She replied, "Because I have a *perfect life*, but a *lonely heart*."

*mentor: Maja Čajko**institution: OŠ Sveti Križ Začretje, Sveti Križ Začretje**Dorothea Dijaković*

THE HORROR NOVEL

One cold and stormy night Lilly Williams was in her room, reading. She loved reading novels and buying antique books. She always went to a shop called “Spooks and Creeps “. One day she found a horror novel there. The story was set in Italy in 1900. She decided to buy the book because it reminded her of her grandmother. She was born in Italy in 1891. She asked the manager of the shop how much the book cost and he told her that if she wanted the book she had to win it in an auction. Lilly really wanted it so she made the highest bid. She went home feeling very happy because she won the auction. She came home and went to her room. She was really excited, but when she opened the book she saw that it was blank...there was nothing written in it! She was very disappointed because she paid quite a lot for a blank book. She threw it on the bookshelf angrily. A few days later, Lilly’s whole family started experiencing some paranormal activities in the house. Then her grandmother suddenly died from an unknown illness. Lilly was devastated. She noticed the book on the shelf and felt extremely exhausted. She decided to throw it out. But before she threw it in the trash, she opened it one more time. She was shocked – there was a whole chapter written in it. And her grandmother was the main character! She read it and felt shivers down her spine. Everything about her grandma dying was there. And the title of the next chapter was “Lilly”! She quickly closed the book and decided to go to the bookshop and ask the manager about it. She rushed out of the house, but when she came to Diagon street, she couldn’t find the bookshop. She walked up and down the street, but it just wasn’t there. She asked a passerby where the bookshop was, but, strangely, he said that there was never a bookshop there. That day Lilly went missing...

mentor: Suzana Tolić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno Brijesće, Osijek

Martin Drenjančević

AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Yes, school... That is a very boring thing. Mostly because you repeat the same thing every week. But it's still fun because of friends and some teachers. ☺ To make life more fun there are after-school activities.

So according to my calculations, 89% of boys go to football practice. Well, I don't. I go to basketball practice, and I also play the guitar. I am great at basketball; I always beat my dad when we play outside. I go to my practice two times a week and I love it. The fun fact is that I watched only one LIVE basketball match. Also, I have been training basketball for 1 year and I have already bought two balls. But don't think that I am silly because I spent money on two basketballs. I have bought two balls because I thought one was punctured and then after two weeks, I realized it was not punctured. Yes, it's a very funny story. And I think that's all about basketball. So now it's time to talk about the guitar. First things first, the question "What is better, basketball or the guitar?" Well, the answer is easy, the guitar is way better than basketball, so we have got a lot more to talk about. What is so special about the guitar? So basically, touching the strings already makes you feel good. Maybe you'll never get a chance to get that feeling, but trust me, it is incredibly good. And imagine, you can just punch those strings and you make a melody. Yes, I can do that. And I also have a good teacher. So alright, that is all about the guitar and I think it is all about after-school activities. Yes, goodb... Wait, wait, wait! I almost forgot I do one more thing after school. I play video games. My favourite video game is Minecraft. It's a game from 2011 and, by the way, I was born in that year. Minecraft is all in cubes. That is the only strange thing about it. It's all in cubes, but it's still one of the most popular games in the world! That is also one fun fact about Minecraft. I have been playing it for 4 years now and I love it! I also play Fortnite. It's a shooting game.

And yes, I think school is very important, but activities are important as well because without them life wouldn't be interesting. So, that is all about after-school activities for real this time. So, goodbye!

*mentor: Mia Dević Mandura
institution: OŠ Jelenje - Dražice*

Ivano Korman

MY BASKETBALL JOURNEY

One day back in 2018 I had my first experience with basketball. That day my dad came and said what would you like to play, football or basketball. I said basketball. I didn't know anything about sports but I still tried my best on my first practice. When I came I have seen everyone on practice were so much bigger and then me and older then me. At first when I got the ball in my hands I didn't know what should I do, I was first running with the ball to the basket and missed. But I learned so much and started to get better. But still wasn't doing so good like the guys that played with me. I really wanted to play my first game like the others but was too young and wasn't even tall like others. I was playing and playing so much, going to every practice I could and was getting better. I wasn't gonna give up. I wanted to get better. At practice I was looking at how my teammates played and I realised there is a lot of work to do. I started watching NBA to see how other players and teams play. I was really impressed how they play. I have seen some professional players like LeBron James, Gianni Antetokoumpo, Stephen Curry and others. I was trying to do some of their plays like Gianni's euro step. I was practicing outside and inside, no matter what. I had a dream in my mind, my dream was to make it to NBA one day. And I was trying my best to make my dream come true. I was better, stronger, faster, smarter, and focused on basketball.

In 2020 I was already one of the best players on practice, but still many people from the class were talking about how I couldn't make a shot with a football. Every athlete knows you cannot score a bucket so easily with a football. And 2020 was a really different year. Corona virus came so I didn't practice so much and I got worse at basketball. I was bored so much but I didn't have to go to school. At home I had a basketball but no basket so I went to the playground and practiced there. I was terrible, I missed most of my shots, but that changed. After a couple of days I was scoring the most of my shots like layups, three pointers, rebounds and other. The next day coach called and said we have practice tomorrow. So I had to get ready for practice. I was outside, I was running and working on my dribbling. I was outside

for a very long time, like 4 – 6 hours so I was really tired. I went inside the house and fell asleep. The next morning I woke up, I brushed my teeth, ate breakfast and played videogames. I think every professional athlete was a gamer before. I went to practice right after playing video games. On practice first we worked on layups. I am really good at that but still don't like doing layups for the start. I would rather do dribbling to the basket for the start. Then we got in pairs and worked on passing. We do if of the floor and other types of passing. It is good because I fixed my passing so much with that exercise. And all the same till December 20021.

In December 2021 I played two games. I was so excited when we came and had pre game warm-up. That was 30 minutes long and then the game started. I was really nervous so I didn't play so good the first game. We lost. Also the second game.

The next week we had two games. I was nervous. I just wanted to score one point. The first game we lost and I didn't score and the second game we lost, too. When I came home, I was really sad. I was practicing 2.5 – 3 hours a day and the day before the game I was outside for 4 hours. When we came to the game I saw a beautiful bucket, I was doing great in defence and in attack, and I scored another bucket and two minutes later another bucket. I felt like Kobe Bryant is inside of me. Someone did a foul on me so I got two free-throws, I scored both. At the end of the game I realised I scored 20 points. That's the highest in my career. But we lost for three points. The next game, we won, I scored the winning three pointer in the last second. And that is my journey, but it's not over yet. I still didn't make my dream come true. Now, you tell me your story.

*mentor: Ana Katruša**institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice**Zoja Ličinić*

MERMAID'S LAKE

Once upon a time there was a beautiful lake. But that lake wasn't ordinary; it was magical. Mermaids live in the lake. They have got beautiful tails which shine in the sun. The most delightful mermaid is called Marie.

One day the mermaids play with a golden ball. Marie drops the ball in the forest nearby. All mermaids get angry with Marie. "Now, you need to go and get the ball back," says Wynona, her friend. "But I haven't got legs! I can't reach the ball," cried Marie. Wynona left furiously.

"I'll help you!" someone says. "Who says that?" asks Marie. "Nobody," again the same voice. "Please, if you hear me, help me! If you're not a fish, of course," asks Marie again. "You're one silly mermaid," says very small fairy. She's got long straight brown hair and brown eyes. Her wings are pink. She is wearing skirt made of leaves. "A fairy?!" says Marie. Marie looks at her with her blue eyes. Her wavy black hair is wet, and her blue tail is shining. "Yes, my name is Lola," the fairy tells Marie. "I can give you your ball if you want it." "Oh, yes, please! All the mermaids are angry with me because I lost the ball." "OK, but you need to get me my crown back first." Lola seems unhappy. "But how? I don't even know where your crown is. Why do you have a crown?" Marie was curious. "You see, all the mermaids are angry with you, and all the fairies are angry with me. I'm a princess and I lost my crown." now Lola is sad. "My crown is at the bottom of your lake." "I can find it and give it back to you. I'll go and look for it," offers Marie.

At the same time, Wynona finds Lola's crown and puts it on her head. Marie sees her because she comes out of the water with the crown. She yells at Wynona: "Give me that crown! I need it now!" "Never!" says Wynona. "I don't believe you anymore because you dropped the golden ball!" "I can't let you have it. It belongs to the fairies." But Wynona doesn't listen to her. "Mermaids!" she calls. "Catch her!"

Suddenly, Lola comes to them and stops them. "That's my crown," she explains. "I lost it when I danced, and it fell into your lake. Can you give me back my crown?" Wynona sees her mistake and the little fairy takes the crown back. To thank them, she returns the golden ball to Marie.

They lived happily ever after.

mentor: Anita Baranašić

institution: OŠ Sesvetska Sela, Zagreb

Tin Cesar

CORPORAL TIN'S JOURNAL

April 19th 1862, Frankfort, Kentucky

We were at Drill camp. Our general Ulysses S. Grant was explaining the buglers and the drummers what each drummer or bugler meant. Then we heard them. The CSA (Confederate States of America) soldiers. "STATIONS" he yelled and we got into the trench. The artillery crew were loading cannons. The bugler played the "Commence Firing" call. We started shooting and the artillery crew commander also yelled to fire. Then the general said: "Bayonets!" then he yelled "CHARGE!". We got up and started to charge. We avoided the CSA's artillery strikes. The fight was over and we started marching to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi. We infiltrated a CSA camp on the way and stayed there for a couple of months.

July 10th 1862, Jackson, Mississippi

We infiltrated Jackson and liberated it. The bugler called the call for lunch, we got out of our tents and came to the middle of the camp to eat. Then, we heard it. The rebel yell, not just 1, but 100 of them. The same scenario from before. They were almost successful of liberating our camp. Then the CSA soldiers retreated to Alabama so that meant Mississippi was liberated from the CSA and now in the USA. My general promoted me to corporal I was proud of myself. I told the general that I'll go check on the artillery crew. I go to the artillery shooting range and the sergeant for the artillery crew greeted me and asked me why I came to them. I answered that I want to see how they prepare the cannon. It was a complicated job there were 5 men to operate it. 2 of them had long metal sticks, 1 had an amber cleaner and a rammer, the other one had a sponge. Then the 1st man cleans the barrel of amber and he holds the barrel with the end of his stick then the other guy cleaned the barrel with a wet sponge and the 1st guy then cleaned the water in the barrel. Then their commander goes to a box filled with different types of ammo. They weren't balls like you see in the films, they were bullet shaped. Then he puts it at the end of the barrel. The guy that cleaned the barrel for ambers now rams the bullet into the barrel. Then the 3rd

and the 4th guy position the barrel and the cannon to the target. Then the 5th and final guy primmed the cannon and fires it. And when they fired it, the ball hit the center of the target.

I got back to my duties and it was peaceful for now. That's all for these 2 months. If anything interesting happens, I'll write it in this journal.

This was Corporal Tin signing off.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Ante Katura

SECRETS OF AN AVERAGE LITTLE BOY

Once upon a time, maybe a few months, lived a little boy that goes by the name of Demetreus Demarcus Bartholomew James III. Jr (we will call him Demetreus). Demetreus has black hair and blue eyes along with a very goofy stance. He stands at a whopping 5 foot 6 inches. He was a very average boy, playing games every day and hanging out with his friends...

BUUUUUT, he had a very dirty little secret.

Before we get to that, meet Tony Marasolinne.

Tony is a very boring individual because everything, i mean EVERYTHING he has is made to make him popular and very mainstream. As an example, his t-shirt is black red along with adidas trousers. His shoes are white Air Max 270s.

He is not mainstream when he is with Demetreus because they are BFFs.

Now, back to Demetreus, the secret is that.....Ooooh, suspenseful!.....

He had a Mush Lab in his house.

If you are wondering: "What in tarnation is a "Mush Lab?", let me tell you.

A "Mush Lab", as Demetreus and Tony named it, is a place where Tony and Demetreus came together and brought different food products like eggs, salt, yo-ghurt, ketchup and various other stuff to mix it into a substance that would be great to make someone throw up. Then, they would take their HUGE red and powerful slingshot, climb on top of Tony's flat, red roof and shoot the strangers with the mush. Now, I have to end the story. The end.

You thought i was really going to end the story like that? You would be dead wrong.

Remember how I said "secrets" instead of "secret"?

And I said "friends" instead of "friend"?

Well, it is time to meet a little bit more of his friends and a little bit more of his secrets.

Demetreus Demarcus Bartholomew James III. Jr. only has one best friend. That would be Tony Marasolinne.

Best friends aren't your only friends. There also are normal friends which you see a little bit less.

Demetreus had tens of these.

One friend of his in particular is a little devil.

His name is Joseph Karlow.

He is a very popular individual who gets invited to every football tournament around the quarter they live in. He is just very good at football and the ability to dribble Demetreus as much as he wants to do so. Forget it, that is not why he is so popular.

He has a lot of firecrackers and, umm... the whole schoolyard turned red because of the man himself, Joseph Karlow. I guess you can imagine how big of a problem that was. Demetreus and Tony could not play football without getting first-degree burns.

Joseph was the definition of a little devil.

Now, what was their big secret that nobody knew except Joseph, Demetreus and I?

Want some suspense?

I will give you suspense.

The man himself threw a firecracker in a container near Demetreus' house and burned it down. That was ultimately blamed on a lightning strike since Demetreus' parents were not home.

That caused the other containers around it to get filled to the brim and beyond since the container Joseph burned down had the highest capacity, and the container filling was causing a dreadful stench.

Joseph was very lucky and got away with the situation. Also, his little brother came on the schoolyard with the most powerful firecracker Joseph had and lighted it. Demetreus was not there to witness the situation, but his friend Denny Barrabanas told him that he came to the schoolyard and saw a random kid running and screaming 'Cobra 8! Cobra 8! Run! Run!' Then, he heard a loud, bomb-like explosion (which is not dramatization since that firecracker has around 100 grams of gunpowder). Denny is still shocked how Joseph's mom could let Joseph's little brother out with such a firecracker. It was very confusing considering Demetrius' firecrackers did not have gunpowder. If you are wondering what connection Demetrius has with Denny Barrabanas, he went to kin-

dergarten and primary school with him. Also, he taught Denny how to play football.

Denny Barrabanas is a blond man with brown eyes. He is not very tall and almost always wears a blue t-shirt with grey trousers.

Now, Demetreus also shares a secret with Denny Barabanas, since he is a man of trust. He does not have the strength to do something like telling someone's secret. Denny has a very important secret. What is it, you might ask?

The suspense is killing everybody, right?

His super smart dad developed advanced Nanobots that can help cure 95 percent of diseases!!

Can you see what impact this will make on society?

I think you can!

This is really going to impact society!

Also, the nanobots can duplicate themselves to create more nanobots and eradicate 95 percent of diseases!

Isn't that amazing?

P.S If Area 51 and FBI scientists find out that Denny's dad developed such a monumental thing, they will eradicate the man off the planet as they probably want to discover it themselves for extra funding.

Now, Demetreus has a secret only for himself, without anyone knowing.

That would be the fact that he owns a game that is in second person perspective. A game that has a second person perspective is a game that lets you control the player from a non-playable character's perspective.

Demetrius has many, many more secrets to uncover, but it is actually 12:30 am so I will shortly have to go sleep.

Now, it is time for a huge plot twist.

The writer, or I, Demetrius.

This Flash Fiction is based on my actual life.

Demetreus would be me, AK.

Tony is my lifelong best friend, MM.

Joseph is my new, other best friend, BK.

And Denny Barrabanas is my lifelong good friend, DB.

I am very thankful to have such good friends which is why I have included them in the story as characters with the same personality.

mentor: Dajana Vidaković

institution: OŠ "Matija Gubec", Čeminac

Lunamia Đanković

A MAGICAL ADVENTURE

One spring, when the little girl Maja was still in elementary school, something very unusual happened. She liked to watch cartoons and movies in which the main characters were fairies and elves. One spring evening, when she lay in bed, she saw a bright light through the window. She got scared and covered her head with a blanket. In the morning she told her mom, but she didn't believe her and neither did her dad. All day Maja thought about the coffee, the light and why it appeared. The next evening, when it was time to sleep and rest, she went to bed again.

The magical light appeared again.

This time, Maja was not afraid, but looked out the window to see what exactly it was about. When she looked, she saw two wonderful and magical fairies in flight. She liked their wings the most, in some places transparent and colorful, and mostly sparkling like fireflies. The fairies were enjoying their flight, but they noticed that someone was watching them from the window of a house. They didn't get scared and run away, they came to Maja. They introduced themselves to her and Maja found out that one fairy was called Lola and the other Greta. The fairies asked Maja if she would go with them on the adventure of a lifetime. Maja didn't change her mind at all because she always loved fairies and fantasized about them as well as magical beings that could all exist.

She immediately agreed and went with them. Lola and Greta took their new friend to a magical forest outside the city, under a high mountain. In the forest were Lola's and Greta's friends, also fairies and elves, and Maja also met dwarves, good witches, and she even met the good golden dragon Robert, who, that spring, guarded the mountain and their spring forest. Together with her new fairy friends, Maja toured the fairy village. Lola also showed Maja their house, made of large forest leaves supported by strong branches. When they entered, everything around them began to fly. Maja was scared, but Lola told her that objects start flying when someone enters the house because of a fairy spell. The fairies also had their own garden, full of colorful and very rare flowers that the little girl had never seen and that grow in the forest in spring.

Greta and Lola together with other friends showed Maja their games and dances. Greta saw the sunset. Greta warned Lola about it, and the two immediately talked to Maja. They realized that they had to return the girl home quickly so that her parents would not worry. At the exit from the forest, the whole forest seemed to start singing. The fairies promised Maya that tomorrow evening they would come to her window again and invite her to an adventure and a visit to the forest. When Maja woke up in the morning, she saw the spring sun shining in the sky and she was very happy because she met fairies and other magical creatures, and she was even more happy that she would continue to hang out with them...

*mentor: Marta Barišić**institution: OŠ «Jesenice», Dugi Rat**Luna Zemunik*

HIGH SCHOOL DISASTER

I walked confidently into school, as I always did. While I was walking to my first class, I noticed students I didn't know staring at me. Surprisingly, they weren't admiring me. They were staring at me with noticeable disgust shown in their eyes. "Well, this is not good at all!" – I thought, as I was running off to my Maths class. As I expected more and more students kept staring at me which was creepy. I needed to know the reason for this annoying situation as soon as possible.

I sat down at my table as the bell rang, and the class started. There was a short break after the lesson. I was leaning against the door with my mind full of thoughts and none of them were good. I couldn't stop hearing my classmates making up the stories about me. Each rumour sounded worse than the previous one. Even though they were whispering it seemed so loud. I was on the verge of tears when my best friend Lia walked up to me.

"Hey bestie- whoa, you look hideous!" I was in a complete shock. My own best friend to talk like that. "What do you mean?" – I said, with a hint of anger. "See for yourself!" – She replied as she was giving me a mirror. My eyes widened as I was staring in it. I did indeed look hideous. "I have to fix this." – I thought for myself. I ran into the bathroom with my tears rolling down my cheeks. I knew that there wasn't anything to help me to fix the disaster on my face. There were some red marks all over it and the dark circles under my eyes were huge. I sat on the floor and started looking everywhere in my schoolbag. "I need to have at least some mascara somewhere or a skin foundation..." I whispered to myself. I was so happy when I finally found them.

After washing up my face thoroughly, I dried it up and put on some skin tint, applied my mascara, and walked out the same bathroom I had run into as insecure as ever. The only difference was that now I was walking out of it as confident as I would ever be.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Paula Malenica

UPSIDE DOWN DREAM OF WINTER

I wake up in snow and look around, nothing is clear to me.

How come it's snowing in Split. The last time it fell when I was 5 years old. I was turning my head, when I feel breathing on my neck. I scream and turn around when I see a Cooke. For a second I think I'm in a madhouse. I rubbed my eyes for a good 5 minutes, thinking that something would change, but nothing. I hear a voice coming out of the cookies and I almost pass out. I look a little closer around me and see the inscription castle biscuit. Houses and shops were also made of biscuits, but in fact everything was made biscuits. I rise from the snow and almost freeze. This snow is particularly cold. I felt a touch and suddenly wake up. Luckily, I was in my room without snow or strange cookies. My mom used to wake me up for school. I put on my jacket and shoes. I went to school, but when I left the apartment, I saw gingerbread walls around me. However, I didn't actually wake up, I went to another dimension. My heart was beating three hundred per hour, I thought, I was going to fall thought the floor, but I still calmed down and pretended that everything was fine. When I went out in front of the building, I saw gingerbread men walking. Suddenly I fell through the hole that led to the biscuit prison. I looked around for a long time thinking I would find something, but nothing. Suddenly I see a biscuit dressed in royal clothes. I was surprised and stared at him wide because I was scared. Then the biscuit king asks me a few questions as if in an interview. In a few minutes the king leaves and I am left alone in prison. I felt as if someone was holding my leg. I didn't see anything on my leg or around my leg, so I assumed that I was imagining everything. Oh, what bit me. I noticed a gingerbread man and he tells me to follow him. This day couldn't be crazier. The gingerbread slipped through even the tiniest of holes. He finally got me out of jail. He took me to the aircraft and lifted it all the way to the clouds. I felt the aircraft shake and fall.

I suddenly got up and jumped out of bed. I felt things to make sure that I felt them for real and not to imagine. Just so that this nightmare doesn't happen again.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Nina Slavić

LOST IN ISLAND OF STILLNESS

Once there was a girl named Alison.

She was a normal eleven-year-old girl who lived in a London with her family. One day she woke up from her sleep tied to a board with some monkeys carrying her into a big forest. She was scared and confused. After a while out of a corner of your eye you could see a big stone fortress. Next morning, she woke up surrounded with worried faces of her classmates Tim, Olive and Victoria. She didn't know them well, but she was happy to know they saved her. They had same experience, but they escaped. Since they didn't know the way out, they decided just walking straight. That night they were all awake, they all kept watching guard all night. They were just eating, walking and drinking all day. For them it way not easy. They had to fight for they own food and even more important for their own life. They James that place *Island od stillness* because there was no sounds. They walked for a long time until they found a river. After they build a boat, they got into the river and started rowing. Then they sow a sign: 'D... river'. There was a half missing. It should have been written: 'Dead River', wait until midnight, all red underlined.

Fortunately, they build a boat shaped like a canoe. At the midnight the river became a lava. Boat turned on fire and started melting, but kids miraculously survived. After that moment they decided to move from the river deep into the jungle. Jungle was better but still not good. Day was good but night horrible because they knew there was lot of other animals up there. Olive was smart enough to realize they were lost in time. That meant they were between present and past. After that it didn't took him long to realize that they were in parallel universe before humans, but more dangerous. That was a big success for them. Next few days they were tired but decided to keep walking. It started to be harder and harder for them. Animals where smarter, then jungle bigger and bigger and they were sad and hopeless. They parents were looking for them for over a year now. They called police for thousands of times. Kids didn't know year had passed. They become braver and their appearance didn't change but they were a lot smarter, braver, wiser and ahead other eleven-

year-old kids. They started to find notes like - you are closer, afternoon don't talk if you want to walk...Every note was correct like that note was meaning that afternoon if you make sound ground will turn into living mud. Alison was wise one. She find out solutions for everything. Tim strong and brave one. Always ready to fight. Olive smart one and Victoria one great cooker. Days past by like a minute and once „poof“ storm .They got separated. They were miles away from each other. Alison got into a freezing part of the world, Tim into a darkest forest, Olive into a hottest and Victoria got into a part with beautiful beaches. They all started walking straight back to jungle. All roads where hard and every way was harder than another. Storms, rains, show, waves, darkness and many other problems. But none of those stopped them from getting back. Victoria sow something in a distance. IT turned out to be a women named Mrs. Lunfif. She was on island for over sixty years. She was looking like twenty-year-old women. She was the one who wrote notes. That was a moment when Veronika realized, they were in the game for three years now. When kids find each other, they were happy to see Mrs. Lunfif. They were together for a few more years until they found a way out. They needed to get on a same monkey fortress from the beginning. There They found a diamond which got them beck to a normal world. It took them weeks, months and years to get back there. It was a hard way to get up there. After they finally got there, they had to hight with a monkey which seen them as a fresh meal. It was a long fight, but the king was a big gorilla, and a diamond was on his crown. After they got the diamond and get back it was hard time for them. They families where worried and realized they are much older. After a couple of years, they were twenty years old. They all got married and stayed good friends and if you wonder about Mrs. Linfif... A life stories come to end one day so does hers, but she will always be remembered in their stories of *Lost in Island od stillness*.

*mentor: Mia Dević Mandura
institution: OŠ Jelenje - Dražice*

Ella Bovac

MERMAID

Once upon of time there was a girl named Nixie. Nixie loved swimming on the beach. While she was diving underwater she found a cave. She dove into the cave and found a gem. When she touched the gem it broke. Nixie was scared that she did something wrong, so she swam up to the shore.

When she got out of the water she could not stand up. She kept trying and trying and trying but nothing. When she looked at her legs, she saw that she has a mermaid tail. She was shocked and dove back into the water. While she was underwater, she found the mermaid kingdom. As she went closer, a mermaid came out of nowhere and said: "Hi! I'm Carol." Nixie was to shocked to reply. "Come on, I'll show you around.", said Carol. Nixie nodded and followed her around the kingdom.

While Carol was showing Nixie around, Nixie saw a door to pitch blackness. Nixie asked Carol, "What's that door there?". "That's the kings throne, he doesn't like intruders. Also, we have to go to meet him because you are new here, right?", asked Carol. "Yes, I am.", said Nixie. "Well then, let's go!", said Carol. They entered the kings throne. While swimming Carol asked, "So if you're a mermaid, how come I never see you?". Nixie replied, "Well, I live far away. I go everywhere in this ocean and I always meet new mermaids, but where do you live?" "I live in... ice cream?", says Nixie. "Oh, never heard of it.", says Carol.

After swimming for ten minutes they arrived. "Hello father, there's a new mermaid in the kingdom.", says Carol. Nixie introduced herself, "Hi, I'm Nixie. Nice to meet you." The king replied, "Why are you here?" "Well, I had nowhere to go.", said Nixie. "Hm... Have you heard about the broken gem?", asked the king. "What gem?", asked Nixie. "The rainbow one that you broke?" "I didn't break a gem!", Nixie said scared. "I saw you entering my throne and touch the gem!", the king shouted. Nixie swam away as fast as she can before the king got up. As Nixie swam away her tail started disappearing. She could hardly breathe. When she got to the shore, she grabbed her stuff and ran away leaving Carol disappointed.

mentor: Martina Salamon

institution: OŠ Mitnica, Vukovar

Vito Marijanov

THE LEGEND FROM SPACE

There was a kid who really liked spaceships. He dreamed one day to be an astronaut every day after school he only talked about spaceships he also talked a lot about how space is very fun and magical.

His mom listened to him every day about spaceships, astronauts how it is so magical there. One day he went to school and his teacher asked the class what would they like to be when they grow up?

Some kids said firefighters! some said a police officer! but only he said astronaut... Every body laughed at him and said that how stupid the idea was. When he came back to school he came back crying home.

He locked himself in his room his mom was very scared for him and asked... Honey a-are you okay? He didn't reply he was in his room locked up for 2 hours straight. When he came to the kitchen to make a sandwich his mom ran towards him crying and she said..O my god honey are you okay? He said im fine but his mom knew that he wasn't telling the truth. She said I know you are lying if you weren't lying you wouldn't lock your self in your room for 2 and a half hours straight!

He said ughhhh alright I will tell you. Our teacher said what would you like to be when you grow up? And I said astronaut and the kids just started laughing and saying that being an astronaut is stupid and pathetic. He said there are you happy now mom!

She said yes, yes I am happy because you told me this if you wouldn't told me this then I wouldn't know all this! His mom said now tomorrow we will go to your class and I will say that they all apologize and shake hands with you.

The next day he and his mom went to his school and his mom said to his class that they need to apologize to him because it is not nice to make fun of someone because that is their dream. They all apologized to him and the rest of the day they didn't mention a thing.

After a very long time the boy became an adult he was still trying to be an astronaut he was going to college he moved out his mom's house and had an awesome

apartment, he was happier than ever. He was trying to get a girlfriend for months and that seemed to him like ages.

But one day he found one girl that wanted to go on a date with him. He was very excited and very nervous because this is his first time to go on a date. He had 2 hours left to get ready. He first took a shower, then after that he made his hair and put on his suit and shoes

and by the time he looked at the clock it was 6:45 and the date was at 7:15 and the drive was about 20 minutes long so he had to start driving now. When he came to the restaurant he saw the girl that he is dating there, she said hey are you ready to go? He said yes uh lets go in.

When they sat and ordered their drinks and food he said sooo uh what do you do for a living? She said I am an astronaut for Nasa how about you? He said I don't have a job yet I am looking for one at the moment but one day I also want to be an astronaut.

When the date was over he went home and sat on his bed and he was thinking how did he find such a perfect girl? 3 years later he was 23 years old and he finally found a job at Nasa just like his girlfriend. He was still in a relationship with her.

He was in his first year of being in Nasa and he loved it there he made some new friends and every one had welcomed him like he was there own, every one was sooo nice and it is very awesome there.

In his 2 year there he was highly trained and he was the first astronaut that went to space in the 2 year but since he was very trained, his manager said that he could go to space to see if there is something that they have not discovered.

He was very nervous but happy in the same time this was his first time to go to space. When he had his gear on and everything on he was nervous that he would mess something up but his coworkers gave him the confidence to not be scared.

When they did the count down he was confident that he was gonna make it. When he got to space it was just like he imagined pretty and magical his dream came true after all these years he made it, he cried because he was so happy he said that when he comes back home for the holidays to his mom he is going to say everything.

When he got to the moon the first thing he did and always wanted to do is to do a backflip on the moon. It was so fun to him because it was his dream, the second thing that he did is put up his home flag he came from Canada to the USA but he put up both of the flags.

It was his time to go back to earth he did one last backflip on the moon but he knew that this was just his first time he would be on the moon because he believed that he would be plenty of other times.

When he came back to earth every one was so happy, and everyone was there even his girlfriend but he had it all planned out because he had a diamond engagement ring for his girlfriend that is now his wife. When he proposed everyone saw it and everyone clapped and cheered while he proposed to her.

And that is why he is called the young legend.

*mentor: Lidija Šaravanja**institution: OŠ Vladimir Nazor, Čepin**Ana Barišić*

THE DIARY OF A LOVESICK ASTRONAUT

Hi, my name is Max. I am an astronaut and I like to write about my life in my diary. One day, when I was fourteen years old, I decided that I am going to a school for astronauts. I never thought of what was going to happen to me. In college I was a straight A student, so I didn't really have to worry about my future after college... Oh, today is my last day of college and it seems like I must find a job. It sounds horrible but I really need to find myself a good job... It's been a while; in three months I am going to fly to the moon for the first time. It sounds so unreal because it was my very first childhood wish. Hey, time flew so fast I am going to the moon tomorrow... Yes, today is the day when I am going to the Moon. I can't wait! I am going to be with five more astronaut's, their names are Maja, Patricia, Marta, Eleonora, and Alex. I can't wait to meet them!

On 3rd of September, 2022 at 2PM we started flying. I met them all, they are so nice and cool, especially Maja.

We have been talking since the moment we met, she's like a female version of me. It's very interesting in the rocket, these bodysuits are cool. We have been traveling for seven hours now, which means we have to travel for 29 more hours to get to the Moon. I am going to write some more later; I am busy talking to my new friends now. Dear diary, I am so sorry for not writing to you for a long time. I was busy talking to Maja. I think I'm in love with her. Also, I think we're soulmates. Never mind, let's talk about space. It's so beautiful here. It's full of stars and it seems so unreal... Finally, we arrived to the Moon. It looks perfect. While getting out of the rocket Maja and I were holding hands. I was blushing so hard.

She said she loves me. I was so happy. It's time to go back home, I am so sad because it's beautiful in here. Maja and I were talking the whole way home. We realized that we have so much in common. We arrived on the Earth. We got so lucky here and we were all happy.

When we got out of the ship, I hugged her and I asked her for a date. I was so scared that she would say no, but she said yes, and she was as happy as me. On our date we kissed, and we have been together since.

Dear diary, it's been a couple of years. I totally forgot about you because I am so in love, I mean I am lovesick. We have been to 3 more trips to the space. With Maja I noticed love is such a powerful feeling. It's so warm, nice, happy, unreal, sometimes sad, and definitely mind blowing.

I want to give her the whole world, but she deserves so much more. She deserves the whole universe but that is what she already is. So, everything I have for her is my powerful love and a diamond ring which is in my pocket! Update: She said yes! So, dear diary, this is the end because everything that is going to happen to me I want to keep it all only in my heart.

*mentor: Anna Maria Popović**institution: OŠ Ivana Kukuljevića, Belišće**Leon Ranogajec*

ADVENTURES OF LERO THE MOUSE

In a small town by the river there was a mouse named Lero. Lero was a mouse who was good with everyone, only not with a cat Orel. Lero didn't know why Orel hated him.

Lero and his friends went to the hill next to the city where was Orel's house to ask Orel why he is angry. They came to Orel's house and knocked on Orel's door. His mom answered: „Hi guys! Orel's is in the garden.“ Lero and his friends went to the garden.

There was Orel playing football by himself. Lero went to Orel and told him: „why don't you like me.“ Before Orel could say anything the thunderstorm started. Their friends entered the house but Orel and Lero

Starts running in the forest where was the hunter's house. They ran through the forest

So fast that they fell asleep. After two hours they woke up. because of the hunter's whistle dogs attacked them. They started running like never before in their lives. But Lero tripped on a stone and fell on the cliff. Held with the little finger. Orel came back and helped him to get up and they escaped.

When they returned to the city, everyone was waiting for them. They had so many questions but one was the most interesting. Why did Orel saved Lero. Orel answer. because mice and cats are best friends.

mentor: Tihana Modrić
institution: OŠ Bol, Split

Marta Paut

LION KING 4

It was a beautiful day in Pridelands. All the animals got up. Pride Rock was decorated with flowers. Because Kovu and Kiara were supposed to get married. The day before the wedding came. Kiara was shaking with nervousness and Kovu did not know about himself. When Nala Kiara's mother came to pick up Kovu, she was surprised. Kovu was scared. Kovu, why are you scared, Nala asked him. Kovu answered her: I am afraid because I know that I will not be a better king than Simba, let alone Mufasa. Nala tells him you will be king no matter what. Then Simba appears and looks at Kovu and then at Nala. Kovu gets anxious and asks anxiously: Simba can we talk? Simba then answered: Of course we can, what do you want to talk about? Kovu: I wanted to talk about governance and rules in the Pridelands. Simba: Of course. Kovu and Simba exit the cave so they can go to the top of Pride Rock and Simba starts talking to Kovu. While Simba and Kovu talked, Nala comforted Kiara because Kiara was stressed. Mom, I'm not ready, I'm not ready, says Kiara in sadness, you're ready Kiara, says Nala.

The day of the wedding came. Vitani arrived and declared: "Come on Kiara, Kovu has already arrived and Simba is waiting for Nala and you Kiara. Here I come, exclaims Kiara! Vitani stood opposite of Kovu and, waiting impatiently, began to watch with a smile. Simba, Nala and Kiara quickly arrived, and the ceremony began. All the land was happy and so were Nala, Simba, Kovu and Kiara

4 YEARS LATER

After 4 years Kiara and Kovu had a cub. The cub's name was Mohatu named after his grand grand grand grandfather. When he was to be baptized all the animals gathered around Pride Rock. Rafiki the monkey came to the top of Pride Rock and raised Mohatu so every animal can see Mohatu the future KING of the Pridelands. When Mohatu was about 5 years old Kiara took Mohatu to the tip of Pride Rock. Kiara told Mohatu this. All that the sun shines on is our kingdom Mohatu. When me and your father are gone you will rule over everything the sun shines on. Yes, mom

Mohatu says. Mohatu this is serious, says Kiara with a straight face. Zazoo comes to alert the pride that hyenas came to the Pridelands. Kiara told Zazoo to take Moahatu to the cave and that he alerts the pride. The pride goes to the hyenas and fights. The pride comes back to Pride Rock. After about 5 days 3 families of lions came to Pride Rock in search of a pride. Nala wakes up steps out of the cave and sees 3 families of lions. What are you doing here, Nala asks. We are lost and we are in need of a new pride says a lioness, are cubs need food and water. Nala lets them sleep under the leg of Pride Rock. Later that same day when all the lions are awake. The pride decides to keep the 3 families.

Mohatu's first and last love

There were 5 cubs in the families. Mohatu had a glance of one of the cubs he fell in love with the lioness her name was Kamari. The names of the other cubs were Aheri and Jasari for the boys for the girls Kula and Kamali. Kamari fell in love with Mohatu on first glance. Kiara and Kamari's mother Nzuri saw that there was a spark between those two. Simba recognized a male lion it was Simba's adopted brother Malka. Malka recognized Simba. After a few days Mohatu and Kamari become inseparable. Mohatu and Kamari played with Kamali, Kula, Aheri and Asari every day. They were beast's friends. When they grew older, Kamari and Mohatu deeply fell in love got married and became KING and QUEEN with their beast friends: Kamali, Kula, Aheri and Jasari by their side they ruled beast in the history of their family tree. They lived a long and happy life.

mentor: Anna Maria Popović

institution: OŠ Ivana Kukuljevića, Belišće

Luka Crnčević

THE LOST DOG

Once upon a time there lived a little dog. The dog went everywhere and one day he got lost. The dog tried to find his way home but he didn't. The night was coming slowly and the little dog was afraid of the dark. When the day came, the dog tried to find his way home again but failed again. When night fell again, the dog was no longer afraid, but he missed his home. The next morning the dog woke up to the sound of a car and there was a man in the car. The man got out of the car and saw the dog lying without food and water and then the man took the dog in and they lived happily ever after.



PRIMARY

SCHOOL

7TH AND 8TH GRADE

*mentor: Ivana Kasunić**institution: OŠ Nikola Tesla Rijeka**Neva Glumac*



THE REAL WORLD

Once upon a time called right now there was a little girl with the name Ivy. She lives in the small village of Adventureville and has had quite the normal life. In her eyes that is. She wakes up every day to chaos and destruction, but we'll get into that a bit later. As I said she wakes up at about 8 a.m. (quite happily too, if I might add) and has a bowl of honeysnail shells with some griffin's milk. Just the usual for the break-slow. I mean it would be a breakfast, but the snails aren't that hard to catch and even less hard to buy. After that, Ivy gets dressed in her favorite hoodie and sweatpants (for comfort's sake) and heads off to the local market. That is her favorite place to go. So many exciting new people and products! And there is always some drama... "Hello mister Agebladel!", she said politely to the scary tall man with an eyepatch and tattoo sleeves. "Hi, there little miss Ivy!", said the man back, "Would you like to purchase something from my booth?". "No thanks, sir", replied Ivy. "But, I have a dragon's tooth razor, yeti coat, and a real-life gargoyle statue that doubles as only a slightly wild pet if you look at it for too long". Ivy didn't really need any of that, plus it all seemed very dangerous, so she declined the offer. She could have sworn, though, that the second she turned around to leave she heard the man mumble to himself: "Ungrateful kids these days. I sacrificed my left eye for this." So, she turned around to walk a bit faster. Next up was Madam Philea's booth. She was the oldest villager in the whole of Adventureville and she knew absolutely everything about everyone in the whole world. She has a magic crystal sphere, but do not be mistaken, a crystal sphere is far more powerful than a crystal ball because it can see everyone and everything everywhere! Pretty cool right? The lame crystal ball can show you only the people and things you care about. So boring! And so, our heroes story begins with a single conversation...

"Hiya missy, sooo how can I help you today?", asked Madam Philea in a slightly nervous voice. Ivy noticed that she was nervous, so she replied: "I'm not really looking for anything in particular but I would like to know if everything is okay?" Madam Philea replied angrily: "It's that sleazeball Andhogorohill. He just keeps ruining

everything! He stomped on my herb garden, and he shaved my friend's grandmother's husband's cousin's girlfriend's cow! Can you believe it?!" Ivy was certain that the magic sphere made her come to that last conclusion, so she didn't ask how she had managed to figure out that small detail. "I say", continued Philea, "someone needs to stop his age of terror!". All right so maybe you're a little confused now. This is the chaos and destruction I was talking about earlier. It's not really that bad. It's simply a tad bit annoying. And this Andhogorohill guy? He is just a gnome who is angry at the world for no specific reason. It has simply been that way for years now. Nobody has even tried to stop him! Until Madam Philea said so. As soon as she yelled that, all eyes were on her. Even the goblin's eyes and spider heads that she was selling were looking at her with shock. Then that same shock turned into excitement. And then finally anger! People were so mad at the gnome that they went ballistic! "I agree with Madam Philea. We have been falling for his stupid pranks for too long! Look at what he has done to me!", said a plump lady as she was pointing to the nearby house. On the window frame, there was a half-eaten pie that was supposed to be cooling down. "He ate half of my favorite pie!", she complained. "Oh yeah? Well look at what he has done to my canary!", yelled a neat-looking man in a business suit while he was literally pulling out a canary from his sleeve. The canary was an interesting color. It was the brightest purple color ever. Andhogorohill must have dyed it. While the people were bickering over who got pranked the worst, Ivy disappeared from the scene and went to her favorite booth and her favorite person in the whole world! "Hi Liam!", Ivy waved excitedly to the shopkeeper, "How are you? Did you get pranked by Andhogorohill this week? Because I didn't!". It was true that she didn't get pranked this week, but she did the week before. She was just getting ready to enjoy her breakslow when she spat out the first spoon. It tasted disgusting and she knew what it was. Somebody had replaced the delicious griffin's milk with the gross cow one! Ew! "Whoa slow down Ivy", said a kind-looking man, "I avoided the pranking too this week". After a small chat with Liam and purchasing the magical potatoes from him (they're sort of like regular potatoes just – magical!) she went home. It was lunchtime. Just as she sat down to eat her Loch ness monster fillet leftovers. She heard someone yell in a frog-like voice: "Wilbur! Winnie! Wilma!" Curious, she ran outside to inspect the situation. There in the middle of her garden, she saw a pond that hadn't been there before. "Cool", she whispered. As she got closer and closer, she noticed a frog sitting on a water lily. Around the water lily, there were so many tiny tadpoles. "Uhhhh, hello there I'm Ivy and who are you?", asked Ivy. The frog turned around and almost fell from the water lily. "Wow you must be the 'Main character'

that my husband was talking about I'll go get him. Nice to meet you. By the way I'm Winnie" Shortly after Winnie disappeared, a different frog jumped up onto the water lily. "Hello there princess of Shakaloopingetrakcyraymoore Kingdom! I see you are finally ready for your quest?", asked the frog, "I'm Wilfred and I'll be your chaperone during this adventure". Ivy was a bit stunned and confused. She confronted the frog called Wilfred: "Are you sure you have the right person? My name is Ivy". Wilfred seemed slightly disappointed: "Oh, then Ivy it shall be. You must stop the evil Andhogorohill from pulling his stupid pranks!" Now, why in the whole world did Wilfred the frog choose Ivy? It could be because she was pure-hearted, nice person. But the reason is a little bit deeper than that. After thinking for a bit she accepted the offer. Well how hard could it be anyways... Wilfred gave her a little rock – to help her in times of need. "Also I will be joining you!", said Wilfred. "Why?", asked Ivy. "It's because of my kids I have twenty-six...", Ivy abruptly interrupted: "You have twenty-six kids?!". "NO", said Wilfred the frog: "I have twenty-six thousand three hundred and eleven kids". Ivy thought she was going to faint, but she understood Wilfred's reason. And so the journey to the land of Andhogorohill's castle had begun. They started the journey the next morning and Ivy noticed something. One, her backpack was a lot more spacious on the inside but wasn't bigger on the outside. Two, she had an XP (Experience Points) bar at the bottom of her point of view and ten hearts (for ten lives that she got). Interesting! She met Wilfred outside and as soon as they got to the market people started showering her with gifts and presents. Liam gave her a little slingshot. Not the best weapon but it will do. People were pestering her to do the dumbest of tasks like getting a cat down from a tree or finding their beetroot, but she didn't have any time for side quests. Some voice inside her told her that she had to go for the real deal. She was going to defeat Andhogorohill himself before anything else! So with a heavy heart and an even heavier backpack, she left her village. I can spare you the details of her and Wilfred's traveling but it did take several days. "Sometimes I wish I was at home eating my breakslow instead of this energy bar flies every morning", Ivy complained after two days of traveling. She was already down to four hearts because of some silly attempts to shorten the trip. Once she fell into the river and another time she fell from a tree, but she'd known what would happen if she lost all her hearts. "Nothing good", she assumed. Wilfred was loving the energy bar flies and he wasn't complaining in the slightest. This was his peace of mind away from his family. Just for a little bit. Just then ahead they saw it. Andhogorohill's castle. Well... It was more of a children's toy castle but for him it was home (he's a tiny gnome remember?). Just as they were opening the castle gates a bucket of mud fell onto our heroes. "How is he so good at this?", asked Wilfred

annoyed, “It’s like his life purpose is to pester people”. “He isn’t that good”, said Ivy, “we were just caught off guard”. So, soaked to the bone with mud, they made their way around the castle. The castle was HUGE in the gnome’s eyes, but for Ivy it was the size of an average flat in a skyscraper. And there he was sitting on a little chair that to him was like a throne. “What are you doing here?”, the gnome said in a childish tone, “this is my house so get out!”. “Not so fast” said Ivy. “I have come here”, she looked over to Wilfred who looked a little hurt, “I mean WE have come here to stop you from pulling any more pranks!”. “I would like to see you try”, said Andhogorohill. He had a bubble machine. He turned it on, and the bubbles got into Ivy’s eyes. It stung a lot. She was now down to three hearts. As she tried to get closer, she slipped on some cooking oil on the floor that she hadn’t noticed before. “Wow this gnome really is good”, she said to Wilfred who was down to one heart. Wilfred had only one heart (life) because he was just an observer. He wasn’t supposed to be the hero. Just the mentor. But he has now realized that the situation is getting worse by the second. Ivy lost her second heart because Andhogorohill hit her in the face with a raspberry pie. Very precise aiming for someone with such short hands. This was it... It was her last heart... She cannot lose it. She heard Wilfred yell to her: “The rock! Use the rock!”. She knew what she had to do. She grabbed the slingshot and the rock. She aimed. And Aimed. She released! And hit Andhogorohill right in his big nose. He fell unconscious. When he woke up Ivy felt that she shouldn’t just leave him like that. “Hey who are you and what are you doing in my house?”, asked the gnome. “Don’t worry I’m leaving now... Wait! Do you remember what just happened? Or do you remember anything?“, asked Ivy convinced she solved the problem. “No, not really”, said the gnome. Ivy knew what to do: “Well you’re a nice and kind gnome who lives in this castle. Oh, and your name is Andy”. “Andy... I love it!”, said the gnome

So that was it. Problem solved. She was tired. She wanted to close her eyes just for one second. One... Second... When Ivy opened her eyes again, she was in the Adventureville market. Everyone was congratulating her. Rageblade, Philea and Liam. EVERYONE. Especially Wilfred and his family. Then she saw the biggest sunset ever even though it was only noon. The sun was huge then it simply turned off. She was left in a dark space. She couldn’t see or hear anyone anymore. She saw some names in front of her. Like credits. Like the credits at the end of a movie. She saw a person. A girl. A much bigger girl. Then Ivy slowly started to fade away. When Ivy faded away completely the girl stood up. A voice called her: “C’mon honey it’s dinner time!”. The girl looked over to her computer on whose screen Ivy was on a second ago. “Until the next adventure”, the girl whispered to Ivy. And even though Ivy wasn’t there she had certainly heard her.

*mentor: Ajrin Floričić**institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan**Anabel Stojšić*

THE ICON

Sarah and her best friend, Nicole were boredly lying on Sarah's bed, trying to find something to do. "We should download this new app I heard of," said Nicole. "I think that it is called "I dare you". "And what does it do?" asked Sarah. "Apparently, it gives you a challenge every hour for a day and if you complete all the challenges in the first fifteen minutes of every hour, you win a prize at the end. My neighbour, Mark, said he tried it out, but he only got to the third challenge because he did not hear the notification on his phone. He also said you are only allowed to download it once and it discards itself at the end of the twenty-fourth challenge." Sarah thought about it for a minute and then they decided to download it at the same time. "Let's make this a bit more interesting," suggested Nicole, "We will compete with each other and the first one to complete all the challenges gets a weekly allowance of both of us for a month." Sarah's eyes shined at the thought of how much money she could get and all the things she could buy with it. "Deal," said Sarah. Nicole's face brightened up. "Yaaay!" she squeaked.

Sarah checked the time on her phone, it was ten thirty pm, which meant they still had half an hour left until the first challenge. They both went downstairs to get something to eat. While they were eating, Sarah asked Nicole, "So, what exactly are these challenges about?" Nicole responded, still chewing a slice of pizza, "I am not sure, but I think Mark mentioned something about sending certain texts to people that the app chooses from your contacts." For the first time that evening, Sarah was not very sure she wanted to participate in the challenge. She feared that the app could choose Hunter, her crush from school. Sarah would feel humiliated for life if she had to send Hunter any kind of message, especially an embarrassing one. She thought about giving up, but then she reminded herself of the money she would get, and she realized that it is not that big of a deal. "But how will they know if we completed the challenge?" asked Sarah skeptically. Nicole sighed "I guess that they can read the messages on your phone then." She checked her phone, "It is ten fifty-seven, we should get ready for the first challenge. Oh, and one more thing, we should not let

each other know what our challenge was until we complete them.” Sarah nodded and took a deep breath right before she heard the notification on her phone. The game has begun.

Sarah ran up the stairs and burst into her bedroom. She clicked on the notification on her phone and a blank chat appeared. After a few seconds, an icon popped up. *Hello there.* Said the first message, *you are Sarah, right? **How do you know my name?*** Typed Sarah. *That is not something you should worry about right now. Rather concentrate on your first challenge. Which is ...* Sarah waited for a long minute and then the icon popped up again; *Call your sister, and when she picks up, do not say anything, just be silent for a minute and then hang up.* Sarah was relieved she could do that. It is something she and her sister do all the time to each other. She took her phone and typed her sister’s number. It started ringing. Emily picked up, “Hello” Sarah stayed silent “Sarah, hellooo?” “She waited for another minute, “Are you pranking me again-“ Sarah hung up before her sister could finish the sentence. Then she heard a notification. *Good job. Stay tuned for the next challenge, Sarah.* A few moments later, Nicole appeared at the door. “So, did you do it?” she asked excitedly. Sarah nodded. “Me too, what was the challenge, tell me everything!” Sarah rolled her eyes, “It was nothing special, really. I just had to call Emily, then when she picked up, I had to stay silent for a minute and then hang up.” Nicole made a sad face “Well, that is not fair, I had to call mom and tell her I love her and then she kept me on the phone for another ten minutes.” Now it was Nicole’s turn to roll her eyes. “But what did Emily say?” Sarah smiled. Oh, she thought I was pranking her, we do that all the time, I just hope she will not say anything to mom. What do you think the next challenge is going to be about?” Nicole stared at the ceiling for a moment, “I honestly do not know, but I hope it is something similar to the first one.” They decided to spend another hour watching a movie. As soon as they started, Sarah got a text from Emily; *What was that about? Were you and your stupid friends prank-calling me again or what?* Just as Sarah was about to answer her, she got a text from The icon, as she called it now; *Do not answer her. **Why? Is this the next challenge, I thought we get one each hour.*** Typed Sarah. *No, but if you answer her, the next challenge will be much harder than it is now.* With those words repeating in her head, Sarah went back to watching the movie. At exactly midnight, the notification went off again. This time, without introduction, The Icon typed; *Now, you are allowed to text Emily, tell her that you did not realize you were calling her because your phone was in your pocket. Make sure she does not suspect anything about the challenge, or the app.* Sarah did exactly what she was told to do, then she headed downstairs to see what Nicole got. “I had to block Alex,

do you know how much effort it took me for him to finally start following me on Instagram, and now I had to block him. I did it anyways. What did you get? Please tell me you had to block someone as well.” Sarah shook her head, “I had to text Emily and make sure she did not think it was a dare. It was pretty easy.” They went back to watching the TV. Around 00:45 Sarah’s mom texted her to let her know they will not be back home until at least three am. When the pointers on the clock hit one in the morning The Icon started typing; *Let’s see... the next challenge is...; take a picture with your pretty friend and post it on your Instagram story.* Sarah was a little indecisive at first but then she headed downstairs. Nicole was sending a text to Brian, her brother, saying something about the car. “We have got to take a selfie and I have to post it on my story,” she said. “Okay,” said Nicole and started posing. After that was done and The Icon approved the picture with an emoji of a thumbs up, the girls decided to head to sleep. They both set their alarms so that they could wake up about fifteen minutes before two am to make sure they would not miss the next challenge. Sarah told herself she was not even tired, but she fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. After some time, Sarah woke up, the house was dark, and Nicole was still sleeping. She checked her phone; it was one-thirty in the morning. Since she could not fall asleep anymore, she decided to just be on her phone until Nicole woke up. Ten minutes later, Sarah heard a noise. It was a quiet rustle and it seemed to come from her back yard. At first, Sarah was scared, but then she calmed down and told herself that it was probably just the neighbours’ cat Winny that goes through their garbage almost every night. A few moments later, the alarms on both of their phones went off and Nicole woke up. Sarah told Nicole what she heard, and they both agreed that it was probably just the cat. They spent the next fifteen minutes trying to guess what the next challenge was going to be. When it was finally time for the fourth challenge of the evening, the girls cuddled up together on the couch and stared at their phones with anticipation. Nicole was the first one to get the challenge; *Take a picture with Sarah and send it to your brother Brian,* typed the Icon. Sarah and Nicole took a picture and sent it to Brian. Then, they waited, it was already two-eleven and Sarah was starting to get nervous, something seemed off. Then finally, a minute later, The Icon started typing. After what seemed forever, two words appeared on the screen; *Pick up.* Sarah was confused. Pick up what? But then it all cleared up when she heard a familiar melody coming from her phone along with the words on the screen; *unknown caller.* Sarah’s eyes widened in horror, her hands shaking. She and Nicole both stared at the phone for a minute. Then Nicole whispered; “Pick up.” Sarah slowly turned her gaze from her phone to Nicole. “Do it, come on. Nothing is going to happen.” Sarah swiped the phone icon to the right. Her stomach turned around when

she heard the unnaturally deep voice, slowly speaking; “Hello there, girls. Having fun tonight, I see.” Sarah and Nicole were shaking together on the couch, staring at the blank wall in front of them. “You both must be really brave to download such an app, or maybe you were just really stupid...” Sarah’s whole body was shaking. “Who are you? What do you want?” she said, trying to make her voice sound less shaken.” Nothing really, just seeing what a beautiful house you have, I am disappointed you did not invite me...” Nicole turned to Sarah, crying. “What is he talking about?” She asked. Sarah opened her phone settings just to find out that her location was on. They looked at each other and hugged even stronger when they heard the same rustle from before, only now it was getting louder and louder and the noise seemed to travel from the back yard all around the house to the front porch. The girls started weeping and crying while the man was slowly unlocking the front door of the house they were hiding in. As he entered, they were paralyzed by fear and could not move. He slowly started walking towards them. And in her last moments, with tears running down her face Sarah was looking at the living room she spent her whole life in, at all the pictures of her and her family, slowly becoming aware of the fact that this is going to be the last thing she is ever going to see and with that thought, she felt the coldness of the knife that was being pushed against her throat. “Why?” she asked, “Why would you do this?” The Icon sighted, ”In the real world, people just do things because they can, there is no why.” And with that being the last thing those girls were ever going to hear their lives ended. When the Icon was done with the girls, he calmly walked around the couch, took their phones and discarded the app. Then he walked over to the kitchen and opened the oven. He reached into his bag and took out a homemade bomb he had made himself earlier that day. He slowly placed it in the oven and then, when he made sure that the front door was unlocked and he is going to be able to safely return to the street, The Icon planted the bomb to one minute, took the knife, put it in his bag and left the house. By the time the bomb went off, he was already on the other street, watching the house being blown up.

Three days later, Brian was standing at the cemetery, watching the caskets of his sister and her best friend getting buried. That night, he was at the club when he got a call from his mother saying that he needed to come home as soon as possible. When he got there, she told him that Nicole and Sarah died in an explosion. Apparently, the girls decided to bake cookies in the middle of the night, but the oven exploded. After the funeral was over, Brian looked at the picture his sister sent him that night. Since she died, he looked at it a million times but this time, he noticed something in the background; a shadowy figure of a person looking inside the house through the window.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačiča Vrbovsko

Doris Klaić



A NIGHTMARISH CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

Often, we encounter situations when parents make their unfulfilled dreams come true through their children.

Some father adored motorcycles and now buys his son one. Some mother wanted to be a doctor, and now she wants to enroll her daughter in medical school. And so on.

Do you know those kinds of parents? Well, I do.

* * *

A few weeks ago, my mom talked about the Christmas Story in Čazma. She wanted to see it for several years but never found the time or money to do it. But she decided that will change this year, and we were on our way to that sparkling Christmas-loving fairytale.

Is it really a fairytale? It depends on whom you ask.

How did it start?

But, mom, I don't want to go there. I am not interested, I said.

My precious, you will see, you will like it, it's magical, so many lights, a Christmas atmosphere, we will spend time together..., she replied sweet-like.

Oh, what's so special about a few shiny Christmas lights? There are a bunch of those on our balcony, making it look radioactive! We could stay home, put on some Christmas music, and you can make pancakes. We can have so much fun together. Here and not hundreds of miles away!, I tried to convince her.

Honey, I will not argue! We're going on Friday, and that's it!, she growled.

And that gloomy Friday came. We drove for several hours (I could have spent all that time on my smartphone doing bright things!), and the rain was pouring, which

was the unmistakable sign of the sky mocking me. My brother and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. We instantly knew how the other one felt.

Our mom said excitedly, passing by some decorated houses: *Look at this! This is so nice. I can't wait to arrive!*

We just nodded, thinking about the electricity bill all those decorated house owners are about to get in January. Happy holidays, people!

Thinking that and feeling sorry for ourselves, we finally reached our destination. We were blinded by all those Christmas lights!

Oh, my God! How muddy everything was! Disgusting! Disaster! I was thinking.

I got out of the car and immediately jumped into a puddle! Really magical! Some gentlemen there ask us to pay the entrance fee.

For what?! To see which puddle I will step into next and who will stick an umbrella into my eye? Oh, my God! I'm stuck in a Christmas nightmare!, my brain and heart beated in rhythm as one.

My mom went crazy taking all those photos that looked the same and recording every single move we made. She didn't care about the dreadful rain! She was having the time of her life!

Mom, I am hungry., I started nagging her.

That is your problem. Why didn't you eat your lunch before leaving?, my mom snipped at me.

We will eat something when we return home., she said indifferently.

So... and that's my mom. She doesn't care much because her child is hungry. She admires the lights. As if we lived in the dark until arriving in Čazma! As if Nikola Tesla hadn't invented electricity yet.

I think my agony is finally over when she runs to me excited like a baby and says: *Look, we must go there! We have yet to see that part of the Salajland!*

Oh my God! I'm a genuine magician! I feel like Peppa Pig walking along those muddy paths and trying to avoid all the puddles.

After a quarter of an hour, she finally says it is time for the restaurant. *Super! Great! Finally! Yes! I'm saved!*

That's the only smart thing she said in the past several hours.

The restaurant is so beautiful but empty; there is nobody, only waiters. We sit down and look at that menu, but nothing attracts my stomach. I feel like crying! I'm not too fond of meals offered in the restaurant, and drinks are more expensive than a barrel of oil. We get up (*thanks for nothing*) and get into the car, which we hardly recognize, covered with mud. And off we went! Finally! Freedom!

We decided to eat somewhere else. We reached the restaurant where we had been several times already, knowing that the food was excellent and the prices were acceptable. For the Croatian pocket, I mean.

The parking lot was crowded. Oh, my God!

The restaurant was packed! There was no free table. People were waiting outside for a table to become available. I wonder if I am feeling the rain from the leaky roof or if it is pouring from my teary eyes!

We gave up and drove to another restaurant. There were a few people, and the prices were Croatian-friendly!

Finally! Food! I'm saved!

I start to eat, but... I can't!

I am not hungry anymore! That's a tragedy! An unexpected one!

I take a bite, and my brother takes the rest.

He could eat a roasted pig by himself!

I will not comment on my mother's words about the fact that I could not eat.

Up to that moment, we have quarreled 20 times because it is obviously our tradition when we go somewhere.

Not the tradition! We don't even start our journey without a good quarrel! It's a rule!

(These quarrels are primarily between my brother and me. But then mom interferes; sometimes, she defends him and sometimes me. Then she murmurs something to herself, mainly because we don't listen to her.)

At the end of the last quarrel, she gave a 5-minute monologue. And finally, we headed home.

You thought the story ended with my mom's monologue?! Guess what?! You were wrong! It is 10pm, and sequel 2 of the story begins.

My brother and I play a song that we really like, and that's the trigger...

What is that? What kind of songs are these? Is it even Croatian? I need help understanding it! Today every fool is called a singer. What is so excellent in that song?, she goes on and on.

We laughed and listened to our kind of music, boosting the enjoyable atmosphere.

When we finally came, and our mom parked the car...showtime!

My brother and I raced to see who would be first to the toilet. Mom started making a fuss that we would break down the door. Maybe the house as well!

The house is cold because there is no fire. The dog is barking because he must go out, and he is angry because he was left alone. Who will take the dog out? Nobody! I

am cold and wet, and I am hungry now. My brother took him in the morning, so he doesn't want to do it now. Mom is lighting the fire and doesn't have time. Who will take him out?

Honestly, I don't remember who took the dog out. It was probably mom. I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

When my impressions settled in the morning, it wasn't as bad as I thought. It would have been much nicer if it had snowed instead of rained.

If we exclude the cold, mud, hunger, long drive... It was great!

We went somewhere we'd never been, and we spent time together in a unique way that best describes us. And the best thing about all that is that it inspired me for this story. We fulfilled mom's wish this year, and I am so glad about it. My brother suggested that we fulfill his wish next year. He wants to visit Oktoberfest. Imagine us there! What a nightmarish adventure that would be!

I suggest spending time with your wacky families whenever you can! Wacky and full of love! They are yours!

Do it all year round, not just during Christmastime!

mentor: Nataša Kufner Delak
institution: OŠ Skrad

Christine Götzmann

THE WEDDING RING

Samuel, a seventeen-year-old boy from New Zealand or more precisely Wellington, wanted to go to York in England ever since he was a little boy. He was intrigued by the history of the city.

His family never had sufficient money to afford a trip all the way to England. So young Samuel Adams had very slim chances of visiting York. When Samuel was just a kid, his mother, Jane, promised him that one day she'll make his dream come true.

In school, the boy was an outstanding student, always showing interest in History and Arts. One day, in the seventh grade, his favourite teacher, Ms. Bennett, asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up. The question took him by surprise because he did not know...and to this day he doesn't.

Samuel and his best friend, Elijah, decided to start a business. They chose to make wooden sculptures and sell them online to earn money. With the money, Samuel would pay for his trip and Elijah would rent an apartment of his own, so he did not have to live with his siblings any longer.

Their business started out well, though after a while, they realised they were not making much money. Elijah calculated that if they continued working at this speed, they would earn the money in several years. Samuel did not have the patience. They needed to make money and they had to do it quickly. He stayed up all night thinking how they could earn money fast. He was too slothful and refused to work hard. He couldn't think of anything, at least not anything legal. It would be much easier if he could illegally get the money, but it was too risky for him. However, Elijah wasn't up for the task and refused to help Samuel earn money that way. Samuel did not want to do it by himself, the truth is...he was too scared to do it alone.

Elijah and Samuel quit their little business and gave up on their idea. There had to be another way to get the money they needed. Even though Elijah came from a wealthy family, his parents would never give him a great amount of money. Therefore, that really was not an option.

Samuel started focusing on school again, if he could not go to York, the least he

could do is put some time into his studies. He wanted to make something of himself and earn the money his family could have only dreamed of having.

If he did that, he could pay for his trip, and buy his little sister, Angie, a pet hamster she had been begging her parents for. He always wanted to see his little sister happy. Ever since she got diagnosed with GAD, generalized anxiety disorder which interfered with her everyday life, Samuel has been worried about her.

Angie and Samuel were never close, he barely spoke to her because she was seven years younger than him. He could never relate to her. She was cheerful, hardworking and carefree, she did not exactly care about her grades in school while Samuel was stricter and gloomier.

His little sister always tried to get close to him, but he never really showed how much he cared for her. The truth is, he cared, a lot even. She means the world to him...he just does not show it. In all these years he has never told his sister he loved her. Angie has tried countless times... She hasn't given up on him, every day she reminds him how much she loves him. Samuel was never the affectionate type.

Samuel was a happy child, much like his sister, until everything took a turn for the worse. His father had a heart attack in the middle of the night and passed away, this all happened when Samuel was just eight years old. The tragic event changed him and since then he has become gloomy and pessimistic. When he was fourteen, he even dyed his hair a chestnut brown and hid his natural blonde hair. One thing he couldn't change were his stunning green eyes, anyone would get lost when staring into them.

On his 18th birthday his mother Jane surprised him with a plane ticket to York. He was beyond excited. This was the first time in the past ten years that he smiled. That was until he realised the ticket was not for York in England but for York in Pennsylvania, USA. He stopped smiling, his mother started to apologise saying that it was an accident, how she did not mean to buy the wrong tickets. Samuel was devastated. His mother begged him to go anyway. Since she was not able to return the ticket and did not want all that money she saved up to go to waste.

Samuel accepted, he only did it to make his mother happy. He was ungrateful and disrespectful to his mother that day. He went to his room, to pack his bags for the flight the next day. Immediately he texted Elijah, complaining about his mother's mistake. Samuel was furious, he was not thinking straight.

After he packed his bags, it was already super late, he got ready, brushed his teeth, washed his face and put on his pyjamas. He got into bed and set an alarm for 5 am. He fell asleep after several minutes, it did not take him long to fall asleep.

After Samuel woke up, he got to the kitchen and made himself some cereal for breakfast. Afterwards, he brushed his teeth and got dressed into some comfortable clothes, a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie. He wanted to be as comfortable as possible for his long flight.

His mother drove with him to the airport, his sister came as well. They both came along with him to the airport to say goodbye. When she set her arms on him, he noticed her wedding ring was missing, but he said nothing. The flight was smooth and relaxing. No turbulence or anything such. When the plane landed and Samuel got off, he sighed unhappily, this wasn't where he wanted to be, he was disappointed, but he remembered he was doing this to please his mother.

After Samuel settled in his hotel room on the second floor, he decided to visit the city centre. He got some ice cream and bought a magnet for the fridge since his mother loves collecting magnets from places, she or her family members visit. Samuel also bought a postcard for Angie and wrote her a letter.

Dear Angie,

I know I wasn't the best brother to you but do forgive me, ever since we lost our father, I haven't exactly been myself. I appreciate you for trying to stay by my side while I have been rejecting you.

I do love you Angie, Always and forever my dearest sister.

Sincerely, Samuel

But he didn't send it to her because he decided to give it to her when he gets home.

Samuel spent the rest of his days in York sightseeing and visiting famous places the city is known for. He studied the history of the city and learnt so much about York. On the other hand, he spent his nights in the city full of excitement and fun. He met a group of people his age who were also visiting York and they hung out during the late hour.

Samuel and his new friends Denis, Bonnie and Matt did plenty of entertaining activities like fishing in the yellow breeches creek, visiting the Perrydell farm dairy and escape games. They even played on the playground. Their idea was to feel free and young.

Though he did have fun doing all those things with his friends, more than anything he enjoyed spending hours and hours in the York County History Centre. His favourite memory of the trip is when Denis fell into the Lake Redman and swam out all wet whilst everyone laughed, it was hilarious.

Soon it was time for his flight back to New Zealand, he packed his bags and said goodbye to his friends that dropped him off at the airport. They cried and hugged

until it was time for Samuel to get on the plane. As he flew back all he could think of was the great memories he made in York.

He fell asleep halfway during his flight back. He woke up just before the plane landed, he was so happy to finally be home, to finally see his sister and his mother.

As he was getting out of the airport with his luggage, Angie spotted him and at once ran into his arms. Their mother walked to them slowly with a huge smile on her face.

Once they got home Samuel gave Angie and Jane their gifts and asked his mother to speak to him alone in the kitchen. Samuel started to apologise with tears in his eyes. He was so sorry for being ungrateful and rude to his mother before he left. He was sorry because his mother had sold her phone and her wedding ring just so she could afford the ticket and send him on the trip of his dreams.

His family wasn't poor, they had the money they needed for food, water and electricity. They had everything they needed but did not have sufficient money to spend on stuff like pets or expensive trips. Sometimes not even Christmas gifts.

And when Samuel realised what his mother had done to afford the trip for him, he felt devastated and horrible, like he stole from his mother. The wedding ring was the only thing left of Samuel's father, Nathaniel, they owned...

It meant so much to Jane and that made Samuel feel guilty. He could not apologise or express how sorry he was for the way he acted before he left.

After Jane and Samuel finished talking, Samuel drove to the pet shop and bought Angie the hamster she had always wanted. He knew it would mean the world to her. On his way home he decided to call his best friend and tell him everything about the trip.

When he got home Angie was reading his letter with tears in her eyes. She wanted to hug him and never let go. Samuel taught her a valuable lesson, always to be grateful, that it is never too late to change and we can do anything if we want to.

They had a long talk and Samuel gave her the hamster he bought for her. Her eyes lit up when she saw the adorable tiny animal in her brother's hands. She named the hamster Glossarick, after a character from her favourite cartoon. They hugged once again and she thanked him for everything.

Angie was so joyous and light-hearted knowing her brother finally became her big brother.

*mentor: Ružica Lušić**institution: OŠ Ivana Kozarca Županja**Lena Oršolić*

THE PATH

He's walking down the old mossy stone path. Where is he going? Only the path knows. The trees felt alive, almost mimicking one another. The ever-changing leaves danced in the wind like the free birds that rule the sky. The earth was peaceful. The traveller paced, he didn't know where he was pacing to, but that didn't matter. He felt it in his bones, in his very core even, that he was supposed to be here and that he was supposed to follow this path. This old worn out mossy stone path. And so he paced, following the cracked path as trees swayed blissfully around him. How long has he been walking? Minutes? Hours? Days? He didn't know yet, but he didn't stop walking. Not until that old trusty path led him to... **An ostrich?!**

The ostrich looked panicked sprinting around in circles, almost as if it were searching for something. It didn't even notice the traveller, even if it did, it most likely wouldn't care. "What are you looking for, dear ostrich?" the traveller asked curiously. The ostrich, completely ignoring the traveller, frantically stuck its head into the soft ground. It slowly dawned on him...the ostrich was looking for its egg. "I can help you look for your egg." The ostrich finally looked up at the traveller. "Why? Why are you even here?" asked the ostrich. "The path led me here!" the traveller stated. "Fine, you can help," the ostrich replied hesitantly. And so they searched, they searched every bush, behind every tree, inside every hole but nothing. No sign of the egg. The longer they looked, the less hope they had. "No...No.. I don't understand! It should be somewhere around here!" the ostrich stammered. They kept walking. They walked and they walked until they reached a large white egg on the cold hard ground. The egg was cracked, the delicate shell brutally broken into millions of pieces laying scattered on the earthy forest ground. The air turned cold, you could almost hear the ostrich's heart breaking. "This...This is not my egg!" the poor ostrich desperately cried out. "Dear ostrich, I," The ostrich cut him off before he could speak. "No!! I told you, this is not my egg!! My egg is not shattered, it must be somewhere around here! We just need to look harder!" the ostrich hissed angrily. "Ostrich, I'm sorry. We can't keep looking for something that we have already found," he said sad-

ly. "Please! We need to keep looking!" the ostrich bargained. "I'm sorry, this is the truth. You must accept the truth, ostrich, even when the truth is cruel," said the traveller. The ostrich said nothing, for the pain was too great for it to even speak a vowel. Instead, it stood there with the traveller by its side. The sun was setting, but that didn't matter, not now at least. After some time, the ostrich nodded. "You are strong, dear ostrich, even when the world is cruel. We must go now," stated the traveller, sympathy in his voice. The ostrich nodded again. "Thank you." Those were the only words that left the ostrich's beak. The traveller smiled sadly at the ostrich, placing his hand on one of the ostrich's admirable wings, it almost felt like they were good old friends. In seconds, the ostrich disappeared into an angelic storm of feathers flying up into the sky. The air was warm, and the forest was welcoming. The ostrich was at peace, it was free.

The traveller walked from place to place, creature to creature, listening, helping, freeing..."**But why? For whom? Why do you keep doing this, traveller? You don't even know how you got here!**" "You might be right, I don't know where I'm going right now, but this path has never led me astray. It always got me right where I needed to be." "**But why do you do this? Why do you help them when you yourself could be living a great life?! Why don't you want yourself to be happy? Why don't want to enjoy life!? Why do you have to help these ungrateful fools!?!?**" "Because I know that I'm supposed to, I know that it's my purpose. I know that I am contributing to something greater, something good. I, frankly, don't care what you think or if you don't understand why, because I know that I'm supposed to be doing this. There is always reason behind anything and everything even if we cannot understand it," the traveller explained. "**Oh traveller, you are but an utter fool! An idiot choosing to free others of their burdens! But let me ask you one final thing. Who is going to free you, traveller?**" The traveller was quiet for a moment until he finally spoke again. "That does not matter, at least not yet. The path will show me all I need to know when the time is right, and until then, I will continue fulfilling my purpose," the traveller replied determined. And with that, the voice was gone, allowing the traveller to continue following that same welcoming stone path again. But this time, this time it was different. He could feel it in his bones that things were not going to go according to plan. The further into the forest he went, the more uneasy he got. The air got colder with every step he took. It was no longer sunny, and the birds were not chirping happily. Instead, it was quiet. Much too quiet, in fact. Instead of stopping or turning back, he kept on moving. It felt like the trees were reaching for him, they looked almost...alive. He kept following the path, the same cracked

path that used to feel welcoming and comforting. He kept going, not stopping when the path was barely visible, not stopping when the branches were reaching towards him, not stopping when the chirping of birds was replaced with loud, sharp wind. He kept walking, he had to. He couldn't give up, no, not after everything he's seen, heard, felt, experienced...He couldn't stop, so instead, he sped up. He wasn't scared, he didn't allow himself to be, he couldn't afford to be scared now. He thought about all the things that the path showed him, trees taller than mountains, flowers with colours he didn't even know were possible to be seen, streams with waters clearer than glass...Then suddenly, the path stopped. That path that led him this whole time, the only thing he knew, the only comfort he had, it stopped here. It led him somewhere for the last time. And where did it lead him? A grassy meadow lit bewitchingly by moonlight. There was a pleasant cooling breeze, and in the centre of the hypnotic meadow was...A weeping chrysanthemum.?

The traveller cautiously approached the sobbing chrysanthemum. Oh, dear chrysanthemum, why do you cry?, the traveller asked, slowly sitting down next to the chrysanthemum. The weeping chrysanthemum was far too upset to answer, so he waited. He waited for the waterfalls to slowly start drying out, placing his hand against the soft grass. The chrysanthemum's face was illuminated by the moonlight when she finally mustered up the energy to speak. "I'm all alone! They're all gone! They left me all alone!" the chrysanthemum wailed out. The traveller looked into her glimmering teary eyes, and for the first time, he didn't know what to say. He wasn't calm anymore, and in that split second, he felt like all hope was ripped right from his hands. He quickly got himself together, knowing that he couldn't turn back now. "What happened, dear chrysanthemum?" the traveller asked. "All the flowers are gone! They all withered away! I'm all alone! I don't want to be alone anymore! I don't even know how long it's been anymore!" the chrysanthemum yelled, still slightly crying. "But dear chrysanthemum, you're not alone! Life is all around you, you just have to look close enough. You can't keep dwelling on the past, therefore wasting the present! It's normal to grieve, but after some time, you must get up and continue, because time will not stop for you and it's too precious to be wasted," the traveller stated calmly. The chrysanthemum looked at him, shocked. She started crying, this time very softly. Once she was finished, she stood up and the traveller did the same. Suddenly a bright, white light appeared in the distant hills. She wiped the tears off her soft face. They looked at each other, and they knew in their hearts what they were supposed to do. They walked, they walked towards the light, hand in hand, together, glowing white butterflies flying all around them. They were no longer alone, they were free.

mentor: Sanja Konjić

institution: OŠ Brezovica, Zagreb

Eva Baraba

TIMMY'S STORY

Timmy is a 10 year old boy living in a small American town. He's an excellent student, or at least he used to be. His grades haven't been so good ever since his parents got divorced about a month ago. But they're managing it well, so he is too. Most of the time.

Timmy has always thought his life is kind of boring. Ever since preschool, all his friends kept telling him all kinds of stories about the places they had visited. Different cities, countries, the cool jobs their parents had, the new toys they had gotten for their birthdays and so on. He himself never got to tell stories like these because his parents never had cool jobs or bought him shiny new toys. They never travelled places, at least not places he would consider cool or exciting. Timmy used to be bothered by that, but he's gotten used to it by now, so he doesn't mind it anymore.

Most mornings Timmy's mom Angela drives him to school in her tiny grey car, after which she drives to the office building where she works as a secretary in a large corporation. Timmy's dad Mario used to work for the same company so the two of them would go to work together, but now he works in a car factory for minimal wage. Timmy only gets to live with his dad every other weekend, which is not nearly as often as he would like. Every kid who has divorced parents would agree with him, he is sure of that, but Timmy and his dad still manage to spend a lot of time together as Mario picks him up from school almost every day. They usually go to Timmy's favourite playground, where they stay for hours each time. Sometimes they go to other places too - wherever he wants. Timmy loves his dad for this.

Another thing about Timmy is that he's a really smart kid. Incredibly smart. Ever since the day he was born, it was obvious that he was more intelligent than all the other kids around him. He started walking at the mere age of 8 months. Shortly after that he started speaking as well, but he wasn't saying a few mumbled words as you may expect such a young child to do. He started speaking whole sentences right away. The first time he spoke was when his family went on a field trip to a beautiful lake near their town. Timmy's parents had been planning to take Timmy there since the day he was born.

They got to the lake and had a great time. When it started to get dark, Angela picked Timmy up, saying it was time to go. Timmy looked at his mom with disappointment and said: “Aw, not now!”. His parents were shocked. They stayed still for a few moments, trying to process what had just happened, and finally they started cheering and applauding their son.

Five years later Timmy took part in his first spelling bee. He had been preparing for it for so long and in the end he won! He even did so well that his teachers were shocked - they couldn't believe his talent.

Now that he's ten, Timmy got even smarter, but he hasn't been putting it to use that much. However, this will have to change soon enough because on the day our story begins, an amazing opportunity is going to come Timmy's way.

Timmy gets up at 6 am for school. He brushes his teeth, washes his face and gets dressed. Just the usual boring morning, the start of the usual boring day. “Timmy, get down here already. You're going to make me late for work!” Timmy hears his mom shouting. He sighs and makes his way downstairs where he finds his mom talking on the phone with someone while making breakfast. “Yes, I completely understand, Mr. Smith, I'll make sure to get it done by Thursday, I promise.” She moves her phone away from her ear and whispers: “Hurry!” as she hands Timmy a plate with some waffles. He sighs again and takes the plate. His mom must be in some kind of trouble with her boss again. Since there's nothing he can do about it, Timmy just eats his waffles as fast as he can and lets his mom drive him to school. She is on the phone with her boss throughout the whole car ride, so he just silently sits in the backseat. As his mom drops him off at school, she finally hangs up the phone and says: “Alright sweetie, I've got to go now. Daddy is picking you up later. Bye!” He sighs for the third time this morning and drags himself to his classroom. He slowly walks to his desk which is all the way in the back of the classroom and sits down. After the first period his teacher gestures at him. “Timmy,” he says, “I have something really important to tell you.” He looks serious. Timmy gets kind of worried, but he walks up to Mr. Williams pretending to be unbothered. “Mr. Taylor needs to speak to you and your parents about something very important. Come to his office today after school, he...” Another teacher calls Mr. Williams for help. He tells Timmy to hang on for a second and rushes to a different classroom. As soon as he hears that Mr. Williams is far away, Timmy runs out of the classroom, checks if anyone is around and then proceeds to run as fast as he can. He stops when he reaches the front door. What could he possibly have done that was so bad that the principal is calling his parents? According to his teachers, he's a very well behaved student, so what does this mean? Is he going to

get suspended? Or expelled!?! He takes a deep breath and reassures himself that he's going to figure something out.

At lunchbreak Timmy is even more worried. Should he go to the principal's office later or not? In the end, he takes a deep breath and decides it's best to go and deal with whatever punishment is awaiting him, so that's what he does.

As he is entering the principal's office, he sees his parents sitting next to each other. Mr. Taylor isn't there yet. Timmy swallows and silently sits down on a chair next to his mom's. She gave him a confused look and asked what this is about. He reassured her that he doesn't know. About two minutes later, Mr Taylor entered his office looking surprisingly happy. "Well, I'm glad all of you are here" he says as he sits down across them. "I'll get straight to the point. "Timmy's heart is pounding. Here it comes. He's about to get expelled. "Timmy has been asked to take part in a national spelling competition in New York City. It's in three weeks and the winner gets a full scholarship at Harvard university." What!?! Timmy's parents are staring at Mr. Taylor with open mouths. At first Timmy is just happy that he's not getting expelled, but then he realises what this means and his jaw drops as well. However, Mr. Taylor isn't done yet: "If you're willing to take him to New York, he could participate, but it wouldn't be easy to win. There would be over 100 participants, all of which have been working hard. Timmy hasn't participated in many competitions, but he won all of them with ease. If he works hard these three weeks, he might end up studying at an ivy league school, which is a pretty big deal. So, what do you think?" Angela said: "Wow, this is great! We'll definitely consider it." Mr. Taylor says: "Alright. Let me know when you decide." "We will."

Timmy can't stop smiling as he and his mom enter the car. He's always dreamed of going to a school like Harvard, but he knew his parents couldn't afford it. If he wins, it could change his life. But he would never be able to win, he would just embarrass himself. Besides, going to New York is really expensive... "You should go." His mom says, breaking his train of thought. Timmy immediately says: "But I could never win! And travelling to New York costs a lot of money." "Let me worry about the money. You should go and give your best." Timmy thinks about this for a few moments and finally says: "Fine", even though he still thinks he's going to embarrass himself.

The next morning Timmy wakes up excited because in three weeks he'll be going to New York. As soon as he gets to school, he tells all his friends about this. His teacher practices with him after school. He knows he's not going to win, but at least he's going to get a cool trip out of it.

One week later, Timmy is still practicing every day. It's going well and he's learning fast, but all the other kids are probably doing much better than he is.

The day before the competition, his mom wakes him up early. It's a really long car ride to New York so they need to get going early. They quickly eat breakfast and get in the car. They pick up Mario and start driving straight to New York. By now Timmy is really stressed about the competition so he decides to read a book to keep his mind off of it. They arrive in New York at 2 am, check in to their hotel and go straight to sleep.

The next day Timmy's dad wakes him up at noon. The three of them eat breakfast and drive to the place where the competition is going to be. It's a large building in Manhattan. Inside there is a big hall that looks kind of like a court room. There's a podium, seats for the judges and seats for the audience. A woman approaches Timmy and hands him a blue shirt that says "Participant" and a sheet of paper. She rushes towards some other kids who just entered the building. Timmy puts on the shirt over his sweater and sees that the paper is a schedule. He sees that he's up last and feels a little bit relieved. He waits with some other kids in a corner until a judge starts calling out names. One by one, the kids go up on the podium and spell the words the judges ask them to. Timmy is so nervous he's getting dizzy, and when the judge calls his name, he slowly walks up on the podium. His legs are shaking and his heart is pounding. The judge asks him to spell a very easy word, but his mind is all blank and he can't say anything so he just stands there staring at the judge. He repeats the word but Timmy still doesn't say anything. He thinks to himself that this is a disaster. He should just run away. Then he finds his mom in the audience and she gives him an encouraging look. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and comes to his senses again. He spells the word correctly, just like every other word the judge tells him to. When the judge tells him he can go, he runs to his mom with a huge smile on his face. "I did it!" he says. She hugs him and says "I know!"

Seven years later, Timmy gets up early. Today is a very special day. It's the day Timmy is going away to college. He gets downstairs and eats breakfast with his mom who is now a successful manager. They get in the car and pick up Mario on the way. They need to get going early because it's a long ride to Harvard.

mentor: Gordana Grgić

institution: OŠ Dragutin Tadijanović, Slavonski Brod

Lorena Šeremet

THE DREAM VACATION...OR IS IT?

“Happy birthday!” - my friends screamed when I opened the door.

Hi, I am Thalia and I live in a loud, busy city. I have an apartment close to the center and I grew up like a real city child. One morning I was sleeping when my doorbell rang, and it was my best friends – Hazel and April standing in front of my door with lots of balloons and wishing me happy birthday.

I let them inside and after getting ready and blowing out the candles for my 19th birthday, they wanted to give me my present. I already said that they do not need to spend their money on me, but they ignored me.

Anyone could tell how excited they were to announce what they got me.

“Hazel, you should tell her, you are the one that planned almost everything” - April said.

“Okay, fine...,” Hazel started to speak, “Thalia...we got you...,” she stopped for a second,” A VACATION TO CALLIS!”

“Like my dream city - Callis?”

“Yes!” - they both said.

“But when?” - I asked.

“Tomorrow, that means you better start packing” - April answered.

Callis is a small city on the coast, with gorgeous beaches and breathtaking sunsets. There are not a lot of people, which is even better because there is not any noise nor heavy traffic. It is good to be away from all that stuff for a while.

I really have the best friends in the world!

After those great news, I thanked them, and we already started planning our vacation.

April was planning everything that we could do there while Hazel was planning all the outfits we could wear. I was helping both and giving suggestions.

“Hazel, are you going to bring that knife your father gave you, because I don’t think it will be the same without your delicious fruit salads?” - April said.

“Well, of course, I can’t wait to make all of those.” - Hazel confirmed.

Before we even noticed, it was dark, so Hazel and April then decided to head home.

The next day I woke up late, so I was in a hurry all day.

I started packing, I overpacked myself but it is important to be ready for anything.

Usually I am very indecisive, so I had a lot of trouble picking my clothes and all the things I was packing, but somehow, I managed to pack everything, and I was on time.

At 3pm my friends and I came to the airport. Our flight was at 6pm, but we wanted to be sure we were not going to be late.

On the plane, I sat alone, April and Hazel were sitting behind me.

That was my first flight, but I was not scared.

The plane soon took off but after a while I started to feel something, something that I do not usually feel, like something was wrong but I decided to ignore it and enjoy a vacation that I always wanted to go on.

Besides my weird feelings, the view was so beautiful that it is hard to describe it.

Clouds were red and orange because of the sunset and everything down there looked miniature. After a while, we landed and then headed to our booked beach house.

Our house for the next few days looked amazing. It was big and next to the beach and on first thought, it looked magical, but on second thought, something bothered me: there were no houses around, no bars, shops, and no people. Well, I thought that is because the owners wanted the house to have some privacy.

We unpacked and had something for dinner, it was already late, so we went to sleep.

In the middle of the night, I woke up; it was the same feeling I had on the airplane, I could not sleep anymore, so I went to our front yard.

While sitting on the bench, I realized how breathtaking the sky was.

There are for sure more than a million stars shining in the sky, I could look at them for hours.

I wanted to enjoy some more but that feeling just seemed to not let me go, soon I headed inside to get some more sleep, or at least try to.

Hazel woke me up and said that breakfast was ready, April made us pancakes.

I was going down the stairs and could already smell our breakfast.

We really enjoyed it and decided that we were going to go to the beach.

The weather was amazing, the sea was warm, and the waves were gorgeous.

April is sometimes like a little child so the whole time we were at the beach, she

was in the sea swimming and diving.

Hazel and I on the other hand like tanning and drinking cocktails more, so that is what we did.

As the sun went down, it was time to go home.

That night, none of us wanted to cook so we ordered pizza and drinks.

Music is blasting and we are eating, drinking and most importantly – having fun.

At that moment, I realized how lucky I am. Everything was perfect, until the electricity went off.

We stopped talking, music stopped playing and it was completely dark. You could hear our screams, but you could not see anything.

I imminently reached out to my phone and turned the flash on, then I finally saw April.

“Are you okay?” - I asked her.

“Yes, and I am glad you are too, wait, where is Hazel?”

Hazel. I almost forgot her and now I realized that she is nowhere around us.

“Thalia, we must find her, let’s go!”

I knew we must find her, but I was constantly asking myself why she would go away after everything went dark. She should have been waiting for us to do something.

We searched and searched but it was all useless until we entered one of the many rooms of the house. We opened the door and froze.

That room was empty, there was no furniture or decorations, and the walls were black.

It was only one thing that caught our attention – there was something written on the wall.

Those big white letters across the whole wall said: THERE IS NO ESCAPE.

April and I looked at each other and after a few minutes of silence I said - “Maybe it’s just a joke, why would anyone have written this.”

My own heart did not agree with what I said, but I wanted to stay calm so badly, I had to say it.

“You’re right, there is no chance.” - April agreed but judging by her face I could tell she said that for the same reason as I did.

We agreed that Hazel is the most important now, so we kept searching for her but eventually we got tired and decided to look for her outside.

After we walked to the door, I reached the doorknob but when I tried to open the door, I realized it was locked.

That was the moment when we started to freak out.

“There is a chance that the door is just stuck, let’s try the other door.”

April tried to open them, but it turned out just as the other one.

Who did that? Why did they do it and where is Hazel?

At that point, neither April nor I knew what to do.

After a couple of minutes, April said - “This is getting out of hand. It just cannot be a coincidence anymore...”

She was right, nobody jokes like this. The thing that still bothered me is that I did not know where Hazel went.

I told her the only thing that came to my mind - “I have a plan, let us split. I will go upstairs, and you go to the basement, come here after 15 minutes, I will wait for you.”

“Fine, I’ll be here” - April answered and walked away.

I watched her shadow slowly disappear in the dark.

At that moment, I was alone, and I honestly did not know what to do or what to expect.

I came upstairs and first searched our rooms, but she was not there.

Then, I searched some other rooms and the only thing I found was a lot of dust.

Earlier than I expected, those 15 minutes were over, so I headed down where April and I were supposed to meet.

I got there, but April did not. At first, I thought she simply lost track of time, but 5 minutes passed by, and I was still waiting, then 10 minutes and then 15. Soon I realized that she was not coming.

First Hazel and then April? I could not understand what was going on.

April went to the basement, that meant something, or someone was there.

She could not just disappear.

As I was walking down the stairs, I felt tingling all over my body, I felt that with every step it was getting colder and colder.

There are around 20 steps, but it feels like there are almost a hundred. I cannot even name how many things were going through my head then, I did not know anything no more.

That was supposed to be my dream vacation and then it felt like a total nightmare.

Why did Hazel choose this house? How did both of my friends disappear? Did somebody plan that?

Everything seemed unreal.

After a couple minutes of silence, I arrived in the basement.

The basement of that house was huge.

Everything felt weird when I got there, it is even hard to explain. It was very dark and quiet, luckily, I still had my phone with me. Besides all the weird things, there was one more thing that I noticed...the weird smell.

It smelled like a dead human body.

I moved my flashlight to the right for less than a meter and then I saw it.

I was right, it was a human body, but not just somebody, that was April.

April was lying on the floor, dead.

Why? Why would someone do that to her?

I came closer to her, and realized she did not have a pulse, her face was so pale and even though she was not breathing, I noticed the terror in her eyes.

April is dead.

As I sat next to her, I felt the same as she did, I felt nothing.

I did not think why this is happening anymore.

My mind was frozen, I could not feel my body, and I hoped nothing was true.

After some time, I realized that I would not do anything if I just sat here.

Then, even though that was extremely hard, I looked some more in April, then I saw a knife next to her and realized that was not the first time that I saw that knife.

The knife was Hazel's.

She used the same knife to cut fruit with and make the best fruit salads.

What did that mean?

I did not want to believe it, but there was no other explanation for that except... before I finished my thought, I noticed something.

That something was someone lying next to April's dead body.

That someone was Hazel.

Who or what was behind all of that?

I wanted to cry, but I no longer had control over my own body.

Then, I noticed a light down the hall, and something told me I had to go there, so I got up but as I was walking towards that hall something jumped out.

Everything turned black for a few seconds.

Suddenly I heard something loud and opened my eyes, but when I did, I realized I was in my bed, in my apartment far away from Callis.

I did not understand. How did I get into my bed?

Then, I heard the loud noise again.

That sound was my doorbell.

I put my slippers on my feet, got up and walked to my door.

It was April and Hazel.

“Happy birthday!” - they screamed when I opened the door.

mentor: Ivana Pinčić

institution: OŠ Mertojak, Split

Amelie Kačić

BITCORN

Tom was sitting on a small balcony of his little apartment where he lived with his mother and father. They didn't have a lot of money. His father is selling canned corn on a street. That corn was part of states goods stocks which expired. Dad is buying that corn from some smugglers who are (in Dad's opinion) serious business men. But people are not really used to buying some suspicious corn from some weird guy right on the middle of the street, so Tom's dad is not making a lot of money in the end. His mother is a "housewife" even though there is not a lot of things to do in that poor little household -washing a few broken plates and cooking corn for her family. Tom's family never went on a holiday, they never had less than two holes on their clothes, they never had nice things and they never ate anything except from that smelly corn for dinner. But Tom really loved his family. He knew that he had less than all of those kids in his school, and he always dreamed...ooh he dreamed. All of those shiny toys that said "Hello" to him out of that shop window and that jacket with a car picture on the back, that one guy from his class has... He was craving for those kind of things, the things you need money for. But that lust never made him angry or upset. He always thought that his parents have a plan. He thought they were superheros, and that they will make everything possible. But in reality it was a little bit different.

That foggy afternoon, right after Tom came from the school someone knocked on the door. Dad jumped right away, and opened the door when he saw Martha standing there. Martha was their house owner.

"It is time for you to pay me. I am sorry but I can't wait anymore."

"Sorry Martha. Come in please. You know I'm not good with money now..."

"You said that to me last hundred times."

"So sorry Marta! Wait... Wait a sec... Here! Take one can of corn as an apology. Please."

“I already have 46 of those in my pantry. You gave me a whole collection! But I can’t lie... It is a good corn. It tasted like a fish I once ate in that expensive restaurant in Spain... Oh what a time...”

“I know Martha. I’m only selling the best... Please give me 15 more days. I will pay you.”

“Okay. But that’s it. If you don’t pay, I am sorry, but you will have to leave.”

“Okay Martha, I will take care of that,” he said while he was trying to open squeaky door for Martha. He knew that he couldn’t get that money in that time. And how come he even needed to pay to live in this awful place called “apartment?” Should he steal? Sell his kidney?

“I will think about that in the morning,” he murmured.

In the meantime Tom was in the living room with his mother. Rain started to pour so Tom was really excited.

“Waterfall! Mom! When is it going to start?”

“Soon honey. The water needs to cover whole roof. Wait a little more, I will prepare the buckets.”

Tom absolutely loved waterfalls. The roof was so bad that it was leaking every time it was raining. But Tom didn’t see that as a problem. He saw it as some marvelous nature wonder. Sometimes all three of them would sit on the couch, eat slices of apple and listen to the sound of water hitting the bottom of the bucket. They would even sing songs with the same rhythm. If it’s the lucky day, you could see some mold from the roof falling in the bucket with water. Tom always imagined that those green things were little fish and that they bring extra luck. His parents unfortunately did not think the same way.

“Come on son. Go to bed. It is late and you have school tomorrow, dad said while making a big yawn. In the same second Tom ran to his little bed, tucked him self in big puffy blanket. Hi looked like sweet little teddy bear.”

“Goodnight honey,” mom yelled. She was in the middle of counting pennies on a kitchen table.

Night was cold, but dad’s brain was burning from thinking. He needs to find a way to make more money. He needs to pay for this rent. He can try finding the second job. Maybe that will work. But who will hire him? He doesn’t know anyone who is hiring now. And he doesn’t really have some kind of amazing work skills. He’s going to fail. Next day dad really tried to sell more corn.

“Mam, it is the sweetest corn you will ever taste,” he yelled all through local market. Buyers didn’t come in large number.

15 days passed so fast. Dad didn't find the money but somehow one of his "business partners" got him little old camper as their temporary accommodation. That camper was staying in that man's yard, and he kept all of his garden tools there. They will stay there until they come up with something else. Dad was grateful. Frank said that he is not calling himself generous man for nothing.

That morning Martha knocked on the door.

"I'm sorry, but 15 days passed."

"I know Martha we are packing our things," mom said while folding a few of Tom's shirts.

"Okay. I'm sorry once again. But I can't afford this. You are not paying me."

"We understand you Martha."

"Sorry and good luck," she said. She tried to open the front door, but the handle fell off.

"You will have to pay me at least for this handle."

"We will Martha," mom said. You could obviously see the steam coming out of her ears. "I will open door for you so you could go out the fastest you can. We don't want to keep you from your business. Bye Martha." The sound of door crashing could tell that mom was really annoyed by her.

They came in that small camper in the evening. It smelled like cow manure. There was a big sign on the door that said "You're so poor -people break into your house and leave things." Dad laughed so hard when he read that. "What a good joke", he said. But mom just glared at him.

"But dad, this is not as funny as our old house," Tom said.

"I know. This is just temporary."

"And dad, there is no green waterfalls here!"

"Oh trust me, there is going to be a lot of waterfalls for you here," dad said while looking at old rusty roof that was going to fall apart every minute. Next morning dad tried to sort some of his old papers. He wanted to feel productive. There was bunch of old files and documents that he didn't even know how he got them. But soon he found something.

"Look what I found, honey!" dad yelled.

"What is it?" mom said and immediately rolled her eyes.

"It's the old weeding gift from Oliver!"

"Oh, poor Oliver. There is going to be nine years without him in a few months."

"Well, he was in his basement whole life doing that crazy mathematical things. His whole life was in those silly equations. And yet in the end he didn't become fa-

mous or anything. He just went crazy. But look what I found. He gave us 20 pounds in some thing called...What is this?...Bit?...Bitcoin!” He also wrote, “You will thank me later! Best wishes for a fun-filled future together. It also says that I need to convert this into money on some Bitcon ATM.”

“Oh, so he was such a skinflint that he also couldn’t give you that small amount of money in cash but he even made you look for that thing Bitcoin ATM to get your money. Oh my God.”

“Hmm, you know he was eccentric. But 20 pounds!!! Do you know how much money is that?! We can even buy air freshener. No more cows poop smell!”

“Okay. Don’t get too excited. Just find that ATM. You also need to pay for the bus ticket!”

He immediately got up and went looking for that thing. He didn’t even know what he was looking for. But 20 pounds! It was a really big amount of money for him. He went into the nearest shopping center. He found the ATM. As soon as he approached it, security guards started to walk a little bit around him. A guy looking homeless doing something on the Bitcoin ATM? Pfff... Not so normal situation. He scanned some code on the paper and enter tons of his personal information. Account balance: 3.232.568,77 pounds. He started shaking. This must be some mistake. But it says clearly that money is his. ‘What does that mean?’ He knew that it has to do something with online money and those kind of things. Oliver told him about that 10 years ago before his death and before he was even married. He somehow pressed the button and logged out, then his heart started to hurt. “I’m going to die. But I’ve just found out I have money! Oh God!” He fell on the floor and people tried to help him. He needed 20 minutes to come to his senses. Everything seemed bigger around him. After that he approached the ATM once again, withdraw the biggest amount of cash he can pick up in one day – 10 000 pounds and went home – to the camper.

When he came, he opened the door calmly and wished mom and Tom a good evening. Then he picked up fifty pound note and ripped it in front of their faces. You could only hear a big scream. Tom just sat on his bed made out of two pillows and started to cry.

“Are you out of your mind?” Mom said while holding two pieces of a fifty-pound note in her hands. One tear just rolled down her face.

In that moment dad pick out the cash out of his jacket. Luckily this one just had one smaller hole.

“We have over a three million pounds.” He started shaking again.

“But how? How?!” Tom said curiously. He also started jumping around the camper.

Dad told them the whole story. That night was their last night in the camper. Last night sleeping in any improvised bed. And they didn't feel comfortable at all. Money changed them really fast. Next thing that was filling their life was house looking, buying new things, things they never had! What a metamorphosis! Dad was so proud. His family now had a big, nice house. No more holes in clothes, no more holes in roof. They even bought a dog who smelled like public toilet even though the dog had baths in the most expensive dog cosmetics in England.

There was this one night that was so special to dad. He asked his son a question that he wasn't able to ask him before. It was possible now.

“Son, what do you want for dinner?”

“Just a can of your corn dad!”

mentor: Ante Žderić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno naselje, Zagreb

Rima Janči

SAVING OUR SOULS

The year 2222

The body is the vessel of the soul that takes it through space and time. My name is Terra Salvatore and this is my message to you. We crave saving because the Earth has almost reached the point of no return. In this day and age, we live in a world where breathing is restricted for the air we breathe is toxic. Where one needs to worry about every single breath. Where even a simple act of going outside for a few minutes can kill you. They say that it's safer to stay inside. Then why am I doing this? It's the only way to survive.

I can't breathe! I need air! Urgently! While grabbing my oxygen can, I looked at my clock. It was 3 am. I opened the can and took a thirsty sip. That would do for a few hours. How was that enough you might ask? Humans have evolved in a way that a single sip of oxygen is enough to keep you alive for a few hours. Unless you go outside. That's a whole different story.

The thing is, the government doesn't want you to go outside because there is a way. There is a way to fix all this. I'm determined to find it as soon as possible.

The year 2217

"Mom, dad please don't leave me!"

"We are running out of money, soon enough there won't be any to buy oxygen cans. We have to go. We need to find a way."

The year 2222

Those were the last words I had ever heard from them. So here I am, five years later with nothing but what they left —millions of questions.

In their honor, I will continue and finish their mission. And I have a plan for how to do it. The only question is, will it work?

If I wanted to fix this, I would need to go where it all started. And that would be in 2022. We have always learned that the air is toxic because previous generations

weren't conscious enough, they didn't think about the consequences. Well, I am going to show them the inevitable consequences.

I rushed to the attic. When I was little, my parents used to tell me stories about the time machine that they had made. I didn't believe them. But now, it all made perfect sense. My parents travelling a lot, being obsessed with finding the 'solution'. I suppose it runs in our family.

Opening the attic door I *scanned* the whole room. Standing there, I felt blood freeze in my veins. Where is it?!

"You didn't think it would be that easy, did you?"; a little mean voice said.

"Stop. Just stop! I can't deal with you right now," I screamed.

I fell to my knees and cried it all out. What's a point of a plan if you can't make it come true?

When I calmed down, I asked myself, "Where would they put it?"

And then it came to me.

How was I so stupid? I had this book that my parents gave me for my 13th birthday. It contained a beautiful necklace with a key. A beautiful antique key. And, there was a note that had a riddle written on it.

"I'm an old relative whose hands can't hold anything and eyes can't see anything."

The year 2216

"Here you go sweetie, happy birthday!"

"Remember, you can use this only once."

"Fine.", I said while rolling my eyes.

I wasn't happy about the present so I didn't even try to solve the riddle. Until now.

The year 2222

A grandfather's clock! Of course.

I rushed to my room and went straight to prepare oxygen. I had to go outside. This was my only chance. I needed to unlock the grandfather clock that was in my parent's old lab. I had never been there, but I knew all about it.

After a 20-minute drive, I arrived at the mystery spot. Opening the lab I thought that all my childhood wishes came true. As a child, all I wanted was to visit this place. But now, standing in an old rusty lab, I was a bit disappointed. It was impossible to look for a clock if I couldn't see anything because of the dust. There was work to do for certain.

After 30 minutes, the lab was all clean. Now I could start searching.

– an hour later –

Why wasn't anything there? Where could it be? All I could feel was utter rage. I grabbed an old glass bottle and threw it on the floor. Rushing to the bookshelf I tried to move the bottle away, but instead, it just moved itself to the right revealing... the grandfather's clock!

I tried to grab my necklace while shivering but an alert came in. I knew that sound very well. I only had half an hour of oxygen so I'd better hurry.

While I was unlocking the clock, a note fell from there. Reading it, I shut my eyes. I already knew what the note had said. This was my last time in this lab. If I went there again, I would not be coming back. At least not in this life.

If this was the sacrifice I needed to make for humanity... then I would do it, without any remorse.

I took my diary, with the cryptic message in it, and courageously stepped into the clock.

The next thing I knew, everything turned black.

"Will at least something change? Are we going to save our souls?," I asked myself while slowly drowning.

mentor: Ana Katruša

institution: OŠ kralja Tomislava Našice

Elena Juranić

A GIRL WHO COULD WEAVE WORDS

Once upon the time there was a girl named Pelija. She lived in a remote corner of Britain, and most of all she wanted to be a explorer, like her brother. She was valiant, shrewd in mind, and very curious. And she would have been an excellent explorer if her father had allowed it.

Namely, at that time women were teachers and housewives, and her father was kind and did not want to disappoint her when she was not accepted into the academy. So Pelija reluctantly sat in music classes and watched the boys learn science and foreign languages. But Pelija was not discouraged. She would borrow geography and science books from boys. She peered through the keyhole of her brother's room while he studied maps and encyclopedias. She memorized all the lessons and learned to list all the countries of Europe by heart. One day, she swore she would do something brave and become famous, and she had no idea how it would actually happen...

Her younger sister Ognjena loved stories. Every night Pelija had to read to her from the tattered pages of a cheap novel. One evening, Pelija didn't want to read, but she couldn't resist her sister's beautiful eyes. She laid her hand on the yellowed page. The words began to squirm, very slowly began to climb up Pelija's hand. Her fingers turned black from the flood of words. Verbs, adjectives and nouns rushed up her forearm and conjunctions appeared on her face. Pelija started screaming. Her father ran into her room and started examining her. He was a doctor, and found that Pelija was perfectly healthy. Her father bent down and asked her: „Please, just don't let it happen again.“ Pelija nodded but crossed her fingers.

The magical girl soon discovered that sucking up words is not the only thing she is gifted at. She could pull words out of other people's heads. She discovered it one rainy, cold afternoon, at school. The bell rang and the boys started mocking Pelija because of her torn skirt and tight shoes. In her entire thirteen-year-old life, she had never wanted to hit anyone so badly. Pelija just turned on them and clicked one of them on the nose. At that moment, the words slipped into her fingers. As soon as she arrived home she spun a ball of words.

For a few days, her skills amused her, but then she realized that her powers had consequences. All her books were empty after a while, and the box under her bed fuller. She no longer had anywhere to keep the strings of words, and it was sad for her to burn the empty pages of books, so she had to hide them from her father. One day the doctor had to go on a trip and left the sisters alone. Pelija placed her hand on the note that doctor left in the kitchen. Ognjena saw it and told her: „You’re doing it again. I’ll tell dad when he comes back.“ „You won’t, or I’ll put all the bad words in your ear while you’re sleeping.“ Pelija said. Ognjena stuck out her tongue, but still avoided Pelija for several days.

That night, things got more serious. Pelija could not sleep. She opened the window and her hair danced on the night breeze, she took strings of words and knitting needles. She started knitting. After all, all those hours of housekeeping were useful for something. She knitted gloves from strong words, caps from wise ones, and socks from the light and beautiful words. And the very next day she put them on, since it was snowing. Dressed up like that, she went to school. After just a few steps, she felt her legs bounce and slide easily down the floor. It felt like freedom and confidence in her hands. As soon as she came to school, she answered all questions whether they were cheeky or fair. But as soon she took off her cap, gloves and thick socks to slip her foot into her dancing shoes, everything turned around again. Those wise and strong feelings disappeared quietly. Suddenly her legs were heavy again, her hands were clumsy and her head was full of confused thoughts. She found peace in library, and she visited it especially often these days. Pelija noticed that something was missing, every day there were fewer and fewer books. Pelija knew that she had not even touched most of them. After she entered the library one Wednesday and found the French teacher throwing books around screaming and wailing, she decided to sneak out in the evening and put the words back on the sheets and put them on the shelves like missing books.

That evening, she didn’t take off her dress or look at the grammar book but waited for everything to quiet down she opened the window. Pelija left the house holding words and sentences in her fingers. She felt the unwanted words trying to climb up her throat and shook her head. A moment later, she found herself in front of open library door; the librarian did not lock the library. Pelija almost noiselessly crept into the hall and passed through the oak door. For a moment she just stood like that, petrified. The words were flying all around the room. Her heart skipped a beat. Her blood ran cold as she felt a hand on her shoulder...Pelija slowly turned around. There was a boy, with a beautiful face and strong hands. Pelija tried to run but she could not.

She looked at the boy: “Why are you stealing books?” He didn’t answer but there was something odd about him. He was shining. Like a god of light. Words appeared on Pelija’s cheek; the boy smiled. “We need you.” he said. „ Why?“,Pelia started to panic, she was still fighting with invisible power, „ Let me go! Please! “Because at the end we will all become stories.” he whispered. Pelija stopped. The boy was a ghost covered with words, and pages of burned books.

„At the end we will all become stories.” she repeated.

mentor: Martina Salamon

institution: OŠ Mitnica, Vukovar

Iva Kuprešak

PANDORA'S ISLAND

“Hurry up, otherwise we will be late!” Chloe yelled at her friends who were trying to catch up with her. “We’ll be there two hours before the museum opening!” gasped Theodore, it was too much running for that blue-eyed, blonde, chubby boy. “Yes, Chloe”, started Julian, “why did we come this early anyways?” Julian wasn’t as interested in museums and history as Chloe. “I’d like to ask someone professional about that necklace I found the other day. My theory might be true!” said Chloe while pulling a beautiful, ruby-colored, teardrop shaped necklace out of her pocket. “Oh, just let it go already, it is probably a fake.” Said Theodore. “We’ll see about that.” No matter what they said, she was certain there was something special about that necklace. Chloe was sure that it really *is* Pandora’s necklace. Legend says there was a necklace in Pandora’s box that can take you to an island full of temptations and fear where only the ones with pure heart can find the treasure and come back home. The boys were making fun of her theory, they were annoyed by listening to Chloe and her stories. When they found out the museum was closed, they got angry and left. Chloe spend rest of the day thinking about the necklace. When she was in her room, she saw a shining red light coming out of her necklace and, like in ecstasy, she took a few steps forward and touched it... She woke up on a beach. After she came to her senses, she saw Theo and Julian looking at her. They were stunned. Maybe Chloe was right after all? If so, how will they come home and where even are they? “Hey, maybe I can find our location on my phone!” suggested Julian, but that didn’t work. His phone was empty. They decided to look around. The island was full of weird looking plants and dark blue trees. They walked through the dark wood when they came across the remains of an ancient temple. Only the entrance was intact. Chloe ran towards the entrance. “Come on, this is going to be great!” “Yeah, it’s not like we’re stuck here or anything...” said Theo in a sarcastic, but also scared voice. They were walking through the temple corridor when suddenly they heard a loud, scary noise. They tried to get back, but the entrance closed. “Whoever dares to come here must pass three tests, you have seven hours, otherwise you shall stay here forever! And I

warn you, do not eat anything if you want to survive!” a women’s sharp voice came out of nowhere. “Wh-what does it m-mean, who are you?” fearfully said Theodore. “She is Pandora, we’re on her island!” Julian started to panic. Pandora’s evil laugh echoed through the temple. “See, I told you!” Chloe was proud of herself. After hours of walking, they ended up in an empty room a wooden box in the middle. Julian noticed a metal door in the corner of the room. “Ouch! The doorknob is hot! And there is a seven-letter code” “I’m sure the answer is in the box.” said Chloe. There were many squares carved on the upper side of the box lined up next to each other and the same-sized cubes were on the floor. “Don’t you see? It’s sudoku! Look, there are few filled squares, but instead of numbers, there are signs for earth, water, air and a letter R. We just need to put the pieces together.” “Well done, Chloe, I’d never be able to figure it out.” said Theodore. “Let’s get to work, then.” Sign by sign, piece by piece and they were done. The answer was Pandora. Julian wrote Pandora on the door, but nothing happened. Doorknob started glowing. Theodore took Chloe’s necklace and put it in the doorknob. The door opened. When they entered the next room red lasers showed up from the ceiling. One laser quickly burned Theodore’s sleeve. They turned to a place where the door used to be, but there was nothing but a wall. “How will we get out?” asked Julian. “I see the door on the other side of the room,” said Chloe “I guess we have to avoid those lasers as much as possible.” “Oh, God, I hate PE. And this room is bigger than a football field!” said Theodore. After two hours and a few burns they finally made it to the last room. This room was not like the previous ones. There was a big hole in the middle of the room surrounded by many rare and unusual plants, there was name of each plant written in Latin. Theodore approached one of them “Hm...Venenum ficus. Hey, Chloe, ficus is a fig, right?” “It is, why?” said Chloe while looking for any clue that might lead them to the treasure. “No way, Theo, you found food!” said Julian and plucked the fig from the tree, Theodore did the same. “Wait, guys, don’t eat that! Don’t you remember what Pandora said, you might-” started Chloe, but it was too late. Both Julian and Theodore were unconscious on the edge of the black hole. “They did not listen to me, now you will pay the price. Now only the two of you can come back home, so you can save only one friend!” Pandora entered the room. “You can’t do that! I have two hours to find the treasure!” said Chloe while crying and holding the boys so they don’t fall. “You won’t find any gold or diamonds here. These plants are my treasure! Now, the question is, what is yours?” asked Pandora. Chloe looked at Julian, then Theodore and realized they are her treasure, her gold. But who will she choose to save? She pulled them both at the same time and jumped into the abyss. She was falling slowly

when suddenly a familiar male voices came to her ear. “Chloe, get up! You’ll be late for school!” She opened her eyes and saw Theodore and Julian in her room. “You are alive!” she hugged them. “Well, it would be weird if we weren’t, wouldn’t it?” asked Julian. “Yeah, of course, let’s go.” And they happily went to school. The necklace around Chloe’s neck started to glow...

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THE DREAM OF TRUTH

Dreams are a special thing. They take you to a different world and they show you things that you can't see in this reality. I always think of dreams as a message from your spiritual guardian. My dreams are always different every night, but not now.

I have been dreaming of the same woman every night for the past few weeks. She looks like an angel, and she is a warrior. Every time when she visits me, she tells me a different story about witches, wizards, fairies, and magic, like a parent to their child before they go to bed. After she tells a story, I wake up. Just like I did right now because I heard someone bursting in my room.

"Fia Graystone, you were supposed to be ready half an hour ago." - my mom said with annoyed face.

"Sorry, my alarm didn't go off", I replied.

We are supposed to go to a random town called Worldford that's placed in the middle of nothing for a whole month. I'm literally going to kill myself. The car ride was tiring, my brother was constantly yelling because of his video games, my mom was playing some boring song and my dad was constantly hungry like he hadn't eaten ten minutes ago. It took us about three hours to get there. When we got there, my mom parked in front of the house we are renting. The house looked nice. It had a big garden. From the inside it looked modern and colourful. After we put our things in the house, we went to a local restaurant for lunch.

"There is one library here, so you can visit it after lunch." - my mom said.

"I already know that - I researched the whole town while we were in the car."

After lunch I decided to visit that library. While I was walking through the town, I realized that it's very beautiful. It's not that small as I thought. The streets were clean and there were a lot of flowers and trees. The library was behind the rose bush. It looked very vintage from the outside. I walked into it and from the moment I stepped in there, I was in love with it. This place was not so small but also not so big. There were only few people there. I went to the back of the library to see what's offering. I took a book with a cool cover.

“That book is pretty good if you like love triangles.” - The boy with brown eyes and a black longer fizzy hair said.

“I hate love triangles; they are stupid and boring.” - I said back with a face that asks who you are.

“By the way, my name is Alexander.” - he said.

“Well, nice to meet you Alexander, my name is Fia and I have to go.” I stormed off from the library. He kind of looked fine as hell, and annoying, but I would rather kill myself than think of some random guy that I’ve just met. When I got to the house I ran to my room and threw myself on the bed. I felt more tired than ever in my life. I just closed my eyes and fell asleep.

“Fia, you need to listen to me very carefully.” - the woman I always dream of says.

I nodded my head.

“All the stories I told you were about magic, creatures and battles. I took part in all of them. I was there, in all the battles, in all new discoveries and in all new beginnings. I wrote lots of magical history. But now it’s time for you. You will find a house in the place where dead people live, and alive people visit. These people will protect you. You are more powerful than you think.”

As she said those words an arrow stabbed her heart. The blood that I thought I would only see in the movies was on her white – but, now red dress, like when you draw a rose on a white paper and then you colour it red. She fell on her knees while pressing the wound with her hands. In that moment I looked at her in disbelief.

“Wake up Fia, it’s not safe here anymore.” - she gave me one last smile.

If you told me one year ago that my dreams are going to feel like they are real, I wouldn’t take you seriously. But now, this is a whole new story, a whole new beginning. I woke up all sweaty, felling like I died. She told me to find a place. A place where my story begins. So that’s what I am going to do. She wants me to find a house behind a cemetery. I guess I will be heading there. I got dressed up, said goodbye to my family and told them I am going for a walk. I searched where the cemetery is, and it took me half an hour to get there. I came there and slowly walked into it. It felt so dark. The woman from my dreams never gave me her name and I never asked her. She told me to get here so here I am. No people were here and that’s good because I don’t want to look crazy. I reached the last row of graves and saw a house not so far away among the trees. I walked to it. The house looked abandoned. The windows were covered with slats. Slowly walking towards it, I found myself on the house’s doorsteps. I knocked, but nobody answered. So why not just break into the house?

I grabbed the handle and started opening the door as I heard a voice. “Hello Fia, didn’t see you for like a day.”

It was the guy I met in the library. He and three other people were here, sitting on a couch. They were in the same clothes; the only difference was a sign on their shirts. There were daggers and knives on the desk. They stared at me, and I stared at the picture of the woman from my dreams. They must know who she is. Or should I say was. These people looked like they were some kind of killers.

“You’ve probably met Feye. She was one of the most powerful witches of her time but sadly she died before she even visited you in your dreams. Ghosts can do that “- the girl says. “My name is Beatrice, here present are also Avyanna, Ace and you’ve already met Alexander. Now we are probably looking like we are going to kill you, but when you get to know us, we are actually nice. “

“Can somebody explain who you are, and why did she send me here? “- I asked. “I don’t have any connections with magic. “

“You have connections, “- Alexander said as he stood up. “Believing something gives you all the connection Fia; all you have to do is open you mind. You are one of the special ones who did it. “

The house began to shake. We all rushed outside. Before I walked into this house, there were only trees and flowers in front of it, but now there were five creatures standing there. They were at least two meters tall, looking like they were burned. Magical people were standing in front of me. From now on, I will call them like that. They didn’t look scared at all.

“So, who will end this children’s play? “- Ace asked.

“I feel bored, so I would like to take this. “- Avyanna replied.

She lifts her hand up. The knives that were in house are now in the monsters’ chests. Her power is telekinesis, so that’s what the symbols on their shirts mean.

“Fia, one person would like to meet you now. “- Alexander said. “Would you like to pay a visit to that person? “

“My mom will kill me when I get home, “- I said. “But I don’t see a reason not to visit that person.“

I’m not scared of anything. My life is starting to be fun. I am not afraid of dying. We are all born to die. He took my hand and a moment later I was in an office. It looked old. The walls were dark grey, and it all looked dark.

“Hello there. “- the voice behind us said. “Welcome back students. “

A woman in her fifties was behind us. She passed by and leaned on the table. She looked like a nice person though. I have no idea why I am here and who she is, but this is getting interesting.

“You are probably asking yourself why you are here. “- she said. “Well, my students brought you here because you are someone who holds a strong power. You never

knew that because you didn't know how to make them go out of your body. Many people can't believe you are a real thing, and the others want your death. So, I have a proposition for you. How about you join this school? I will give you time to think about it. We just want to protect you, Fia. If you choose to join, your uniform will be here. "

She pointed her finger at the uniform that was on the hanger. I looked closely.

There were five symbols on the shirt: Fire, Earth, Water, Air and Spirit.

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Erik Pletikos

THE WINNER

The winnerA man won a mystery prize that is unknown to everyone who was competing for this prize. The conditions to win this prize were the following: they had to collect 3 golden balls with marks on them that say 1, 2, 3, and they needed to pay 5 dollars for a box that contains a ball inside. The colors of the balls were: blue (50% to get this ball), hazel (30% to get this ball), dark red (19.9% to get this ball) and golden (0.1% to get this ball). The man got crazy because of the mystery prize so he went to every store he could to get the golden balls. While going to the stores he got to his last 5 dollars and a homeless man asked him if he could spare some money to him. He wanted to give him some money, but he couldn't, because he needed that money for the balls. The homeless man bursted in tears, so the man thought: "He's getting on my nerves now!", so he handed over the money to the homeless man. But surprisingly, the homeless man stood up and ran! While he was running, he took out his shirt and under that old shirt there was brand new clothing full of money! The man had enough, he ran towards the homeless man, threw him on the floor and took the money from him to teach him a lesson. Finally, he got to the final store and bought the box, he opened it and found the first golden ball. Even the cashier was happy for him! He happily went home to celebrate that he won the golden ball, but he felt watched... The car behind him was suspicious, it started to follow him all around the streets. After going around some random streets, it got on his nerves, so he got out of the car and asked: "Who are you??!! Show yourself!!". The door slowly opened but nobody was there. Instead, the computer said: "Come take the prize", with distorted raspy voice. The man slowly walked to the car and there were the other 2 golden balls. He asked himself "how???", but he took the balls and drove back home...happily...

Day 1

People heard shouting in the man's house. They quickly rushed to his house, broke in through his door and shouted: "Where are you???", but..., he came downstairs

calmly and asked: “What happened? “. They responded: “We heard you screaming! What do you mean!?!?”. The man responded: “What do YOU mean??? I was shouting because I won a mystery prize, so can you please leave my house? You and your horde have done enough trouble...” They sighed while going home. After the chaos, the man has often had some power outages with strange raspy breathing behind him every time it was dark. When this strange thing happened, he checked every time behind him and the surprise was that there was no one there, so he thought it was his imagination. But this imagination felt real because he heard thumping in his room every 6 hours. The thumping wasn’t the strangest thing, the strangest was when he watched TV and the channels automatically changed to channel 389 which was the horror channel. Every time he wanted to go to sleep, when he turned off the lights, the lights turned on again and it flickered. Then he checked the battery, it’s fine, he checked the light bulb... it’s fine. So he got a new plan to move out from his house and go to another county, but he forgot that there were power outages and he had no time to reserve a plane ticket. Also, doors could open automatically or manually but his house wasn’t a smart house so the question was, when he wasn’t looking why did the doors open? Why did the doors open when there’s nobody to open them and to close them? This all started yesterday when he got home from the store and the front door was open.

Day 2

Power outages, mysterious voices, automatic TV channels changes, thumping, flickering lights, doors automatically opening and closing, there’s nothing worse than that. He thought he was crazy because all of these things started to happen from the time he got the balls from a mysterious car.

Because he was too happy he said “Tomorrow is the day of the prize.” He couldn’t stop thinking about it like he was possessed by a demon.

He drove to see a doctor. While he was driving he felt dizzy and he heard something or someone whispering on his car radio “tomorrow“ repeatedly. When he came to the doctor’s he said that he probably had *sonophobia* (an unusual fear of sounds), BUT the psychiatrist said differently, he said “There might be demons in your house!.” He was terrified what the psychiatrist said to him. Then he sat on a chair in the hallway and one of the other doctors came and said not to worry about that, because that psychiatrist has *daemonophobia* (a fear of demons) and he is saying this to all of his patients. They will put that psychiatrist in the solitary. The man was relieved to hear this, but there’s a problem. „The house...like it’s haunted or controlled by someone“ he said while fear was striking him like bullets.

Prize day

„The psychiatrist was right, heh“, he said, while shaking in the corner full of fear thinking that he’s going to die. In the past 4 minutes the power was DONE completely. Everything was dark and his old flashlight was nearly dead. While sitting here, he heard a phone ringing. He scaredly went down the stairs, his legs were shaking, his brain was in panic. When he got to the room where the phone was, he shakingly took the phone and said scaredly: „hel-l-l-o?“ An anonymous distorted raspy voice responded: „It’s by the door..“ and it hang up. He put the phone down and he heard a doorbell. While going to the door, shakefully he opened them and... it was the prize! It was a box taped with a note on it that said “Thank you for finding the golden balls, now goodbye ☺“. He didn’t care about it and opened the box...it was nothing in there. After 3 days a story has been talking lively that a man died of a heart attack because of all the stress and fear. The police confirmed that this man died from AI... .

The end

But, how can a computer make this?

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Sabina Hegeduš

A TEEN

Another day has already occurred, and you still don't know how to love yourself. Most people barely know themselves, so what does it matter what they think of you?

Two siblings—they are the moon and the sun, threads of obscurity and light weaved into a galaxy of probabilities. When one falls, the other raises, and sometimes, they find common ground to bring balance to. I have never seen such devotion. I envy it in every possible way.

Then, there is the matter of the empathy. She wears an emotionless mask, because how could she ever deal with her feelings when those of others overwhelm her daily? Gloves perpetually cover her hands, and she wishes to touch no one.

That's what happened to me. I have a younger sister who is always one step ahead of me.

My parents please her by bringing her every dream into existence, while I'm most of the time left behind. Maybe I'm overdramatic. I'm just 15 years old. My mum once told me that I should never want to grow up fast. She said being a kid is a gift to every one of us that you can only have for a short period of your life. It's true, but I'll rather have to work 11 hours a day for the rest of my life than go to school and feel agitated while uncomfortably sitting on a hard wooden chair, without moving an atom.

The worst part of school is being bullied. Two months ago was when I developed an eating disorder. Pauline and her pack of cats are one of the worst people ever standing alive. A couple of days ago, they cut my hair while it was up in a high ponytail. I'm constantly trying to defend myself, not yesterday tho. While I was walking to class yesterday, Marcus, a boy from junior year, saved me from a pack of starving cats. The way his lips moved in harmony while yelling, his hair was black and parted to the side, really made me numb on my knees.

This is the first time I have found a crush after a few years, and he is so perfect. I just don't

believe he would fall for a fool like I am. But he was way too compassionate toward me, and it's so hard to find a guy like this nowadays. Watching him argue for me felt intimidating. He felt like a fort, and forts are designed to intimidate the population. It was like I was in a military building that defended me from cats, consisting of an area surrounded by a strong wall, on which soldiers are based; being a teenager is hard, spread the word.

It shook me out of my thoughts when my mother came barging into my room.

"Dinner's ready," she spoke and shut the door. She's in a bad mood, I can sense. I stand there for a minute. I look over at the mirror. Have I been looking like this all day?

Every time I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt disgusted at what I see. I always wished I was beautiful, like Nora, Pauline, or India. My school therapist told me it was just a phase, because I'm a teenager, and that's what most teens my age feel like. I will eventually grow out of it when I turn eighteen. But what they don't know is that these emotions keep destroying me every day. Every second. Being a teenager, what it feels like, is stressful for us. Every day is the same problem. Should I choose this shirt? Or this one. These pants are too tight, but not the skirt. What if I get sexualized or bullied? What if they don't fit me? I should put make-up on, I will feel unattractive without it. It's an everyday affliction. Maybe I won't impress my crush one day.

I made myself downstairs to the kitchen where my parents were. My dad casually smokes and plays board games with my sister, while my mum washes the dishes. Oh, this reminds me of an argument I had with my parents yesterday. I was, how they said "misbehaving" and "spoiled" after I forgot to tidy my closet. They made a big obstacle out of something I forgot.

What happens when they forget something? Nothing. Nothing happens. They act like they didn't forget anything, but if I try to tell them the same thing they say to me, I would get grounded, or worse, hit and yelled at. They call me spoiled when I forget something. I wish I could turn 18, so I can move out as soon as possible.

I can't believe it. Something embarrassing happened while I was at school. I was walking down the stairs to the restroom and slipped in front of Pauline and her gang. Oh. My. God.

This was so embarrassing. I didn't exactly fall, but I just slipped. I wish I had a time machine.

Walking to the class, I ignored everyone looking at me. I was uncertain of what I felt and what would happen. I just knew this would spread around the complete school. Once again, I let myself drown deep inside my thoughts and eat my entire brain. I felt like I was slowly getting brainwashed by my own emotions. I can't even describe my feelings right now.

I saw Marcus looking in my direction. I looked back at him and we made eye contact. He was just smiling. I hope he didn't hear. Marcus started walking towards me. He seemed happy.

"Don't be mad at yourself." He spoke. I knew he cared, but I couldn't trust him yet.

I ran, I ran as far as I could. I had no idea where I was. My legs were working themselves, while my mind told them to stop. I had enough of all this. I wonder how other teenagers are dealing with their problems. I mentally cannot do anything about it. I have no one to talk to, to express my feelings, and I don't have anyone to listen to me except... maybe Marcus. I'm done with suffering. My parents, class, everyone, I am done with them. I can't deal with my impulsive thoughts anymore.

I noticed an old wooden stump; it was covered in dirt and tied up with a long rope. I stood there for a minute, completely powerless and unconscious. I grab the rope and wrap it around my torso, the other half around the biggest rock I find. After a few hours of pulling the rock with all my might, I finally found it. I strip myself naked and jump into the river.

I let myself slowly sink to the bottom of the river, unable to move. The heavy rock keeps sinking deeper and deeper. And then it hit me. Regret. I felt the burning sensation in my chest as the water filled up my lungs. My sight is becoming black, and at the last moment, I feel myself touch the bottom.

And there lies the corpse of the girl, her clothes lying on the grass next to the river, dirty and ripped. She never came home, which caused big drama around the town. After 7 years of missing, the police give up trying to find the girl. Her sister grows up into a wise woman, always praising and thinking about her sister. Marcus stays alone, he loved her, but after finding out the love of his life disappeared. He never loved again.

Life is cruel and difficult. You should never give up trying. There will always be people to stop you. But you have to stand up for yourself and never make the same mistake as Clair.

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A TRIP TO THE SUBCONSCIOUS

“Where am I?”, she thought confusedly. Just moments ago, she was rolling on her living room floor, desperately fighting for air. But the place she woke up in wasn’t like anything she’d ever seen before. The sky was pink, with a few clouds and a crescent moon in the middle of it. The ground was soft and grassy where she stood, but as she looked further ahead, she noticed the grass was covered with worn out stone tiles, leading to a city of only her wildest dreams.

“Welcome to your subconscious!” a familiar voice answered. She quickly turned around only to see a girl who looked like a spitting image of herself standing before her eyes. The girl had the same complexion as hers, but various other things were different. For one, her hair was a neon shade of pink and put in a low bun. Also, she wore a hoodie and sweatpants in place of a crop top and jeans that she wore.

“My... subconscious? How did I get here? Did...did I die?” she asked fearfully.

“No. Well, not yet, at least. Whether you live or die today is entirely up to you. You see, your mind is currently entering a panic mode. It is trying to find a way to save you. Most people remember it as their life flashing before their eyes, and while that’s not entirely incorrect, it’s also not correct. Let me explain how things work: you are sent here to your subconscious to find a memory, an idea, or whatever it might be – if there actually is one – that will help you save yourself. However, because time here moves a hundred times faster than out there, all you can remember afterwards is just a bunch of random memories flashing before your eyes”, the girl explained.

“So, I’m still alive?” she asked the girl.

“Yes. But you’re not going to stay alive for much longer if we don’t start searching for answers soon”, answered the girl with a noticeable annoyance in her voice.

“Uh, right, sorry. We should probably get going then, huh?”

Shortly after, they found themselves wandering the streets of Omnia, which the girl explained was the name of the breathtaking city she had seen earlier from afar.

Now that she got a closer look, she realised the buildings were even more unusual than she originally thought. They were all in vibrant colours or with vibrant coloured details, so much so that it made her eyes hurt. Most of them were large beyond comprehension, and each of them was absolutely ridiculous. For example, they had just passed by a bleached, yellow coloured tower-shaped building with numerous floors covered from top to bottom in red climbing roses. It had some randomly positioned windows and doors, from where the only way to get in and out would be by climbing the roses. Apart from that, she was also fairly certain the tower had no roof. Although, it was hard to tell because of how tall it was.

After a couple more minutes of silent admiration, she proceeded to try and start a conversation. The silence was getting too uncomfortable for her. Plus, something had been on her mind ever since their last talk.

“Hey, I know you said we don’t have much time, but how much time do we have exactly?”

“An hour and a half, give or take”, the girl answered as they took yet another right turn, this time into an alley.

“Seriously? That’s almost nothing!” she all but yelled as she avoided puddles on the ground.

“Yeah, well, when you got here, you had around a minute left. So, after you do the math, you get...” the girl was about to calculate, when she decided to finish the sentence for her: “One point six hours.” Math was her thing after all.

“Exactly”, the girl confirmed while stepping out of the alleyway and getting back onto one of the main streets. From there, she could clearly see a square with a statue of her best friend in the distance but decided not to question it.

“Also, where are we going? I’m choking, so our best bet is finding a memory of a TikTok video I saw on the topic or a random Google search I did from who knows when.”

“I’m aware. That’s why we’re skipping all these other buildings and heading directly to the Knowledge Centre.”

That was enough to pique her interest and make her eyes shine with curiosity. “Knowledge Centre?” she inquired. Maybe she was a bit of a nerd after all.

“A high-tech library containing anything and everything you internally marked as interesting or just worth remembering”, the girl turned to her, giving her an all knowing smirk.

“So cool!”

As they were walking, a thick fog started forming around the city. She didn't realise it right away, but it became rather obvious once she couldn't see some of the buildings anymore.

"Hey, what's happening...?" she asked in a panicked voice.

"Simply put, we're running out of time. The mind is starting to shut down because of the lack of oxygen", the girl explained in such a tone you'd think she was talking about the weather.

"Well, in that case, hurry!" she yelled at the unfazed girl, now getting frustrated in addition to being absolutely terrified by the whole situation.

One of the good things about being in your own mind is not actually having a physical body. Therefore, you can't get tired. For that fact, she was especially thankful after they started running. Ever since she noticed the fog, she had been dead set on running the rest of the way and not taking any chances. Naturally, after quickening their pace, they got to their giant, glass destination building much faster. It was strange, really. She was expecting some sort of an old castle or perhaps a complex of buildings resembling a college campus, but the Knowledge Centre was actually just an endless skyscraper. At first, she was disappointed, and rightly so. But that changed as soon as they stepped foot inside. Despite its dull outside appearance, the inside managed to knock her socks straight off. Not only was it all neatly organised by date and content, but each group was also individually decorated to match the content. There was a lab in the chemistry aisle, a realistic and accurately moving solar system in the astronomy aisle, a garden in the plant aisle, and so forth.

She was ecstatic.

"Ugh! It's no use. There's nothing here", she voiced her thoughts. They had been searching the place for at least half an hour and still had nothing. Now, the time was starting to get to them.

"No way, it has to be here! Where else could it be? We're looking for guidelines on how to stop yourself from choking! Where else would you find that information other than in a library of random facts you've picked up from the Internet?" refusing to give up, the girl tried arguing.

“Well, it’s not here!”

“It has to be here! We’re just not looking hard enough!”

And at that moment, it dawned on her. “Or...we’re not looking in the right place!”

“Huh?”

“Follow me”, she said as she led the way out of the ‘body hacks’ aisle and into the elevator. Once both of them were inside she pressed the button for the lowest floor and waited. While they were waiting, she took another look at the map of the building’s contents, trying to memorise the path she was about to take. When the elevator got to the ground floor, she went out alongside the girl and started going from aisle to aisle until she finally found what she was looking for: the section titled ‘other’.

“When are you planning on tell me why we’re here?” the girl asked with confusion written all over her face.

“I was never interested in medicine. Sure, body hacks are cool, and I’d love to learn more of them, but I was never really interested in medicine per se or saving lives. In other words, while body hacking is the closest we’ve got to a category that would contain something like ‘how to save yourself from choking’, that’s still not the category it falls under. The only section here in which we have an actual chance of finding something like that is the ‘other’ section”, she tried to explain her extremely complicated stream of thought when she came across exactly what she was looking for. It was a Google search from 2023 titled ‘How to perform the Heimlich manoeuvre on yourself’.

The moment they found the memory, she was back in the ‘real world’, fighting for her own life. With her fists pressed forcefully against her chest, she was gasping for air. Finally, she caught her breath. As the colour was slowly coming back into her cheeks, the memories flashed before her eyes. A smile played about her mouth as the realisation hit her: ‘I’m alive!’

*mentor: Mia Škrinjar**institution: OŠ Remete, Zagreb**Filip Obrovac*

SECRETS OF THE SAHARA

An explorer, famed for his many adventures and uncovering many secrets which no one knew the answer to, decided to test his luck, traveling the Sahara Desert. It had been believed that this cursed desert had held treasure the likes of which could make even the richest people feel endlessly poor. As he started his journey, he realized that time seemed to change slightly, it was already night, even though he entered at about 9 am. It had only been an hour. It seemed the desert held more than simple treasure. He decided to keep going, after all, he was a great explorer, nothing had stopped him on his previous adventures, why would anything stop him this time? He didn't think it would be too long of a journey, so he decided to go alone with little supply however, which might prove to be a problem later on, but for now, he was determined to keep going and to find the treasure. He kept walking for hours, seeing nothing but more sand, not finding anything. This was when it became apparent to him that he didn't know how to find the treasure, he was simply wandering, trying to find something, and to bring it back. He was sure that if he kept walking, he would find something. After a day, he had to settle down and rest, he was getting very tired after all, the time warping of the desert had kept it night, so he wasn't feeling hot, simply warm, but he couldn't sleep on the sand, so he decided to look around to find some place where he could lay down and rest for a few hours, something, would come up, and he could rest, something would come up, and he would find treasure, everything he wanted, surely would happen, it always had. After not finding any place where he could rest, he ended up lying down on the sand, very uncomfortable, but he managed to sleep, only to wake up to the scorching hot sun. He decided to get up, lying there would only mean his doom after all.

He kept walking drinking out of his flask, it was almost empty, but it was so hot there, he couldn't last without it. So he drank it all. So he could continue, for a little bit longer. After a few more hours, his will to keep going was drained. He tried to call, for someone to come pick him up, but when he tried, he realized that phones, radios, not even walkie talkies worked. He hadn't noticed the silence coming from

them, since he was so fixated on his goal, and now he was too deep in to go back. He would surely die if he did, so he could only keep going forward. After some more time, he found a village! But it was abandoned, there was nobody there, he searched the little houses, finding nothing inside but bugs. He ate the bugs, because he didn't bring much food, and what he did bring, he had already eaten yesterday, but there was no water there, must be why it was abandoned. Still, it was the best he could ask for. While he could, he decided to rest with a roof over his head, and hopefully night would come and it would be safe for him to travel further. After he woke up fully rested, and somewhat fed, he continued his journey. It had proved longer, harder, and deadlier than he had anticipated. He had saved some bugs from the village, so that he doesn't starve in the desert. He didn't like it, but he had to do it. They even had some water inside them, so he was slightly fed and hydrated, what more could he ask for? He started to see things, mirages, he was seeing water, and trees, fruits, and lakes, people, and society, but it was all fake. He was still stuck in the desert, quite possibly going to die, but we can't be certain, only time will tell. He saw another person, but they were surely just another illusion. But they looked as tired, hungry, and scared as he did. He went to try and talk to them, and they answered! Finally, he found somebody!

They decided to travel together. The other traveler told him that where he was going held nothing either, so they decided to go to another direction. The other traveler had been traveling for weeks, he could barely remember how to talk, or what people looked like, so he was a bit odd, but otherwise well meaning and helpful, it was nice to have company. The two were walking now, making what seemed like progress, but they had about 20 more days of walking to go. At least they got to talk now. But they felt they weren't exactly alone, like someone else was watching them, many people actually. They kept going for a day, nineteen left, it would be done soon, maybe even sooner, just in a way they didn't hope. After traveling for many more hours, they managed to find something, a pyramid, not a large one, but a pyramid either way. They entered it, and apparently someone had trapped the pyramid, they were trapped in a hole. They were stuck there for a few days, not being able to figure out what to do, but then a stranger appeared from the top of the hole, he threw them down a rope, and they climbed out. He didn't speak English though, he was probably Egyptian, or from another country. Either way they didn't understand him, but he led them through the pyramid, to the middle of it, the grave of the pharaoh, but there was no gold, someone else had plundered it. The Egyptian was clearly surprised and saddened by the news, and started trying to find the gold, to no avail,

whoever took it, was long gone. The Egyptian broke down in tears, the one thing he had to protect, he had failed. He decided to stay there so no one else may desecrate the grave of his king while the two explorers left the pyramid. But then, on the top of the pyramid they saw a bit of a bump. They climbed up the pyramid and there was a button on top. After debating it for a while, they decided to press the button at the tip of the pyramid, then a new, smaller, completely golden pyramid appeared out of the ground, and when they entered, they were so focused on the ground so that they don't fall in a hole again, that they didn't notice that there was a mysterious door. It was hard to see because of all the spider webs, and when they opened the door after seeing it, they were met with a task they needed to complete to get the treasure inside of it.

The task they were met with, was an enormous room, on the other side of the room was another door, but with a hole, and also the room was filled with gems, gold and riches people can only dream of. But they were only allowed to find and take one object, for if they took any of the other pieces of gold, they'd be killed on the spot. They were tasked to find a square pearl that they'd need to place into the hole in the door to unlock it. They instantly started searching. It felt like more gold was spilling in, they had much trouble with their search, but after many hours, they finally found the square pearl, but it seemed the room was filling up with more gold, and the door behind them was shut. The gold started rising up even faster, they started to run, almost swim in the gold. How was it possible for this much gold to be in a room? How was it coming in? It wasn't important to the explorers, they were mere meters from the door, just one more swim, just one dive, just one step, and they made it, the gold started receding when they unlocked the door, they came in, and saw a big chest, but it had a lock, and where was the key? The exhausted travelers, desperate for gold, and unwilling to search again, simply broke the lock with a stick, but this angered the pyramid, and its residents, since gold started to spill and spawn again. They ran as fast as they could, our first explorer made it just in the nick of time, but his friend, did not, he was buried under the gold, and blood started to sleep out. The explorer thought it a very bad idea to touch the gold, so he apologized to his friend's body and walked away from the pyramid heading in the opposite direction of it.

The other three ways were options explored, so that one must be what he was looking for, what he needed. Leaving the pyramids, more encouraged, he began his adventure again, walking with wide quick steps, after all, he and his friend had made much progress towards here, he needed to cross that distance, as well as the distance to his goal, it would be foolish to go slow, it would cost him weeks, it would mean his

certain death, as always. He had little food left, only a few beetles, and he was eating through them very fast. At least if he got out of this alive he'd finally be skinnier, a blatant lie, because he'd stuff his face to hell when he got out, if he got out. After making it back to where he had met his friend again, he realized just now that it seemed that the sun was following him. Wherever he was, it was there, always near him, he couldn't get away from it. It was terrifying when he realized it, but it seemed to just be giving him light. He went through a few dark villages and it had offered him light, especially in the pyramids, he simply hadn't noticed it. He was busy with greed and the urge to find treasure and get out of there finally, so at least the sun was friendly, even if it was scolding hot, he preferred the moon, since then it was cold, but it was better than the heat. He kept wandering, the moon finally came out again so he could go quicker now. He kept thinking he saw a forest, or a plane, or civilization, but he didn't, he still had a very long way to go, the 19 days they had to travel? They didn't know it at the time, but now he had to go for 35 days in this direction. He managed to find yet another village, it seemed a bit, off, this time, like it wasn't freely abandoned, like it was something else. Maybe he thought it because of the blood stains on the walls, but maybe because of something else, who knows what could have happened there. He was desperate though, so he decided to search the houses. He found corpses inside the houses, warm corpses, this wasn't long ago, he needed to run, fast. He found a flare somehow in one, but he heard voices behind him, he jumped out of the window of the small hut he was in and started to run as fast as possible. He heard footsteps behind him, but he couldn't look back, it was too dangerous, he ran, and ran, and ran. It was a bunch of Egyptians deep inside the Sahara, all gone mad, trying to kill him. One threw a large spear at him and it hit him just enough to cause him to leave a trail of blood along the ground, making the Egyptians want to feed off his corpse. The hole was already there, they just needed to make it bigger, they needed food. But fortunately, the explorer had determination and a flare gun, which he shot into the air. They didn't recognize it, and ran away, they didn't know what the gun would do.

Soon after, a helicopter came for our adventurer. No one believed what he said about the desert, or the stuff in it, but at least he was safe at last.

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Mihaela Cvijanović

LADY HELEN TO THE RESCUE OF MAGIC

You have probably heard various stories about witches, wizards and magic. You've heard how a witch kidnapped someone, how a wizard entertained the royal family with his magic, how there were many types of magic, both dangerous and amazing, but have you heard about an event that happened in one of the most powerful kingdoms in the 17th century? King Henry's kingdom, Theola, was a powerful and popular kingdom in England. In Theola you could find all kinds of people: the royal family, their soldiers, villagers, workers, even people who possess magical powers. They all lived happily in the kingdom until the King passed a new law.

The people of Theola gathered in the main square under the balcony of the castle, and the King then gave his speech.

"Dear people of Theola, I have decided to introduce a new law that some of you will not like." Before I continue, I must tell you that King Henry never liked magic and its use.

"...So, the new law states that people who possess some form of magic must leave the kingdom, and if anyone uses magic, he or she will be punished by death.", said the King.

After the speech, the people went away, and one girl approached the King.

"Henry are you sure about this law? A lot of people have this gift they can't get rid of", said Lady Helen. The King just snapped at her: "Yes Helen, I'm sure, now go back to the castle."

Lady Helen was the child of Prince Arthur who died in a battle, so King Henry decided to give Helen a home in his castle as he was a very good friend of her father.

During the royal family's dinner, King Henry's son, Louis, decided to talk to his father about the law. "Father, I don't want to interfere with your decisions, but I also have the right to participate in passing laws, since I am the heir of the throne". He continued after a short pause. "In my opinion, people will start to protest and the

kingdom will not be the same without the contribution of magic.” The King looked at him sharply, got up from the table and went to his room.

It was past midnight at that time, everyone in the castle was sleeping and Lady Helen decided to sneak out of the castle and hide because she knew she was in danger. She was one of those with magical powers! Lady Helen made her way to a small house that only she knew about. The cottage was hidden deep in the Leiwer Forest next to Lake Ester. The forest belonged to the kingdom, and every night, the soldiers went around the forest so that no one could enter the castle. Lady Helen had to be very careful. Helen came halfway when she heard the horses. She started to run and when she noticed the thick bush, she decided to hide behind it. The royal horses passed along with the soldiers, and Helen continued her small journey. While she was walking, she saw an object, like a mirror among a pile of stones. She got closer to the stones and saw a small mirror with beautiful patterns. Helen took the mirror in her hands, looked at herself, and heard someone talking. Suddenly, a figure of a girl appeared in the mirror. Helen screamed, threw the mirror on the floor and walked away from it. The girl in the mirror continued: “Helen, don’t be afraid, you don’t know who I am, but I know very well who you are. My name is Melissa, I was a friend of Arthur, your father. Take the mirror and talk to me.”

Helen did what she was told and then she asked her a few questions. “How did you know my father and how did you recognize me? Why are you in the mirror and how did you get there?”

Melissa explained that she was in the same military unit as Helen’s father. After the battle of Natringam, she came across a witch. The witch casted a spell on her and she ended up being trapped in the mirror among those cold stones in the middle of the dark forest. “Can you get out of the mirror?” Helen asked. “I can’t, an eternal magic has been cast on me... Oh, Helen, I’m glad I ran into you, I have a lot to tell you about the new law so don’t stand here anymore, take me with you to the house and we’ll talk along the way.”, Melissa ordered.

Helen did what she was told, again. She wanted to ask Melissa how she knew she had been going to the house, but she gave up. Helen and Melissa were already very close to the house when Melissa started talking again. “Listen, Helen, you must be very careful, they can’t find out about your magic.”

“How, ...how do you know about my magic, who told you?” Helen gasped in horror.

“It doesn’t matter how I know. The only thing you need to know is that I can help you. If King Henry finds out, he will kill you, even though he loves you. So, you must

learn how to hide your magic even when there's no one around.” Melissa explained.

“Lady Heleeeennnnn !!! What are you doing in the forest?!” a familiar voice was heard. It was one of Louis’ soldiers, Leo. “Lady Helen, what are you doing in the forest this late? Come, get on my horse, let’s go back to the castle.”

It was normal for Lady Helen to go to the forest during the night so this was not the first time that the soldiers had found her during a tour. Helen knew what was waiting for her back in the castle- an unpleasant conversation with King Henry. Helen returned to the castle and found Henry’s angry face staring at her in the dark room. She promised not to do that again and went to her room. But, when the King went to sleep again, she took out the mirror from her pocket and called Melissa. “Melissa, talk to me, tell me how to hide my magic.” Melissa appeared and started talking. “I don’t have much to tell you, I told you the most important thing. Don’t use magic anywhere, even when you think you are alone somewhere, don’t use it. The time will come when you will be able to use it calmly and safely, until then be patient.” she whispered to Helen. “Okay Melissa, thank you, good night.” Helen answered.

In the morning, Lady Helen was woken up by Leo and what he told her hurt her a lot. “King Henry died this morning. We will explain everything to you today at the royal council, now go to Louis.” Leo said.

Helen knocked on the door of Louis’ room and went in. “Leo told me the news, I’m very sorry Louis.”, Lady Helen started talking. Louis just hugged Helen, his tears flew down his eyes.

Of course, a lot has changed in Theola since the King’s death and the most difficult thing at that moment was the reorganization of the government. Prince, soon King Louis, had to take over the royal power because he was the eldest and the only son of the King. You may have wondered where Louis’ mother was.

Queen Alexandria died in the attack on Theola 20 years ago. Prince Louis didn’t remember her because he was only a child when she died. The prince had no brothers or sisters, but he had Helen. Helen was like a younger sister to Louis. She came to the castle before the Queen’s death and Louis loved her indescribably. He took great care of her.

Prince Louis was supposed to be crowned in exactly three days. The coronation ceremony had to be followed by the most important members of the court, soldiers and members of the royal family inside the castle. The external part of the coronation usually took place outside the castle including all the people of Theola.

On the day of coronation, everything was great, Louis was crowned, the people were happy and there were no problems. During the external coronation, some people expected the King's speech. Louis noticed their anticipation, but he didn't know what the people were waiting for. Unlike Louis, Helen immediately knew what the people wanted. After dinner, Helen invited Louis to go with her to the table for four, a place where the most important decisions in the kingdom were made.

"Louis, since you have become the King, you can change laws, you know, abolish the old ones and add new ones," Helen started talking. Louis immediately understood what Helen wanted to talk about. "You know, Helen, I've been thinking about that, about my father's law. He might have been right, so I will stick to his decision until I give it a second thought," said Louis. Helen didn't like his answer, she got up and did what she shouldn't have done, she used magic.

"You, ... no, it's not possible, Helen, you have magical powers!," said the frightened King.

"Guards !!!, screamed the King. "What happened, your majesty?," asked the guard. "Take Lady Helen into the dungeon for a while," requested the King. "Why, what happened?," Leo came running. "Leo, don't interfere, you will find out," said Louis. Leo knew everything about Louis, they grew up together in the castle and Leo is Louis' most respected and best soldier. Helen remained silent the whole time, because she didn't want to oppose him after he had found out about her ability. She just knew that Louis would not keep her in the dungeon for long.

Helen spent the night in the dungeon and Leo woke her up in the morning. "Helen, get out, go to Louis, Leo said. She did as she was told. "Louis, forgive me for what happened yesterday, did I hurt you? I wanted to talk to you about the benefits of magic, but then I got angry and showed it in a bad way," said Helen. "Everything is forgiven, said the King. I was thinking for a while, you know about the law, I don't know if I would leave it or not. Honestly, I'm afraid. If you prove that you and the others who have that power can be trusted I will remove the law," said the King. Helen thanked the King and ran to the person she knew would help her, Leo!

"Lady Helen where are you going?," Leo asked. "Leo I was looking for you. I need your help. How can I show Louis that magic is good and useful", asked Helen. "I have an idea; I will talk to him with you by my side. Let's do it after lunch," said Leo.

As agreed, Leo broke the ice and explained why magic was good. He pointed out that magic saved people, healed, brought happiness and helped with arranging kingdoms. The strongest argument was Louis' mother, who was saved because of magic. "Thank you, Leo, I've heard enough from you, you can go!," said the King.

“Helen, I knew you were going to look for someone to help you, but it doesn’t matter, I am satisfied with your cooperation, and I will abolish the law about magic! Helen jumped into the King’s arms and began to thank him. When the King repeated the repeal of the law to the people, everyone jumped for joy. And so, my dear readers, magic has found a permanent home in the Kingdom of Theola with the help of Lady Helen and Soldier Leo.

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Matilda Detoni Mundar

SELF-DISCOVERY

I'd like to start this story with myself. To put it evidently I don't like myself. I don't think I've ever liked myself (whoever that pathetic loser might be). Various people have something they like about themselves. Perhaps their eyes, or the way they say hello. The simple things. I find it silly to think that anything about me is unique or worth a while. There's nothing wrong with that. It just makes me rather dull. Many people talk about finding themselves. Most of us become average anyway, so what's the point? Ironically, I claim to be working on myself when I haven't found the person I'm working on. Although it might be upsetting to lose yourself I'm not bothered by it. This topic is rather peculiar because my so-called friend told me I'm mean. It took me by surprise because all I've ever known was to be swell and polite. Ever since then, I've become distant towards her. My personality was left untouched and unbothered by such a comment. Then again, I really liked a girl last year. She loved funny girls so I became a clown. I hid behind a mask and made silly jokes to make her laugh. Now everyone knows me as a clown. The thing is, I'm not even funny. We dated for seven months. It didn't end well. Even though she was awful I loved her. First love, I suppose. I then discovered that I shouldn't attach myself to people. After a while, I adopted a coping mechanism to deal with all the pain. However, it wasn't a good one. It became an addiction. I saw it as a release, an escape from it all. All the thoughts, feelings, what ifs, maybes, and all that could've been. It's ironic how I thought addiction was like a cold. You get over it by the end of the week. My battle against it is going to reach its second anniversary this year. The longest I've been sick for was a month. I felt true isolation at the time. You could say a lot of my hatred against myself and humanity came from it and bullying. Even in kindergarten, I got picked on for being different. I was tall, had weird glasses, and had nerdy interests. Children were cruel to me. Unfortunately, my peers have taken that position these days. In fifth grade, I gave in and tried to fit in. I grew out my hair and started dressing like everyone else. To say I was unhappy would be an understatement. All I wanted was to be like the others, but I was left miserable and alone. It took me ages to

realize it was pointless. Once I cut my hair short I felt euphoric. I decided to find myself. For the first time in forever, I cared about who I was on the inside. It was the start of the journey I'm on today. My worldview has shifted since then. The way I sought fulfillment was foolish. If I weren't in despair it would be positive. I'm not implying it'd change, but it'd have a hopeful glance at the world. Instead of wishing death upon myself, I want to wake up excited and full of life. It would be lovely to feel the sun on my face, full of eagerness, brightness, and joy. To read a book in the park as the birds' chirp is all I ask. It's utterly unfortunate how I've lost friends due to my negativity. Gloominess has become a part of me. It makes me irrational sometimes. Although it hasn't affected me that much through the years. When it rains I feel at peace. It's the only time I don't feel lost by myself. It also reminds me that I'm ashamed of what I've become. My own parents have made me aware of my disappointment. If I were exceptional they would finally be proud. I haven't had much academic success, but I still try to get my parents' approval that way. It's nice to know that all my sleepless nights weren't pointless. After desperately trying to succeed I found some luck in arts and writing. It wasn't much, but enough to get a pat on the shoulder. My parents aren't bad by any means. They're lovely people. I'm very grateful for them and everything they've done for me. Yet I don't trust them. I can't bring myself to trust anyone, so how could I? Keeping secrets to myself's hard but better than trusting others. The same way I bottle up anger. I've done with the rest of my secrets. Making me an introvert. That's what I've become. Closed off to everyone and weirdly anti-social for my age. Therapists have told me that I have to want to get better. Otherwise, I won't make any progress. Turns out they were right. I wasn't working on myself after all. I just claimed to be. The same way I claim to be better. Everyone can tell that something's wrong. Refusing to admit it won't change that. You'd think my attitude would shift, but it hasn't. I'm still stubborn, astray from who I am and want to be. Thinking of ways to change that has become second nature. Writing is something I've been able to express myself by. A tool in the overall discovery. I found out many things about myself by writing. Personally, I don't think I'm as good of an artist as everyone tells me. Likewise, I have no future plans. I only want to be at peace with myself. The only way to achieve that is unknown to me. I don't believe in finding or having a sense of individuality. Because I've lost all my senses. Emotions are illusions I can't process. Feelings are things I can not put into words. Joy is something I haven't felt in ages. Something I'm craving like it's my last meal. Help is a privilege I don't have. Recovery is a journey I took the wrong turn on. I can't tell apart my thoughts and illusions. I've always been so quiet. So patient and always waiting for

my turn. My turn never came. The sun rises every morning and goes away at night. Depression works night shifts. To be truthful it gets worse at night. Being by yourself while no one is watching is mortifying. There's no one to stop you from your doom. I crash. Unable to process the simplest of things. The only thing I'm able to do is whimper in the dark. With music as my only comfort. The amount of sadness I feel is unfeasible. If I could properly process my emotions I'd be crying every day. For hours probably. All the sorrow, anguish, and bleakness. I'd love to cry it all away. Wash away all of my sins. I'm neither religious nor do I wish to be. Knowing there's a higher power that made me this way is bothersome. That power being God or biology is irrelevant. I'm aware that putting that blame on others is avoiding responsibility. Which is not my intent by any means. Do I deserve it? Was I too fortunate with a supportive family and good grades? In my opinion, I deserve all the sadness, but getting suicidal thoughts isn't my ideal type of fun. Honestly, I'm losing it. I feel like a schmatte. Tattered, worn out, and shabby. Even when it's fixed, it remains useless. Just like me. I feel itchy thinking about my purpose in the world. Forcing myself to do things thus I don't get tossed away. Fearing abandonment is very typical. Plenty of people are terrified of ending up alone. Similarly, I love being alone but hate feeling lonely. I'm not afraid of many things. However, I've never been able to ditch my fear of the sea. The darkness and mysteriousness of it have always petrified me. Those are qualities I don't look for in humans. Humans are like books. You can read open ones and see what they're about. When picking up a closed one you don't know what it's about. My friends are open people. I desire to keep it that way. The more I know about them the safer I feel. Knowing they're incapable of hurting me is nifty. Change is something I have a hard time dealing alongside. Our family dog died last year, and it still hasn't hit me that I'm never going to see him again. I deeply regret refusing to see him for the last time because I couldn't bare to see a dead body. Coping with death is not something I'm good at. The worst part is I'm clueless as to why. Death is a natural part of life. I've accepted that. Still, I cried when my grand grandparents died. Due to experiencing copious amounts of agony, I've become numb and unattached from everyone and everything. It's the way my brain chooses to cope with suffering. Bitterness is the taste of my coffee in the mornings. Torment is the feeling I sleep by. When I have time to doze off that is. My permanent slumber shall wait till I can afford to rest. There's plenty to do beforehand. Adventures I've been looking forward to. Dreams waiting to be carried out. I still have plenty of hope for life and recovery. Just not enough to keep me afloat. My thoughts are drowning, suffocating my mind. Telling me to swim with the fish until the end of my days. What a quiet

way to go. Being consumed by my greatest fear while experiencing comfort. It sounds like a fever dream. All gone once it passes. You're left with memories to remind you it isn't always horrible. They're holding onto your sanity. Maybe that's why I lost mine? I forget things, many things. I also forgot what was the point of all this. Self-discovery right? My story continues every day. This happens to be a summary. I'm getting sidetracked at this point in my writing. I've come to the conclusion I'm not getting anywhere. There's no point in continuing. Now everyone knows I'm a pathetic, depressed loser. If I were to end this story I'd feel unsatisfied. Such a distasteful ending this is. The protagonist hasn't succeeded and hasn't gotten over their fears. All they've done is ramble about their thoughts for a few minutes. How boring. Much like myself. Scrambling through my notes. Searching for anything to nag about. It was fun. I can't say I laughed.

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Ana Rogulj

LUCID DREAMS

“It’s just like a circle...” Matilda was telling herself as she was opening her eyes. It was another day, another week, another month. It was all the same. Wake up, eat, go to school, eat, go home, sleep. It all repeated like a nightmare. She got up from her bed and headed downstairs for breakfast.

Her mother prepared her favorite breakfast, a strawberry cream sandwich, and told her “Please do better at school, for me”. She wasn’t doing very well in school. Matilda just glanced through her and ate the breakfast without saying a single word. Her dad was waiting for her and her little brothers in the car. They all got in and went to the school. There were five of them in the family. Mother, father, Matilda (17) and her three little brothers (6, 9, 11).

Her family was the richest in the town, although money meant nothing to her. When she got to school, she went straight to her class and didn’t look at anyone. She didn’t have any friends and she spent most of her time sleeping. It’s not like people hated her, she just didn’t want friends. She got to her class right on time. They were learning Korean history when suddenly a fragment of her dream came out of nowhere.

Matilda felt shocked because it never happened to her. It was about her working in a newspaper factory, the place she didn’t like. She wasn’t the only one who wasn’t a fan of that place. Some guy was there who made those days easier. At first, she didn’t recognize him, but after a few minutes she realized that it was the baker’s son, just with darker hair. His name was Ren. She didn’t like him in real life, but in the dream, he was a whole new person. She was grateful to him, so she prepared a picnic for the two of them. They went on a meadow near the popular lake in their town. There was no one but them. They sat down and started eating. “You know, you really helped me there.” There was no response. He got up and started running away. “Hey! Please, stop!” she said. She expected him to stop, but to her surprise he just vanished.

Her mind returned to the class when the teacher asked her a question. Matilda realized that this was the end of her dream. “Matilda, are you even listening?”

She replied with only “I’m sorry”. “Well, are you going to answer my question?”, but Matilda didn’t even look at her. She was sent to the principal’s office to have a talk. “Matilda, I am going to have a talk with both of your parents. This is unacceptable, your grades are getting worse and worse?” Even though she didn’t care and just wanted to go home, the principal’s words hurt her. She was sent back to the class. On her way back, she saw Ren through the window of his class. The school bell reminded her how big of a jerk he is. Ren’s class. She instantly forgot about the dream and remembered how big of a jerk he is.

The time of the lunch came. Everyone went to cafeteria except her. It was always like that. She heard one of her classmates saying “She’s a total weirdo”, but she ignored him. No one dared to bully her, because her parents were the bosses of most of her classmates’ parents. Ren hated that. He couldn’t stand her because of that. His father’s bakery was in a financial debt. Matilda wanted to search what kind of dream she had, but her parents took her phone hoping that she would start learning. She just ate her lunch in silence, wanting for the day to go faster.

She had a few more classes and went straight home. When she got home, she didn’t have time to greet anyone. She went straight to her room, dropped her books and opened her laptop. Matilda searched “What is it called when you know you are dreaming?” and that first thing she saw was ‘lucid dreams’. She clicked on it and it was all clear. She was fascinated by the fact she can control it. She clicked on another site with a title named “How to achieve lucid dreams?”

On the site, it explained how the scientists studied college students’ sleeping schedule. The student would sleep for five hours, set an alarm, if necessary, tell themselves they are dreaming and go back to sleep.

Matilda was quite shocked after reading the sites, but she was ready to try it. She wanted to know he was so nice to her in that horrible factory. She set an alarm to 05:00am. She figured that she would be asleep by midnight. No surprises! She fell asleep ten minutes before midnight.

At 05:00am sharp she was awoken by an annoying sound of the alarm. She turned it off quickly so the others wouldn’t wake up. She took the piece of paper from the bedside table that she put last night and read it. ‘YOU ARE DREAMING’ was written on it. She remembered everything and went back to sleep. After a few minutes, it happened!

She was in the dream knowing that it was a dream! She roamed around on the meadow for a while, but then her eyes landed on Ren. She ran to him, but this time, he wasn’t running away. “Hey! Why did you run away yesterday?” “I had to milk my

strawberry cows.” They were both silent for a while until she broke the ice “Well, where are the cows?” in just seconds, the scenery changed when he snapped his fingers. They were in a stable with his strawberry cows, golden chickens and many other mystical creatures. He showed her the buckets full of strawberry milk. She didn’t expect to see those weird farm animals. She still had many questions, so she asked him “Well, then why didn’t you tell me? Why did you run away?” “Because you were waking up”, he responded. Matilda was confused but said nothing. She enjoyed being with him.

“Can we fly on a rug?” she asked.

“Surely”, he said.

“Then, can you make it night so we can watch The Milky Way?” Matilda adored astronomy. She couldn’t see many stars because of light pollution in her city.

“Everything for you”, he said confidently.

She got goosebumps, but she didn’t know if they were good or bad. They flew on the rug around the imaginary city. Wind was blowing in their faces and they were smiling from ear to ear. They didn’t really talk, because they didn’t need words to show their emotions.

Suddenly, they flew down to the ground and he started running. She was confused why he did it again, but then she was woken up by her alarm. She looked at her clock. “07:00am”.

She tried to fall back into the dream, but she couldn’t. Matilda got ready and went to the school. School was like yesterday, like every day. Today she went to the cafeteria just to see Ren. She looked at him thinking “Is that really the guy in my dreams?” Matilda went back to her classroom and ate her lunch. The day went faster than yesterday. She got home, ate her dinner and went to her room. This time, she didn’t even open her laptop, but went to sleep. She couldn’t fall asleep, so she thought about what to ask him. She was thinking and thinking, and then her eyes felt heavier.

The alarm woke her up again. “05:00am”. She took the same paper from the day before, read what was written on it and went back to sleep.

A few moments later, she saw Ren who was waiting for her. She ran to him and hugged him. Matilda was already attached to Ren and felt a connection between them. They went snowboarding, because she asked to. They mixed every ice cream flavor because she wanted to. They were walking while eating their ice cream when Matilda asked “Are you real?” Ren said “Only here”, before he started running. She stood still knowing what was going to happen.

She woke up. “Eat, sleep, repeat...” Matilda said to herself. She did her routine and went to the school.

Everything was the same for 20 days. Everything except her dreams. The more time they spent together, the more she felt closer to him. He filled her heart with pure happiness. Their time together was precious. But one night, he started acting nervous. She felt that he had to tell her something, but didn't know exactly what. They were feeding the elephants when she finally asked him.

“What do you have on your mind?”

A drop dead silence seemed like lasting for hours. He finally confessed to her.

“I planned everything.”

She didn't understand what he was talking about.

“What everything?”

“The dream. It wasn't an accident.”

She was speechless, but again confused.

“I planned our first meeting, knowing that you would want to come back.”

“I- I don't understand. All of it was you? But how?”

“I can't tell you anything except that this is the only place where we can be together. I have something that could change everything.”

He pulled out a tear-shaped, golden necklace out of his pocket: “How about staying here with me?”

She said just one word.

“How?”

“If you put this necklace on, you can never take it off, but we can be finally happy together in this perfect world.”

She was petrified. Living in the dream forever? She was thinking and thinking about the choice she was going to make.

She took the necklace from his hands and looked at it for a while. That tear represented her unhappy life, but the gold showed where she came from. She was shaken but ready. She chose selfishness. It was her life after all. She looked at him and said: “Can you put it on me?”

He gave her an innocent smile and put the necklace on her. They both felt relieved, like a fresh blow of wind on a summer night.

They went to a beach that he made just for this special occasion. As they were walking while feeling reborn, she played with the necklace and felt that something was written on the back of it. She flipped it and read: “I broke the circle.”

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Ema Županov

THE NEW STUDENT

Have you ever had a feeling that something wasn't right? That's how I felt that day. September 5th was the day that my life got turned upside down. It was the first day of school and as much as I hate school, I have to admit I missed it during the summer break. I woke up early that day because I decided to have some extra time to get ready. I put on a sparkly black dress and even decided to wear high heels. As I was applying my makeup I glanced at the clock. It was 7:45 a.m. I quickly grabbed my bag and ran to catch the school bus. "Phew I was almost late," I thought to myself.

I looked around and saw a guy I had never seen before. He had a long messy blonde hair and dark blue eyes, which looked like the depths of the ocean. He looked lonely and had a sad expression on his face. I stopped staring and got off the bus. I saw my friends Mackenzie and Addison waiting for me. I missed them a lot. As we were catching up and talking about interesting things that happened to us during the summer, the bell rang. We all sat in our seats and waited for the teacher to come in. We heard footsteps and some talking behind closed doors. The wooden doors creaked, and the teacher came in. "I hope everybody had a great time during the summer break. I'm here to introduce a new student. His name is Rio." He looked familiar and then it clicked. "That's the guy I saw on the bus." He didn't even say hi or introduce himself further. He sat all the way in the back.

Chemistry passed relatively quickly. Everybody was rushing to the next class, geography. We all sat down except the new kid. He started handing out envelopes to every single person in the class. There was a message inside the envelope about a party at his house. The only additional information was the address and the time we had to be there.

At first, I didn't want to go. I had a bad feeling about it, but Addison started nagging me saying things like, "It will be fun." or "What's the worst thing that can happen." Looking back, I should have listened to myself. We had a few other classes, such as math and biology before finally going home. I decided not to take the school bus and walk home with my friends instead. All three of us were chatting about some

intriguing topics on our way home. “Goodbye! See you at the party”, were the last words Mackenzie said to us before we all went our separate ways. I had a few more minutes of walking before finally coming home. As I entered my house, my dog Walter greeted me at the door. I talked with my parents before going into my room. Since I had a lot of time before the party, I decided to study geography. “Beep,” my phone rang. I grabbed it and saw Addison was calling me. I answered. “Don’t forget about the party!”

“I won’t, I will start getting ready.”

I decided to wear a basic outfit. I honestly didn’t want to go, so I didn’t really care about my appearance that day. Just as I got out of the house, I saw Mackenzie and Addison waiting for me. I felt relief knowing that I won’t walk alone. As we were walking closer and closer to the destination, I felt more and more nervous, and more awful thoughts were running through my head. “What do you think about that Maddie?” I quickly snapped out of it, realizing I wasn’t even listening to what my friends were saying. Eventually, we arrived, and when I saw his house, the first thought I had was, “He must be rich.” The house was modern, like one of those giant mansions in movies. Looking up at the tall rooftop I felt like a miniature ant. As we were arguing about who will knock on the door, Addison yelled, “I’m not a coward. I will do it.” She did what she said, putting her clenched fist on the door and knocking a few times. Just as Rio opened the door, we saw more people coming, and some were already inside the house. We came in and my gut feeling only got worse from there. We waited a few more minutes for everyone to gather up. Rio started explaining a “game” called Murder mystery. A guy from our class interrupted and said, “Wow, he speaks.” Everybody giggled except for Rio. He started explaining the game rules again. “You will all get a piece of paper with a role. There are three different roles: innocent, murder, and detective. If you get the innocent one, try not to get murdered. If you get the detective one, you’re supposed to stop the murderer. And, of course, if you get the one with the murderer on it. I don’t think I have to explain that one. You can’t say your role to anyone. And finally, no leaving the house.”

Now at first glance, everybody thought it was just a fun game. Nobody expected what would happen next. We all picked out a piece of paper. I picked out the last piece in the box. My cold fingers started to open the crumpled-up paper. I opened it and read my role; it said “Detective.” After everyone saw their role, the only thing that you could see was a bunch of teenagers running and laughing. Addison told me, “See! I told you, Maddie, there was no need to be worried.” For a second, I thought so too. I felt relief knowing that my overthinking was just overthinking. A few more

minutes went by, and nothing happened. I grabbed my phone to check what time it was. 7:05 p.m. was the moment when everything changed.

We heard a loud gunshot. Everybody started screaming. A girl from our class named Kylie attempted to call the police but it was unsuccessful. Before she could dial the number she was shot in the chest. I didn't know what to do. I was so worried that I couldn't even move. It's like that moment when your stomach drops when you're at the top of a roller coaster. The feeling just won't go away. It stays there and makes your heart race. Your thoughts spiral out of control. I just wanted this to turn out to be some horrible nightmare.

I was looking around seeing more and more bloody bodies lying lifelessly on the floor. Mackenzie pulled me away, and we both hid behind a couch. I told her, "I'm the detective. I have no idea what I should do." My eyes filled up with tears. The only thought I had was, "What if I don't make it out alive." Mackenzie crawled out of the couch and tried to open the doors or the windows, but she couldn't. All of them were locked. I heard a few people screaming. "Rio is the murderer." I should have known the way he was acting at school. Everything was eerie. I looked around trying to find some useful objects, and close to where I was, I saw a baseball bat. I quickly grabbed it with both of my hands. I knew there was no turning back now. I got up and ran. I saw Rio upstairs. I could recognize him by his blonde hair. I decided to run and try to hit him with the baseball bat. I basically had no idea what I was doing. I just knew I had to do something. I was getting closer and closer. I swung the bat as hard as I could, and hit him in the head. He fell to the ground. I didn't know how I should feel. I took the gun out of his hand and tried to find a working phone. There were around seven people injured. I tried to think positively. As I was walking, I found a phone on the ground. I immediately went to emergency calls and called 911. I told them what had happened and the address, and they said they would come right away. I felt tears sliding down my cheeks. I was shaking.

Immediately after, I decided to find my friends. I remembered I hadn't seen Addison since the beginning of the party. I ran to try to find her. I looked everywhere, behind every cabinet and under all the beds. I could feel my heart race; I didn't want to lose her. I found the basement. As I was walking down the stairs, I was getting more anxious. I heard a familiar voice, "Who are you?" It was coming from the basement, so when I got to the last stair, I could see someone. The dress looked familiar, and then I saw Addison's face. We hugged and cried for a minute straight. I have never been so happy to see her in my life. I told her everything that had happened. We went back to the living room since we heard knocking at the door. The police were there.

I explained the whole situation as best as I could. The ambulance also came to take care of the injured. Everything else was a blur. I remember the police safely driving everyone home. In the end, almost everybody survived except for Kylie. I hadn't known her that well, but I felt awful. Nobody knew that this would happen. I have no idea where Rio is, and I do not want to know. It has been a year since the incident, and I still have nightmares from the party that night. Addison, Mackenzie, and I moved cities. We go to a different school, and we are trying our best to forget about it. Later on, we found out through news articles that he switched schools ten times. Apparently, they kicked him out because he got into fights and severely bullied a few students. He was even using a fake name.

After this experience, I promised myself one thing. In the future, I'll trust my instincts and I will never get influenced by other people. Had I trusted myself, I would've never witnessed something so disturbing and traumatic.

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Iva Kolarić

RAINFALL

Cassie always felt different. Not that something was wrong with her, but she just felt invisible. Unreal. Alone. Wherever she was, whatever she was doing, she felt invisible. Cassie accepted that the feeling of loneliness and emptiness wouldn't pass. Cassie would listen to her surroundings, to the laughter, to the cars, to the wind. She would listen to "normal" people, to their conversations and wonder why it was so hard for her to feel something. She wondered when it will finally rain. She wasn't happy, nor sad. Just empty. Just invisible. Sometimes she just wondered what would happen if she did not exist. Would people's lives change? Was she holding someone back? These thoughts would usually appear at night, before bed and before her brain shuts down. She was scared of her brain; it would take her to the deepest and darkest places. She was scared of it because of the power it holds and how it just couldn't function right. Everyone felt something and no one had these thoughts on their mind. It was like another dimension, another world, another multiverse of imagination. She would lay on her bed, try to close her eyes for longer than a second and try to fall asleep. But she would end up staring at the old white ceiling for hours until the alarm beeped. Maybe it was her that was the problem, because if no one has the same problem, you're doing something wrong. Nothing she tried helped, she just couldn't feel anything, she was just a shadow version of the person she used to be. The insomnia would continue for weeks at a time until she would eventually collapse into her bed and fall asleep so she wouldn't die. That was the power that her brain had over her.

She wasn't always like this. This Cassie was just a blurry reflection of her past self. She couldn't really remember why she became like this in the first place. Her past would come in glimpses and flashbacks at the back of her mind now and then, but everything else was a blur. Her eyes didn't have a spark in them anymore, and all of her smile lines were long gone and forgotten. Her face became just flesh and skin, she wasn't a person anymore, just a human being. Almost like she wasn't Cassie anymore. Just a girl that looked a little bit like her past. She wouldn't dream, she would

just sleep. Food didn't have a taste anymore; it was just a fuel that kept her going. She didn't feel real anymore. Cassie felt like her eyes were tricking her and the person in the mirror wasn't actually her. Who was she now? She was overwhelmed by that feeling from time to time until she would forget it eventually. Why was she like that? Why was she invisible and alone and empty all the time and why couldn't she see the world in colored glasses? People that once knew her didn't recognize the person in front of them.

Cassie felt like she was drowning, but once she tried to come back to the surface, something would pull her back to the bottom again. She would sometimes walk to feel something. She would look at the forest green trees, the dim streetlamps, the cats and the grey sky that looked like it was about to rain. The strange thing was that the rain never came, the sky always looked dull and gloomy. After what seemed like forever, she was exhausted and tired of walking in circles, she sat on a bench and closed her eyes. Cassie could feel the wind on her face and on her hands as she tried to keep warm. She suddenly felt a weight on the other side of the bench, someone by her side, and that was the moment that Cassie felt something real in even she didn't know how long. When she turned around to see who sat beside her, she saw a boy. The boy looked like the cold sharp wind hit him in the best way possible. She looked him in his sleepy eyes and didn't say anything, she was just looking at him. They sat there without a word being spoken between the two. Darkness took over the grey sky and Cassie got up from the bench and began walking away from the boy. She didn't need to know his name, something in her head was telling her that he would be back tomorrow. Maybe it was wishful thinking, maybe it was mindless dreaming, but she just wanted to feel again. She laid in her bed for hours that night, not because of her brain and her dark thoughts, but because of the chemistry going on inside her head that was resulting in that she was happy. Her heart had been borrowed and blue for too long, she didn't feel empty anymore.

Cassie went to that same bench the next day, hoping that the nameless boy would come and sit with her. She waited and waited, and after what seemed like forever, the boy came and sat beside her. They sat on that bench for a long time, sneaking glances at each other. She thought he had beautiful green doe eyes. He stuck his hand out to her hoping she would shake it. "I'm Sebastian" he quietly said to her. She shook his hand and looked him in the eyes, a small smile forming on her face. "I'm Cassie, it's nice to finally know your name" she said. There was silence after that, they didn't talk nor look at each other. They sat in the comfortable silence for hours, and with no words spoken they felt like they had said everything they needed and more. The

dark came too fast, and after that they both got up and left the bench. Just as Cassie turned to walk home, Sebastian spoke up "Do you wonder why the sky is always grey but it just never rains? ". Cassie had that thought in her head for a while now. She would think about trivial things like that when the dark thoughts tried to overwhelm her. "No idea" she stated and began walking away with a weird but exiting feeling. It was like a million butterflies were flying inside her stomach and around her. She felt happier in that moment than she had in months, but she also felt relieved. Like a weight was lifted from her chest.

Cassie began to like and understand the feeling of being appreciated and understood. It was like she saw a part of herself in that boy. She liked that they didn't talk much, they just sat in comfortable silence. People say conversation and communication is the key, but not in their case. Silence was loud enough for them to hear and understand everything. Cassie didn't feel this understood in a long time and she didn't complain. She saw a piece of herself in Sebastian. She wanted to soak up every moment spent with him on that old wooden bench. He fascinated her in a way no one ever did. He had a handsome soul. And that was the only thing she cared about, his soul. It was pure and kind and everything that she wanted her soul to look like. Not melancholic and pessimistic, but just beautiful and free.

She went to their bench the day after around four p.m. She sat there alone with her thoughts while waiting for Sebastian to show up. After what seemed like hours, she spotted a figure approaching her. "I began to think you weren't going to show up. " she said half-jokingly. "Hello to you too. " he replied with a what appeared to be a smile. He had a pretty smile. He sat beside her to her right and just stared at the grey sky above him. Trying to think of things they could talk about was the hardest. So many things they wanted to say but their heads were empty and they couldn't open their mouths. "Tell me about yourself. " Cassie said and broke the dead silence. She was curious about his life and his past. "There is really not much to tell and it's not interesting. I grew up in this town and I just never got the courage to get out of it. " he said the last part with a sad smile. She empathized with him; she knew the feeling of just wanting to get away all too well. "What about you? " he quickly said. Cassie didn't know how to answer him because she had no memories of her childhood or of life in general. There wasn't much to say. She was born here, she grew up here, and then one day after years of being "normal" she just couldn't feel anything. After thinking of the answer and getting lost in her thoughts, the cold wind hit her face. "Not much to say either, I've been here since I was a kid and I live in a building five blocks away. " that was everything she managed to say. An hour later, after sitting in

silence, they got up and began walking away in different directions. "Cassie," Sebastian said, and she turned around, "do you think it's going to rain tonight?". "I have no idea Sebastian, but I hope it does." she said with a small smile on her face and began walking away again.

She wondered if she could finally see the world in colored glasses. Time passed and every time she walked away from their bench; she had a bigger grin on her face. They talked or just sat in silence and that was enough. Cassie didn't really know what the feeling of love felt like, but after all this time spent with him, she knew that she loved him. Really, really loved him. And it felt so peaceful and real, not just imagining. Could she feel again? She wasn't sure, maybe it was her mind tricking her all this time. Happiness, nervousness, excitement and joy all at once. There was only one thing that she was sure of, she loved Sebastian. She loved him in the morning, she loved him in the afternoon and she loved him at sunset and night. Cassie went to their wooden bench early in the morning to think about everything. About herself, about Sebastian, about her feelings and about life. She thought to herself that life was finally worth living and enjoying. She didn't even think once about checking the time on her watch because those thoughts were her happy place. She thought about how it didn't rain and that was strange. It was cold, humid and the sky was as gray as ashes. The weather was always weird here. Later after getting home, she just laid in bed and thought about how tomorrow she will tell Sebastian she loves him.

Cassie went to their bench and decided to wait for him to arrive. She saw him approaching and decided to rip off the band aid and just tell him everything. "I need to tell you something important and you have to listen until I'm done talking. Okay?" she said, a little bit too fast. He nodded and she took a deep breath. "I can't feel anything, well I couldn't until the last couple of months. For an exceedingly long time I was alone and empty and sad and I just couldn't sleep for longer periods. But then I met you and I finally felt something. God, I feel everything now! But the one thing I am sure of is that I love you...more than words can describe" she said everything as fast as she could. He took her hand and kissed her. She felt relief and peace at that moment and wanted to stay in it forever. She felt water on her head, looked up at the sky and saw rain drops carefully falling down. It was finally raining.

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Sara Margan

REUNION, ORIGIN AND TRUTH

Once upon a time there was a girl named Vivian. She was a quiet girl who didn't talk to a lot of people. She had long, silky black hair and enchanting eyes. Vivian had only one friend, that being Jeanne. Jeanne wasn't like Vivian. She had long, soft white hair and sweet eyes. She was more sociable and very sweet, meanwhile Vivian was quiet and uncommunicative. Even if they were different from each other, the two girls were inseparable. But they had a few things in common: height, date and year of birth. They also looked really similar to each other. Vivian and Jeanne weren't related, yet they shared so much in common. Too much in common, in fact it was almost like they were the same person. They were good girls, they didn't hurt anybody, not at all. They never laid a finger on a single person nor on a single animal, yet everyone feared them a little bit. Everyone around them felt odd when being close to the girls, even animals would run away in fear sometimes. Nobody really paid attention to the reaction the two girls caused when being present, except for Mal. She was a really loved girl. She was friendly towards some people, but fierce towards others. She always made the people she loved laugh and deeply cared for them. She never caused any harm to anybody, but was always ready to fight. She had curly red hair and golden eyes. She always wore golden jewellery, such as a necklace with a little sword hanging from the chain. Mal never really paid attention to Jeanne and Vivian, not until she noticed how terrified her friend was when she was near them one day. Mal tried to ask her friend why she acted like that, but she didn't manage to get a response. She knew they didn't hurt her as they would never do that. Right? Mal started to suspect something. She tried to get those thoughts out of her head but she couldn't stop thinking. What if they weren't so innocent as they looked? What if they were malicious actually? Mal kept asking herself countless questions, but she couldn't come to an actual conclusion, so she decided to take action and investigate. One day, she decided to follow the two girls after school. She noticed how they walked and moved the same. While being near them though she couldn't help but feel uneasy. Something was wrong and she knew it. She was gripping the dagger in

her pocket the whole time. She received the dagger as a gift. It was a gold color with a mix of silver on the end of the blade. On the side of the blade there were some runes engraved in it, they seemed ancient but she didn't know the origin of the dagger. She never used the dagger, she promised to use it in self defense only. While thinking she took a look at her surroundings. It was a dark forest. Silence filled the air. She could only hear her own footsteps. But why did she hear only her footsteps? Why couldn't she hear their footsteps? Suddenly she came to a stop. She looked up and noticed she was in front of what looked like a shrine. It was abandoned though. It had strange symbols and runes painted and engraved on it, but there was a really relaxing atmosphere. She decided to go deeper into the shrine. She walked and walked until she found a statue of a woman with four arms, long hair, and two sets of closed eyes. It had a lot of flowers and offerings around it. The statue was in a kneeling position with two of its hands holding a sort of sphere and the other two in a praying gesture. The sphere emitted an odd reddish glow. Mal stared in awe. She was amazed by the statue. The woman looked so familiar to her, but how? She had never met a woman with four arms and four eyes before. She resembled someone a lot, but she couldn't figure it out. Mal's thoughts were interrupted by someone calling her name.

"Mal...?"

She turned around. She found the two girls in front of her.

"Vivian. Jeanne. What did you do to my friend? And most importantly, how do you even know my name? I never mentioned it to you."

Mal was nervous, but she didn't want to seem weak.

"We didn't hurt her, we promise. We just talked to her," said Jeanne.

"Talked? She came out crying and shaking with fear. Stop lying and tell me what you actually did."

Mal was growing angry. She couldn't stand when people lied. Her fear was turning into anger.

"She did cry ,didn't she?," said Jeanne again.

"What do you mean she did cry, didn't she?! What are you talking about!"

Mal's golden eyes were now burning with wrath. She was growing impatient.

"It's because we're cursed...," mumbled Vivian silently.

"What did you say? Speak up!"

"Were cursed, Malenia.," said the two girls in unison.

Mal froze in shock. Not because they told her they were cursed, but because they called her by her real name. Nobody ever called her by her real name, nobody even knew it.

“How do you know my full name? How could...”

“Should we really tell her? What if she doesn’t believe us? What will we do if she doesn’t cooperate?”, whispered Vivian.

“Don’t you dare ignore me! Answer me!” Mal started to grow angrier and angrier. She started to come closer to them.

“We’ll tell you the truth, but promise not to do anything irrational,” said Jeanne calmly.

“Fine. I promise. But don’t pull any tricks on me,” said Mal still angry.

“We’re not human. And perhaps, you’re not either,” said Jeanne.

“What? Okay you’re not making any sense now! First you didn’t answer my question and secondly!!-”

“Come, we’ll show you,” said the girls in unison.

They walked past her and got close to the statue. They turned to Mal and asked her to hand her dagger.

“My dagger? No, why do you need my dagger?”, said Mal holding tight to her dear dagger.

The dagger suddenly shook and somehow left Mal’s hands. It penetrated the sphere that the statue was holding. Mal expected the sphere to break or to explode, but it didn’t. The dagger started to shine.

“Take it,” said Jeanne, smiling.

Mal hesitated, but then she grabbed the dagger, though it wasn’t a dagger anymore. As Mal pulled, she noticed the dagger became longer and longer. It became a sword, but it was too long to be a normal sword. It was twice her size. Mal wasn’t even a short girl, she was a bit too tall for a girl. Which is why the blade seemed so big compared to her.

“So it really is you, you truly are the Warrior of the Emphyrean,” said Vivian, amazed.

“Warrior of what?”, asked Mal, confused.

“Malenia, remember what we told you before? That we three aren’t human?”, asked Jeanne.

“Uh, yes? But how am I not human? I’m convinced I’ve been a human my whole life, you know?”, asked Mal, or actually Malenia.

“That dagger of yours, it was a fragment of the mighty blade of the Warrior of the Emphyrean. It was destroyed during the War of the Betweenlands and the strongest mages put a binding on it. Whoever found the Statue of the All Knowing and pierced

it with the binded fragment of the blade would have the power to restore the blade of the Warrior. Over the years, only the ones who were somehow related to the Warrior could bring back this weapon. But the only ones who were related to the owner of this sword were inhuman beings out of this world, out of this universe.” explained the white haired girl.

“This means that you, Malenia, are not part of this world. We knew that you were not one of the simple minded, that’s why we talked to your friend. Your friend couldn’t believe it, so she ran away crying not wanting to have a bitter goodbye with you.”, said Vivian.

“I’m... related to the Warrior of the Empyrean? I’m not human? But how! This doesn’t make any sense!”, said the worried girl.

“You’re her reincarnation. You even have the same name as the first and strongest Warrior. You have the same features and the same courage as her too.”, said Jeanne smiling.

“Really? That’s great. And what exactly do you want me to do with this information? What, do you want me to leave the ‘simple minded’ humans and join your magical and oh so sacred world or something?”, said Malenia sarcastically.

“Admit it, you just don’t want to come back to your homeland.”, said Vivian looking up.

“What?”, asked Malenia confused.

“We know you’re in there Malenia. Don’t try to hide your true identity through a mortal’s body. You can’t even hide yourself properly. Your unusual long red hair and your golden eyes are still noticeable to outer beings, you may fool the humans but not us.”, said Vivian exposing her.

Malenia’s shocked and confused face turned into an emotionless face. Her warm golden eyes were now cold. Scars started to appear all over Malenia’s body.

“Alright, I confess. You caught me.”, smirked Malenia waving her hands.

Vivian and Jeanne couldn’t believe it. She was back. The Warrior of the Empyrean never really died, she just faked her death and possessed the body of a human baby and thus lived seventeen years as a human.

“So it really is you! We are so glad to have you back, Lord of the Fallen!”, Jeanne said with an excited tone.

“I prefer Warrior of the Empyrean, sounds more like me. Lord of the Fallen is way too noble. You know I despise the nobles. And also, to have me back? You think I’m coming back to that forsaken realm?”, asked the red haired girl playfully.

“We beg you, all the Realms are falling apart without your command, your army

and your grace! Outer beings may go extinct if the war continues!”, begged the black haired girl.

“War, you say? Where exactly?”, asked Malenia, intrigued now.

“In the Betweenlands, Emyyrea, Devuniake, Warlonse, Mor-”

“That’s a lot. Count me in. A war can’t be called a war without me. Though, I’m a bit rusty with my skills and everything, I might need some assistance.”, said Malenia cracking her knuckles.

“We’ll help you! We will fight off anyone you want and we’re going to assemble the best army ever!”, said Jeanne with stars in her eyes.

“Even a better army than the one I commanded during the War of Sins?”, asked Malenia smirking.

“Yes!”, said the two girls in unison.

“Fine, let’s not waste anymore time then.”, said the Warrior of the Emyyrian.

Thus, Malenia sliced the air and created a portal. The three of them entered and arrived at a palace, where Malenia’s followers still lived and where the two girls were going to search for skilled soldiers for her army.

In the end, everything got back to normal in Malenia’s life. She continued to fight, to command and especially to win. What about her friends in her mortal life? Aren’t they worried about what happened to her? Why didn’t she come back?

No, because she erased herself from the mortal universe. There are now no records about her anymore.

Everything’s back to normal. Right?

*mentor: Daniela Močinić**institution: OŠ-SE G. Martinuzzi Pula**Lorena Suhalj*

THE PINK NAILED WOMAN

One night Josh Baker was sitting in his apartment watching the TV, as usual, when he felt something strange. He felt like someone was watching him and he was scared. He searched the whole apartment but there was no one but him. Josh decided to shake it off and go to bed but little did he know he would regret that... Half asleep he saw a silhouette of a short woman in a long dress standing in the hallway. She had long soft pink nails that she was scraping the wall with. Josh was traumatized but she wouldn't stop. She was getting closer and closer but when she reached the door-frame of his room she disappeared. Josh let out a sigh of relief and went back to bed. In the morning he went to work and on his way there he met one of his colleagues, Harry Elderson. „Hey man! You're finally back! How's life?" Harry asked with an excited tone. „Meh, it's fine I guess yours?" He replied calmly. „Uh...can I tell you something?" he added. „Of course what's the problem?" Harry asked worriedly about Josh. „Well, last night something strange happened to me... I saw a silhouette of a woman scratching my wall but when she came closer to me she was gone." „I'm sure you were just imagining it. Let's just get to work," said Harry, while entering in his office. Josh had to leave early because he was not feeling the best. Instead of walking like always, he decided to take the bus. He had a weird feeling but he just ignored it. He sat on the first empty seat he saw, but just seconds later a woman sat right next to him. „Hi, I'm Anne Williams. Are you going to Wonders street, too?" she said in a sweet voice. „I'm Josh Baker and yes, I am," he smiled. „Oh wonderful! I live there, what about you?" she sounded super excited. „Me too!" „I live more near the end so you could visit me sometime," Anne proposed. „That would be awesome! I guess I'll see you around!" „I guess!" she said while he exited the bus on the stop before hers. When Josh entered his apartment, he felt really uneasy and nauseous. He was trying to get to his bedroom, but he collapsed on the floor. When he woke up he found himself in a white room lying on a bed with some tubes attached to his arms. „You are in a hospital, you hit your head on the floor really hard and you were unconscious for about three hours," said the doctor. „If it weren't for your girlfriend

right here we don't know if you would survive..." She looked at Anne who was sitting by his side. „She is not my girlfriend.” „I'm not his girlfriend,” Anne and Josh said at the same time and smiled. „Okay then I'll leave you two to talk!,” the doctor said with a smile on her face. „So... how are you feeling?” Anne asked quietly. „I'm better now, thanks... but how did you save me?” „I don't know, I just had a weird instinct you were not okay and with the help of a few neighbours, I got to your apartment and called the hospital,” she blushed. „Wow, that's amazing, thank you so much.” She just blushed again to Josh's words. The next day Anne was at Josh's apartment, they were talking about animals and all of a sudden Josh noticed Anne's soft pink nails. „Hey sorry for interrupting you, but when did you get your nails done?” Josh was creeped out. „Oh, I got them done a week ago, why?” she replied with a grin on her face. „Just asking.. Well, I have to go but we can talk another time.” Josh said terrified „Okie dokie” Anne said while hugging him. When Anne left Josh felt a pain on his shoulder and when he went to see what it was, he was shocked to see a scratch mark. He was really scared and all of a sudden he heard a whisper, „Hey Josh so you like my nails...” Josh was looking around terrified of what he just heard. „There is no point of looking, you will never find me Joshie...” Josh took his car keys and ran out the door. He was driving to his parents' house and on the way there, he saw some women in the wood scratching the trees and staring at Josh that was passing in his car. Josh screamed and crashed his car in the forest. An hour later, his parents found him there and they were traumatized by what they saw. Their son was in a car and was bleeding from everywhere. Only a few minutes passed and the ambulance was there. „We don't know if he will survive Mr. and Mrs. Baker. The doctor is trying his best in the surgery but there is just a lot of blood that was lost...I'm sorry...” The doctor that came out of the surgery room said „No please, I need my son back!,” said Josh's mother while crying her heart out on the floor. His father, sitting there, was also crying. „It's going to be okay, honey, sit down...” She sat down. After a few hours of waiting the doctor finally informed them that the surgery was successful and that Josh would be fine. When Josh woke up, he told his parents about the woman he saw, about Anne and the car crash, and his parents were so shocked, but they were willing to help him. When he got out of the hospital, they suggested that they meet Anne. Josh called Anne and when she came over, Josh's parents were so frightened but acted normally because of their son. After Anne left, Josh overheard a conversation of his parents. We have to find a therapist for him. I don't know what is wrong with him,” Mrs. Baker proposed while sobbing. „He is probably having hallucinations they need to stop as soon as possible.” Josh entered the room: „What do

you mean hallucinations?!? I'm not hallucinating, dad and I don't need any therapist. What are you guys talking about?" Josh said while shaking. „Honey, listen... Anne isn't real she is just someone from your imagination that you have been seeing." His parents explained „No, it can't be, mom! Anne is real and she is trying to kill me I need your help." Josh was so confused and scared. „Let's go to the hospital..." said Mr Baker with horror in his eyes. After some time they found out that his colleague Harry Elderson swapped Josh's pills for drugs. He wanted Josh to get really ill so he can take his position as the manager of the company. Harry was sentenced to 13 years in prison and Josh would stay in hospital until he recovered, he would go to therapy and his parents and doctors would try their best to help him.

mentor: Tatjana Mioković
institution: OŠ Retfala Osijek

Kata Markotić

A STORYTELLING LETTER

I live in a four-story 1900s Victorian-style house. I hate it. The biggest issue is that my entire family from my mom's side lives here. They're all old and most of them don't even have a job. I am the only child in the house. My parents got divorced, which is why my mom has never moved out. Although my uncles say they haven't moved out yet because they value the house and our family, I know it's just that none of them have the money to leave.

"We as a family," my grandpa says, "have to stay close." So, he insists on all of us eating dinner together every night. I hate those dinners. They never talk about something interesting or something I can understand. There is only talk about politics, what someone did wrong, or arguments. At one of those family dinners, my mom brought up us renovating the house. I couldn't believe it! Throughout the years, my house was repaired only if it was really necessary, like if something just wasn't functional anymore. Furniture, wallpaper, and decorations were all outdated and falling apart. My room never looked like something owned by a child. It was all furniture, cluttered, and never had fun colors. The thought of us renovating made me so happy. Initially, everyone argued that renovating was too expensive and time-consuming. My mom mentioned how we could sell old furniture and vases as well as jewelry. It was about one hundred years old so it could bring us a lot of money. Everyone got interested. I knew they never cared about the legacy; they only wanted to earn money from it. My heart thundered as I was waiting for everyone to debate the idea. By the end of the night, we had convinced everyone and agreed to start tomorrow.

The next day, I woke up and saw that the living room was empty. My mom began removing the wallpaper and I joined her. Upon finishing, we discovered an old, closed room. The wall blocking it had to be completely knocked down. The dust was overflowing. It even got into my eyes. We found old pictures, paintings, vases, toys, and clothes. We even found letters from the 1940s. For some reason, the letters stood out to me. My mom said we would sell them to a museum since they are highly valuable. In spite of her advice, I didn't listen. I was just so inquisitive. I couldn't re-

sist and I opened it. I turned around to make sure there was no one around me and opened the letter. Although it wasn't as interesting, I was still fascinated by the neat handwriting and the antiquated vocabulary. The letter was signed by Lory Harrison, who I realized was my grandpa's mother, my great grandma.

I went to our backyard right away and thoroughly searched the pictures and paintings. I found a large painting, a portrait specifically. The lady in the painting looked like an angel. At the back, there was a name. The lady was my great-grandma Lory. It was a self-portrait, and there were even more paintings done by her. She was such a talented artist.

During the next few days of renovation, I learned a lot about my ancestors and I collected so much information about them. It got to the point when my desk started looking like a detective's evidence board. Everyone in my family was openly uninterested in what I told them and they got really mad at me.

I wish they would just ignore me now like they always do. I wish I could do what I want without being severely judged by my closest family members. I wish they would realize how they treat me. Everyone is like this to me. Except for grandma Lory. It's my escapism to learn about her. She was an expert in writing at a time when literacy was rare. She was also incredibly smart and skillful. I asked everyone connected to her about her, but there were no helpful answers. They knew the basics, but for some reason, no one knows how she died. My grandpa is her child, but he suffers from short-term memory so it doesn't help.

I loved reading the letters she wrote, but I wondered why they were never sent. I searched every room and dug through everything in search of more letters. One night, as I was decluttering my room, I found one, but this one looked a bit odd. I slowly opened it, standing next to the candle, still shaded by the darkness of our hallway. My eyes opened wide as I read the words, *Dear Amy*. My heart was racing, but I continued reading. She told me about how she had heard my thoughts and wanted to...help me. I didn't know what to do. I knew I couldn't tell anyone, but I couldn't write her back. I decided to just go to sleep and hoped that this was just a stupid dream. I wasn't able to fall asleep. Maybe she will send more letters? What if my family somehow finds out? What if...she is a ghost?

I somehow fell asleep. When I woke up, the letter was still on my desk. It slightly ripped as I opened it yesterday. My whole family got really mad at me for sleeping till noon and skipping breakfast, but I didn't feel guilty about it. I took the letter with me and decided to go for a walk. "What if all this is just the start?" I thought...

Indeed, it was just the start. I started finding letters referring to me everywhere.

She answered all my thoughts and questions, but she would never tell me how she died. I had to keep a promise that I would never let anyone in my family find out about any of this. It all seemed so surreal. It was like we were best friends, chatting every day about everything we could. I was so attached. Before talking to her, when my family made me feel upset, I would lock myself in my room. Now, I just go outside, sit on the ground and read whatever she wrote to me. I feel like there is someone right next to me, hugging and comforting me, but it's just her words. The letters didn't feel scary anymore, they just brought me joy.

I was searching for new letters, but I couldn't find any for two days straight. That made me so anxious and hopeless. I had to think for a bit, and I realized I had never searched the main bathroom. I went in there but couldn't figure out where the letter could be. I got really upset and I aggressively took down the mirror. It fell and pieces flew all over me. I was in pain, but it was physical. It could never compare to the feeling of knowing that I may never receive a letter from her again. Tears started running down my face and I was breathing so heavily that I felt like I was going to faint. It had to be somewhere around here. I ripped the wallpaper rapidly. Nothing. My mom heard me and ran upstairs. When she got to the bathroom, I was on the floor, crying hysterically. She thought that I was hurt by the glass of the mirror and felt bad. I couldn't stop crying, even when she took the glass pieces out of me. My family called me insane for breaking the mirror. I couldn't fall asleep again. I whispered for grandma to give me a sign that she still watches over me.

In my dreams, I saw her. The dream felt so real. I was in a pitch-black room that had infinite space. A candle was lit up, and it was Grandma Lory who did it. She was far away from me, but I still saw her and recognized her. I ran to her as fast as I could but she looked at me, turned around, and walked away slowly disappearing. I woke up feeling like I actually did everything in the dream. I was lying in my bed for a few moments to process everything. The day was unsuccessful and I, again, didn't find anything.

I had the same dream for many nights. I always tried talking to her, but she would only look at me and disappear. The more I had those dreams, the more bloodshot my eyes got. One morning, as I woke up, I felt blood coming out of my eyes, running down my face. I looked horrific. The bleeding stopped and I wiped my face. Everyone in my family gave me strange looks. That same day, I was passing next to the staircase to the attic and I saw the same candle from my dream, lit up. As I slowly walked up the stairs. I saw her. My great-grandma Lory. I was in pure shock. This time she was walking towards me, and I tried to take a step back but fell down the

stairs. My mom rushed upstairs and picked me up, but I wasn't conscious. My eyes were bleeding more than ever and my mom got so worried.

When I woke up, I was lying on the couch while my mum was sitting next to me. I told her what happened with Lory and she explained everything to me. In Warlington, our village, whoever talks or finds out too much about the past gets punished. And the will of the dead can be for someone to get a punishment. „Your grandpa was as curious as you are and he got the ability to remember and all his memories erased. “She said. “Grandma Lory”, she came closer to me and whispered, “lost her voice due to it. That is why she wrote letters.”

“How do you know all of this and you're still not punished?” I asked her. “I am. My punishment is that I will never find my true love and will have to take care of my parents for the rest of my life,” she replied. So, my mom was never supposed to have kids? Was I adopted? She said I wasn't. “You are a miracle Amy, and truly the best daughter I could ever have,” she told me as she teared up. She was scared of the punishment happening to me, and it almost did. I was supposed to lose my sight, which I didn't, but I will still have bloodshot eyes for the rest of my life. But wait, this doesn't make sense. If grandma Lory was punished, why would she want that for anybody else? I don't think it was her wanting to punish me. At least now I know why my mom never talked about her childhood.

Apparently, the curse in our village exists because people far from the past were focusing on their past so much that they weren't living in the present. The past is here for us to learn from and not regret. It has been a week since all this happened. We are now saying our goodbyes to the house and moving to a new state. All the vintage items in our house, hidden, making me almost lose my sight, we sold it. I wasn't allowed to take anything besides my backpack and a few essential items. I am now on a search of a better life. No one around me knows that I brought one old necklace with me. I had to. I know that this wasn't Lory's fault, and I genuinely hope that I will get at least one more letter from her.

From the past, we learn, and from my great-grandma Lory, I learned that I don't hate my family at all. Sometimes we just have to leave our past thoughts, ourselves, and moments so we can have more space for new opportunities.

I hope the new owners of our house have a wonderful life.

mentor: Linda Kuničić

institution: OŠ Petra Hektorovića Stari Grad

Andela Roić

THE PROTAGONIST

The only sound to be heard in the fairly dark room was the sound of light typing coming from her computer. She sighs as the alarm goes off. It was 7am and Veronica was finishing one of her already overdue assignments. She was an average student, not the best grades but not bad either. She was the type of girl who had a few close friends, but everyone knew who she was. She gets dressed, eats her cereal as fast as she can without choking - she was late as always, and brushes her brown wavy hair in a bun just so it was out of her way. Shoes on and she is out the door.

Entering the classroom just a few seconds before her English teacher she drops her bag on the floor next to her desk. “What’s it this time?” Casey asks jokingly. Casey was one of her best friends if not the single best, they had been friends since diapers. Even if she was a bit loud and well let’s say strong willed, she was there through thick and thin. “Oh, stop it will you? You know I was up all night doing the report for Mr. Jonson’s class” I replied sitting down next to her. “You are boring. In fact, I-”, “What’s up kids!” Theodore Rush shouted from the back, he was two months older than the duo but still insisted he was much more mature than them, hence he loves annoying them by calling them kids. “So, the famous Teddy rush decided to honor us with his presence.” “Your very welcome Case now how are my favorite two girls” Teddy said exaggerating. “Shush both of you I can’t get another mark in this class!” Veronica whispered and yelled. “First of all, the teacher won’t hear you from all the way down there, secondly any of you got any plans, I need to get out of my house. Contrary to widespread belief staring at white walls isn’t good for my artistic inspiration” Casey was an incredibly talented artist, she was creative since day one and could think outside the box really well, well if the box were not hypothetical, she would have already painted or decorated it. There was not a single object in her room that had not been painted over at least twice. Walls, desk, lamp, door you name it she did it. But unfortunately, she was facing art block and needed some inspiration. “No sorry, I have a ton of work to do, might as well have lunch in the library. Care to join?” Veronica asks, hopefully, having them there will reduce her boredom “I’m

free, and a big no to library lunch, I'm not in the mood" Teddy replies calmly. Casey and Teddy are best friends who love to argue about the smallest things. Their dynamics are adorable. "Ronnie are you sure?" Casey asks pleadingly "Can't you make time for us?" she continues as teddy chimes in "please Ronnie?" Veronica sighs and mumbles a small "Sorry" "Fine Teddy let's plan later." As the class ends, they go their separate ways. On her way to the library Veronica spots a group of people surrounding the so called "holy trinity" of the school. Mya Campbell, Sidney Dixon and Laurie Long. They were the movie like pretty girls. Oh, how Veronica wanted to experience their life just for a day. It's not like she didn't like her own; she was curious what it feels like to be one of them. To have an entourage to follow you everywhere, to have friends but never know who to trust, to always know what to say. It was all so different to the life she's used to living. She finally makes it to the library and makes herself comfortable. After all she will be here for quite some time; she had a few free periods and had a bunch of work to get done. After half an hour she was done with one of her assignments. Starting her history assignment, she remembered she was not allowed to use any electrical device because her professor had decided they were too dependent on the internet, and they should try doing homework the way he did it back in the day. Pulling out a piece of paper she asked the librarian for help. Standing on her tiptoes she reached the book on a high shelf. What? She is short. As she took the book another book fell with it. Lovely violet covers and gold letters saying, "The Protagonist" In her hold the book opened shoving a comic book in which there was a girl that looked just like Veronica sitting on the floor in a library just like her. Veronica felt chills on her spine looking at the comic book which had drawn out everything that happened in her life. There was a drawing of her, Casey and Teddy talking this morning, her working on her assignment last night, her walking her dog yesterday afternoon and events going years back. The page the book had opened was in the beginning of the book, but as she was rewinding her whole life, she felt like she was watching a movie, everything she had done or said or even thought was displayed in the book like she was an animated character, page after page pages started to appear as she was going back in time till the day she first opened her eyes. Frantically turning the pages, she was terrified, she felt like whoever had drawn out her whole life was watching her right now. Closing the book she opened the first page, a picture of her with her name and under it said, "female protagonist," there was also Casey and Teddy as the "best friend" and the pretty girls and her mom everyone was there. To say she was scared was an understatement, her assignments long forgotten. She wanted to see if the book could tell the future, so she listed further in the book she didn't

even have the book in her hands she was sitting doing her history assignment, then she left the library went to her favorite cafe, took her hot chocolate, and went home to eat dinner. The scared Veronica, leaving the school library, which was already empty by now, ran the fastest she had ever had in her life, to Casey's house. Banging her fist on the door Casey opens and looks at her strange "Did you just run here?" Veronica pushes her out of the way and goes to drink some water in the kitchen. "Care to tell me what is happening?" "Casey" Veronica starts panting "You must see this, also I am never doing this again" "See what?" Casey asks as Veronica pulls out the book from her bookbag. It took some time to explain to Casey what was going on-she was a bit slow. "Veronica this isn't good. How is this even possible?" Just as Casey says that the book changes, where there was a drawing of Veronica going to her cafe now there was a drawing of her running to Casey's. "No, I refuse to believe this is real pinch me." Veronica brushes her off as she looks at Casey's pale face "Let's go." Veronica says strictly "What? Where? Ronnie, what if this is just some sick joke? I'm calling Teddy." Casey states after bombarding her with questions. "Promising idea call him then let's burn this thing in the ally." Teddy came as fast as he could and the brought him up to speed. "Hang on, what if we could change the storyline in the book" "What do you mean Teddy" Casey questions. "If we could change the storyline of the book, we can all get rich and solve all our problems. Look Casey you have art block why don't you try drawing me finding a substantial chunk of gold?" Teddy states explaining his plan. "No." Veronica retorts not giving it a second thought. "Why Ronnie, we could be on to something?" Casey takes Teddy's side "What kind of question is that? We have no idea what this is and what is happening. I am not putting my life on the line for something unexpected that can ruin us. And I'm not letting you do so either." Veronica says confidently "I'm taking this with me and burning it." She adds. "Oh, so that is what is up. You want to take it all for yourself. Is that it? because you are the so called "protagonist," huh?" Teddy raises his voice accusing Veronica "of course not Teddy I just don't want anything to happen to us" Veronica starts to get offended "come on Teddy calm down" Casey tries to sooth the situation "Casey, stop it. You are either on her side or mine, can't you even see what she is doing?" Teddy was mad. Like, really mad. Steam coming out of his ears mad. He thought his best friend was betraying them. "I'm going to go." Veronica says before she bursts out the house." Teddy what was that" Casey asks worriedly "I-I'm not sure, it's like I couldn't control the words coming out of my mouth" Teddy was sweating, and he spoke with a shaky voice. He was nothing like the Teddy who just argued with Veronica "Hey it's ok, how about you sleep over, and we sort this out

tomorrow.” Casey suggests softly. Next morning the trio decided to meet up at a cafe. After sitting in silence for ten minutes Casey breaks it” listen Veronica, how about we try Teddy’s idea? It sounds good, doesn’t it?” “No Casey, I told you what I think about it and that’s it.” “I told you she was going to say that. This in pointless just give me the book.” Teddy scoffs looking deadly serious. Veronica disagrees and as she sees Teddy getting up makes a run for it. Veronica was running, book in hand. being chased by Teddy. Casey obviously stayed back. Veronica was not fast, or athletic but resourceful, and small hiding was not a problem. She ran into an ally and hid under a box as Teddy ran past her. She left her hiding place panting and found a metal barrel people use to get warm. She opened the book on the first page one last time as she saw something in the corner of her eye, under Casey’s name there was no longer written “best friend” but “villain.” Her eyes widen as she hears a chuckle. She lifts her head as she takes the lighter from her pocket and quickly puts it under the book. “I can’t let you do that” Casey says as she comes closer “Stop! I will light it! Trust me I will, now tell me what is happening!” Veronica yells as she sobs. This may look like Casey, but she is not. Her eyes are bright red, and she has a big grin on her face. Casey takes a step closer lifting her arm when someone holds her tight not letting her move “Ronnie! Light it! NOW!” Teddy yells as Casey pushes him off. Veronica is frozen. She cannot move a muscle.” Let’s get it over with” Casey says calmly before walking to Veronica whose tears are flooding her face. Just as Casey is about to snatch the book away Teddy hits her on the back of the head with a pipe. Gasp. Veronica’s eyes fly open as she looks around. Books. She is still in the library. She fell asleep on her history assignment. “Thank God that was just a dream!” just as she says that in the background you can see a violet book. Was it all just a dream?

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institution: OŠ Miroslava Krleže Čepin

Lara Arambašić

THE MAN

Once there was a man who did not know his name or anything about himself. All he knew was the name of a woman called Clarissa Jones. He went to police stations and private detectives, but nobody would help him, because he did not have any money, and they thought he was crazy until he saw a private detective agency and decided to try it.

“Somebody’s at the door”- said Zari and jumped with excitement. When she opened the door, she saw a man with beautiful blond hair and chestnut brown eyes. She was shocked but invited him in the office. The office was small, but cosy.

She asked him what his name was, and he responded, “I don’t know”.

Zari was confused, but wanted to help him, so she asked him, “Where do you live?”

He again responded with, “I don’t know.”

“Ok, so what DO you know?”

“I know a woman or at least I might know her; her name is Clarissa Jones. I think she might be my wife or sister.”

Zari jumped out of her chair and went to a file cabinet; she grabbed a file with a name - Jackson Jones. “Does the name Jackson ring any bells”-she asked,

“That name sounds familiar, why?” -the man responded.

“A couple of months ago a woman named Clarissa Jones came to me and said that her husband named Jackson went missing, but I’ve never found him. “- she explained.

“Do you think I might be Jackson?”

“I don’t know, she never gave me a picture.”-Zari responded. “But I know her address, shall we give it a try?”

“Sure “-said the man.

They got in the car and started driving.

“So, how did you find me?”-asked Zari.

“I saw your flyer in one of the police stations I went to.” - he simply answered.

“So, you went to many police stations before this?”

“Yes, to all the stations in town” - he said.

“And nobody helped you?”

“No” - he responded disappointedly.

Once they got there, Zari told the man to stay in the car, she ringed the doorbell and a tall man with brown eyes and brown hair opened the door. “Hello, I am Zari, a private detective, I am looking for Clarissa Jones. Do you know where she is?” -Zari said to the man.

“Hello, I am her brother Max. I haven’t seen Clarissa for years. Last I heard she was engaged, but never invited me to the wedding”.

“Can I come inside? I need to ask you some questions about Clarissa?”

“Of course.”

The house was big, with white and blue furniture “Please, take a seat” -Max said politely.

“So, what do you want to know about my sister?” - he asked.

“Did you ever meet your sister’s fiancé?” - she asked.

“No, she was always secretive about him.” -Max responded.

“Is there a possibility that you have some of her things?”

“Actually, I still have a box, let me go grab it”. Max grabbed a box and put it on the coffee table.

Zari opened the box and started looking for something that might help her in finding Clarissa and discovering the man’s identity. She found a book called Yosemite’s diary and a picture. She was shocked and could not believe who was in the picture. It was a picture of Clarissa and the mystery man, but also Zari’s mother. “Can I take this?” - she asked. “Of course, I was meaning to throw that away” -Max responded.

Zari rushed out of the house and got into the car. “So, what happened?” -the man asked her. She ignored him and started driving.

“Are you going to tell me where we are going?” -he asked again.

“We are going to my mother’s house”.

“Why?” -he asked.

“Because I found a picture of you, Clarissa and my mother” -she sounded confused but, also interested.

“Wait a second, what’s your mother doing in the picture?”

“I don’t know. The picture looks like it is very old.”

Both of them were silent for a couple of seconds, until Zari asked him a question. “Does the name Teodora Brown sound familiar to you?”

“No” -he answered.

“Could I take a look at the picture?”-he asked

“Sure, it is in my bag in the back”-Zari answered.

He took the bag and started searching until he saw a book called Yosemite’s diary. When he opened it, he was shocked. Zari pulled over to a close gas station on the side of the road.

“I need to get some gas; do you need something?”-she asked him while opening the car door.

“No, thanks “-he quickly replied in a strange and confused voice.

When she came back, he was still looking at the pictures and thinking.

“The drive is thirty minutes long”-she said while keeping her eyes on the road.

“What are you thinking about?”-Zari asked him.

“Where did you get this book?”-he asked her.

“I found it with the picture, why?”

“Because in the book I found many more pictures of your mother, but I also found pictures of someone I think might be you”, he pointed at one.

She took a glance at it and said, “I don’t remember that”.

“Maybe you were little, and you do not remember.”

“Maybe.”-she answered.

Zari continued driving. “So, are you close with your mother?”-he asked.

“Not really. I moved away when I was sixteen and rarely visited”-she answered until „We are here”—she said. The man looked out the window and saw a big white house and a lush garden full of plants in front of the house. “I have to warn you - my mother is not really the person you want to meet”-she said and opened the car door,“ So, are you coming?”-Zari asked.

“Yeah.”

They were standing in front of the door; Zari rang the doorbell, and nobody answered. She rang it again and again until a tall woman with light brown curly hair opened the door.

„Hello mother”-Zari said with a calm voice.

“I see you’ve finally got the courage to face me. And who is this?”- she asked while pointing at the man. “Maybe a new boyfriend?”

“No mother, can we come in?”-she asked. Her mom was thinking for a few seconds if she would let them in. “Sure, it is your house after all.”

When you come in you see the beautiful tall white ceilings with gold accents. They sat on the sofa. “Do you want some tea?”-Teodora asked the man with a toxic smile on her face.

“Sure, that would be lovely”-the man responded. Zari’s mother got up to make the tea, Zari waited for a couple of seconds until “Ok... so there are a couple of things you need to know about my mother”-she said quietly so she wouldn’t hear her.

“My mother is a manipulative person and a very good actor”-she explained, and the man just nodded.

There were loud footsteps coming towards them. “Here you go, would you like some sugar”-she asked with a smile on the face. When she came back, she finally sat down.

„So, what are you doing here?”

“Mother, do you know a woman called Clarissa Jones? “. Zari pulled out a picture from her pocket and put it on the table. She pointed at a woman on the photo. “This is Clarissa. And this is you, so do not say that you do not know her because we have proof”.

“She might have been one of my clients”-Teodora said with a calm voice.

“Wait, I don’t think I understand, your client?”-he said.

“My mother works in real state.”-she explained.

“So, she possibly bought a house from you?”-the man asked.

“Possibly, I have a lot of clients.”-she simply answered.

“Mother, can I see her file?”-Zari asked.

The man was confused. „What file?”

“I keep files of all my clients for legal purposes.”-she answered.

“Then what are we waiting for?”-the man asked with excitement filling his voice.

“I am not giving you those files so easily. If you want them, you need to get a warrant.” -she said with a demanding voice.

“Fine, if you want to do this, let’s do it! You will be expecting us in a couple of days”-said Zari in an angry tone and stood up. “I am going to the bathroom.” She started walking to the bathroom, but she took a right on the stairs and found herself standing in front of a room. She tried opening it, but the door was locked, so she took a bobby pin out of her hair and picked the lock on the door. After a few seconds she heard a click and opened the door. When she walked into the room, she saw a desk with a lamp on it and next to the desk there was a set of drawers. She first went to the desk and opened a drawer on the left-hand side and grabbed a small key. Then she went to the set of drawers. She was about to open it when she heard a noise coming from the hallway. She opened the drawer, grabbed the file and hid it under her jacket. Her mother sneaked up behind her. „What are you doing?”-she asked.

“Nothing. I thought I heard something.”

“We are going”-Zari said to the man how was sitting on the sofa. He got up and put on his jacket “It was nice meeting you”-the man said to Teodora and rushed to catch up with Zari who was steps from the door. They got into the car.

Zari waited a couple of seconds just to make sure until she pulled the fille from her jacket. The man was shocked. “I am guessing you were not going to the bathroom.”-the man replied.

They were about to open the fille when they heard a loud scream. It was coming from the house. Zari grabbed her backpack and pulled out a gun. You could tell that the man was shocked just by his facial expression. “Don’t worry, I know how to use it”-she said.

„I am going in and you wait in front of the house.”-she demanded.

Zari quickly got out of the car and into the house until she heard another scream, but this time she knew where it was coming from, the basement. She got to the basement and tried to open the door. Of course, it was locked. She did the first thing she could think of – she kicked it. The basement was dark and cold, but it was light enough to see a women tied up in the corner and her mother threatening her with a gun. „Mom, what are you doing?”-Zari asked.

Teodora was now pointing a gun at her, at her own daughter.

“Something I needed to do a long time ago!”-she responded. A bullet was coming towards Zari, and she barely escaped it. Zari pointed at her mother’s foot and shot it.

“Unlike you, mother, I never miss.”- Zari said while her mother screamed in pain.

She ran to the corner and saw Clarissa. Her hands and legs were tied, and she had a cloth in the mouth. “Zari, are you okey? the man was standing on the top of the stairs.

“I am fine.”

She took the cloth out of Clarissa’s mouth and untied her. “Jackson, Jackson, is that really you?”-she yelled. It was like all of his memories came back.

“Yes, love, it is really me!”

mentor: Pamela Grozdanić
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

Nea Superina

THE MISSION

Past

„Indigoo!”, I hear my mom scream my name. In my hands is a 3-year-old boy, lifeless. My mom approaches me and picks me up. We start to run from the grocery store we were few seconds ago.

Now we are at home. I am in my room and I still don’t know what happened. I saw a little boy crying and took his hand. The next thing I knew he was in my arms without any signs of life.

“Dinner!”, my mom screams from the kitchen. I get up and go downstairs. We are sitting opposite each other in silence.

“So...”, she starts, “what happened in the store...”, she stops and takes a deep breath.

I am looking at her. Her face is serious, and she has a look on her face that I’ve never seen before.

“Your father..., he ... umm...he had certain powers. He transferred those genes to you. You have a touch of death”, she says.

“I have what!?”, I scream.

She flinches.

“Sorry... umm, this is a lot to process.”, I apologise.

“It is fine, honey. Now that we have discovered this, you will have to go to a special school for those like you.”

I nod.

“And that is,... where?”

“It’s in Ao’s, which is a world where your dad was born and lived before he came here.”

I nod again.

“When are we leaving?”

“Indigo, I can’t go with you. I am human, but you are leaving in few days.”

My eyes get watery, but I stop myself from crying.

I nod again. I know she saw my face change, but she doesn't say anything. I finish eating and go to my room. I start to pack all my clothes and other valuable things, and simply go to bed.

Few days later

"Goodbye honey," my mother says while hugging me carefully, trying not to touch my skin.

"Bye mom," I say and go through the gate that connects the two completely different worlds.

After she came to Ao's she managed to finish school for gifted children at the age of eighteen. Soon after that, she enrolled at the "Spy academy" where she is now.

Present

I am listening to my professor explaining how to use a M21 sniper rifle gun. It is boring. I am just sitting there and listening. He is about to shoot a target.

(The gunshot sound)

He misses. "Does anyone want to try?", he asks. I just roll my eyes and raise my hand.

"Good, come here," he says and points with his fingers to stand up in front of my class.

I get up and stand there. He hands me the gun and steps away. I position myself and shoot. The target shaped like a human now has a hole in the place where the heart is. I look around the class and I notice that everyone is shocked at what I have just done. Even the professor. It isn't a big deal... I only shot the target. I return the gun to the professor and go back to my seat in the back. The bell rings and everyone leaves. So do I.

It's lunch. I am eating when suddenly I hear my name. They want to see me in the head office. I get up and go there. The door is open, so I walk in.

"Hi Indigo, please sit," the director says.

I'm sitting and waiting for him to start speaking.

"I have a mission for you. You just need to ..., how do I say this to you. You need to steal golden bullets. They are incredibly special because there is some kind of serum in them that disables powers. Bullets are in Murmansk, Russia. There is a building where all people from Ao's work. They are scientists who work for Dominik Belyaev. He was banished a few years ago. The government assumes he wants revenge. Your

plane leaves tomorrow in the afternoon. Guns and other accessories will wait for you in the villa where you will be staying.”

“Thank you, I won’t disappoint you.”, I say still shocked.

“I know you won’t. You may go now.”

The plane lands and I take an Uber to the director’s villa. Uber stops in front of a beautiful white house, with green details. I take my stuff and go in. Inside, the villa looks normal, nothing too luxurious. I go to my room and find a box on the bed. I open it and there is a note inside saying:

Dear Indigo,

This a suit for your mission. I hope you’ll like it.

Director

I pick up the suit from the box. It is a black jump suit made of leather. It has bucklers for elbows and knees. There is a belt around the waist that can hold guns and other things. I go to the bathroom and try it on. It fits like a glove, but it covers all my skin so my powers will be useless. I take it off and put my pyjamas on and take my laptop to investigate the building and work out a plan to get the bullets.

It looks as there is an event tomorrow night. I decide to enter as one of the workers and in the middle of the night I will go on the roof, put the suit on and then I will simply take the bullets from Dominik’s safe. Sounds easy.

The next night

The dress I pick is long and green with hidden pockets for one of the guns I have found in the weapon room in the basement. I get ready and go to the garage. There is a black jeep, a motorcycle with helmet on it and a black Porsche. I take the Porsche and drive to the building. I go in. Everybody looks the same. The men are wearing suits and women are in all kinds of dresses. I get myself a glass of champagne and scan the room. I notice a man in a blue suit surrounded with other men with glasses in black suits. That must be Dominik and his bodyguards. Dominik gets up on the stage in the end of the room. He starts some sort of speech and I sneak in to the stairs leading to the roof. I come to the roof and put on my suit with all the guns, tools for disabling other devices and similar gadgets. I go to the floor under the roof and remove ventilation door and go in. I crawl around for eight minutes and find the place above the safe where Dominik keeps the bullets. I melt the ventilation metal with a laser and jump into the room.

Now I am looking at the stand with a safe on it. Between me and that safe is ten meters of nothing. It can’t be that easy. I look around the room. There are no secu-

rity cameras. I take a spray bottle filled with liquid that shows invisible things and spray it around. In a few seconds I am standing in front of red laser lines crossing each other all the way to the safe. I scan the laser net and take a deep breath. I take one step at a time. I am careful and slow but effective. In less than three minutes I find myself in front of the safe. I take a little device out of my right pocket and place it next to the lock and turn it on. It lets out only one small “biiip” sound and the door of the safe opens. Inside is a small black box with Dominik’s initials on it. I open it to check if bullets are in there. Luckily, they are. I put the box inside my pocket, lock the safe and take the little device I have used to open the safe. I walk through the laser net back to the other side of the room. I gather my things and start to climb back into the ventilation ducts and crawl back to the roof.

I am ready to jump off the roof with a parachute, but I hear the roof door fly open and suddenly, two very tall and muscular men start approaching me. I drop the parachute and prepare myself for the fight. I punch the first one in the stomach and shoot him in the arm. The other one catches me, but I manage to get away and shoot him both in the arm and the leg. I put on the parachute and finally jump off the roof back into the car and drive to the villa.

I park the car and go to my room to take a shower and wash the blood off. When I am done, I immediately call the director.

(Phone ringing)

“Yes?”, I hear on the other side

“Hi, it’s me, Indigo. I am calling to tell you that I have the bullets and I am flying back to Ao’s tomorrow morning,” I say.

“Good job Indigo. I am proud of you. Travel safe.,” the director says and hangs up.

(After some time)

Plane lands and after checking out I go back to the academy straight to the director’s office.

“Hi, I am here to give you the bullets” I say.

“O, hi Indigo. Thank you and excellent job, once again. The government is extremely impressed.,” he answers.

I nod and walk out of the office back to the class. I think that the hacking class starts in few minutes. I am right on time!

*mentor: Daniela Močinić**institution: OŠ-SE G. Martinuzzi Pula**Emma Fabris*

CHOOSE!

Ever since she was in kindergarden, Hailey loved volleyball more than anything. She would always spend her free time watching volleyball matches with her family. Her biggest desire was to be the number one spiker in the whole world.

In order to find success, she needed to practice a lot, but the only volleyball club in her neighborhood was one with only older and taller girls. Being of unusually small stature for her age, that kind of club intimidated her. Nonetheless, that was the only chance she had to fulfill her dream, so at the age of thirteen she finally decided to join the team.

It was a warm September afternoon. Hailey was getting ready for her first volleyball practice. The fear she felt towards the other girls was not even nearly as strong as her excitement when she entered the gymnasium. On the outside it looked like an old, frail building, but on the inside it looked like the complete opposite. It had a nice, warm interior. It looked huge on the inside. Hailey might have been far too excited at that moment, because she hadn't even noticed that there were probably over sixty people in that gymnasium and since she was the only new member, everybody was just looking at her, but she was too busy observing her surroundings with immense joy. Hailey then started staring at the net. It looked clean and new, it was about two and a half meters tall, and on its sides there were two red and white antennae.

That first practice was as memorable as the first day of school, although that one was far more important for Hailey. Seeing the other members of the club playing so skillfully and deliberately, Hailey couldn't wait to get on the court. "So," said Coach, "since you already know the basics, you can start practicing by tossing the ball into the air as many times as you can without it falling on the ground." "WHAT?" thought Hailey to herself. The first couple of weeks everything seemed a bit too boring for Hailey. While the other girls practiced serving, receiving, tossing and spiking with each other, she was practicing basic elements that she already knew far too well. It is true that she has never been part of an actual club up until now, but that doesn't mean that she never practiced. The wall on the outside of her bedroom, the one

facing an extremely vast lawn, was completely marked and ruined by the volleyball ball that Hailey would continuously spike at. Every now and then, Hailey would ask Coach if she could practice spiking too. But Coach would always respond with: "Everything will come with time." Coach was an older man, a psychologist by profession. Although he would often limp when he tried to walk, he would always demonstrate the exercises the others would have to do. Time was passing by quickly for Hailey, but she still didn't enjoy those tedious exercises. But then, after two months of practicing repetitive exercises, Coach finally let Hailey practice spiking with the other girls. That was a moment Hailey would never forget. Everybody was standing in a line, spiking the ball over the net as precisely and forcefully as they could. One girl was on the side, tossing to the others. She was putting a lot of effort into those tosses, so that the others could just concentrate on spiking. Not all of them succeeded, but they all tried their best. It was now Hailey's turn. Her heart was beating, the only thing she felt in that moment was panic. Everybody was staring at Hailey. She shook that feeling off and started to take the needed steps towards the toss. She jumped and swung her hand, but... she missed! The tossed ball hit the floor. Her eyes red, her front sweaty, she just wanted to run away. And so she did. She ran to the dressing room. She felt angry, embarrassed and disappointed in herself. She felt hopeless. "I can't believe it! After years of training alone and hoping I could someday practice with a team, I can't even spike!" she said while her face was swollen from the tears. Unexpectedly, Debbie walked into the dressing room. Debbie was the team captain, she was neither the strongest nor the tallest, but she was the only one who would sometimes try to talk to Hailey. Hailey was a shy and socially awkward person, so she still hadn't made any friends in the club.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?" Debbie asked worriedly. "No, I... it's nothing", answered Hailey. "Come on, you can tell me", said Debbie whilst trying to get Hailey to stop crying. "Well, I just...I wanted to spike since the first day of practice, and today I finally got my chance. But when I was supposed to spike the ball, I missed. I know it sounds foolish, but spiking is the only thing I ever felt like I was good at", said Hailey, reliving that awful moment in her mind. "Oh. I get it. But missing a toss can happen to anyone. Why don't you try again?" said Debbie "I rather wouldn't, I guess I will just continue with my usual exercises", decided Hailey. There was nothing she wanted more than to spike and not have to do those dull exercises, but she couldn't fight off that scary feeling of humiliation.

That went on for weeks. For weeks she wanted to spike, for weeks she cried after every practice, but she just didn't want to risk feeling that way again.

It was now January of the next year. With time, Hailey stopped practicing those awful exercises that she so deeply despised, instead she started tossing, serving and receiving. Despite the occasional mistakes, Hailey was exceptional at all of those. But she still hadn't practiced spiking, because she would always avoid it as much as she could. Considering the progress Hailey kept making, Coach decided to let her play in a practice match against a different club. Hailey was extremely happy, but the thought of missing a spike again shook her to the core. They had to travel by bus because the match would be played at the other club's gymnasium. That gymnasium wasn't like the one she had been practicing in for the past five months, that one was magnificent. It had tall, newly painted walls, a wooden double door with a special design she had never seen before, and a massive graffiti of a volleyball ball on the left wall. It was now 4:30 p.m., which meant the match was supposed to start soon. "OK," said Coach, "the game is about to start. Hailey, you are playing in the first set!" Hailey was shocked. Unfortunately, that game didn't go the way Hailey would have liked it to. No matter who tossed the ball to Hailey, and no matter how they tossed the ball or how many times Hailey tried to spike it, she just kept missing. The fact that Hailey spent her whole life practicing on her own, with nobody to toss to her, led to the point where she just wasn't able to coordinate and synchronize with anyone. She didn't feel like part of the team. Coach wanted to give her a chance, so he let Hailey play the whole first set. But after every unsuccessful spike, Hailey just kept feeling worse each time. So she sat on the bench the next two sets. When she came home she didn't cry, she wept. Her parents were very concerned for her. It's been months since Hailey said she enjoyed volleyball practice. Her parents knew the problem, for they had talked to Coach and Hailey about it many times before. "Listen, Hailey," said her father, "I know how you feel right now, and I understand you just want the problem to be solved, but life is full of obstacles we must overcome, and how do you intend to do that? By running away? In order to solve the problem you must confront it, non run away from it. If it's too big of a problem, you may always seek help, but your future lies in your hands, and in your hands only. If you can't seem to synchronize and spike the tosses of the other girls in your club, then you have to work harder, practice more and put as much effort into it as possible. Deciding to stop spiking forever after you fail on your first try is not the answer. So now you have to decide, do you want to be the kind of person that runs and hides from her problems, hoping others around her will solve them for her, or do you want to be the kind of person that never gives up, that gets up after every mistake and tries again until she succeeds? CHOOSE!" Hailey wiped the tears off her face. "I want to succeed!" answered Hailey determined.

“Then you know what you must do”, said her father, feeling relieved.

In the following couple of months, Hailey practiced more than anybody. Every day, she would ask one of the girls at practice to toss to her. With time she learned various types of attacks, she learned different types of spikes, she started having more control over her spikes and she learned to direct the ball. As she put more effort into what she loved, and started succeeding, she started feeling more confident and she started to believe in herself.

As Hailey kept getting better and stronger, so did her team, and soon they were playing finals at nationals. The team had to travel for three hours to arrive at their destination, so they could play that scary but exciting match that they all worked so hard for. Even though Hailey was feeling more confident in herself when it came to volleyball than she ever did before, she still felt a tiny bit of awkwardness around people. So while the others laughed and made jokes, she sat in the corner looking out the bus window. “Hey, Hailey, would you like to play Truth or dare with us?” Lilly asked suddenly. Lilly was a sweet girl with a kind looking face. Compared to Hailey she was extremely tall, but when she stood next to the other girls from the club, she seemed short. The only thing that seemed strange about her was her voice. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it just didn’t fit her looks and her personality. She looked and behaved in a caring way, but her voice was very raspy and deep. Those didn’t necessarily have to be opposites, but it was a tad surprising and unusual. But Lilly liked the fact her voice was like that, and she liked to talk about it because it made her feel special. “Ahh, sure...” answered Hailey whilst hiding her immense glee. Though Hailey felt a bit out of place, the others didn’t seem to feel that way, which gave her a delightful feeling of ease. They spent the whole trip playing and getting to know each other better. Hailey finally felt like part of the team.

Once they arrived at the gymnasium they would be playing at, they immediately started warming up and soon after the game had begun.

They had lost the first set, and were behind on the second one. Everybody was down, and Hailey had a feeling like she had to say something to raise their morale. “I know that we are losing right now, but we can turn it around! We have overcome many obstacles until now, so let’s overcome another one! We have to decide, are we going to run away from the obstacle and give up, after we’ve reached so far, or are we going to give it our all and win? CHOOSE!” said Hailey whilst trying to encourage them. “We want to win!!!!” screamed all the girls together like they were part of a choir. They screamed so loudly that everybody in the gymnasium looked at them in a weird way, but they just started laughing. Point after point, the score kept changing,

and the next day, the team's gymnasium had the first place trophy on the shelf. And soon, that one wasn't the only one. Hailey's team kept winning match after match, they were unstoppable.

Hailey was now 16, and she was still on the team with her friends. After continuously practicing spikes, Hailey became the ace on her team. There wasn't a toss she couldn't spike or a block that could stop her. Different clubs would invite Hailey and all of her friends to join, as she wasn't the only one with amazing capabilities, but they declined each and every one of them. They knew how strong they were together, and after years of playing with each other they had gotten used to one another. Together they got past any obstacles that came in their way, because that was what they CHOSE to do.

mentor: Daniela Močinić

institution: OŠ-SE G. Martinuzzi Pula

Mila Močinić

THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL

It was all quiet, yet so many people. So many stories. My parents were in front of the grave, me and my four brothers on the right and everybody else on the left. Most of the people who were there were only after their money, including my family, but I was different from them. I cared about him; I mean he cared about me. He was always there for me, unlike my gold-digging family. The funeral ended and we got home. On the table there was a letter, it was from my dead grandpa. The letter said that me and my four brothers Cardan, Arron, Atlas and Ryle were going to play a game the next week. We were going to be faced with different challenges every day. There would be people that would always be watching us. And the winner would take the whole inheritance fortune. It was Sunday night, and I could not sleep. I was thinking about the following day. My family was already not getting along, that game would destroy us, I knew it. If I were honest, it would be a terrible thing to put on children. We were all sixteen and, based on how we would do for the next week, it would determine if we would have billions or if we would have nothing. It was Monday morning, 7.30, the five of us had just got out of the house to get to school. On our front porch there were five people all dressed in all black suits. I figured they were our judges. We were all standing there when suddenly huge fireworks were in the sky. It meant that the game had started. It was beautiful, once it ended the judges went away. As we were walking, a truck came and ran over our cars. We just stood there shocked. If that was how our grandpa was going to play, were we even going to make it out alive? My parents saw everything, my brothers ran to them to ask if they could drive us. My parents said that they could, but only after nine, which meant that we would have to skip the first period. My brothers all agreed, but I did not want to, it was a 15 minutes walk anyway. I arrived 5 minutes late, but the teacher didn't care. My brothers arrived for the second period. That was it for Monday. It was night and I was thinking if the following day the challenge was going to be harder. I hoped not. It was Tuesday morning. We were getting out of the house when the five men were on our porch again. That time the one in the middle came forward and said that day's

challenge was going to be much harder, he also said that we wouldn't go to school, but instead get into the car. We did as they said and drove for half an hour. We came to an abandoned forest. Then they told us to get in a line. They gave us five boxes, one each. As I opened mine, I looked at my brothers. They had the same look. We were terrified. Only Arron seemed thrilled. He was always a bit psychotic. Inside the box there was a bomb. The men in suits said the rules of the game were simple. The bomb would explode in five minutes. And that was how much time we had to find a place where the explosion would make less damage possible. They put the timer on and we started thinking. There were only three minutes left, but then I remembered the bunker that grandpa and I used to go to. I ran there as fast as my legs were taking me. I had never run so fast in my life. I made it to the bunker as there were only 30 seconds left before the bomb exploded. I struggled to open the bunker but I somehow managed. The explosion was loud, but it didn't destroy the forest around me. As I got back to where they left us, everybody was already there. They told me that Arron had just thrown the bomb as far as he could. Ryle put it in an abandoned house. Only Cardan didn't want to tell me where he put his. That was an elimination round. They decided to eliminate Arron since his bomb caused the most damage. That day was crazy, I really hoped that the following day would be easier. It was Wednesday morning. Everything was the same as yesterday, except that they told us we would be having a test. We went back to the house and sat at our table. We had ninety minutes to complete the test. If they caught us cheating, we would be eliminated from the round. The four of us were ready and they gave us the test. I was nervous, Cardan looked relaxed, Ryle and Atlas had the same look as me. They gave us the test and started timing us. The test was pure logic. There were six pages in total. We finished the test. For me it was a bit hard, and I didn't answer the three questions. We were waiting in the living room for about fifteen minutes, when they came back with the results. Cardan had the highest score and Atlas the lowest. Atlas was eliminated. The day was over, and I was still thinking about Cardan's perfect score. I mean, how did he do it? It was Thursday, everything was the same as the day before. We were told to get in the car again. They said that the challenge was knowledge. We went to the forest again, but that time they gave us two pieces of paper. On the first there was a photo of a plant, it was beautiful. On the second the description of it, it was about twenty centimeters tall. Its name was *Leontopodium*. We were given fifteen minutes. As soon as they started timing, we started running. I was running for about ten minutes then I remembered that my grandpa had a picture of that flower in his office. He used to talk about it, I remembered it all. It was a trick, that plant only grew

on the mountains. It wasn't possible to find it there. I ran back. Cardan was already there. "We can't find it here; it only grows on the mountains" I said. The man in the suit nodded. "Too late, I was here first. I realized it first. You lost and I won, again" said Cardan. He was proud of himself. Ryle came running too. But he realized that he was too late and that he lost. They announced Cardan as the winner and Ryle was eliminated. It was just the two of us. Me and Cardan. Brother and sister. Tomorrow would be like the finals in that case. I was scared of what he might do. Because I knew that he would do anything it took to win. Friday morning, the last challenge. Me and Cardan were both ready for everything. They handed us a suitcase each. Inside, there was a million dollars. I was shocked. They told us that we had two days to spend them. The winner was going to be announced on Sunday. I spend the entire day thinking about how I was going to spend that amount. The next day I went to about ten organizations and distributed the money to them. It was Saturday night, and I went to talk to Cardan. I wanted to make sure that whatever happened between us the following day, we would stay friends. Siblings. I mean, we were never actually friends, but we respected each other. It's Sunday morning, the big day. That was it, that was the moment we had all been waiting for. My parents, me and my siblings were all outside waiting. We started hearing drum rolls. We couldn't see them, but we could hear them, they were getting louder and louder, but suddenly they stopped. Huge fireworks exploded into the sky, and I said my name. My name was in the sky. I won. Cardan threw a tantrum since he didn't win. Surprisingly, the judges said that I won because he cheated. Of course he did. I was not even surprised. Unlike my mother, my father didn't seem very happy that I won. He wanted one of his boys to win. But I felt like I was on top of the world. I felt taller than Mount Everest. I did it, I won.

mentor: Ante Žderić

institution: OŠ Cvjetno naselje, Zagreb

Nika Maček

SLEEPWALKERS OF MOTT HAVEN

Vinnie suffered from insomnia, which was why she went to make pancakes at 2:43 am. She spent the last three hours working on an essay on why pottery is important to society. It was due tomorrow and *she will pass*.

But it was snack time now. Vinnie opened the door of her bedroom instantly noticing a weird shift in energy. Her brown sphynx cat, Neo, jumped off the bed and hid under it.

Okay, loser. More food for me.

She stepped into the living room, turning the lights on. After that, her first instinct was to scream.

Her second instinct, however, won.

“Who the...”

“I CAN EXPLAIN!”

On her kitchen floor was sitting a dirty, skinny, blond guy with a cut on his cheek. Eating Nutella.

It wasn't Vinnie's Nutella, no, she was allergic to chocolate. But it very much was Vinnie's kitchen and spoon.

“Well, *no*, I can't explain.”

“I'll call the cops!” Vinnie yelled, reaching for her gun or anything dangerous at all. She always had something when she was out of the house. Lived in a bad neighborhood her whole life.

But Vinnie wasn't out of the house this time.

She didn't have a gun in her pocket or a taser in her bag. She was in her Spider-man pajamas, harmless except for the punches she could throw.

God, I can't die! I'm young! Not even 23!

Vinnie thought she heard God's answer, and They said: *Ooh, look, you aren't dying. That dude isn't a real threat!*

And unquestionably, when she got a better look, Vinnie could see this man looked scared. Running from something. Or someone.

“Who are you? You aren’t from Mott Haven for sure... Where are you from?” She asked him, not sure what to do. “Who are you running from?”

The guy wouldn’t answer.

“I usually don’t do this but I am going to call the cops!”

“Max Evans... I’m Max,” he said. “Your...erm your house was the closest. I had to escape, uh, I owe something to someone and- and he said... I don’t even know.”

Something to someone. *Not very helpful*, Vinnie thought.

“Where you from?”

“Riverdale.”

“Cool. Now, I need names,” she said, “I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

Max was silent again but Vinnie took the gun from the table and flashed it.

“I owe Norville Aileanach some money and a favor,” Max said finally, looking Vinnie in the eyes.

She did not like what she heard. “You owe *Shaggy Aileanach* money *and* a favor?!” *Bad, bad. Very bad (she thought to herself).*

She spoke again: “Get out. Can’t help you. You’re beyond my saving rank.”

“*What?* You can’t leave me high and dry! I’m desperate!”

“Dead is your middle name. Shaggy is a *nasty* person to mess with! We went to school together until he dropped out in, like, 8th grade,” she said, “I was friends with him! We’re still on friendly terms!”

Vinnie felt like a bad person for thinking like this, but she most definitely couldn’t risk messing up her relationship with Shaggy. Max should clean his mess up - himself

But then she remembered the time when her little sister Lottie messed with some thugs.

Vinnie’s older sister, Narcissa, had to deal with it. She was barely 17.

Max kind of reminded her of those times.

I cannot believe I’ll do this. Dear God. I am so going to regret it.

“Max, my full name is Lavinia Cruz and I will help you.” She saw him release a breath he was holding. “You owe me. *A lot.*”

“Thank you so, so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Vinnie called her buddies; in a few minutes, she knew Jordan, Elio, Jude, and Una were coming to meet her at 6 am to make a deal in front of *Romero’s*.

5:53 am, Thursday

Vinnie woke up very calm. She even slept well.

Then she remembered Max Evans and instantly felt the calm leaving her body.

6:08 am, Thursday

Elio and Vinnie made a deal to find Max somewhere to sleep until they figured out what to do. Jordan and Jude took him to Jordan's to give him a little makeover. Just clean him and stuff. Una was Shaggy's favorite cousin, and she said she would try to find out about his intentions.

7:32 am, Thursday

Vinnie got ready for college. She made herself a sandwich and headed out. Carpe diem!

She didn't expect a guy, messy, smoking a cigarette, at her doorstep. His look stopped her in her tracks.

"Where is he, Vinnie?" Shaggy asked.

mentor: Ana Šapina
institution: OŠ Brezovica

Lea Brebrić

A LONE CAT

It was a big city. Big, but empty. All of the people disappeared after the deadly virus, and the cities were overgrown with plants. Nature was finally getting back what humans took from her. The year is 2057. It's a beautiful sight when I wake up. Although, a bit dangerous. I live with my family. Nice cats, but I have to say, sometimes my younger siblings get pretty annoying. We live in a small apartment, but, it's really hard to get to the ground safely without someone's help.

We just came of age to start hunting, so our mother took us outside to teach us. We left the apartment. At first, I thought it was easy, so I kept messing around. We carefully walked down the stairs, looking at all the destroyed apartments. Then finally, we came downstairs. We still had to go through some obstacles. The road was destroyed, so we had to jump over the holes and cracks we could have gotten our paws stuck in. I was talking to my brother when suddenly, I lost balance and slipped. In no time, my back legs were hanging off the road and the only hope I had was my family. My brother grabbed my paws and called for our mother, that was already far away from us. She turned around, and when she saw us, she quickly started running to help me. I heard a crack. And another one. Then I realised, there was no way of getting out. My claws started slipping, and before my mother could reach her paw out to me, I completely slipped off. I hit the ground. My back paw hurt a lot, but luckily, there were some trash bags to soften my fall. I heard my mother yelling for me in the distance, but it was getting quieter and quieter. I slowly started to stand up and looked around myself. It was only darkness, with a few streams of light coming from above. No more birds chirping, no more voices or friendly faces. I was meowing for a few minutes, hoping my mother would hear me, but there was no response. I had to find my way out on my own. Looking left and then right, I was wondering which way I should go. Suddenly, there was a meowing sound on the left side of the tunnel, and started meowing myself, full of hope. I trotted towards the sound into the darkness, but when I reached it, there were no cats. I turned around, and to my surprise, I saw a small green creature, and it meowed at me again. It was cute, but I had a strange

feeling about it. Soon there were more and more and more. They all looked at me, and I knew that was the perfect time to start running. Ignoring the piercing pain in my paw, I ran through the tunnel. I knew, somewhere deep down, that I probably won't get out of this alive. I saw a small hole at the end of the tunnel, and I squeezed myself through it. Some of them were too big for the hole, but most of the little green creatures were still behind me. I ran up the stairs of a building, reaching the roof. There was a big hole between me and the city, so my only hope was to try jumping to the roof on the other side. I reached the end of the roof and leaped in the air. I closed my eyes, and I landed on the other roof. I looked around myself in disbelief and saw four men spraying the green monsters. I quickly trotted down the stairs, and at the end of the street, I saw you! I looked at the boy, staring at me. He didn't know why to be surprised; because of the story I told him, or because he could understand me. He sighed: "You are a strange kitty; you know?" I shook my head and explained: "There are a lot of us outside and we live like a family – cats, dogs, ... Well, really, any house pet that was abandoned". He looked at me and whispered: "Well, you have a friend here now, so in case you want to stay here with your family, go ahead." He stood up. "But, let's head inside for dinner, shall we?"

We entered his house. It was warm and his family was welcoming. His mum gave me some meat and water. I ate it all because I haven't eaten in a few days. After dinner, I asked the boy what the green creatures are. "They are like some kind of plague, always hungry and wanting more. They can mimic other voices they hear so they can lure in their prey easily. Their only weakness is water. If you spray them, they will shrink and become harmless." He looked at the clock, standing up. "It's getting late; we should both go to sleep. I know a man that can find your family. He lives up the hill. We'll pay him a visit tomorrow." We went to his room, and I laid on his chair, as I didn't have a bed. I felt safe, but I knew sooner or later I would have to return to my family.

mentor: Tatjana Kristek

institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek

Lara Flegar

HOLLYWOOD SUNSETS

“You know I love you, right?” his hoarse voice was all she could hear. She was sitting on the kitchen floor, her vision blurry and tears streaming down her face. There was a red mark on her face, which she knew she would have to cover up. When her vision returned, she answered the question with a nod. Her head was still pounding, and she could feel the blood rushing through her veins. Who is she? No one was other than the wife of one of the richest men in the country. Don Desmond, that was his name. Everyone in the city knew it. He was a busy man, but when times were rough, he would get help from his wife, Olivia White. Don Desmond and Olivia White were the perfect couple in the public eye. Don was a businessman, he had his own company, while Olivia had started her acting career a few years ago. That was not the original idea that she had for her future, but then she realized that she would never be able to run away from fame. A lot of people used to say that her name sounded like a celebrity name. That was true, so she guessed that she was made for that. Being rich and famous, having random people in her home all the time, having to meet new people every day, working non-stop, going to award shows; it was all part of the experience. At times like this, having all that wasn’t as desirable as it seemed to other people. “You said we wouldn’t have fights like this anymore. Why are you being like this?” She finally calmed down enough to say something. She waited for an answer. He looked at her with that face that she hated the most. The one that looked like he thought that what he was doing was fine, when it obviously wasn’t. He smiled a little, before opening his mouth: “Listen, I’m just trying to protect you, that’s all.” He looked at her with such a genuine smile on his face, all she could do was listen. Don had always been charming and handsome, no one could deny that. People were often jealous of him, his success, his looks, and most importantly, his money. A lot of women tried getting with him just because he was rich. Olivia started dating him because he was good to her, he listened to her, it felt like he cared. They never fought a lot, only sometimes, like this. “Oh all right, if you say so”, she quickly got up from the shiny, freshly cleaned floor. He put his arm around her and they walked over to

the living room. “Let’s not fight like that again, I think I’ve heard you say the same thing enough times already. I know you care about me”, she told him as he poured two glasses of wine and handed one over to her. They were sitting on their large dark green couch that night, the stars were almost visible, the night was calm. It was 1 am, they had had a long fight, but the good thing was, it was over. Now they could watch anything on TV, tell each other anything, and sip their glasses of wine until they were tired. “Right, I do care about you, though. I hope you know that. I just don’t want you getting killed or something”, he chuckled and took a sip out of his glass. How ironic that at this time next week she would be lying dead on the floor in some alleyway next to one of the brightest streets of LA.

The death of Olivia White was everywhere. It was in the newspapers, on almost every TV channel and radio station. People wanted more information about this unexpected death. They would show up in front of Don’s house to interview him. He would try to avoid them at all costs. People were curious, but they never got any answers from him.

Don’s office looked exactly what you’d expect it to look like, papers stacked precisely on top of one another, a full cup of coffee that he would usually start his day with sitting on the right side of the desk, his computer right next to it, at the center. People entered and exited the room all the time. His office was a busy place. It was modern, the size of his living room. He also got an incredible view from which you could see the entirety of LA’s finest parts. His wife would often visit him to watch the sunset with him, that was his reminder that his workday was over. As he was walking over to his office, he remembered that he would never get to see that specific shade of orange at the end of the day with her. She loved sunsets. He went up to the large black door, and stood there for a second too long, but he finally opened the door and the first thing he noticed was a man and a woman sitting on the black leather chairs in front of his polished desk. They were his most trustworthy coworkers, Sophia and Neil. They assisted him with many issues that arose during the leadership of his company. Don greeted them with a slight smile, but they immediately got up from where they were sitting and started chatting about all the different things that happened while he was away.

“I don’t know, doesn’t it seem a little suspicious? He’s not giving any answers the people want him to give, he hasn’t even answered one question.” I glanced over at my coworker to see if she agreed with me. She was still going through the newspapers. They obviously had Don and Olivia’s names written all over the front pages, because that’s what the news was all about. That’s what all the rumors were about, too. “I

agree, but, come on, you're the most qualified detective out there. I think you should do something about it, Jane", she answered, not taking her eyes off the title in the newspaper, *Bright lights of LA: New Hollywood star Olivia White dead at 38*. I did agree with her, I could take this unsolved murder. I don't think it could be that complicated, it's just strange how nobody had figured out how she died yet. "Hm, I guess. It sounds interesting from what I've heard. Also, I think you could go with me." Kate quickly looked at me, I knew she had been waiting to work with me again. "If you insist", she smiled at me and continued reading through the newspaper. Kate and I are known for working together. We took a break from solving cases a few months ago, but this is the perfect opportunity to get back to work. A lot of people can confirm that I'm a good detective, I've solved at least 15 cases throughout my career, and I've seen a lot. Since I was a little girl, I have grown to like murder mysteries and solving them, that's why I work as a detective. When I started my career, I didn't get recognized fast. Men used to make fun of me because they thought it wasn't natural for a girl to be a detective. They used to say that a girl shouldn't be handling crimes. Luckily, I'm not a person who gives up fast. I worked my way up to the top, and now all those men are absolutely irrelevant. They're another reason why I'm where I am right now, and I will prove them wrong once again. "We should start the mission as fast as possible. Could you call the police for me? I need to visit the crime scene." Kate was shuffling through her leftover paperwork, but she immediately dialed the police and told them what we wanted to do in order to help them solve the mystery of Olivia White. I started typing on my computer to see if I could find out any details regarding Olivia's death, but there was not a single thing. There was one thing I knew for sure; it wasn't suicide. Olivia was murdered in a small alleyway next to the most famous street in LA Hollywood Boulevard. Personally, I don't think anyone would commit suicide in such a public place, and it would be obvious if she did, but no weapons were found at or around the crime scene. "All right, the police told me that we can come to see the crime scene at 3 pm. Let's hope we can pile up some good information", said Kate as she set her cup of coffee aside on the table and walked up to me. "I think we can take a little break now, want to get some coffee?" I couldn't turn down a coffee break, so we took 15.

"There's no clue who the killer could be. Really?" The police officer swiftly nodded. "The only thing we know, ma'am, is that the lower part of her stomach was covered in blood, nothing else. We're sure it's a murder, but who murdered her?", he looked at me and I threw Kate a stern look. She took a notebook out of her bag and started writing something in it. I quickly thought of something that could help speed

up this mission tremendously. That's not what I wanted to know first, though. "And you've already interviewed the suspects?" I stared at the officer in hopes of finding out something we didn't know. "Yes, ma'am. We talked to Don Desmond; he wasn't suspicious..." "Okay, well, can we see the pictures now?" "This is all we've got." I analyzed all 4 photos that he had of Olivia's body. In the photos, her body was on the ground, but something was off. I knew it. The officer looked at me, and he knew, too. Olivia White wasn't dead.

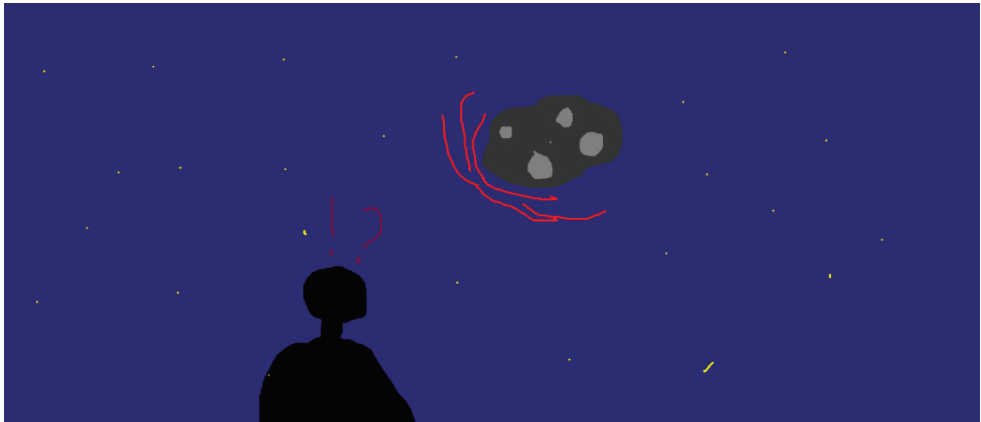
Being dead isn't fun at all. "How much longer am I going to be in here?" It was dark, I was waiting for someone, anyone, to open the door. After about 5 minutes, the small white door that led to this abandoned, gloomy room opened. A hand reached out to me, I grabbed it and pushed myself through the small entrance of the room. "Thanks, Neil." He had a troubled look on his face, I thought something had happened and I couldn't carry on with my plan. "What is it? Is something wrong?", I started panicking. What if someone found out? That wasn't supposed to happen. "Hey, no, calm down! Everything's fine and is going according to plan." I sighed; I walked over to Neil's desk, opened one of the drawers and took the knife that once had fake blood dripping all over it. Neil and I walked up to the door as he told me the plan. We had very little time until the police found out the truth, and by then I would be gone, far away. "We better get going." My dark black hair was up, which I never do, I was wearing a black suit and a black hat that I would take off later, it was just so nobody could recognize me. We waited for a bit before we walked out of the office, we didn't want to be early. Walking through the hallways was easy enough because there are new people entering and exiting the building every day. Nobody suspected anything. Neil grabbed my shoulder and wished me luck. I'm so glad he didn't kill me when he had the chance. I mean, how would you feel if you found out your husband hired his coworkers to kill you? As I walked out of the building, the sun was setting and it was the most beautiful sunset I'd ever seen, a mix of orange and red dominated, and all the different shades radiated from the sky, it was breathtaking. I was free.

mentor: Ivana Čale
institution: OŠ Žitnjak

Mateo Stojak

DISNEY ADVENTURE

It was an ordinary summer night and I looked at the clock. It was 9:00 pm. On the news the host talked about a little meteor that will soon fall in Croatia. I hurried out and looked up at the sky. THAT LITTLE METEOR WAS GOING STRAIGHT TOWARDS ME?!

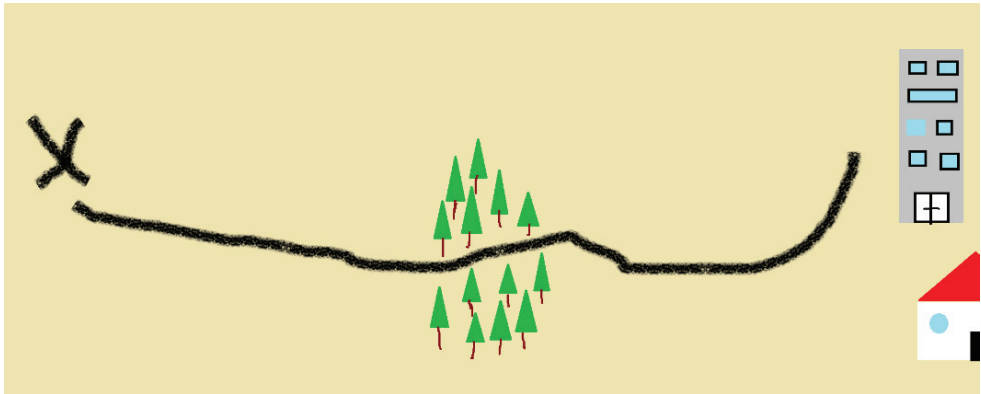


It hit the ground behind my house. I was so scared and the next moment a skeleton walked from that meteor. I ran into my house and quickly went under my bed. The skeleton also walked into my house and started to drink tea. "Well, that's weird," I said and he heard me. I got up but he was standing in front of me. He said: "Hello there, my name is Bob Disney. Yes, I'm Walt Disney's father." I froze. I was so happy and amazed at the same time. I said: "Are you alive?" He answered: "Of course I'm alive and I have powers to create animations like Micky Mouse, strange animals and if you want I can bring you to the Disney World." Of course I said YES. He created a portal. We went in it. That was a world where all Disney characters lived. Lots of sweets, all kinds of juices and other amazing things. I met Micky Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald the Duck and others. We walked all around the Disney World and finally I saw Walt Disney in his golden chair. We met and talked about Disney, why

he chose me and other things that you must not hear. I'm sorry. I came home so happy and I said goodbye to my dear friend which is no longer a skeleton Bob Disney.

Later..

I was chilling in the house and it was around 4 or 5 pm. I went outside to hang out with my friends. I was waiting for them and nobody showed up. I went to my house and fell asleep. I had a dream, something like a nightmare but it wasn't a nightmare. It was weird. It went like this: Bob Disney said: "Matthew you need to come to this place or we will..." A little earthquake woke me up. The map was on the table.



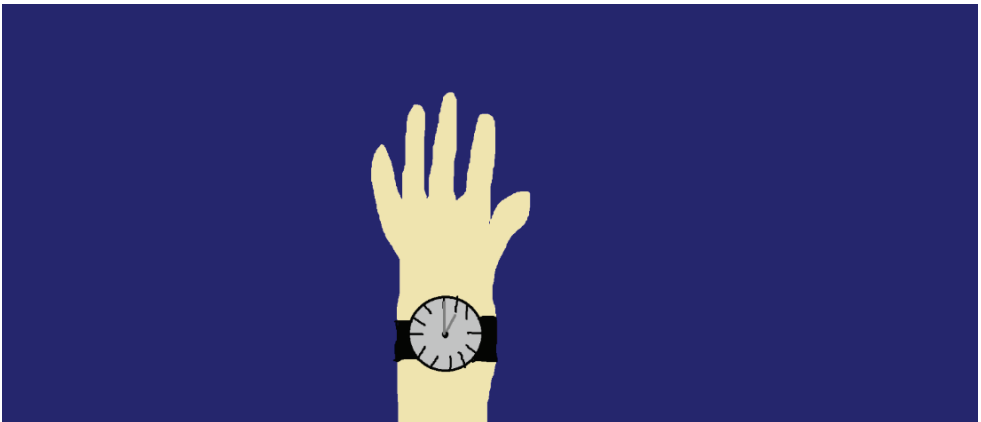
To get to the place I had to get out of the town and go through the woods. The very thought of that horrible forest made my blood run cold, but I had to do it to find out what was going on and if Bob Disney was OK. As soon as I left the house an even bigger earthquake struck. I went out of the city to the dark street. I was worried. Every second I felt that vibration of the earth. I saw a forest from a distance. I was at the beginning of that creepy and dark forest. I felt breathing behind my neck but no one was there. Step by step I heard rustling from the bush and the next moment a SCREAM. After half an hour I was finally out of the forest. I said: YESS, FINALLY I AM OUT OF THAT STUPID FOREST! And when I looked down the street there was someone or something standing there. When I approached it, the strongest earthquake so far and that thing disappeared. I continued and I was at the location. There was something drawn on the ground and when I got to the middle a portal appeared. That was Bob Disney. He barely made it through portal. He said with a weak voice: Matthew, these earthquakes are connected to Disney World. I asked: "How can I...?" an earthquake interrupted me. A crack appeared on

the ground. Bob continued: "You need to help us. Everyone is panicking because the whole Disney World is collapsing and we don't have anywhere to go." I said: "Take me to the Disney World."

I didn't believe what I saw. Everything was falling apart. All sweets and juices... EVERYTHING. I needed to see Walt Disney. We looked everywhere and we saw him letting all characters and animations to our world.



Walt Disney said: "We don't have much time, we need to get everyone to your world and yes, I know that's dangerous, but we don't have many options". I turned around and saw Micky Mouse stuck under one rock. I quickly ran to him and started pulling him. I barely got him when the strongest earthquake ever started to shake Disney World. The ground was collapsing under our feet andddd... UH we made it with everyone else. I said: "That was so close." Walt Disney asked: "Where are we going now?!"



We all sat on the rocks and started thinking. But...nothing. Hours and hours passed. And nothing. "OH I know... AH never mind". I looked at the clock - it was 1 am.

Then all of a sudden an IDEA. I knew exactly what to do. I said: "All right guys, here is the plan. When Bob said to me that I have to come to this location I had to go through the woods. And legend said that at the very end of the giant forest there is a beautiful castle waiting for someone who passes through that forest, but no one has EVER made it. So, if we join forces maybe but only maybe we can go through that horrible forest." And off we went. Half an hour later and we were close to the woods. When we got closer ... BOOM. That creature I saw earlier jumped in front of me but now he was 2x bigger. I was looking at him straight in his red eyes. He had long legs and hands and a creepy white smile.



We all froze, it was like he was trying to control our minds. Walt Disney said: "What do you want from us?" He didn't say anything. Then Bob Disney asked the same question. The same answer; nothing. And then I said: "WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM US?!" He just screamed and said: "Go back to where you came from. I warned you." Walt Disney said: "If you don't let us pass, we will fight you." He was just quiet and then his two legs turned into 4 and his two hands turned into 8. He was a true monster. Bob Disney created swords for everyone and said: "ATTACK!!!" We started heading towards him. We all jumped on him and started hitting with swords. We managed to cut off one of his legs. But a new leg grew on him. I said: "He is too powerful, we need something stronger." Bob and Walt Disney looked at each other. They said: "We have something but we need some time. Buy us some." And PAF I had two katanas in my hands. I looked at that creature and whispered: "This

is the end for you, big boy.” And I rushed on him, looked up and both Disneys were creating something. I stabbed him in the leg with katanas. But that didn’t do anything to him. What Bob and Walt Disney were doing was the only thing that could save us. After all Disney characters and I were on the ground, Bob said: “It’s over now, you ugly creature.” And, BAM, some dust fell on him and he just disappeared. “Well, that was difficult I said.” Thankfully all of us were OK.

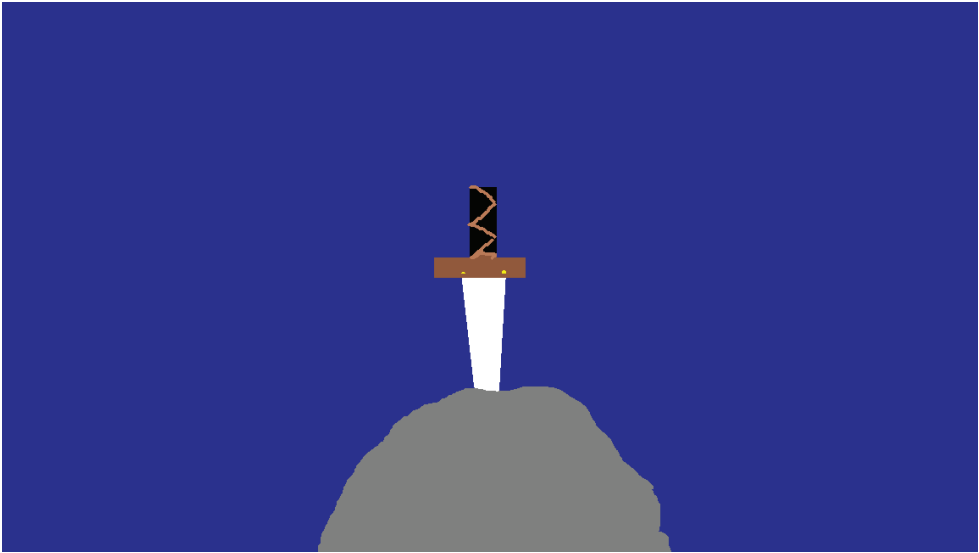
And we were again on our way. Although we defeated the monster, it was still scary. That ugly and creepy forest. But we had to do it because they didn’t have anywhere to go. It was a normal forest (at least we thought that). First steps were scary as hell. But as we walked, the road behind us slowly disappeared. Every stick that broke under our feet made us scream. We walked for about two hours and all that we could see was thorn. So scary and boring at the same time. We were finally out and we had to be quiet. You are now probably thinking: But Matthew why, what happened? A GIANT octopus was sleeping in front of us. She had only one eye, 15 legs and lots of teeth.



We were so scared but all of us knew exactly what to do ... to be quiet. She was huge and we couldn’t pass. “There just has to be another way,” Bob whispered. Then all of a sudden ... Stitch stepped on a stick. Luckily she didn’t wake up but one of her legs grabbed Stitch and pulled him away. We were stunned. Tic ... Tac...Tic...Tac... BOOM, she opened her one eye. We started screaming and running back to the forest. But she didn’t do anything. She put Stitch gently back to the ground and said: “Can you please chill for a moment.” We stopped screaming and set on the ground. She continued: “I’m sorry if I scared you. I didn’t mean to do that. So what are you doing in this dark and evil forest?” Walt Disney said: “How can we trust y...?” Bob

interrupted him: "We are looking for a magical castle somewhere in this forest." Octopus said: "Ooo, why didn't you say so. OK, I can bring you there but you need to help me." Walt Disney said: "What is the catch?" We had to find a sword in a rock and stab her in the eye so she could transform in a star that can bring us to the castle. We did take the deal. So we continued but this time there was no thorn. It was a beautiful big and shiny forest.

We were on our way to find that sword in a rock. We were walking so much that we started to hallucinate. Half an hour passed and we were on our location. We were all looking at it.

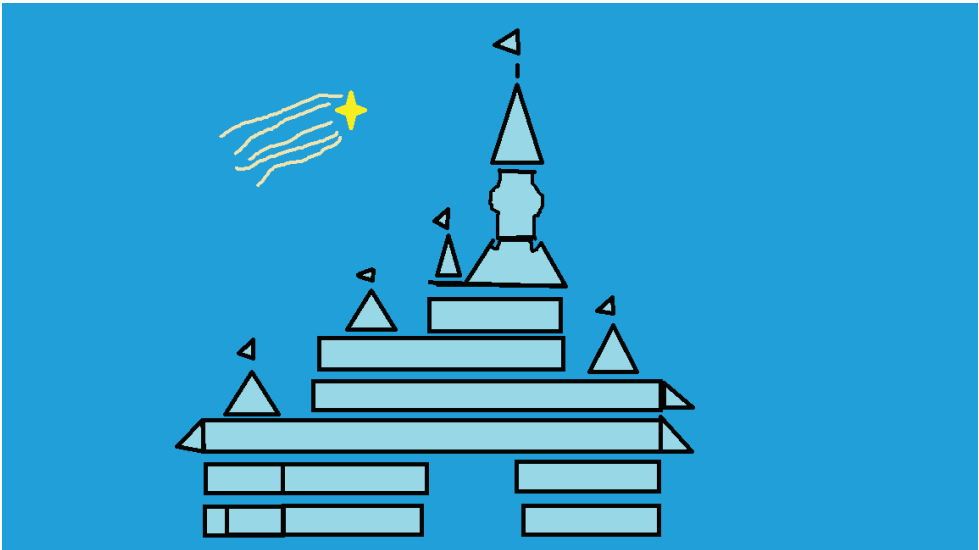


Walt Disney said: "Let's get to work." So every single Disney character tried to pull out that sword. But it didn't come out. Than Bob Disney tried and unexpectedly he failed to pull out that sword. After Bob, Walt Disney tried. But the same story ... nothing. Suddenly, everybody looked at me and just said: "Matthew, go ahead."

So I tried so hard to pull it out and the sword was in my hands. I said: "to infinity and beyond". Buzz Lightyear looked at me and said: "Hey that's my line." We all laughed and continued back to that octopus. As we walked Bob Disney came up to me and said: "Wow man, I can't believe that you're the chosen one. I am proud of you Matthew." 15 minutes later we were with that octopus again. "Oh, I see we have a descendant of King Arthur among us." She was looking at me. I said: "Now, shall I just stab you in the eye and that's it or what?" She replied: "Yes, that's it, and in case you are wondering, it won't hurt me, it will free me." So, I got closer and whispered:

"I'm sorry." One moment she had a sword in her eye and the next she became a beautiful star. She said: "Hop on guys we are going to that big and shiny castle." We all sat down on that star and in a second we were in the sky flying. We saw my town, that forest that we were in and a lot of other things. We flew for about 10 minutes at a very fast speed and then we saw it. The big, shiny and beautiful castle with a river below it. Walt with pleasure said: "Well, this is our new home." Everyone celebrated and we entered the castle. Bob Disney thanked the star and she said that she is going to stay and guard us. We were all thankful and happy that we got a new home. And we all lived happily ever after!

You all know that castle and a star approaching the castle at the beginning of every Disney movie, well, here we are.



mentor: Jasna Vidmar

institution: OŠ "Dr. Stjepan Ilijašević" Oriovac

Martina Mazor

THE LAKE OF TRAVEL

"Mary, find me if you can!" Elisabeth screamed.

Yes, she was fifteen, but she was still playing hide-and-seek with her half-sister. She found one weird lake a few days ago. This morning, she decided to come there. Now, she was standing in front of the lake. It wasn't there before. Elisabeth had a very sad childhood. Her mother, Anne Boleyn, died when she was three. Actually, her father, Henry VIII killed her. Actually, he said that he didn't want Anne anymore. After that, Elisabeth wasn't princess anymore, she was only a *lady*. When they named her for the first time *lady Elisabeth*, she asked, "Why?" Yesterday I was a princess, and now everyone calls me lady Elisabeth?" But it was a long time ago. The lake started changing colours. First it was red than yellow that turned pink, blue, brown, purple, orange, and after all that, it became colourful. Water started going up to Elisabeth and she started screaming. When water was all around her, she disappeared from Hatfield's forest in 1547. Around her there was only dark, everything else was gone.

At the same time, in Hatfield in 2022, around the same lake, there was another fifteen-year old girl. But, she was giving food to ducks. Her grandmother was a little further away. They came there because they were having a family picnic. Grandmother was sitting on a blanket and reading. The girl's name was Isabel. Suddenly, a hand started coming out of the lake. Isabel took the hand and pulled it. After a few minutes, there was a girl standing in front of Isabel wearing long red and gold dress, with red hair tucked in some hat, with awful necklaces, and her skin was unusually pale!

"Where am I?" the girl asked.

"In Hatfield, in park," Isabel answered.

"No, this isn't Hatfield. Hatfield is palace, and it definitely hasn't got a park!" the girl start screaming.

"Honey, this is Hatfield, but this is year 2022," grandma explained.

The girl looked very confused.

"Come on, let's get you into some normal clothes and after that I'll explain every-

thing to the two of you. OK?” grandma was talking with a very calm tone of voice.

“But... Who are you? What are you talking about?” the girl asked again, but she didn’t scream.

“Look, this is hard to explain, but we are your descendants. I’m Mary, like your sister, and this is my granddaughter, Isabel. Can we go now?” grandma uttered. “Yes, now we can go,” the girl said.

While they were walking home, Isabel asked, “And, what is your name?”

She replied, “I’m Elisabeth Tudor, daughter of Henry the 8th and Anne Boleyn.” “So, we must definitely get you some normal clothes. Do you know your size?” grandma asked Elisabeth when they came into the shop.

„My size? My maids just give my dresses,” Elisabeth said with a question mark hovering above her head.

„Of course you don’t... Well what do you say about this trousers? And this shirt? You should try it,” grandma said giving the clothes to Elisabeth.

“Madam, I need help. Well, as you should now, I can’t take off this dress alone,” Elisabeth said.

Grandma came into the changing room and helped Elisabeth. When she got out of the cabin, Isabel was shocked. Elisabeth was wearing ripped dark blue trousers and oversized red hoodie.

“Grandma? She still has some ugly hat and awful necklaces,” Isabel noticed. Grandma took off the necklaces and the hat. When she took off her hat, Elisabeth’s hair was in a net.

“Oh, we need to remove this from your hair,” grandma said and removed the net. Elisabeth’s hair was in braid.

“Oh honey, how can you wear this the whole day, every single day?” grandma hysterically asked.

“Nobody asks us. We must wear it like this,” Elisabeth answered with some coldness in her voice and attitude. When her hair was finally dissolved, she looked amazing.

“Oh honey, you look wonderful. Now, you’ll try more clothes and then we’ll go home. After a couple of hours, they were finally done. Grandma paid and they went home.

“Is someone hungry?” grandma asked.

“I am!” Isabel said.

Elisabeth didn’t say anything.

“Honey what about you?” grandma looked at Elisabeth.

“Well, I usually have dinner later, but I can eat something” Elisabeth replied.

Isabel and grandma served cheese, salami, jam and chocolate cream. Elisabeth tried jam, and she liked it. After dinner, grandma said, “Girls, now Isabel go to the bathroom, and off to bed after that. I’ll help Elisabeth”

Isabel wondered where Elisabeth would sleep.

“In your mother’s room,” grandma said and Isabel went to the bathroom.

When Isabel went to sleep, grandma helped Elisabeth brush her teeth saying, “You now, I waited for your arrival for years. When I was few years older than you, actually I was seventeen, I went to the past. Thirty-five years ago, I went to the past. Then your father was king of England. I was there especially close with your cousin, Thomas Howard. He was your mother’s uncle. We fell in love. When I came back to the 20th century, I had a child. My daughter was Thomas Howard’s daughter. Because she had one parent in the past and one in the present she died young. She died at age of twenty-five. Isabel never met her father. I stayed in the past for one year. Because you are in the future, you may stay here even longer. When was the last time you brushed your teeth?”

“We newer brush teeth, and we rarely shower,” Elisabeth answered.

“Listen to me, tomorrow is the first day of school. I called the principal this afternoon to tell her that and you will come to school with Isabel. I told him that you’re her cousin. School starts at 8:30 a.m. Before that, I’ll buy you a phone and Isabel will teach you all you need to know. Your uniform is in the cabinet.

In the morning grandma went to shopping. She bought a phone to Elisabeth with a phone case. At 8.a.m. grandma woke the girls up. She helped Elisabeth to get dressed. Grandma made to pony tails to both girls and drove them to school. “Issy!” someone screamed and came to Isabel.

“Lily, this is my cousin, Elisabeth, and Elisabeth, this is my best friend Lily” Isabel introduced Elisabeth to Lily. Lily was taller than Isabel. She had long brown hair in braids, green eyes and uniform like Isabel and Elisabeth.

“Nice to meet you Elisabeth. Can I call you Beth?” Lily asked on way that only she knew.

“Pleasure is mine, and you can call me Beth, if you want to,” Elisabeth answered very royally.

“Oh God! Are you kidding or you just sound like you are from the Middle Ages?” Lilly asked laughing.

“Actually...” Elisabeth started, but Isabel said, “She is just kidding, but now we must go to the classroom, the class starts in few minutes”.

After that, they went to the classroom.

“Issy, are you sitting with me?” Lily asked.

“*Oh, this girl is really annoying,*” Elisabeth was thinking.

Isabel was confused. “It’s OK, sit with her, I’ll be behind you two,” Elisabeth said before Isabel decided.

“May I sit here?” a boy asked Elisabeth.

He was tall, taller than Elisabeth. He had blue eyes and light brown hair. He was wearing the uniform, too.

“And you are...” Elisabeth asked rudely.

“Oh, listen to me, now. I’m Caleb. Like ... the most famous boy in the school. I see that your dear stupid friends didn’t tell you anything about me. I’ll sit here,” Caleb commented even more rudely than Elisabeth.

“Well, if you are that famous, why are you sitting near me?” Elisabeth started provoking.

“Well, all my friends are sitting with their girlfriends and you are sitting alone, so...” Caleb said.

It was pretty weird to Elisabeth. Like, they are fifteen and they are all having girlfriends. She couldn’t say anything else, because teacher came to the classroom. They had math for the first class. Elisabeth didn’t know anything because she didn’t learn those things. But, it wasn’t that hard for her. All the time, Caleb was staring at her.

“You are staring,” Elisabeth said to him.

“Don’t imagine things,” he answered.

When the last class ended, Isabel and Elisabeth went home on foot.

“Did you see who was I sitting next to?” Elisabeth said.

“Oh, I did. He actually doesn’t have a lot of friends. Just few. And he told you that he has a lot of friends, but they are sitting with their girlfriends. In school it is actually a rule to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend,” Isabel commented with irony in her voice.

“How did you know what he told me?” Elisabeth asked.

“He told me the same thing last school year,” Isabel explained.

“Granny, we are here!” Isabel screamed when they came home.

“Finally! Lunch is on the table, I must go out, don’t wait for me. You can have dinner. I’ll go to my old friend. She is really sick, she can’t walk,” grandma explained and left.

After lunch, they did their homework and Isabel was watching TV.

“What are you doing?” Isabel asked Elisabeth when she came to the couch.

"I'm going to read a book," Elisabeth said.

"Oh, come on, leave it, let's talk," Isabel said.

The two of them talked for hours.

"Elisabeth, your finger! It disappeared!" Isabel screamed.

"Wait, what?" Elisabeth didn't notice.

"I'll call granny, she'll know what's happening, and what we should do next." Isabel, in panic, called grandma.

"Granny come here, fast!" Isabel burst out when grandma answered her call. "Calm down, what's happening?" grandma asked. She never panicked. "Elisabeth's finger disappeared! You should come," Isabel almost started crying.

"I'm coming" grandma said and end hung up.

"What happened?" grandma's friend asked. Her friend was Margaret Beaufort. "Elisabeth's finger disappeared" grandma said.

"Thank God!" Margaret said.

Grandma kissed her on the cheek and went home.

"Girls!" grandma shouted out.

"Elisabeth, you're returning to past. When you came, you must have forgotten that you were here. When you come back, in 1547, it will be yesterday. And nobody is allowed to know that you were here," grandma say firmly.

Few moments after this, Elisabeth disappeared.

"Thank God, she is in the past now. I'll call the principal and tell him that Elisabeth went to America with her parents and that she'll go to school there. And, now the dishes, and after that we'll visit my friend," Grandma added and called the principal.

When Isabel washed up, she and grandma went to Margaret Beaufort.

When they came, Margaret said, "Oh Mary, you finally came!"

"Yes, I did lady Margaret and Isabel is with me."

Margaret just smiled and didn't say anything.

"Sit down. Did my great granddaughter go back to the past?" she asked.

Isabel was confused.

"Issy, this is the lady Margaret Beaufort, she actually didn't die. She came here when I was little girl, and I'm helping her all the time," grandma explained Isabel. They were sitting and talking long into the night.

"Oh, I am at home, finally!" Elisabeth shouted out.

"And where have you been? Maybe with Thomas Seymour again? Where is he!?" Mary screamed. She was angry. Time didn't stop, obviously.

"Oh, I was in a forest, and I was scared that I'll get lost, so I'm happy you found

me. May we go to the castle now?” she asked.

She was nervous, but she was hoping that Mary didn't notice.

“Yes, but you still must explain yourself why you smell so differently, and why are your teeth so clean,” Mary said.

“Oh, I will. And now I now that I will come faster than you to the castle!” Elisabeth said and started running.

Elisabeth never told anyone that she was in the future, but, who would believe her? Caleb asked few times about Elisabeth, but Isabel ignored him.

*mentor: Ružica Lušić**institution: OŠ Ivana Kozarca Županja**Uma Šabanović*

INVISIBLE

The summer break was amazing, but only for one part of it. I am talking about the part when you are taking a break from school and all your other work. Later, it turns into sleeping until noon, being lazy all the time, overeating, drinking and being unsatisfied. This was my experience, and since I have started it, I will finish my story. You can choose to believe it or try it out for yourself.

One day I woke up just before noon and thought: “All the same film and pop-rock stars are on my walls again!” On one side, there’s Danny DeVito, which my mom forced me to put up, to show that looks don’t matter in talent and hard work. On the other side, there’s Damiano David, the winner of Eurovision, who I put up to show that good looks can also matter. Directly across from me are the members of the band Pink Floyd. They seem very serious, and they help me feel more responsible. Dad forced me to put them up, and he said that one day I will be grateful he did so, when I grow up. Quote, responsibility and professionalism before anything. I look up, and right above me is my pink ceiling lamp. That fancy lamp was basically a waste of money as my TV is my main source of light anyway. It might just also be my eco-awareness craziness. Anyway, I look behind me, and there is the same window and the same curtains. And on the table, most likely lies the same usual breakfast. I move the curtains and look at the apartment building across the street. Everything is peaceful, quiet and everything always the same. If this neighborhood paid for being monotone, it would go bankrupt. I thought about how the family from the second floor must live like. A mother, a father, a boy, and a dog. I could not imagine it so well, but I somehow assumed that everything is how it should be in their lives. That thought kept lingering in my mind the entire day. In the evening, after another movie, I turned my TV off and wished I would wake up in a situation I have never been in. I wished for something that would make this summer break like no other. I wished for something special.

The night went by surprisingly quickly. I woke up, moved the curtains again, and look! I did not see the apartment building across the street from me, rather, I was

in it! Do you call that teleportation, imagination, a dream...? I wouldn't know. Well, I found myself in the middle of their living room, which the sun seemed to directly shine upon. I knew that I was in the apartment of "the perfect family" because in front of me sat their little dog and, surprisingly enough, greeted me: "Good morning, neighbor!" God, a dog that talks? I got goosebumps. I spoke barely above a whisper: "Good morning to you too, friend." In that moment, next to me, just like a lightning bolt, my neighbor walked right by me. I froze at the thought of her asking me what I was doing in their apartment. However, she did not notice me. After her, I saw her husband, my neighbor. He put his laptop in his bag and almost hit me with it. He did not notice me either. What's even crazier, is that their boy went right through me! When I put the pieces together and realized what was going on, I almost screamed, but the dog was quicker: "Yes, you're invisible!"

Oh my God, what now? So many possibilities, so many ideas went through my head. My perfect ones, do you know how to be late for work, do you know how to be angry, do you know how to raise your voice? I wouldn't think so, because they always did everything by their perfect plan. I decided to shake their routine up a bit. I took their car keys from the table and put them in my pocket. Their dog looked at me judgmentally and spoke: "You wouldn't," so I defied the odds and nodded: "Oh yes I would." I stood in the corner of the room. They were almost ready to leave. They put the boy's backpack on his shoulders, petted their dog and looked at each other, exclaiming in unison: "Where are the car keys?" The wife had worry lacing her voice: "Dear, you were the last one to drive last night. They must be with you." The husband was slightly more relaxed, yet still worried: "Yes, I was the last one to drive, but I leave the keys in the same place every single time." The woman only got more stressed: "But dear, if you put them in the same place yesterday, they would be here now." The husband seemed almost annoyed at her worry: "Then you must have accidentally moved them." The wife almost lost it: "Impossible! I know what I'm doing!" The husband scoffed at her: "Yeah, yeah, just like the time you left our entire suitcase in the hotel!" The wife got offended: "Well, if you would have helped me pack, maybe I would have remembered!"

While they were both accusing each other of the car key situation, and in all that, bringing up their past, I asked the dog what it was like living in this family. He told me it was amazing and that he couldn't even fathom that one sweet look and a tail wag would earn him a family and a home. I looked at him in a sort of shock, what is this fuzzy creature talking about? He noticed the shock on my face, and then he explained that the family adopted him. That was two years ago. The weather was warm

and sunny, but a summer storm was coming, and thunder was on its way, it was the topic of everyone's conversations. Thunder! Oh no! He noticed two young people pushing a stroller with a baby inside in a hurry. He went near them and looked at them sweetly. They crouched down and petted him. He saw his opportunity to hide with them from the storm. He followed them and whined. They turned around and couldn't resist that sweet gaze and the tail wagging. He ended up in their apartment, and from that day on, he was a part of the family which he loved the most. They take him on walks, feed him, wash him, play with him. And in return he protects them from thieves and potential danger. At that moment, he stopped for a moment, looked at me and said: "Oh, the irony! How would I ever protect them from an invisible form of danger? I am a dog for professional thieves, well more of a detective, but whatever." I stopped in my praise of him, scared of him proclaiming himself Sherlock Holmes or Poirot.

The argument only continued, with no sign of stopping soon. The dog and I looked at each other, and then he spoke: "Do you think this is okay?" I shrugged and shook my head "no": "It isn't, but it's not fair when you bark all night either!" The dog scoffed: "Of course I bark, it's in my job description." I mean, he wasn't wrong, so I was speechless. I thought that the situation would have calmed down a bit by now, but all I saw were two seriously angry adults arguing. I looked at the dog and asked: "Do you want to carry the keys back to them?" He mockingly laughed at me: "No way. If you're invisible, you aren't stupid. You give them back." I had no idea how it would work out. I couldn't just put them back, that would be suspicious. So, out of ideas, I asked him: "But how?" He shrugged and spoke: "I don't know, Einstein." In that moment, I realized I went way over the line, this was too much. I only wanted them to get a bit worried, I didn't want a major argument to spark. I took the keys out of my pocket and wondered where to put them. Somewhere neutral, so they wouldn't mutually accuse each other. I put them in front of the boy's feet. He crouched down, picked up the keys and took them to his parents. They looked at him with bliss and picked him up, praising him and thanking him. There was peace again, a sort of contentment within the family. The dog looked at me and gave me a small nod, then said: "A little surprise is always good."

I opened the curtains to check if the family was in the car. I saw them enter, but then, the view was from my room! Not from their living room. A small smile spread across my face, and I thought how sometimes "invisible people" can make a significant impact on our lives.

mentor: Ana Šapina
institution: OŠ Brezovica

Petra Tešija

A WALK TO REMEMBER

It was a beautiful Sunday morning when I woke up. The sun was starting to rise over the horizon. It illuminated my whole house. I thought it was a perfect morning for a long walk to clear my head and thoughts. I stepped outside and took a deep breath. The air was fresh and (kind of) chilly. Birds were chirping, and you could hear calming sounds of leaves rustling. I left my house and continued walking on the dirt path that led to an endless field. I could feel the damp grass touching my feet. As I walked, I let my mind wander, thinking about all the things I was grateful for. I was grateful for this beautiful day, the fresh air, and the warm sun on my skin. I was grateful for my health and the ability to enjoy simple pleasures. Also, I was grateful for my now-gone family and friends and the love and support they gave me. This also reminded me of my brother who passed away at an early age and that you should always be good to everyone and enjoy every little moment with them because you never know when is the last time you'll see them. It made my eyes water a little bit, thinking about all the moments we had together.

After a while, I came to a road that split up into two paths. One led uphill to the not-so-big forest and the other path led downhill, towards the clear lake. I stopped for a moment, unsure which way to go. But the downhill path is the faster way home, so I accepted the challenge and chose the uphill path. The forest was full of life, with birds singing and animals popping out of nowhere. The trees provided shade overhead, blocking out the harsh rays of the sun. The air was cool and fresh and I could feel the sweat beginning to appear on my forehead as I climbed higher and higher. After a while, I came to a clearing. In the centre of the clearing was a small pond. I walked over to the pond and sat down on a nearby rock, taking a moment to rest and catch my breath. I glanced down at the ground. My figure was crouched. The second I looked up at the pond surrounded by flowers and the water sparkling, I got that *deja vu* and realised I am in the same place I was 50 years ago as a little girl. That brought me back to the good old days when nothing really mattered.

As I sat there, I couldn't help but think about the beauty and majesty of nature. It

was moments like these that made me appreciate the world around me and all the wonders it had to offer. I also couldn't help but think about the fragility of life, and how important it was to cherish and protect the environment. After a few minutes, I stood back up and continued my walk. The forest grew thicker, making it more difficult to navigate but I didn't mind, I was enjoying the challenge. Eventually, I reached the top of the hill. The view was stunning, with a scenery of the surrounding countryside. I could see for miles in every direction and the sight took my breath away. I stood there for a while, feeling a sense of achievement. I had to start back down the journey back down was just as enjoyable as the climb up. As I walked, I thought about the lessons I had learned on my walk. I learned that life is precious and should be loved. I learned that nature is beautiful and should be protected. And most importantly, I learned that the journey is just as important as the destination. I arrived back at my house feeling refreshed. I knew I was always going to remember the lessons I had learned on my walk.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko

Darin Goršić

THE LEGEND OF JUNINHO

The story begins in a secluded village in Brazil where a little boy named Juninho started his football career. His family was poor, so they could not afford football shoes to train at the club, but that did not stop him; he played barefoot. They had a match for the weekend; he was in the starting lineup but did not have shoes to play in. He asked his friend to borrow his pair, to which his friend agreed. The weekend came, and the match was about to start. Juninho's parents came to watch and support him. That day a mysterious man came to the game, too. He was a scout for the most notorious Brazilian team Santos. Juninho noticed him and played the best he could. After the match, the scout called Juninho and his parents to the side and said he wanted the young man to try out for Santos. Juninho's parents said they did not have the finances for the trip and the club, to which the scout answered that the club would pay for everything because Juninho was so talented. They wanted him to play for them.

Juninho talked with his parents, and they finally agreed. The scout said the manager would come next week and take Juninho to the club. The manager went as the scout had said and took Juninho to the club. Firstly, they went to the club canteen where his future teammates were waiting for him. He introduced himself to the team and got to know all of them. Juninho felt an instant connection with a player named **Damião**. **Damião** was the team captain and the goal scorer of the team.

The next day Juninho had his first training session with the team. It was the first training session of the season, so they played a match the whole time. Juninho originally wanted to play as a defender. Still, the coach saw his potential and put him on the left wing. The coach was right because Juninho played great on the left wing that day.

The club organized a friendly match on Friday, and Juninho was in the starting lineup. Friday came, and Juninho and the others were putting on their kits and football shoes. The trainer and the captain, **Damião**, gave an inspirational speech to the team. When the speech was over, they went out on the field. The match started, and

both teams were playing equally well. It was the last minute of the game, and the ball got to Juninho. He started dribbling, and he successfully dribbled past seven players. He took a shot and scored in the top right corner. Juninho and his teammates began celebrating together and performed a dance called Samba.

As the training sessions continued, Juninho bonded with everyone and became everyone's friend. As he got older, his football skills grew and improved. When he turned sixteen, he was called up to the senior team. In training, he tried extremely hard and gave everything humanly possible in every session.

The first match of the senior team came, and Juninho was subbed on in the game's last minutes. The air was filled with tension. The score was even, and Santos got a penalty. The captain came to Juninho and told him to take it and not be scared. Juninho walked to the penalty spot and placed the ball on the site. He took a runup and did a Panenka penalty. For the rest of his career, he stayed at Santos and won many trophies. He won 2 Ballons d'Or and was the only South American player to do it. He was also a part of the world cup and won it for his country and his parents, who supported him from the start.

Juninho's story is a story of a small village boy becoming a first-class football star due to his talent, persistence, and a lot of hard work.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko

Petra Rebić

CULINARY DISASTER ON CHRISTMAS DAY

It was last year. My family went to Germany, and I stayed home with my grandmother. We played some games and talked about how we would spend Christmas together.

It was the day before Christmas. I offered to cook lunch for us. She said it was a great idea and would help me if needed.

We went to sleep, but most of the night, I was tossing and turning all nervous about the next day's lunch. The big day came. Grandma bought and cut the ingredients, so she made a French salad in a mayonnaise sauce. My task was to prepare the turkey and put it in the oven, let it bake and, after some time, add the potatoes. When grandma finished with hers, she went for a walk with her friend Marge, and I had to put my dish in the oven. When I put the turkey into the oven, I had a little nap because I was very sleepy from last night. I didn't plan to fall asleep, just a short rest until my grandma returned, which was supposed to be 45 minutes. But grandma messed up my plans by staying out longer, and I slept more than I should have. A smoke detector woke me up. At first, I thought it was buzzing in my head. But then I smelled terrible smoke and saw it coming from the kitchen. I jumped from the sofa like my toes were on fire. I dashed to the kitchen to take out the turkey. Or what was left of it. I jumped across the kitchen to the window and opened it.

Smoke was slowly coming out, and I had to throw the turkey into the trash. There was no more turkey. There wasn't any lunch anymore. I didn't know what to tell my grandma.

But it is not over till I say so. So, I put the potatoes into the oven and baked them with extra caution and care. When they were done, I put them on the table I had decorated earlier. I wrote a little note to my grandma saying I was sorry for burning the turkey. The turkey was sorry, too.

When grandma came home, she was confused because she did not see the turkey

on the table, and she understood what had happened. Nevertheless, she read my note and told me that the same thing happened to her once and that the next lunch would be better.

That is if I don't fall asleep again.

mentor: Davorka Nekić

institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko

Dina Marković

ACADEMY OF MAGIC

Several months ago, a girl named Grace had to change schools. The school she was moving to was no ordinary school like the ones you all know. It was a magical school where all-powerful creatures, witches, and warlocks could freely express themselves through their magic.

Grace could have been more social when it came to people. But for her, meeting new people was the way to feel more fear and anxiety.

When she was about to enter the Academy of Magic, a magical purple balloon spawned at her house and teleported her to where the Academy was.

She couldn't believe her eyes when she stepped out of the balloon. Two of her childhood friends were standing there at the Academy entrance. Alan and Lizzy, a well-known faces from the past.

Grace shouted: *No way, it's you, guys!*

When Alan and Lizzy recognized the voice, they rushed to Grace and hugged her.

At that moment a teacher called all new students to the main hall. She wanted to give the students the keys to their dormitory rooms.

While the students were in the hall teacher asked them if they had any questions. A girl named Diamond asked where they kept all the magic. Instantly, Drake, a boy with the evil present in his eyes, replied swiftly with a big smirk: *You wanna steal some magic, ha?* Diamond got mad, lost control of her power, and used her magic to get revenge for his words.

She could control bodies and lifted Drake in the air and threw him to the wall. Seeing that lack of respect for the Academy and the unnecessary use of magic, the teacher got furious and said we were not each other's threat. Not now. Not ever.

The teacher said, *In this school, we learn about magic, get to know and control our powers and train persistently to become as powerful as possible to defeat the Demonic Academy.*

They test their students' powers to see what kind of magic they have in them. But here and now, some of them still need to get their powers.

Days passed and looked the same. They spent all the time either in their rooms or training. Everything was so dark like there was some occult energy lurking at them.

Suddenly a ghost came from the wall:

Hello, my dears! I'm Yokashikoki.

Grace asked her friends Alan and Lizzy why the ghost flickered.

Feel free to use this pen for writing or drawing, Yokashikoki said, winked at Grace, and then disappeared.

Alan said that he thought the ghost was flirting with Grace, but Lizzy made fun of his idea, and Alan was embarrassed.

Guys, this is not a joke. I want to know what it meant, Grace said nervously.

Let me try to write something, she continued.

But nothing whatsoever happened. Grace asked if they knew someone who knows to draw. The catch may be giving the pen to a person who can draw. Lizzy grabbed her hand and took her to the room she was never in.

The room belonged to Melody, Lizzy's friend who was a master when art was concerned.

Look, Melody, this is the pen that the ghost gave us several minutes ago, and it said that we could feel free to use it, after which it winked., Grace started.

It must be the magic pen they were talking about, but how did the ghost give it to you and not someone else?, Melody was wondering.

I don't know. Could you draw a doll on which we could test our magic?, Grace asked nicely.

Melody replied reluctantly: *I can, but it is illegal. I'm scared that they might expel me or, even worse – transfer me to the Demonic Academy.*

Lizzy was curious: *Why is everyone so scared of the Demonic Academy?*

Melody said very quietly, gazing around as if she was afraid someone was there and might overhear them: *Well, I don't know much about it, but...I heard that only evil witches and warlocks go there. And if you break any of the Academy of Magic rules, you will be sent there even though you don't deserve it. That's why I can't use the pen. I'm too afraid to use it, you see.*

And then, out of nowhere, the alarm announcing the danger went on.

One of the teachers went from room to room, saying that even if they were not ready for a battle, they needed to take part in the upcoming one and defend the Academy.

Everyone got out except for Grace and Melody. They stayed in the room because they didn't have the powers yet and couldn't participate in the magical battle.

They watched all their Academy friends fight and felt deeply saddened for not being there with them.

Out of the blue, Grace stated confidently: *Give me the pen. I know what we need to do.*

She started to draw the creature like the one who gave her the pen. Melody was scared they would get in trouble because they were breaking the rules.

But Grace carried on. She drew the ghost the best she could, and then it came out of the paper and said:

I'm the principal of the Demonic Academy, and you two are the only ones who tried to stop my students. No one has ever figured out how to use the pen. I'm proud of the Academy of Magic! You are worthy opponents! Now, let's stop this battle, shall we?

The girls were so confused.

(Several hours later)

A lot of things became evident in the past several hours.

Drake and Diamond both got expelled from the Magic Academy because they were the ones who started attacking the Demonic Academy first, and it was them who started the magical battle between the two Academies.

Grace and Melody got bonus grades because they stopped the battle showing their strength even without the magical powers.

The Academy teachers said that they could use the pen. And in the end, everything turned out OK. At least for the time being.

Who knows what is waiting for them in the future...

mentor: Tatjana Kristek

institution: OŠ Vladimira Becića Osijek

Bruna Dagen

THIS GIRL - HSTSBD

In this world, there is a girl. This girl is full of thoughts, sadness, happiness, joy, anger, and even love. She is a mess and she knows it. She has already accepted it. In this world, there are mean, loving, angry, 'nice', jealous, funny, smart, and sad people. She is aware of it. When she looks around herself, she can see faces, blank ones, even colorful and messy ones. This girl is aware of her beauty since she was little. As she got older, she realized that to people around her, that is all she is. She wanted them to acknowledge her the way she acknowledges other people. But they never really did. She is not a sad girl. Her mind is full of words, sentences, lyrics, and quotes. She finds comfort in book characters, books in general, films, and songs. Not just any type of song, real songs. She has never understood why people around her do not get them or enjoy them the same way she does. Not only has she found comfort in books, movies, and songs but she has also found comfort in the people who make them. She believes the people who make them are masterminds. They are different. She wants to be one of them. She wants to create, and make people feel, and think, she wants them to understand. She does not understand how some people do not feel the beauty of the cinematography, acting, and the beauty of film. She loves to feel. But this girl cannot sing nor write songs and has never tried to act. She simply cannot be these people. This girl has many problems in her life. She has learned how to deal with them, how to hide them, and even ignore them. She had to. But sometimes she breaks. She breaks into a million pieces and just stays there. She has to feel. When she knows the timing is right, she gets up. But the new start never erases the cause of breakage. She is a happy girl, even when she is not. Little things make her feel the happiness she deserves. When she walks down the street, she absorbs her surroundings, it is all in the details. When she hangs out with the people she loves, she matches their happiness until she feels it too. Always fake it until you make it. But there is also some joy in her life too. People can only bring joy. At least that is what she thinks. But not just any people. People that matter to her. Sometimes just their existence makes her feel. But this girl also feels anger, too much

anger. Just like happiness and joy, it is all in the details. She cannot control it. She has to learn to control it, just like everyone else. But does she? Anger is her favorite feeling, it makes her question everything. It tests her. She enjoys it. But anger is not the only feeling that makes her feel that way. There is also love. She would call herself a hopeless romantic. She believes love contains all the feelings she feels. She has only ever read about love, but what happens when the story ends? She thinks. She feels. She questions this world. In this entire world, is there love like in the books? Does the love she reads about have to be just a made-up feeling like everything else in the book is? All the details she sees around her, no matter where she is? She never seems to see the love she wishes to feel in the future like the one she reads about. But that is why she is a hopeless romantic. She loves love no matter what. Sometimes she wishes to feel alone. She needs to feel peace. That is what she thinks about at the end of the day, maybe she should feel lonely, but never alone.

“We have mirrorballs in the middle of a dance floor because they reflect light, they are broken a million times and that’s what makes them so shiny. We have people like that in society too. They hang there and every time they break, it entertains us. When you shine a light on them, it’s this glittering, fantastic thing, but then a lot of the time when the spotlight isn’t on them, they’re just- they’re just still there, up on a pedestal, but nobody’s watching them.” – Taylor Swift

mentor: Pamela Grozdanić
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

Emma Bubić

HOPE

In 1917, a little girl was born. She was from Italy, but her family moved to Rijeka. Her name was Sophi. She grew up to be the best woman on Earth, she never said a bad word about anyone or anything, she loved life, and it almost ruined her.

When she was 22, she was volunteering at the hospital, where she met a young man. He was from Italy as well. He introduced himself, but Sophi didn't like his name so I will use her version of the name instead of the real one.

Sophi: "Hmm, I don't really like your name, it doesn't suit you. I will just call you Liam."

And she really did that, she called him Liam.

Back then, women didn't date younger men, it just wasn't considered to be normal. So when he introduced himself, he said he was two years older. Sophie thought that he was 22. He also said that he had already served in the army.

They fell in love after a short period of time. Soon after, they got married. They lived in a big and beautiful apartment. Sophi was so in love, and she thought Liam was as well. Sophi found out that she was pregnant with a girl and she couldn't have been happier.

However, Liam got a phone call from Rome. They told him that he had to go back to Italy because he had to serve in the army. Obviously, he couldn't lie to Sophi anymore. He had to tell her the truth. He said that he had lied to her and that he was two years younger than he really said he was, and that he had to go in the army. So he left her, pregnant and alone.

She forgave him and said she would wait for him. But he didn't do the same thing. When he was in Rome, he met a girl and cheated on Sophi, the woman who gave him everything, the woman who was waiting for him back at home with his child, the best woman on Earth.

The girl from Italy also got pregnant. Poor girl was only seventeen years old when that happened to her and her parents kicked her out of the house. She was lost and didn't know where to go, so she asked Liam for help. He didn't know what to do so he sent her to Rijeka, to his wife Sophi. Sophi, being so kind and generous, didn't want to kick her out. She couldn't kick out a pregnant child on the street. But she also knew that she couldn't keep her in her house forever. So she sent her to Liam's parents, who were Italian and really stubborn so they kicked her out and bought her a plane ticket back to Rome. To this day no one knows what happened to her.

Liam came back home and said that he was sorry, that he didn't know what was happening, that he loved her and things like that. Unfortunately, she forgave him, because being good was in her nature. She deserved the whole world, but the world didn't deserve her.

They had another child, this time a boy and his name was Luca. Soon after he was born, Sophi was pregnant again. One day, their life was interrupted by severe bombing so Sophi had to hide. She was holding Luca in her one hand, and one-year-old Luna in another one while being pregnant with the third child. They hid in a bunker. Luca was just a baby, only few months old, and he died being poisoned. Luckily, Luna, Sophi, and her unborn child miraculously survived. After losing a child and having to take care of her two other girls, Sophi was exhausted.

Soon the war ended and Rijeka became independent. The Italians moved back to Italy because they were scared that they were going to get shoot at. Liam was one of those Italians. A lot of his friends were already dead and he was scared for his life. On his way to Italy he didn't bring his passport, because he knew that as an Italian soldier, he would probably die. Being worried about his life, Liam made a new passport. He lied about his real name and called himself Liam, just like Sophi did. Remembering the day when he met Sophi, he also lied about his age and told them he was 28. Sophi and the kids were supposed to come with him as well but they couldn't. Sophie's entire family moved to Italy and she wanted to do that as well but the government wouldn't let her leave because she was really smart and they needed someone like her in the country.

In spite of her forgiving nature, no one was there for Sophi when she needed help, except her little angels, her two daughters. They were her only hope, the only light in her life, the only reason she didn't give up. When she was 39 she met a handsome, tall man who brought a smile on her face after a long time. She finally found someone

who cared about her and who was just as good person as she was. She was in love with him more than ever, and he felt the same. His name was Harry, and soon they had a son. He wasn't an easy child. When he was little, he would always run out of the house. On one occasion, Sophi bought a big bag of sugar, and hid it because it wasn't easy to get it. George found out that the bag was in there so he locked himself in there and started eating sugar. After realizing that George was missing, they started to look for him. First, they looked outside because of George's tendency to run away. They even called the police. After some time, Luna found him in the closet, sleeping with his hands covered in sugar. Oh yes, the boy was a handful.

Harry got a job offer to work in school, not as a teacher, but as a janitor. It wasn't his greatest choice but he was happy as long as he could provide for his family. Sophi also got the job as a cleaning lady in the same school. So all of them, Sophi, Harry, Luna, Maya and George, moved to a small apartment that was part of the school. Someone always needed something and they couldn't get any peace. There was always someone knocking at the door. But they were still happy and no matter what happened, they were always a family, and family was supposed to stick together. Even though Harry wasn't Maya's and Luna's real dad, he loved them as they were his.

He had long curly hair and whenever he was sitting, Maya would sit behind him and play with his hair. He loved it when she was doing that, and so did she.

One day, a big car was parked in front of the school. Harry went to see who that was. When he opened the gate he saw a man standing there. The man introduced himself as Liam. Harry heard the stories about him, so he was in a state of shock. He told Liam to wait for a second. He ran back upstairs and told Sophi.

Sophi: "Who was that?"

Harry: "Liam is here."

Sophi was left speechless, but after a moment of silence she turned to Harry and said, "Bring him inside."

Once again, Sophi showed her good nature. After everything that Liam had done to her, she still welcomed him in. She didn't even say a bad word about him, not once. Maya heard what Harry said so she quickly called Luna. She rushed in her room. Luna was jumping over a skipping rope.

Maya: "He came..."

Luna: "Who?"

Maya: "Dad..."

Luna just stopped. She was standing alone in the room left in a state of shock, just

like Harry a few moments ago. She didn't say anything, until she heard a familiar voice coming from the kitchen. It was her dad. After years and years of him being gone she finally saw him. Maya didn't really care because she didn't even know him. He left when she was one years old. But Luna did remember him. She ran to the kitchen and hugged him. They all talked peacefully. Liam just wanted to tell them that he was moving back to Rijeka, and that he would love to spend some time with the girls. After that day Luna finally had the chance to spend her time with her dad. She was really happy.

Maya, Luna and George, have grown up now. Luna fell in love and moved to Italy, George met someone as well and moved in with her and Maya did the same thing. She started building her house with the most beautiful view, and was doing that with the love of her life.

One day, Liam came to the place where they were building their house. He was getting old. He stepped on a block, looked at the view and said:

"I will grow old here beautifully, I can't wait."

Maya just laughed at him and said:

"You will spend as many days here as much as I did with you."

Few years after that, Maya got a call. It was from Luna:

Luna: "Dad passed away..."

Maya: "..."

Luna: "I just want to know if you will come to the funeral"

Maya: "I'm sorry for your loss, but I will not."

Luna: "Yeah...I figured, just wanted to check."

Liam was nothing to Maya but a stranger, a stranger who hurt her mom so much.

All of them had children, and then grandchildren. And guess what, I'm one of them. Sophi and Harry grew old together and stayed happy until the end. Sophi when through so much and she had never lost hope. In the end, she really did get her happy ending, which helps me remember that there is absolutely nothing bad about letting people go and finding new happiness. So don't be afraid to do that. You never know what kind of beautiful rainbow will come after the storm.

*mentor: Davorka Nekić**institution: OŠ Ivana Gorana Kovačića Vrbovsko**Tamara Kljajić*

STEPMOTHER

My name is Lexi. And this is my story.

I was born to a wealthy father; his name was Leo. He was never home, so I spent all my days with well-paid nannies who cared for me. When I was 14, my dad met a woman who soon became my stepmother. Her name was Clara. She never liked me, and the feeling was mutual. Unfortunately for me, after six months, they got married. Most of the time, my stepmother and I were alone in the mansion, with my father constantly working and travelling. We mostly spent time quarreling. I started spending more time in my room which was my shelter and my place of tranquility. One day while trying to find my childhood toy, I found some paintbrushes, so I started painting. Soon painting became my passion. I painted hundreds of pictures and had more ideas about what to paint next. But one day, my stepmother came into my room while I was painting and, seeing how messy it was, shouted: *Lexi, what is this? You must clean your room right now!*

Of course, I didn't pay any attention to her. I should have, though. Two days later, when I returned from school and entered my room, I screamed! My room was empty! Not a single painting was there! They were all gone! I dashed into the living room and confronted my stepmother. She replied calmly: *I asked you to clean your room, didn't I? Did you do it? Of course, not! So, I did it instead!*

Cleaning my room meant throwing all my precious paintings into the trash. I was shocked. I ran out crying uncontrollably. I ran until I felt weakness in my knees, so I sat on a bench in the park. Suddenly, Anna, a girl from my school, walked up to me and asked what was wrong. I started crying again and told her my story. As a result of that, she invited me over. We were going to Anna's house when she mentioned that her grandma loved painting. After that day, Anna, her grandma, and I started painting regularly.

And, of course, I still wasn't on good terms with my stepmother.

After some time, I stayed at Anna's house for several days, and on the last day, my father came knocking on the door. I was shocked when I saw him standing there and

told him to leave. But he said the stepmother missed me. I wasn't sure about that, but I was sure I didn't want to return. In fact, I didn't want to see her ever again.

(Three months later)

I was participating in an art exhibition, and when I gazed at the audience, I saw my stepmother. She walked up to me, saying she loved me but didn't know how to show it. She was sorry for everything, and I felt the same.

We live together as a family now, but things aren't perfect. There are many obstacles to overcome and many miles to cross. But we are on a good path.

*mentor: Ivana Gradečak
institution: OŠ Ivanovec*

Karla Kraljić

INFINITE CLOUDS

There once was a god, his name was Surke and he was the god of rain. He was assigned to watch over a small village which was rough and morally wise. No one would listen to him when he was trying to help. Even though the villagers only did what suited them, he couldn't do anything to punish them because no one was technically breaking any rules. One day he had enough and decided to set one of them up to break a rule. He picked a man, about 40 years old, and he made him steal an artefact from the head god Elreen, promising the mortal enormous wealth. When Elreen noticed that his artefact was missing, he ordered the gods to find out who had stolen it. Lo and behold, Surke found it in the man's cottage, getting permission from Elreen to punish the village. That same day the village was cursed with eternal rain. The curse could only be broken by talking to Elreen and to make him believe that Surke set the man up, but no one has ever been courageous enough to do so, for over a thousand years. The person that does succeed to convince him is someone we would call the chosen one.

"That's why it always rains here. ", she said, sitting on her bed, trying to interest the small child in the story.

"Mum, stop feeding Nora nonsense! ", Nora's mother yelled from the room next door. Nora was a bit shaken by her mum's voice since she didn't expect it to be so loud. Nora's mum walked in "That's just a theory hub, I know there has to be a more scientific answer to the rain than what your grandma just told you ", she explained. "But mum, why does it rain every day then? How come I have never seen the sun, and I'm already 15 years old? ", Nora argued back, a little sad as she had always dreamt of seeing the sun, without the rain blocking the view.

"I wish I could tell you. ", Nora's mum answered.

"Maybe I can. I mean, the village is named Rain-wol for a reason, isn't it? ", Nora's grandma explained as she stood up from her bed.

"All right, that's enough. You should go to sleep, Nora. It's already 11:30 pm, and I don't want you staying up till midnight young miss. ", said Nora's mum as she rushed

her to her room. Nora hesitantly put on her PJs and went to bed, letting the comfortable darkness consume her as she fell into a peaceful sleep.

That night she had a dream. In her dream, she climbed the tallest mountain of Rain-wol and talked to Elreen, telling him about the greedy man who *stole* his artefact but was set up and he was innocent. Surke should be punished, not Rain-wol. Elreen told her that she might be right, though she didn't provide any solid evidence. Surke has to be punished for not taking his job seriously and letting this happen in the first place. When Nora got off the mountain, the rain stopped, and right as she was about to look at the sun, she woke up. She stood up and while rubbing her eyes, she realized that she was the one, the one to stop the rain. She rushed to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and dressed up. She ran to the kitchen and sat at the table.

"Morning mum! Morning dad! Morning gran!", she greeted them happily.

"Someone's in a good mood today, huh? ", Nora's dad said, looking at some newspapers he was reading.

"Mhm! Mum, can I get some eggs? ", Nora asked, trying to sound less excited than before.

"Luck is on your side today, just made some. ", her mum said, placing a plate of eggs in front of Nora. Nora quickly ate them, excused herself from the table and rushed out the door, but not before she grabbed an umbrella, of course. She looked out at the tall mountain which her house was facing. "All right Nora, you've got this. ", she whispered before starting to walk on the road toward the mountain.

The mountain didn't have a name, it was known to everyone as *The Mountain* and no one dared to name it as there were theories that Surke lived on it, and after what apparently happened last time the people upset him, everyone was too afraid. "But I'm not scared, I can do this ", Nora thought to herself as she stepped in front of the trail that led to the top of the mountain. She took a deep breath before starting to climb up. The trail was old and looked like no one had stepped on it in years. As she went up, she started having second thoughts. What if she isn't the chosen one? Then all of this would be pointless! But by the time she had changed her mind, it was too late and she was only one step away from the top. "Well, here it goes..." She took a deep breath and made one step. She was speechless as she looked around. Everything was perfect with no rain. There were flowers of all colours and a small pond with little ducks in it, swimming peacefully without a single worry in the world. As she started looking further around and walking on the perfectly flat top, she spotted a fox and followed it. The fox led her to a big cloud where the rain was pouring even harder than she was used to.

“Hello? “, Nora said with a questioning look on her face.

“How dare you come up here... Wait, how DID you get up here? Only gods can come here, you aren’t supposed to see anything but the rain. “, a deeper voice from the cloud called out, leaving Nora in shock. She quickly brushed the confusion away and started talking back.

“I’m here to request for the rain to stop. It has been over a thousand years and everyone is sick of it.” “Huh? And why should I, Elreen, the head god, listen to a measly mortal? “, the voice called back in a more threatening tone.

“Because we were set up, Surke set a man up to steal your artefact! Please, I have no reason to lie to you. I’ll do anything! Just promise to make the rain stop! “, Nora yelled desperately.

“I see. You’ve come here to beg for the rain to stop. Well, how about this? I’ll stop the rain if you do as I say, sound fair? “the voice called back. Nora said nothing but simply nodded.

“All right. See that rose over there? Go and fetch it for me, will you? “, the voice demanded. Nora ran over to the rose, picked it up while making sure not to get pricked by a thorn. “Good job. Now, here’s a jar “, the voice said, as a small, empty jar appeared in front of Nora, “prick yourself and put some blood in it. Not a lot, we want you to stay alive. “ Nora hesitantly picked up the jar, pricked her finger and placed it above the hole, letting some of her blood drip into it. The bottom of the jar barely filled up as she pulled away putting the jar on the ground and her finger in her mouth to suck on the blood.

“Good job! So proud of you. “, the voice cheered as Nora saw the jar disappear. “Now go home, the rain should’ve stopped by now. “

“Are you sure? I can still hear it. “, Nora replied. But she didn’t want to waste her time.

“Yeah, yeah! Now, run along, I have things to do. “, the voice said as the cloud disappeared...

Nora hesitantly walked off the top of the mountain and as accustomed to, she opened her umbrella. But to her pleasure, there wasn’t any rain.

“I did it! “, she yelled in pure delight and started descending the mountain. But when she came down, she found herself soaking wet!!! The rain was pouring, harder than it did before. “Wait... what? “, Nora thought to herself. “What in the world?... No, I... I gave him the jar. It’s... It’s still raining! Why is it still raining? I did what I was supposed to! ... It’s not fair! “

mentor: Martina Salamon

institution: OŠ Mitnica, Vukovar

Paola Gelo

WHAT IS LOVE?

There's this guy, who sometimes feels like a boy that I could love, like really love... But the other times he feels like a total stranger. I fell in love last year - on 14th of August, I don't know if he did but sometimes it feels like we are two teenagers who found comfort in each other. We spent most of the summer break talking to each other all night, he's the first boy who ever made me feel good about being me. He made me feel something I've never felt before, he made the feeling of being safe even more special. We don't talk as much anymore, I like to believe that's because of school ; he always talks to me when we are on a school break. It makes my heart sink because of the fact it's ruined, I ruined it...I am clingy to almost every guy I meet, but it wasn't the fear of abandonment that scared me. It was the fact that I knew no matter what he did I'd still love him. I don't want a guy like him, I want him. He's perfect. Sometimes I wonder if he knew how much I would've given for him, how much I cared. I understand love can't be one sided, but in the back of my mind it's both sided. Would've it been different if I didn't stay up all those nights. Maybe if I was prettier, smarter, or maybe just tried more. Even though we barely know each other, It still hurts watching him fade away. I'm not sorry we tried, I'm sorry how we ended. Even though it is toxic for both of us, if I had a chance I would've done it again because I would've tried with you a thousand times than try once with another guy. I wonder was there a time when he loved me, or I was just delusional. I wonder if he knew how much I loved and cared for him, but maybe we will start again ; maybe not now but one day. I didn't care how much it hurt because I still stayed. But you know what, what is there to do life isn't always fair and at the end we all die right? But sometimes when life isn't fair you just need to keep going, to show the world that you are capable of staying alive. I mean there's always going to be a problem. My problem is I can't stop thinking about the times he was nice, he isn't like that to everyone right? I remember all the tiny details he told me, and sometimes feel like he doesn't even remember the color of my eyes. I don't think I will ever love this much again, I know you are probably thinking 'She's a child she doesn't know what love is'.

In my opinion the definition of love is when you love someone so much you would give them your lungs when they couldn't breathe, love is thinking about all the good sides a person has and not caring what other people think. For me that's love I'm still young so I don't exactly know so I said what I feel. I related to so many poems about him, he's the biggest love and heartbreak of my life. I actually hope there's a spark between us, he gives me so many mixed feelings and it's stressing me out. I tried to get over him so bad, made myself fall for other guys but I just couldn't ,and even if I did a little it would be because I saw his personality in them. I tried so hard to be his someone, defended him when everyone said bad things. But your eyes just make me escape from everything, I'd like to one day take a long walk with you and talk about this. You wont ever know that I wrote an essay about you. But I think enough proof I love you is that I wrote a thousand word essay about someone who doesn't even care. I hope one day you find this and think through what you lost, I don't think a person could love you more than this. I didn't choose to write this because of the prize, I wrote this to show people how they shouldn't give their heart to someone who will crash it up and throw it away. I know you have problems too but that doesn't give you any rights to bring someone to the point where their day depends on your emotion. I still love you and I'll make sure to tell my kid where he got his name from. I'll always see good in you, however you act, I will remember the day where you made me feel loved. You saved me ,in every way I could be saved. You were like my other half, my soulmate, my first ever love. You know they say that you never actually get over your first love, and I finally understand that now. Even though you hurt me, if you ever come back, I'll be here. Right here with open hands. I don't think I've ever met a person like you. I have met A LOT of people and nobody feels like you. I hope our situation wont come to an end. That we would end up together, but you make the world a better place for me. I knew I loved you right away, and I miss us. I miss how we were, I miss everything I didn't appreciate when you handed me it. You have a beautiful soul and God will know if we are meant to be, if we are then he will connect us again ; if we aren't then I'll let you be happy with your next girl. I hope she could give you things I never could. But you know I wanted to, I wanted to give you the world. I just wanted to talk to you, I miss talking to you. I really wanted us to work. Changed everything about me to make you like me. But like always you can't force someone to like you. And life goes on, but it will never be the same. Not without you.

mentor: Ana Bahat

institution: OŠ Vladimir Nazor Budinščina

Petra Jambrečič

LETTER TO THE MOON

Her eyes were sea even though they are black. I melted in them. Her hands were the warmest and her touches the gentlest. I was her Sun. And she was my Moon. She kept the seas in her eyes, and in her laughter carried the undertones of summer. Once, during our night walks along the coast, we observed the reflection of the sky on the crystal surface of the sea. Or rather – the glare of the Moon. „When you look up at the sky, do you see the universe?“ I asked. „No. I can't see the universe,“ she replied. „What do you see?“ „I don't know. I love looking at the Moon. It has some charms of its own. If I wasn't a man, I would definitely be the Moon,“ she said. „Why the Moon?“ I wanted to know. „I imagine the stars as a loud mass of people. The Moon is more like a quiet man left alone,“ she explained, „but you're not alone.“ Four months later, the Moon became my only light in this world. One of those that haven't gone yet. She left us one sultry night when June dies and August is born. It was almost midnight and the night sky was picturesque. The transition from black to dark blue was the background for the full Moon; the night sky so clear that you could almost see every crater. The Moon, a brilliant yellowish-white color, seemed larger than usual. Millions of stars were scattered behind him, a few large, but mostly a multitude of small ones. The embrace of the cold wind caressed my face, and all I could feel was sadness and helplessness. Just like the feeling of floating in the ocean on this little raft, with nothing to tie to. She always comforted me with her words. „Imagine that life is a book. One page is clothed in gray and darkness, and each subsequent page carries the most beautiful shades of the brightest colors. But if you give up on the first gloomy page, you'll never see the bright ones.“ She would encourage me. I missed the echoes of her smile, her kindness, her love. So I started looking for her. I looked for her in empty fields and city lights, in passing cars, on winding roads and shooting stars until I found her in my dreams. The warmth I felt inside then overpowered the cold and rain outside. Since then she visits me often. I know she'll be here again looking at me with her dark black eyes and holding my hand all night like I held hers. I would like to walk together once more along the seafront and build

sand castles, to listen to the sea organ and watch the coral light. Although she is no longer with me, I believe she is in a place like heaven. In a place that looks like the home of majestic angels with beautiful white feathered wings. I imagine them wearing long, flowing silky white dresses, their golden curls falling as they dance through the misty valleys of the sky with her. I will still need a lot of time and strength to collect all the memories of her, hug them tightly and store them where the memories are stored. I often wonder if I will meet her again tonight wandering through our dream palaces and gardens of eternal peace. To have her. To love her. To fight together against forgetting and missing. Somewhere between heaven and earth. Me – too awake to sleep. She – too tired to wake up. Between tranquility and restlessness. We love each other in this story. In my words and her silence. In every written letter and every marking point. She, my Moon. I, her Sun.

To my dear beloved grandmother.

Dear teacher, this story was inspired by my grandmother who passed away a few years ago. She always called me her Sun, so I wanted to mention that by using the comparison of the Sun and the Moon. The dialogues that I also mention are made up to show how she always inspired me and was there for me. We had a really special relationship and I often dreamed of her. She lived in Zadar for a while and we often went to her place in the summer. When I thought of her, I always thought of warm nights by the sea. I tried to describe my feelings towards her and our memories as best as possible. I hope you enjoyed this story because I put a lot of effort into it.

mentor: Maja Mitrović Laškarić

institution: OŠ “Antun Nemčić Gostovinski” Koprivnica

Lara Bakovljanec

SUPERHERO BOY

Have you ever thought that somewhere in the world there is a person who has superpowers?

Well, what if I tell you that a long time ago there was a boy who had superpowers? His name was Jack.

However, Jack didn't know he had superpowers. He was a boy like all the others. He went to school, and he had an older brother and a younger sister. His brother's name was Luke, and he was going to middle school. His sister's name was Jessica, and she went to kindergarten. They were really close to each other, but their parents weren't really in a good relationship. Jack's father liked to drink a lot, and his mother wasn't very happy with that. They would also fight a lot. Once, Jack's father accused Jack's mother of cheating. After that fight they didn't talk to each other for days.

Jack's mom worked as a dentist, and his father was a director of a company. At least that is what Jack thought. The boy's parents went to work really early, so they left Jack's older brother Luke to look after Jack and Jessica. After Jack went to school Luke drove Jessica to kindergarten. Jack had a lot of friends at school, but there was one friend that he loved the most. His name was Lucas. Jack and Lucas became best friends last year. He also had a crush. Her name was Vanessa and she was the prettiest girl in school. She had long, blonde hair, freckles, beautiful green eyes, and she was really skinny. Almost every guy in school was in love with her. Jack knew he didn't have a chance with her but he never gave up. He knew she liked roses so one day he decided to put a bouquet of roses in her locker. He also put a note that said “I like you“. He was waiting for Vanessa to come to her locker and see the roses. After 5 minutes of waiting, she finally came. Vanessa opened her locker and the bouquet fell down. She picked it up and immediately started blushing. Jack was really happy.

When he got home that day his mom made dinner. His dad wasn't home as usual. He was probably at the bar drinking. With or without his dad home he enjoyed the spaghetti his mom made. After dinner they all went to sleep. The next day he woke up and he had no idea what was waiting for him. He got to school. Lucas asked him if

he studied for the maths test. Jack's face turned white. He totally forgot about the test. So, what did he decide to do? He skipped school. And he somehow got away with it. Jack got to the front door of his home and then he realised that his older brother was still home. He tried to sneak in through the back door, but his brother saw him on the cameras and he waited for him in the kitchen. As soon as Jack thought he would be able to sneak in, his brother appeared in front of him saying.

"Well, well, well... Look who we have here," Luke said. Jack felt shivers coming down his spine. He got scared when Luke just jumped in front of him, but he got more scared when he realised in what kind of situation he got in. Jack started explaining to his older brother. "Luke, please let me explain. So, today I had a math test, and I didn't know I had it. I didn't study for it. So, I thought it was better to run away than get a bad grade. Can you please not tell mom and dad?" Luke promised that he won't tell mom and dad on one condition. That was to never skip school again. Jack agreed.

The next day Jack got to school, and the teachers asked him why wasn't he in school the day before. Jack said he was coughing and thought he was sick. The teachers believed him and Lucas was shocked about it all day. He couldn't believe that teachers actually believed him and let him get away with it.

As soon as Jack got home he started studying for the math test that he would take the next day. Tomorrow at school Jack was a little nervous about the test. Math was his last lesson and he was preparing for the test throughout the whole day. When Jack got home Luke asked him how the test went. "Fine, but I don't expect an A," he replied.

The school year was coming to an end and prom date was coming closer. "I'm planning on asking Vanessa to go to prom with me," Jack told Lucas. "You don't have a chance," Lucas said. Jack didn't listen. Next day at school it was Friday and Jack's class had swimming class. Jack hated the swimming class because all the boys in his class had abs and he and his best friend were the only ones without. Vanessa was in that class too, and Jack thought that Vanessa won't even look at him when she sees his body. That day in the swimming class they were doing diving. Jack noticed something strange while diving. He noticed a few blue dots on his legs and arms, but he didn't think it was anything special.

Finally, weekend came. Jack thought he was free, but his parents both went on a work trip and Luke was leaving for a scholarship to Ireland, so Jack and Jessica had to stay at their grandmother's house. Staying at granny's house was a living hell for Jack. He needed to do all the house chores because granny was old, and she couldn't do it all by herself.

The weekend passed quickly, and it was prom week. Prom was on Wednesday, and until Wednesday all of the students didn't go to class because everyone was decorating the hall.

On Tuesday night Jack got ready to ask Vanessa. He sent her a message and she replied immediately. She wrote: "Hi Jack, a lot of guys have already asked me out, but I think I'm gonna go with you. Thanks for asking".

Prom night came. Jack was ready for the big moment. He walked into the hall only to see Vanessa dancing with Lucas. He walked up to them.

"Vanessa, what is going on? I thought you were my date?"

"Oh sweetie, I am sorry, Lucas was just prettier and nicer than you."

"I told you that you didn't have a chance," Lucas grinned.

Jack felt sadness and anger at the same time. He ran to the bathroom and started crying. While crying, he felt something burn his knee. He looked down and saw that he was crying lava. Jack thought he was dreaming, but he then looked back at the burn on his knee, and realised it wasn't a dream. He ran home as fast as he could.

"What's wrong?" Jack's parents asked. Jack told them what happened and that he started to cry lava. His parents looked at each other. "He is ready," his dad said. Jack was confused. "Let us explain," mum continued. "In our family we had blood of superheroes through generations. And we all have superpowers. Even me and your dad. I have telekinesis, and your dad has super strength. It looks like you have lava or fire." Jack was looking at them in shock. His mum continued: "As you know, I work as a dentist, and your father works as a director. Well, it's not really that way. We both actually work as secret agents at a superhero company." Jack was really shocked but also angry because his parents were hiding it from him all this time. His parents were waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. He was stuck deep in his thoughts. Suddenly, he remembered the blue dots that appeared on his body while diving. "Mom, dad I noticed something while diving on Friday. I realised that when I'm in water some type of blue dots appear on my hands and legs." Jack's parents had an even bigger smile on their faces when they heard that from Jack. His mom said: "Oh, Jack baby, you probably have the blood of your grandfather. Your grandfather was a multi-powered superhero. And now you are too. You have fire and water in you." Jack started feeling excited and he wondered how to control the powers. "As time goes on, you will learn to control them," his parents said.

And exactly that happened. As time went on, Jack got used to his powers and learned how to control them. He also became the hero of the town. Because he was

forbidden to uncover his identity, he called himself the Super Boy. Now because he was popular as a hero, he didn't need Lucas or Vanessa to make him happy. He was happy with the life he had.

That is how the story of the Superhero boy comes to its end. Jack's story also teaches you a lesson. You don't need others to make your life happier. You should be grateful for the life that belongs to you.

mentor: Tanja Pokupić

institution: OŠ Miroslava Krležje Čepin

Iva Banović

A SCARY JOURNEY

SOMETHING PEOPLE ARE AFRAID OF

Everyone knows about the village of Chedar. Not because it's really small or because there are more children than adults, but because there is something that all people are afraid of. There is a haunted house or how people call it, a house of horror. No one knows a lot about the house. Some people say that it's dangerous, some that there are poisonous snakes inside and a lot of other theories. Everyone is scared to go in the house.

FOUR FRIENDS

It's autumn and it's time for school.

-Mom, I don't want to go to school!

-Why John? Why do you hate school that much? I know it's a pressure, but it's for your own good. You are going to be something one day.

-I know, but...I don't know how to explain it.

-Right. Now pack your things and be ready in 10 minutes!

Mom drove John to school happily because she didn't have to go to work. When John saw his three closest friends, he ran to them and gave them a big hug.

-John! There you are. Oh, I thought you are going to be late again.

-Hahahaha! -everyone laughed.

Bell rings.

John, Mary, Rosie and Mark were in the same class. They were all different. Mary loved science and she wanted to become a scientist. Rosie was great at math, Mark loved PE more than anything else and John was a sleepy guy. They were best friends since first grade. Now they are in eight grade so this is their last year together. They want to spend it the best way possible.

AT SCHOOL

Class started. While everyone talking about their holidays, John almost fell asleep.

Emily was on vacation on Hawaii, Chloe went to France, Ryan spent time at home with his family, Billie same there...

When it was John's turn, he woke up all confused. Everyone was laughing not because they wanted to mock John, but because he fell asleep again. That made even the teacher smile.

-So, I didn't go anywhere except in my bed. It's my perfect spot.

All class laughed at John's response.

-Your holidays were great! -someone from the back said.

-Actually, yeah. They were pretty good.

FIRST EXAM

When John got home, he tried to hide his disappointed look on his face with a smile. Mom realized something is wrong and she went to John's room. John was writing history homework.

-Hey, is everything okay?

-Yeah, everything is fine.

-Did something happen at school?

-No...Classic, you know Mr. Smith...

-Oh, him again. I know it's hard, but just this year and you are free of him.

-Mom...you know...today we wrote a quick exam in Physics.

-Really? But it's the first day of school. And?

-And...no one studied.

-No one? Did the teacher even tell you something?

-No, and I think I'm going to get a F.-John said as fast as possible.

- What?!

-Please don't be angry.

-Since when your first exam is about to be graded?

-I don't know...

-Okay, I'm not angry this time.

-You are lying.

-No, really. Maybe I put too much pressure on you. I know it's eight grade and a lot of things are more complicated than they were when I went to school. I'm not going to yell at you anymore, but you can be grounded. Right?

-I expected something different, but okay, I can live with that.

PLAN FOR WEEKEND

-Uh, this week was really hard.

-Yeah. -Mary agreed

-What should we do this weekend? Watch a movie together or something?

-I don't know...

John said: -I have an idea! Why don't we go in that horror house?

-What? Are you crazy? Who knows what is inside? -Mark said.

-I don't think this is a good idea...-Mary said

-What about you Rosie?

-I don't know either. I want to know what is inside, but what about our parents?

Don't you think they are going to be worried? I mean, I'm a little bit scared, but still want to go.

-We don't have to tell them. We aren't going to be there for hours and days.

-I'm going if everyone is going. -Mary said

-You know what? I'm going too. - Rosie said

-Great! That's three of us. What about you Mark?

-No. What if the theories are true?

-That's just what people think, it doesn't mean it's true.

-Come on Mark, for us.

-Please!

-Fine.

-Yay!

FIRST TRY

It's almost 12 o'clock and everybody is here.

-Huh, it's cold here outside.

-Yeah.

-We'll survive.

-Right.

John, Mark, Mary, and Rosie are in front of the house.

-Who should get in first? -Mark asked.

-Let John, this was his idea. -Mary replied.

John entered the house. He saw broken windows and doors. A lot of dust in the air and torn curtains. Slowly others entered, looking around themselves.

-I can't believe that people lived here. -Rosie said surprised.

-Me too. -Mary replied.

Suddenly they heard something. For a second they thought it was wind, but it wasn't. Curtains weren't moving. They ran from the house as fast as they could.

-What was that? -Mary asked out of breath.

-I don't know. It wasn't wind.

-I don't know either. -Rosie said

-I knew theories were true, why didn't you believe me?

-Come on Mark, it surely isn't snakes, we would hear hissing. -John tried to explain Mark

-But what if they are in there? Huh?

-Okay, we are going to bring some equipment tomorrow. Now we know that something is inside. That's better than not knowing anything. Right?

-I don't know John, is this really good idea...

-But we made a deal. You can't break the deal.

-Me and Rosie are in, but I don't know for Mark.

-You know that I'm scared, but as your friend I'll go under one condition.

-What? -everyone asked.

-I'm going to bring a weapon.

ANOTHER JOURNEY STARTS

Rosie and Mary finished homework first and all day they played together while John went to his grandma. Mark on the other hand was still at home thinking what to bring with him.

He decided to wear his dad's helmet from military and uniform with boots. He also brought shovel for defence and his toy pistol with bullets in his pockets. John, Rosie and Mary laughed while Mark was walking towards them, but that didn't bother Mark at all. He was proud of himself.

They again entered the house. The wind was blowing, curtains were moving backwards, and forwards and the floor was creaking. It was cold, but nothing stopped them. Slowly they entered the house deeper and turned on their lamps. At first, they didn't hear anything, but as they got deeper in the house, they heard something again. The sound was exactly the same.

-Did anybody hear that? -Mary asked.

-Yeah. -Rosie replied.

Mark pulled out his pistol and looked everywhere, but he didn't find anything.

-We should split up, that way we'll faster explore the house. -John said.

-Good. I'm going to look in the living room. If I find something, I'll call you.

-Rosie said decisively.

-Me too, but I'm going in the kitchen. -Mary said.

-Great. Then I'll go in the bedroom and the bathroom.

-I'll go down the hall and other rooms. -Mark said surprisingly.

After twenty minutes of searching throughout the house, nobody found anything.

There was a loud scream. It was Mark.

-Mark! Are you okay?

Mark didn't know what to say. It took them two seconds to get there, and they all looked like they had seen a ghost.

-A basement! -John screamed

-Wow Mark, I thought you would give up.

-How would I? Look at me, I have everything I need for an adventure.

Everyone was happy because they found something, and maybe it was something valuable.

WE HAVE A PROBLEM

To find a secret basement - it's very hard even for detectives, and now the four kids had found one. What a moment! John and Mark decided that they will open the basement because they are stronger, but something was wrong. They couldn't open it. Mary and Rosie joined them, but nothing was working.

-Great, now we need to find a key! -John said angrily.

-I remember I have seen something shiny on the tree while I was checking around the house. Maybe it's the key.

-Let's go and see! -Mark said all excited.

They were running as fast as they could. Mary showed them a tree, and something was really shining.

-I'll climb the tree. - Mary said.

-Are you sure, Mary? - everyone was shocked.

-Definitely!

So, Mary started climbing the tree without any problems. Everyone stared at her. The tree wasn't thin, but it was high. She grabbed the key and slowly got down. Everyone clapped. Mary was proud of herself.

-It fits! -she screamed.

She turned key to the left three times and unlocked the basement.

-This is the right one! I unlocked it!

Everyone was so happy, and they danced around the house with enjoyment. Mary

stepped aside and Rosie opened the basement. No one could believe with their own eyes.

THERE IS SOMETHING

Everyone's jaw dropped when they saw what was inside.

-T-this is t-treasure!

-Aaaaaah! - girls screamed and then boys joined them.

Their eyes were going to pop out. Nobody thought that this was real.

-Maybe we are just dreaming. -John said.

-I hope you didn't fall asleep again.

-Pinch me.

-No problem.

-Auch! So, this real!

-What are we waiting for, let's go grab treasure!

Everyone went to the treasure, and they were grabbing as much as they could.

Everyone was very happy, but then John remembered something.

-How can we tell our parents about this?!

-...I totally forgot about them...

-Oh, no. If I tell them, they will ground me for life.

-They will go crazy if we tell them where we have been today!

SOLUTION

-So, what are we going to do?

-I don't know. If we tell them they will ground us for life and if we don't tell them and they find out we will again be grounded.

-And even if they don't find out, how can we hide that?

-Uhm, there are so many things in my head.

While the friends were thinking about how to tell their parents about the treasure, some homeless family walked by, and friends noticed them. A mother and child. There wasn't a father. All four of them felt sad about their life.

-Can you imagine what they are going through?

-No...-everyone said.

-I can't believe how hard life can sometimes be...

-I have an idea! -Rosie said.

-Speak.

-Why don't we give them treasure that we found?

-You mean all of this?

-Of course not. We will give them enough to live. To buy a nice house, food and get a job. Other treasure we can give to other homeless families and help them like that. However, we won't give all of the treasure because there is more than enough.

-Genious!

-That's brilliant!

-And when we help them, other treasure that will be surplus will go to us. We can tell that those are our savings.

And that's how four friends decided to do something really special.

*mentor: Jelena Marijanović**institution: OŠ kneza Mislava, Kaštel Sućurac**Iva Maleš*

SCATTERED ILLUSION

A loop. Every day feels like a loop. Get up, get ready, go to school, come home, do homework, study, get ready for tomorrow, get ready for sleep, sleep, and then again. I got up feeling more exhausted than usual. It's nothing weird for me to feel sleepy after getting more than enough sleep, but this time it was genuine exhaustion. I sucked it up and got ready for school. It was a Monday, so the first subject I had was biology. I find biology entertaining, but it was weirdly boring that day. During a passing period, my friends and I were walking up and down the school hallway. My friends and I chatted about random things like we always do. The bell rang, so we went to the classroom and finished the rest of the work we had left. Then, we had to go to music class. It was boring, as usual. When the bell rang, everyone rushed to the next period. However, just before entering the classroom, I saw him.

I have known this guy forever, and he has known me. We weren't friends, but it was more of an "I know this person" kind of relationship. We have never talked or anything. His name was Ryle. I saw him in a way that I never saw anyone else. His beautiful pitch-black hair that's done in a taper cut (or something close to it), with his hair on the sides neatly trimmed while drawing attention to the top. And his gorgeous blue eyes. I have never seen such eyes that can clearly express which emotion a person may be feeling at a particular moment. They are a shade of light blue. His eyebrows and lips are so perfect, and his face is just really pretty all together. He isn't crazy tall, but he is a bit taller than me. He always walks with his hands in his pockets. He wears black all the time but sometimes switches to blue. His voice is a little high, but it suits him so well. I have never seen such a perfect person. I swear, his smile could light up a whole room. And the best thing is that he is my age. But, not only is he pretty, he is really kind and funny. He is also really energetic and vibrant. At least, that's what I figured out after a few days of an in-depth analysis. He sometimes skips while walking and is usually just really outgoing with his friends. I had to snap out of it because I didn't want anyone to notice me staring. I was thinking about him the whole day. I was in a huge denial that I might have a crush on him, but as

time went by, I accepted the fact that I'm not heartless, and that I'm actually capable of having those feelings for someone. The next few days, I just couldn't help myself but always look for him or make him notice me. I would rush to get out of class so that I could walk past him. And suddenly, every poem, every imaginary scenario, every daydream, and every romantic song was about him.

I figured that he was going home on almost the same path that I do, so I stopped taking the school bus and started walking home with my friends because they live near me. I would always rush them to pack faster so we could be in front of him. Eventually, I told my friends, and they were happy and supportive. They gave me advice and told me things about him that I didn't know. But I only told my best friends, of course. Anyway, the next day, exactly two days before the winter break, I had an extra class, Red Cross. It was at 7:10 a.m. It was so hard to get up, but I managed to. Luckily, my best friends go to all the extra classes I do, so I'm never alone. All of them rushed before me to the class to get my seat. I sit in the corner in the back, so we always compete for that seat, but that day, I was sleepy, again, so I couldn't be bothered enough to run. My friend, Amelia, rushed back out and told me, "Cassy! He's here!" I was so confused. I entered the classroom, and Ryle was there. Yes, Ryle, and no, I wasn't dreaming. He was there in the flesh. I was standing there shocked, but to be honest, he looked as shocked as I did. I was just standing there, making eye contact with him. I couldn't help but notice his leather jacket. It fit him so well and brought out his eyes. I stuttered when I excused myself for coming a bit late. He was taking a test because we have the same teacher for Red Cross and biology. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I can't say, I caught him staring at me a couple of times too. After class, I found the courage to ask him how the test was, and he said it was alright. We exchanged a few words about other subjects we had that day, and that was it. I was so happy. He was holding really strong eye contact, and I barely managed to look him in the eyes, but luckily I didn't do anything embarrassing. I have never felt this full of joy. The loop was finally broken by him. Life felt as if it was in a place where it should be. Everything just felt so right.

Winter break was one day away, and there was nothing I could do anymore. I was so scared that he would forget about me and that all the effort I put into this was for nothing. I knew I had to do something. So I decided to confess to him. I had a perfect plan. After school, to confess my feelings to him and go away. Let him think about it and then give me his answer after the break. Then, the last day came. When school ended, he was walking toward his friends, and I ran after him and grabbed his hand. "Ryle, I like you." He was staring at me, but he wasn't surprised. He had a straight face and said, "Thanks."

“Thanks...?” I repeated with disbelief.

“Yeah? What do you want me to say? I like you back. Oh, please, give me a break! And, who even are you?” His friends started laughing. I felt a sharp pain in my chest. As if someone stabbed me. I didn’t cry because I was trying to save a last bit of dignity I had left. My friends arrived and came up to us wondering why everyone was laughing. I couldn’t hold back my tears anymore, so I started running home without saying a word.

When I came home I cried like there was no tomorrow. Luckily, I was home alone. After crying for an hour straight, I put on some music, hoping it would cheer me up. But then, one of the saddest songs started playing, and I started crying again. It was like that for the whole winter break. I was in agony. I didn’t even go out with my friends. I felt even worse when I remembered that I would have to see him and his friends every day at school. And before you know it, the school was starting.

I put on a casual outfit, did my makeup, and decided to walk to school alone. I was biting my nails out of anxiety. When I entered through the school gates, his friend was running toward me with an envelope in his hand. He gave it to me and, while catching his breath, told me that was what Ryle had left me. “What he...had left me?” I asked him what was happening and he was shocked that I had no clue. He and his family moved to the UK because his dad got a better job there. I wasn’t sad. I was just wondering what was in the envelope. I ripped it open and pulled out a letter.

“Dear Cassy

You gave me your heart. You’d like me to hand it back whole again? But i wont. I cant. As you already know, Im moving to the UK because of my father. I knew it then and i thought that saying that would make me look cool and badass in front of every one. But i was wrong. You’ll live a long time Cassy, an eternity without me. You will look at the faces of passersby hoping for something that will, for an instant, bring me back to you. You will find moonlit nights strangely empty because when you call my name through them there will be no answer. Your heart shouldnt be aching for me because you will find someone better in the future. Someone you can find happiness with. Someone who wont rip you apart and then apologize thru a letter. I realized i made a foolish mistake that will forever be by my side, haunting me. People told me how you liked poetry and old-fashioned things,so i wrote this in the most poetic way i could. Even if you accept my apology, i wont know, so it doesnt really matter. I just want you to know that im sorry.

Ryle“

After reading it, I was still processing it. He apologized? My eyes filled up with

tears. I wasn't necessarily sad, but I couldn't hold them back. I started walking while looking down, hoping no one will notice me crying. This time I didn't know where I was going, I was just going. I ended up on the beach. It was sunset. I sat down, but even that beautiful view was the ugliest and the saddest I've ever seen. Thousands of things were going through my head. I got flashbacks from what had happened. I spent months of my life giving him everything I could, thinking about him and rethinking every move I made at school. It was all done then, but I thought he'd maybe change his mind. Then I got up and threw his letter into the ocean, watching it dissolve. While the ink was getting smudged, I started laughing. "Poetic my..." "He can't even spell." I said, still staring at the ocean.

Now, two months later, here I am, still standing. I thought I would never be able to get over that, but I managed to. I managed to because of my family and friends who were there to support me. But I also managed to because I changed my mindset. It's truly fascinating, how a delusion, a created image of someone, can be harmful. Especially if it leads you to do irrational things. I realized that no one can help me if I can't, and don't want to help myself. By changing my mindset, I mean that I realized that happiness shouldn't depend on a person. It shouldn't depend on anyone, but myself. Especially on someone you know doesn't care about you, yet you still push it. Sometimes, it's even better to let go of those people. I have to admit it, I feel better now because I know that every single day doesn't depend on the fact that someone looked or didn't look at me. I realized I don't need to find my happiness with someone else or with anyone at all. I need to find it within myself first.

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THE LOST CITY

As the greek philosopher Plato said in his Timaeus dialog, Atlantis, in greek meaning Island of Atlas, was legendary city that was lost in one day, he belived that this legendary city was big empire that was placed in front of the pillars of Heracles, he also belived after the Atlantis sank, god Poseidon took it as his home in water kingdom, but no one knows the whole story. The legendary city Atlantis in deed was in front of the pillars of Hercules, how was made and how did it dissapear, this story will explain everything.

Back there in ancient Greece, greek gods were worshipped, one of the big three was greek god Poseidon, god of the seas, oceans and earthquakes. But the god was lonely, in between the nereids one had to be choosen to be his wife. At the isle of Naxos nereids preformed the dance, Amphitrite was chosed among all her sisters. Amphitrite declined his offer for marriage, but Poseidon was stubborn, he wouldn't give up, Amphitrite didn't want to give up her purit and aside that, she thought Poseidon wanted her as his slave. Poseidon chased her for months with proposals, he drove her up to the wall, one night she headed to the Atlas mountains, she wanted to hide herself from Poseidon and she knew she could also ask Atlas for help. Only problem was the fact that Atlas mountains are very close to the Medditerranean sea.

-Atlas, please, I need your help, Poseidon won't leave me alone, please, I just want all my focus and grace to go to helping people and sea, I declined his offer but he is too stubborn.-said Amphitrite- I am begging you.

-I am going to help you, I don't like gods, and you're just minor deity, just a sea nymph, if helping you means that one of the gods will be miserable, then I will help you-Atlas replied

-Thank you, accept my deepest gratitude-

-There is a city, my city, Atlantis, that is great empire, my people will welcome you once they realise I was the one that sent you there, to get to the Atlantis you have to walk over the mountains then I will send you a dolphins to get you over to Atlantis, there you will live in peace, I assure you.-

So Amphitrite started her Journey, while she was walking over the mountains Poseidon went over to the Oracle of Delphie, he wanted to know where Amphitrite was, he wanted to know if there will ever be something between them, he saw her on the mountains but he choose to stay and wait for her until she got to the sea as he wouldn't have any power on the mountains, he didn't want to scare her, but he also found out what Atlas said to her and figured out that he, as the god of the sea could make dolphins take her to him. So he waited. Amphitrite after two weeks found a way through the mountains and was now on the shore of the sea, there were dolphins waiting for her, little did she know that the dolphins were manipulated by Poseidon, they took her and started their journey, but she saw something was off, in that moment Atlas got power over one of the dolphins and that dolphin fought off others, he took Amphitrite to the Atlantis. People of Atlantis saw her and knew she was sent by Atlas and so were very welcoming. When all the other dolphins got back to Poseidon he was mad, at that time he didn't know where Atlantis was. He didn't let anyone in the sea, and no one was safe at that time, high waves, tsunamis and strong earthquakes shook the Earth.

On Atlantis Amphitrite was living with a bunch of women, but everyday she felt guilty for all those natural disasters. After few weeks the women found out truth about Amphitrite and her real identity as a sea nymph.

-It's all my fault, this wouldn't be happening if I accepted his offer-Amphitrite said

-Dear it is not your fault, I am sure he will calm down soon-said Basilia, one of the women Amphitrite was living with

-He will not, it's been a year and a half since I declined him, everyday I fear that he will find me, I don't want to spend the rest of my life living and doing things for him, I do not want to be his maid, or worse his little slave-replied Amphitrite

-Dear no one would want that, you need to trust me, you are safe here.-added Cassadra

Amphitrite lived with a bunch of other women, she lived on Atlantis as normal human being, she helped people a lot, she fell in love with place, they danced everyday, they had meals together, at that moment she didn't miss her sisters or her birthplace, she saw Atlantis as her real home, they were community that was rarely bothered by any outside force. Until one day Poseidon found them.

-Where is Amphitrite? I demand to know-said Poseidon while looking over all people

Emperor did not fear Poseidon, so he went to talk with him- I am afraid she is not here, if she was, she would show herself.

-You dare to lie to my face, tell me where she is!-

-I suppose I cannot share that information with you- said emperor- and I have to ask you to leave Atlantis, now.

-How dare you reject a god on this way, I will sink Atlantis down with all the people on it

-No! How dare you, this is a city of Atlas, this is not your kingdom to be ruled, now be gone filthy god- said Brasilia- Amphitrite is long gone, you scared her that much she fell on her death bed once she came here, she was scared of you! She tried to run and hide from you, and that was the result. Now you have nothing to find here, go away!

-N-no it can't be, I god Poseidon swear on the river Styx that Atlantis will from now on forever be under the water surface, and I will make Atlas watch the destruction of his loved city-as Poseidon said that big tsunami came, but Amphitrite showed herself

-Poseidon, please spare the people-voice came from the crowd

Poseidon in despair didn't even look at the person, he thought it was some random lady begging for his mercy.

-I won't show mercy on these awful being, they don't deserve it.-

-I am not dead, I am scared, because I do not want to be your slave, they were trying to protect me, I accept your offer for marriage, take my hand and spare the lives of these people

As these words came to Poseidon's mind he realised who was talking to him, his heart felt joy after year and a half

-Amphitrite! I am afraid that I cannot stop it now, I swore that Atlantis will be underwater forever with all the people who will go down with it, but now that I know you're alive, Atlantis will be underwater kingdom and all these people will be turned into mermaids and mermans, aside that I do not want you to be my slave, I want you to be my wife, Amphitrite, your beauty and your grace were the reason I picked you aside from all yours sisters, I heard your conversation with Atlas, I do not want to separate you from the sea nor the people, I want quite the opposite, so this is my last proposal, I want you to be my wife, but not as the sea nymph, as the goddess of the seas.-

-I-I don't know what to say, I am terribly sorry, I always thought you wanted me as a slave, I thought you wanted to separate me from it all, I accept your offer, I will marry you.- said Amphitrite, in that moment Eros shot his arrows and made two fall deeply in love with each other.

On Olympus...

-I was waiting for you to do that. What took you so long?-Aphrodite asked sarcastically

-Do not blame me mother. You're the one that wanted drama in between these two.-replied Eros

-Well that is gong to be happy marriage... or is it? Guesss we will never know-

...

Atlantis was now underwater but people of Atlantis (now turned into mermans and mermaids) willingly accepted Atlantis as kingdom of Poseidon once they saw Amphitrite was truly happy.

New golden palace was made for the two gods. Amphitrite was happy for a few centuries, but then, around Greece went a word of Atlantis, Atlantis was not known before, why is it now, was the main question. As it turned out, two of Atlantis's residents got away before Atlantis was sunk, abd because they weren't sunk with it they didn't turn into mearmaids or mermans, they headed to Greece where they had family, for generations and generations the story of lost Atlantis was spoken until one family member told the story to an acquaintace, that acquaintace was greek philosopher Plato who found the fact that the whole city was lost in one day very interestng, and in the end used it for his work. Many people tried to find Atlantis, even nowdays, but the city as underwater kingdom is protected with magic so mermaids and mermans wouldn't be seen by the people. There are numerous numbers of theories why was Atlantis sunk and where is it, but no one seems to find exact answer, all that people can, and did do was to try and guess.

The story of Atlantis was told, but two main charachters dissapeard more and more every time the story was spoken until they were gone, that is the reason why you didn't hear original story of Amphititre and Poseidon nor the real reason why Atlantis was sank.

But don't take this love story too serious, Poseidon was not a good husband from time to time, he cheated on Amphititre several times, he had multiple children, but his heart always belonged to Amphititre and his favorite son Triton, althought his other children were also famous...

Theseus, the man who slayed the Minotaur,Pegasus, famous winged horse, but Triton was the heir to the throne. Aphrodite loved the drama in that marriage, she was behind it all. Even thought many of his children were famous, all that drove Amphititre crazy, but she could not anger the god of the seas, if she did, many people would suffer, and she didn't want that. Everytime she wanted to take a stand she

remembered the people of Atlantis, how many human lives were changed, how all these people now had to work for them, She always remembered the Atlantis as a happy place of joy and dances, now everything she sees is underwater ruin, even though she still lived in Atlantis with all the people that made her happy she will never forgive herself, deep down she still thinks it is her fault for all that.

And to sum up everything that has been said till now, sinking of Atlantis was a tragedy that will always stab the heart of the sea goddess, and a mystery that humans are about to find out.

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SIBLINGS

One beautiful day in 1995 when a stunning, slightly tearful little girl Melani was born. After a few weeks, she got home, where she met her older brother Ivan for the first time. When the brother saw his newborn, tiny little sister, he was delighted with her, he knew that he would be able to play, joke and fool around with her, but she didn't react the same, instead, she immediately started crying. Ivan understood that she was still small and that she needed to be adjusted. Days, months, years passed, Ivan and Melani were constantly arguing, but they would always agree to drive their parents crazy with their nonsense, breaking vases with balls, playing until late at night, not cleaning up after themselves... but most importantly, they enjoyed being with each other, Ivan taught Melani something new every day. Although Ivan was a full 14 years older than her, Ivan felt love for Melani and that even if she was so small, she was the only one who understood him.

The day of Melanie's super big 6th birthday came, she invited her friends from kindergarten to come to celebrate her birthday in the huge playroom. Melanie invited her older brother, but Ivan refused the invitation. Ivan was very unhappy, not because his sister had found new friends, but because she would start school in a few days. He immediately knew that he wouldn't be able to hang out with her like before, because in the first grade you still had to make an impression and work on learning to read and to write. He was working as a waiter for two years, because he didn't want a job that would take up a lot of his time when he was at home, so he could hang out with his little, sweet sister. Unfortunately, and Ivan thought it was going to happen, Melanie was so busy with school that she didn't even get to play one game of Monopoly with her brother. And so the years passed, in the meantime, Ivan finished college to become a teacher, he found a new job. Every day the siblings split further and further away from each other. One day in December, ten-year-old Melanie was looking for some old toys in a big box in the attic. She searched and searched for them until she found a green much smaller box, it said "DO NOT TOUCH!" but she was so curious that she couldn't resist opening it. When she opened it, she saw pictures, not

so old pictures with her in them. The pictures had captions on the other side, like “My baby”, “Melanie’s first step”, “My little lucky learns math”, “Monkey got his first unit”, Melanie started to laugh, wondering who took the picture. Melanie took that box with her to the room and as she took each picture, she came to a conclusion. And in the last picture she realized that it was Ivan, but how? The last picture was perfect, funny, the best so far, what was on it was original, it described Ivan and Melani. The picture showed Ivan holding the ball, and Melani with a broken two - pieces vase, one piece in the right hand, one in the left. The most important detail was that both of them had huge, real, white smiles. Grinning from one ear to the other. They were absolutely afraid of the consequences, but there were no consequences, so the parents started laughing. Why? It was fascinating to them how their children were so united, when the parents asked who was to blame, Melani answered that she was to blame, Ivan said that it was not true, then they whispered something to each other and said loudly “WE ARE BOTH TO BLAME!” and started laughing. The parents also started laughing, they didn’t do anything else, because they knew that their words meant nothing to them, so they decided to mark that agreement with a photo.

Behind the photo was written: “My dear sister, I love you very much, thank you for always being by my side and for wanting to take the blame for your brother even at the age of 5. If you ever need to, call my name and I will come. Love, Ivan”.

At that moment, Melanie felt sorry. She felt sorry for her brother, she missed his company. Therefore, as he said, she immediately went to call him and tell him what happened. Ivan was angry because he wanted to give the box to her for her 18th birthday, but he was also happy that she was like him, curious. After that conversation, both of them promised each other that they would find more time for each other in the future, and they started talking, studying and playing together.

Shortly after that event, Ivan found a beautiful, dear, blonde girl, named Lea. Melanie liked Lea, and Lea liked her, she loved her. But although Ivan found a girlfriend, he always found some time for his younger sister. He loved that Melani asked to bring Lea with him on game day, so that all three of them could have fun together. Everyone had their own nickname, Melani was “Mela”, Ivan was “Ive” and Lea “Lena”. They called each other these names when they were together.

And so they played three times every week, they included their parents in that trio, they all loved each other endlessly, no one argued anymore, they all made memories with each other until the end of their lives.

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WAR TO END ALL WARS

Over Germany, another, cruel, gloomy morning dawned. Everything is still half destroyed, half empty and miserable. Everywhere, not only on buildings and objects, but also in the hearts of thousands of people are huge, deep, painful holes. Everything people ever had; the Great War has taken it away from them. So far, many people have lost their homes, some have lost their loved ones, but the sure thing is that they all lost the wonderful lives they lived.

During the first few years of the Great War children lost their parents and many of them had to stay in orphanages. Big, old houses where all of them lived. Eden Schmidt was one of them. Her father was a soldier who died while trying to defend his country and her mother died after she gave birth to her. Eden was a beautiful girl who had a distinctive personality, who could laugh at anything, including herself, she was especially kind and caring to others. She was a girl who primarily, known the value of having fun. She was beautiful inside out because there is no other way to describe the true beauty. Every day she would lean against the old, squeaky window of her room and wait for her boyfriend to visit her. He was all she had left and she loved him with all her heart. His name was Mattheus Bäumer. He had cheerful personality, a big golden heart and was willing to do anything for the people he loved. Eden and Mattheus were so in love, and when two people are in love you can see it in their eyes, you can feel the love, the way they look at each other, how they stare at each other, their eyes full of admiration of undying love for each other, their eyes are smiling, even though they didn't say a word about it, there is this thread connecting the two of them.

It was 12 o'clock, which meant that soon Mattheus will come to visit Eden. Leaning against the window, Eden was waiting for him and thinking about her father. She couldn't believe that he's gone now. „My father was a man like no other, he believed in me, protected me, supported me...“; she thought, „ He always taught me to take meaningful steps and leave my mark, he held my hand as I grew taller to his knee, his hip, his shoulders, no matter how tall I grew, he would always think I'm little.“

Many memories and thoughts were running on her mind. She couldn't help herself but let a tear slide down her soft face. As she cried, she saw Mattheus entering the front yard. She quickly wiped her tears and smiled as big as she could. When Mattheus saw her, he also smiled and ran up to her. He hugged her so tight that she couldn't breathe, he then pulled back and stared at her. „How are you? “-he asked „Better than ever now when you're here “- Eden said while smiling. Mattheus knew that Eden is going through a tough time, especially now, when her father is gone so he is trying to be with her as much as he can. „So... What have you been up to?“- she asked, „Nothing much, except of the news that I was planning to tell you“- he said proudly, „Well, can I hear them?“- Eden asked slightly curious, „I don't know how will you take these news but it wasn't my choice.“- Mattheus said while thinking about how will he tell her that important information, but not hurt her. Eden didn't know what to expect from Mattheus, but her curiosity grew and grew. „ The army needs more soldiers on the Western Front, so my father turned me in. “- he said while looking at the ground. Eden's eyes widened, her body went numb, she was in shock. She can't let him go, why would he even do such a thing? „What is wrong with you? Do you know how dangerous that is? Mattheus are you serious! I lost my father, you're the only one I have left, do you seriously want me to end up being all by myself, with no one? “- Eden said frightened, while panicking, crying, and mixing a thousand different feelings. Mattheus felt awful, he didn't want to do that to her, he loves her. He tried to explain her a couple of times that, that wasn't his choice, but Eden was just crying and thinking of what could possibly happen to Mattheus.

Eden was lying in her bed, thinking about the news that Mattheus told her. She can't let him go, she can't lose him, she must find a way to prevent him from going to the Western Front. She looked at the closet where her father's army uniform was hanging. She looked at it for a while and then produced a wonderful idea. She will go with Mattheus as a soldier to the Western Front and try to keep an eye on him while he's there. Since women can't participate as soldiers there, she'll pretend that she's a man. Eden jumped out of her bed and grabbed the uniform. She tried to put it on, but she realized that she was too thin and that the uniform was too big for her. She then grabbed a couple of pillows and a long stretchy cloth that served as a bandage. First, she wrapped the cloth around her chest to make it look like a man's chest, then she took pillows and tied them to her legs. When she was done with the pillows, she secured everything once again with that stretchy fabric. She put the uniform on and looked in the big mirror that was hanging on her wall. She looked like her father. She was looking at herself for a while and then decided to go to sleep. She took everything off and tiredly laid down in her bed.

A few days passed and the day when Eden and Mattheus have to say goodbye to each other finally came. Again, as always Eden was waiting for Mattheus at the window. She saw him again entering the front yard, but this time with a sad face and tearful eyes. „What’s wrong? “-she asked, Mattheus was just looking at Eden’s face, he didn’t know what to say and how to express his feelings. „I really don’t want to leave you “- he said. Eden felt how Mattheus was feeling, she hugged him and comforted him. They talked, laughed, kissed just spent the best day they ever had. In the evening, they said goodbye to each other with the most beautiful words and wishes. As soon as Mattheus left, Eden knew it was time to execute her plan. A van should come to pick up Mattheus at 10 p.m. which will take him to the Western Front, so she had to be quick. Again, she wrapped her chest with a stretchy cloth and tied a few pillows around her legs and arms. She put on her uniform and sneaks out of her room. When she sneaked out, she headed towards Mattheus’s house, after a while she saw the house and Mattheus in front of it, he was waiting for the van. Eden now has to pretend that she’s a guy, she tried to have a deep voice and act like a man. She ran up to Mattheus and greeted him. „Western Front huh? “- Mattheus asked proudly, „Yeah, yeah “- Eden said in a deep voice. „Are you scared? “- Mattheus added, „Only fools are scared, aren’t they? “- Eden said while trying to act like she’s a brave man. Mattheus smiled and pointed at the van „There it is “- he said, he walked towards the van and entered the back of it. Eden didn’t know what to do so she decided that she’ll just follow him. When they entered, they saw a bunch of other people, looking scary, cold, and fearless. Eden and Mattheus sat down and looked at each other. „Do we know each other? “- Mattheus said a bit confused. Eden went numb, what if he finds out who she is. „No, no, no I don’t think so “- she said in a confident voice. „Oh then, nice to meet you, I’m Mattheus “- he said again, „I’m Paul “- Eden said and everything was going just like she planned.

The Western Front was a disgusting place, very often bombs would fall and terrible shootings would be heard. The place reeked of fear and despair. A thousand soldiers stood in the muddy trenches, being sick, hungry, wounded, and dead. Every few minutes a human life was lost, all you can hear is the cries and sobs of young soldiers and heavy shooting from which would your ears bleed. The place was so disgusting that you wouldn’t recommend it to your worst enemy. Mattheus and Eden, or should I say, Mattheus and Paul became best friends. They have been in the army for several days now. The war should be over in 4 days at 12 o’clock at night. Mattheus and Eden were scared. Tonight, the two of them and a couple of other soldiers were on duty. Everyone was sleeping except of them. They stood like statues, wearing

helmets and masks in case poison was thrown. Their hands were slippery with sweat but they held their rifles firmly. They didn't know from which side the shot might come. Eden felt uneasy and nervous, she feared for her life. A hundred thoughts ran through her mind until she heard someone whispering, „Listen to the silence, it's telling the truth.“ She was slightly confused about what she heard, but she decided to listen. As she listened, she could only hear her thoughts screaming in the silence, she was so focused that she didn't hear when Mattheus screamed, „RUN, RUN, RUN TO THE BUNKER, THEY'RE BOMBING US!“ , Eden was unaware of what was happening, she couldn't hear anything except of herself. She felt someone pulling and pushing her, it was Mattheus, he pushed her so hard, so she can get safe, that when she fell, her helmet and mask slipped off her face. Mattheus couldn't believe his eyes, he froze, and just stood there, looking at Eden for which he thought was Paul. He didn't understand how he had been so stupid not to realize that Paul didn't act like other men. „ Why did you do this to me?“ - he said sadly, „I just wanted to be with you Mattheus, to try to protect you “ - Eden said in a shaky voice. Both of them were slightly disappointed, but it was too much for them to think about such problems while the war was going on.

Three days have passed since what happened, today should be the last day of the war. Tired, hungry, and exhausted soldiers stood in the trenches and counted down the time on the clock. It was 11p.m, in an hour everything will be over. Mattheus and Eden wanted to get out of there so badly. Eden couldn't wait another hour to be freed from that hell, she went completely crazy, she wanted to leave as soon as possible. She made an escape plan and suggested it to Mattheus. „Are you insane? You'll get us killed, and the war is over in less than 20 minutes “ - Mattheus said in a panicked voice, „Please, I can't wait, I want to go home.“ - she said. Mattheus didn't want anything bad to happen to Eden, but something was wrong with her. She went through a lot of stress, fear, and sadness that she went completely insane and is not aware of the situation she's in. The clock was ticking and time was passing, people couldn't wait for the end of the war. Eden knew that her idea might not be the smartest, but she was desperate and wanted to make it happen. When she finally got the chance, she ran out of the trench where all the soldiers were and ran across the battlefield hoping to find a way out. As she was running, she soon felt an indescribable pain in her chest. When Mattheus saw her fall, he ran to her without thinking, screaming, and crying. He gently lifted her head, pulled her to him and cried softly. „ Just a year ago things were so different “ - he said sobbing, he noticed that there were no more shots or loud noises. The war was over and Eden died a minute before the end.

A few days passed since the end of the war, Mattheus still couldn't come to himself. Every day, he visited Eden's grave. He went there and sat by her grave „I think I'll miss you forever, like the stars miss the sun in the morning skies “- he said while sobbing and looking at her grave, „And now I understand that the world is beautiful only when we dream. To be beside you just once more, I swear that would be enough.“ - he then stops crying and looked at the sky „On my silent days I miss you a little louder Eden, I'll never be that me again, but I guess I'll see you when the road decides it's time for our paths to cross again...“

What hurts the most is that they never really said goodbye to each other. War is what happens when language fails. The most disgusting thing that humans could have brought into this world. It never has a happy ending. In peace sons bury their fathers. In war fathers bury their sons. Eden was one of the 20 million victims of the Great War, and Mattheus was one of the true soldiers that fought not because he hated what was in front of him, but because he loved what was behind him. War is not a fun game where you just want to defeat your opponent, war is a fight for your life and the future your descendants will have.

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Tin Karešin

THE PURPLE SKY

Have you ever heard of the other world? You probably haven't, but you might have heard of it under a different name, for it has many names. The magical land, the other dimension, the place with a purple sky or something else. Unbeknownst to many, there is another dimension connected to ours, a world between worlds. Nobody knows how, but they are connected so close that it creates certain doorways. Portals, if you will. They can be hidden around our world and others; you must look very good. They are not hidden behind a wall or buried in the ground; they are hidden in plain sight, just hidden from anyone who isn't looking for them or isn't worthy of the land through them. They are not invisible; they are dim. That means that they are possible to be seen. However, they extort a certain kind of energy that whenever someone passes near them, they suddenly turn their attention to something else or suddenly remember that they forgot to turn off their stove or forgot their phone at home. You'd be surprised to know everything that we don't know even exists just because we don't pay attention. So listen closely, because I spent a lifetime looking for them and finally found it. And believe me that once you've been through that land, you will never be the same. As far as I know, there are many portals in this world. One is in an ancient mesoamerican temple, but I have never found it in all the time I looked. But I can tell you for sure there is one in Japan. It's in an old dojo in the city of Kanazawa. Fourteen years I traveled the world to find one. I've searched every corner of all the seven continents, even Antarctica, in search of these portals; I've scoured every ancient temple, every culture and ancient civilization, even those unknown or unaccepted in history. I've seen almost everything there is in this world, and now I can finally explore the another one. Or so I thought. The ancient texts say that the portals will sometimes not show themselves even to those looking for them if they are not worthy of the world beyond. I thought that meant they wouldn't let anyone with the wrong intentions into the world beyond, but I was wrong. You see, the world beyond those portals is not like ours. It is dangerous, treacherous, unpredictable, and puts you to the test, which is what the texts mean. The portals only let

in those of a strong will and put them to the test of surviving and struggling in that world. So I went to Japan in search of the portals. After fourteen years, I still never lost hope and only strengthened my will because the more I failed at finding a real portal, the more proof of their existing I found. Turns out all of the ancient civilizations had some contact with the other world. Some while it was still like ours, with a civilization living there with their own culture, mythology and history. Others after it fell. So after searching the whole south of Japan, I came to Kanazawa. The closer I was, the more I felt some energy pulling me somewhere until I finally ended up in the dojo. After searching for a while, I remembered I needed to check my phone, so I went outside. As soon as I did, I realised that I had turned my phone off exactly so that I don't have to look at it and I immediately remembered all of the scripts and writings about the portals ability to hide. I just came closer to a portal than I ever was and was about to leave! I rushed back into the dojo and there it was, on the wall opposite of the door in the spot I must have looked at fifty times. It was amazing. I wondered how many times could I have been this close to a portal and let its energy push me away. Could I have wasted years searching just because I didn't pay enough attention? I went through it. My jaw dropped from the sight. I couldn't believe it was real and I finally did it. According to the writings and scripts, the sky was always dark and it was night, there were monsters lurking in every shadow at every corner, food was only found at the ends of the pathways, there were only dark and dead forests, the pathways were the only safe place protected by the stars and there were old forts everywhere filled with danger. Looking at the sight before me I had no choice but to conclude that those who wrote that only ever heard their grandparents talking about the place to them when they were a few years old. It was night, but the sky was alight with stars every square inch. The only odd thing was that the sky was purple, and so was the grass which was covering the ground. I saw the dark forests, but they were nowhere near covering the whole land. And finally, I saw the paths the legends talked about. They were everywhere. I looked to the portal behind me, but it wasn't there! The portal was gone! After a while I came to the conclusion that panic would get me nowhere. This was a test of strength and will after all, I couldn't let fear get the best of me. I noticed a skeleton near on the ground. He was sitting and holding out a sword. It was a later middle-age celtic arming sword, I would know after traveling the world and learning about different cultures for fourteen years. It had a short golden lobed pommel and a short black grip. The crossguard was not long, per celtic custom. The scabbard was weird though, cut in the side and winged, as if it was meant to be worn on the back. I took it out and tried it a bit. After a lifetime of traveling around the

world studying old civilizations I learned some things about fencing. I put it back into the scabbard and put it on my back. It was strangely fitting. I remember my great uncle telling me how his celtic great great great great grandfather Gwalon Jafferot passed through this land with such a sword, and people constantly told me we were alike in stature. Could this be the sword of great great grandfather Gwalon? I took the sword back out and looked at it. On the bottom of the blade were engraved the marks Those were his initials written in ogham, the writing of the celts.

It has been one week, and here is a brief summary of what I found out about this world so far. The paths go everywhere and they are all connected. The „stars“ above from the scripts and ancient carvings are actually small orbs floating above ground that are only noticable when you look at the sky while moving around, otherwise they blend in with the stars. They float around ten meters from the ground at the location where I entered, they do not go down or up as the terrain does. To explain what they do and where they are found I must first explain the food situation. At the end of each path there is food and water laid out in the open. The orbs do not follow the roads everywhere, they only follow them to those places. The reason for this is that the orbs shine a certain energy to the paths that protects from monsters. Yes, there monsters in the woods, but they are not afraid to leave them if they sense food, or as we call it, people. The orbs repel them from the place they shine at. When you find the food and water, it is wise not to eat it all, but leave some scraps, because as soon as the food is gone, the orbs start dissapearing until the last place where the path divides to the next closest place with food. Every now and then the roads lead to some castles. They resemble early middle age celtic castles with a hint of resemblance to mid renaissance spanish forts. The castles however, are only protected by the orbs above the halls that lead to the continuation of the path to food. To enter any other place in the castles is at your own risk, but I had to venture into them, even if just for exploration. This is what I found out after researching the castles and the writings on its walls. The people that lived here worshipped seven deities, three of them being far more powerful, wise and godly than others: Fyrien, Gloryen, Makuta, Kalvata and the three main ones, Kumora, Geius and Ishtrigar. They saw Ishtrigar as the most wise of the three, and the three as the leaders of the rest. Finally, a civilization that doesn't thing gods as rulers who should be worshiped to the point of sacrafice, but as leaders of peace and justice. In our world there are still those who are not yet free people because of the religion of others.

It has been two weeks. I am close to pinpointing the location of the exit portal using the wringing on the walls. Although their sky is not a universe of infinite space

like ours and their stars stay still, the people of this world were still great astrologists. They had maps of their world, but used the stars to navigate anywhere. It just so happens that the location of the exit portal is in the center of this world, and the only way I can find it is if I find pieces of the starmap written on the walls of twelve castles. I have gone through ten of them. I approached the eleventh as any other. I exited the protection of the orbs above quietly and quickly ran to the astrology tower. As I got there I found the next piece of the starmap on the largest wall and added it to the map I drew so far. Next to the highlighted stars was a note, it was a clue to the location of the final piece of the starmap. It said: „Mae'r darn olaf o'r map i'w weld yn y castell sydd ddau ddiwrnod o gerdded oddi yma i gyfeiriad Fyrien.“ It means „The final piece of the map can be found in the castle that is two days walk away from here in the direction of Fyrien.“ by that meaning in the direction of the star system of Fyrien. I got there in a day and a half, but when I got to the astrology tower the wall that was supposed to have the last piece was torn from time and I couldn't see the last piece. I had to pinpoint the location using the alignment of the previous pieces. After three days riding I finally found it. It was right in the middle of the intersection of every path there is in that world. After nearly two weeks I have escaped. Before I did, I left my sword there. Whoever comes here next will need it, I will just get another one. And I left my journal and findings, so that whoever comes next will need them to survive. I will write them over when I come home. Apart from that, I don't know what I will do. After fourteen years of searching for this world I found it and passed through it in weeks. I think I will go to Tibet and compare my findings with the ancient scripts. But I can definitely say that no matter how dangerous this world is, it is the greatest experience in all of my life.

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Ena Mutnjaković

A GARDEN OF DEAD MEN

Sunrise. The one thing I enjoy seeing when I wake up for work. The gentle glow of the upcoming sun with such warm colors to see, makes me want to stare at it forever.

„It is currently 7 a.m.“ I said to myself after getting up from my bed, yawning in the process. Going downstairs to make myself some coffee, I almost tripped over my cat, Lilly.

„Oops, sorry Lilly “the little ball of fur stared at me so menacingly, as if she wanted to kill me for doing that. I rolled my eyes as a response because I knew it was only an accident.

„Such a drama queen.“ I whispered to myself whilst making my coffee. I drank it quickly, and immediately jolted wide awake. After that I rushed upstairs to the bathroom, this time watching where Lilly is so I don't trip over her again. There I did my business, went to my room and started picking out my outfit.

I put on my favorite black suit with a black belt I found lying in the closet. Since I looked so beautiful, I just had to pose in front of my mirror. The confidence always rose up when I wore this outfit.

I headed downstairs again, gave my cat some food, put on my shoes and went out the door.

Walking to the building I worked in, I searched the massive sign that says CSI, which stands for „Crime Scene Investigation“ I saw my colleague, and best friend, Marcus Christel.

„Hi mate, good to see you today. I thought you slept in again “

„No, I actually woke up pretty well rested, and even drank coffee. “

„Good, because we have a new case we were assigned to investigate today. Even our boss is coming with us to help. “ I could see the excitement on his face get more visible as he talked when we entered the building. I don't know if it was from having people die and him finding out why or if our boss was coming with us.

When we walked to the center of the building where we discussed who when and what happened on our investigations and talk about witnesses and prime suspects. I

could see our boss, Zack Rovane, talking to our other colleagues.

„Oh! Mr. Christel and Mrs. Brine, it’s good to see you both. I hope you are ready for a fun day today “

„Seeing dead people is fun? “ I could see Marcus having a wide smirk on his face when I said that.

„Investigating who did it and bringing that person to justice is, I didn’t know you found dead people fun “

„Relax, I was just joking. Party pooper “I whispered that last part because if he heard me, that joke would have cost me my job.

„The message on my phone says that our driver is here. First investigation of the day is Callie McLoar. I will tell you all the details once we get there “

That name sounded familiar to me but I brushed the feeling off and followed Marcus and my boss to our driver. We got in the car and patiently waited to get there. It was about a 20-minute drive. We stopped in front of a small cottage near a river and a forest surrounding it. Zack now started to tell us about the victim.

„Callie McLoar, 27-year-old female, shot 37 times in the stomach and stabbed to her head with a knife. “Now when we opened the door, so many people were inside, the victim’s parents, our other investigators collecting evidence and cops.

„It was speculated that the victim died from the bullet wounds first, and the murderer stabbed her in the head after she died. The reason for that is unknown “

„Maybe the murderer thought that she wasn’t dead so he did the final blow to end it all. “

„Maybe Marcus, that is one of our theories “

While Zack and Marcus talked about the theory why the murderer stabbed the victim in the head, I went to look around for anything that might be the cause for it.

After entering the kitchen, I saw one of our investigators Greg Solomon putting something in a bag and closing it.

„Miss Brine, we found the murder weapons “he said in a serious tone. I saw a kitchen knife in one bag and a revolver right next to it.

„Why were they placed neatly in the kitchen for us to find? That stupid murderer might have left some fingerprints on it and they just left it? That doesn’t make any sense “ I thought to myself, it is really weird that the murderer did that.

„Brine! “a loud voice yelled right next to my ear, snapping me out of my thoughts.

„Boss, did you really have to yell in my ear like that? One day you will make me go deaf “

„Well I called you 6 times already because you have been standing there for 20

minutes “ I have been standing here for 20 minutes? Wow, a new record for me.

„Anyways, Marcus talked to the victim’s parents, turns out when they left, she said she was going to bring her boyfriend over. His name is Oliver Laurens “

„Didn’t he just come out of prison for murder and arson? “

„Yep“Zack nodded in response to my question.

„Wow, already committing a crime after prison, what a way to spend your freedom“ I said that with a sarcastic tone and both Marcus and Zack agreed with me. After that we started to leave the house, I was thinking about having another coffee after this when out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man in the forest.

I turned my head in the direction of the man, the hair on my neck standing up in the process, and I went stiff.

The man, about 193 cm tall, stared at me with such a wide smile that I thought his face muscles were about to fall off. I didn’t see his eyes or anything else except that smile because he was wearing all black which made it hard to see.

I started walking again to the car, worried and scared look on my face. I got in but when I again looked in the direction of the man... he was gone. Vanished, and it made me wonder why I didn’t tell anyone about him. I was probably frightened to bits.

Going back to the building, checking the location of the prime suspect Oliver, displaying evidence to the forensics to check the fingerprints on the murder weapons, sure enough it was Oliver who used them, Marcus, me, and the police going to his location, the police arrested him and we headed back. Though I couldn’t stop seeing the man out of the corner of my eye and it really started to worry me. I didn’t want to tell anyone because he would just vanish after you look away

The day passed slowly and it was now 4.30 p.m., Zack told me to go home early because he noticed the constant worried look on my face. I thanked him and started walking home.

I was so close to my house but I stopped. Someone was right behind me. Breathing so close to my ear. I could feel myself going pale. My heart started racing. I was sweating. I started shaking. I was *terrified*.

„W-who is there? “I said in a shaky tone.

Silence... no one answered but the breathing was still there.

I could feel my hands going cold and my legs were about to give out.

I rapidly turned around, hoping to find some creep being annoying but...

No one was there... Confusion was seen all over my face. I felt relieved yet I was still so shaky, sweaty, and cold. I recognized the feeling. A panic attack. I hurried on

home, knowing that either cuddling my cat or eating might help in this situation and that is exactly what I did. Lying on the couch with my cat purring, I started to think. What caused me to have a sudden panic attack?

„I probably just need to rest a little “I said to myself, still a bit shaken, feeling myself getting relaxed.

„Thank you Lilly “I said, lifting my arm to pet her and she gently shoved her head in it and started to purr more. I love her so much.

7 pm. I’m exhausted at this point. I put on my pajamas and went to bed. Lilly is in her bed across the room. I felt so warm and relaxed, and closed my eyes.

The next morning, I did the same routine. Got up at 7 a.m., drank coffee, I got dressed in the same outfit, gave Lilly food, and left. Still, I was a bit frightened if the same thing was going to happen to me like yesterday, however I brushed the feeling off and continued to walk.

Walking in the building, I noticed that Marcus was nowhere to be seen and people were rapidly walking around, talking loudly while doing so. I spotted my boss talking to our whole team, getting more agitated after every answer he got. However, when he saw me, his eyes lit up with happiness.

„Brine! I was so concerned about you. I was beginning to assume you disappeared too.“ He hugged me really tightly for a second and then pulled away, catching a glimpse of my face, which of course, had a puzzled look.

„Oh, you didn’t hear about the news. “I saw Zack started to get uncomfy, his face telling me that the news he was about to tell me, were not good.

„At one o’clock in the morning, we got a report about sudden screams on Wall Street. I, along with some other people, went to see what it was about. When we got to the house... “

Zack started to get fidgety and couldn’t look me in the eye.

„We realized it was Marcus’ home. Inside, it was completely trashed and him nowhere to be found. There were no signs of blood. I am so sorry Gabrielle “

I couldn’t believe it...My best friend has gone missing? I stared at the ground; mouth wide open with tears running down my face.

„Some of our other coworkers have also gone missing in the same way. “

„O-oh God. “ I said quietly, my vision becoming blurry every few seconds. I am going to find him. I will find him. I won’t eat, drink or sleep until I find him. And the person who did it... will be hanging on my wall as a decoration.

Anger started to be noticeable on my face, wiping my tears harshly. I looked at Zack.

„Get every person to find him. Now. Check everywhere. I don't care how long it takes, find him“

Zack nodded and called the whole building on the search.

Days passed, and about half our team went missing. No sign of them. Nor Marcus. I sobbed loudly in front of everyone, realizing that now Zack was also gone. I could feel the regret and sorrow from the people around me.

At 8 p.m. I was walking home. I couldn't stop thinking about the people that disappeared...

Then the breathing could be heard again.

I turned around to punch the person to get away but I was knocked out.

It was cold, damp, and humid.

I opened my eyes harshly, realizing I was tied up in some sort of basement. When my vision cleared more, I saw them...

My best friend, boss and other men, my coworkers, dead. Mutilated. They had holes all over their corpses. Eyes, feet, chest... was full of holes. Out of those holes were blooming beautiful flowers. It was like a murder garden. I wanted to scream; however, I was stopped by a hand over my mouth.

„You're next, my darling“ laughter erupted from the man. The last thing I heard before everything going dark.

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Emilia Marijanović

THE OBSIDIAN BRACELET

‘Reagan!’ I hear a voice call out to me. I feel the tingling sensation of being rattled by someone. ‘Reagan!’ I finally open my eyes and notice a short woman shaking me.

‘Finally! Took you long enough.’

I sit up and stare at the woman in front of me. She has half-blonde-half-black hair which is tied up in two short braids. She has almond-coloured skin. I finally gain the courage to speak ‘I’m sorry, who are you?’

The woman stares at me in shock. ‘I’m your sister. What are you on about?’

Another person comes near me, it is a man with long brown hair tied in a bun, ivory-coloured skin, and beautiful blue eyes. He bends down and checks my head.

‘She seems fine, might be a concussion,’ he says calmly.

The woman glares at him. ‘I didn’t know concussions come with amnesia.’

The man notices the sarcasm in her voice. ‘Gigi, she might just be confused, let it be.’

Gigi scoffs and turns her head. The man looks at me. ‘My name is Augustus, and that over there is your sister, Gigi.’

I tilt my head to the side whilst he helps me up.

‘You fell down a flight of stairs. Thank goodness you’re okay.’

I look at him. ‘Oh! why am I here?’

Augustus takes my hand and starts leading me. ‘Well, we were having a party and you decided to go upstairs to take a nap. It turns out that it didn’t end well.’

Then we enter a cozy-looking living room. I immediately notice two women sitting down next to each other, arguing.

‘No way! There is no way that they should be together!’ one of the women exclaims.

She has long blonde hair with rainbow highlights in them, beautiful green eyes, ivory skin, and lots of pearl jewelry. The other woman glares at her. She has short wavy black hair. Yet she has a one-green-one-blue eye. She has beautiful toffee skin, and she has a bounty of chains on her clothes.

Augustus waves to them both. 'Hey Gwen, Hey Terra!'

The blonde waves back. The other doesn't.

Augustus points at the blonde girl. 'Reagan, this is Gwen.'

Then he points to the black-haired one. 'And this is Terra.'

I wave to them and Terra waves back to me.

'Where is Xavier?', Gwen asks curiously.

'I'm not sure where he is. I haven't seen him,' Gigi calls out from the kitchen.

I sit down next to Terra. 'Who is Xavier?', I ask.

Terra stares at me. 'Did you hit your head or something?'

Augustus giggles a bit. 'Actually, she did.'

Terra gives him an angry look and then she turns to me. 'He's your boyfriend, Reagan.'

I stare at her confusedly.

'He's usually with you... like all the time,' Gwen answers as she gets up and leaves.

Terra turns on the TV and scrolls through its channels. We watch it in silence until we hear a blood-curdling scream coming from upstairs. We all rush upstairs, almost tripping each other until we reach the room. Upon entering, we notice a decapitated head on the floor, and its body sprawled in the corner, still freshly bleeding.

Gwen slowly backs away as Augustus goes to comfort her. 'Let's get out of here!', he looks at all of us, pulling us out of the room into the hall.

'No, no, no! He can't be dead, he can't be!'

Augustus comforts her.

Gigi goes back into the room. We wait outside, and when she comes back, she doesn't seem happy.

Gigi looks at everyone. 'Let's go sit down in the living room!'

We all make our way to the living room and sit down. Gigi stays standing and starts pacing a bit.

'Well, since we are stuck in the middle of nowhere, I decided to search the crime scene.'

Everyone stares at her and yet she continues. 'I found two items of interest', she showed us two zip lock bags. One contained a strawberry charm, whilst the other one had a black chain with one singular coffin-shaped nail.

Gwen immediately gets up. 'I lost that a few hours ago!'

Gigi stares at her.

Terra angrily speaks. 'I left those two in the bathroom, not in Xavier's room! Plus, I have lost my nail glue.'

Gigi speaks loudly. 'His bracelet is missing, you know, the obsidian gem one! The one he would never leave anywhere!'

Terra retaliates. 'Why are you blaming us? Why not Reagan? She's his girlfriend. But I understand why. It's because she's your sister!'

Gigi looks at her. 'Oh please! Reagan has never had a bit of bad blood in her! You on the other hand were jealous of Xavier!'

Augustus speaks up. 'Let's calm down. We need to think this through.' Gigi, do you have any other evidence?'

Gigi glares at Terra. 'Xavier was up there, the entire time taking a nap. Three people went up: Gwen, Terra, and Reagan. Gwen and Terra both stuck around up there whilst Reagan was napping in another room. Gwen came down immediately whilst Terra stayed up there for almost an hour.'

Everyone stares at Terra whilst she stares back. 'I did not kill him! I spent my time in the bathroom fixing myself up.'

I stare at her confusedly, but with horror-filled eyes. She seems guilty. She is closing her posture off and not making any sharp moves.

Gwen and Gigi back away from Terra, and she stares at them. Not one word is being said anymore.

'Guys, I swear I didn't do it! He was like my brother!', Gigi glared. 'But YOU wanted something of his, didn't you?'

Everyone keeps quiet.

Gigi stares her down, but Terra doesn't return her perspective on Gigi.

The silence is slowly swallowing all our wholes.

Gigi exclaims. 'I'll go investigate a bit more, stay right here!'

Gigi leaves immediately, whilst I get up. 'I'm going to the bathroom.'

I calmly leave the room and go into the bathroom. I stare at myself for the first time after allegedly falling down the stairs. I stare at my curly black hair and my dark brown eyes. I notice something peeking under my sleeve. I lift my sleeve up and notice a beautiful obsidian bracelet. The one Xavier wore. It feels like I got a jolt of energy. I finally regain my memories. I remember all the good times with my friends and my sister. How I and Terra spent so much time with each other. I also remember so many fights with my friends, but mostly my boyfriend. The last thing I did before my fall was that I went up the stairs and told the others I was going to take a nap. Then I went into one of the rooms and lay down. After an hour they came to check up on me and left. I wasn't asleep at all, after they left downstairs, I immediately went to the room Xavier was in. He was on his phone, speaking with another woman. He

called her ‘his loveliest girlfriend’. I knew he was cheating. I felt so much anger at that moment, and when he noticed me, we started arguing. He claimed it wasn’t what it looked like, but I knew what I saw. I got so filled with anger that I hit him in the chest. He stumbled into the corner and fell. I saw the outdoor kit he had laid down on the drawers. I opened it up and took the hunting knife out of it and came closer to him. He felt so guilty and kept his head down.

I don’t remember what happened next. All I know is that I am in the bathroom, changing into a new set of clothes, with his bracelet around my wrist and one of my nails missing. I hear arguing outside the bathroom door. When I come out, I see them all grouped up on the sofa.

Augustus immediately gets up. ‘Reagan, show us your hands, please!’

I look at them confusedly and show them my hands. I have forgotten my sleeve was up. The bracelet was visible.

‘How did you get that?’, Terra asks.

‘I don’t know, I had it before.’

Gwen stares me down. ‘Why didn’t you say anything then when we mentioned the bracelet?’

I slowly come closer. ‘I didn’t know I had it.’

My sister stares at me. ‘You have coffin-shaped nails, Reagan!’

I don’t reply.

Augustus shuts up.

‘You took Terra’s chain from the bathroom and Gwen’s strawberry charm from her purse.’

I retaliate. ‘You know he cheated on me multiple times, right?’

They stand there shocked. I admit to murdering a man.

Gwen tries not to throw up. Augustus moves her away, whilst Terra yells back at me.

‘That isn’t a good excuse! You took his life!’

It’s all so quiet after that. A few minutes later they lock me in the bathroom and call the police. I wait there for two hours until the police come and take me with them. I am sentenced to prison, whilst the others go on with their lives. I don’t have any contact with them, and I’m sure they don’t want to have any contact with me. All I have left is to rot in prison, with the crime I committed out of blind rage.

mentor: Pamela Grozdanić
institution: OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

Sara Srok

AM I ANNOYING OR JUST INVISIBLE?

Hi! My name is Evelin. I have a boring life...I guess. I have two siblings: Jacob (my older brother) and Alice (my younger sister). Yes, I'm the middle child. Sometimes I feel like people forget that I exist. I always hear: "Not right now." or "Talk to you later.", but there is no later. I am tired of calling people for any reason. I have my best friend Sophie, but she is busy all the time as well. Although she is an amazing person, she doesn't always have time to hang out with me. Plus, we go to different schools. Speaking of school...I think I'm going to be late for my next class!

...

And finally the bell rings! Now I'm ready to go home...where the situation is not much different from school. I have to do my homework, be ignored, take a shower, be ignored, eat, sleep and finally...be ignored.

"Hey mom, what's for dinner?", I asked.

"Evelin, can't you see that I'm on the phone? Go annoy your sibling or something, just don't talk to me right now.", my mother replied.

I'm honestly not surprised anymore. And I'm not going to be like my siblings and annoy them, I'm going to do my homework and be useful! Even though I already am...sort of.

...

"DINNER IS READY!" shouted mom.

"Coming!", I said.

I finished all my homework and I'm really proud. Who knows, maybe I am going to be the centre of attention one day. I went downstairs to see my family at the dinner table staring at me.

"Evelin how are you always the last person to get here? What do you do in that room of yours all day?" said dad.

"Well I certainly don't play video games for six hours straight like Jacob or take

millions of selfies like Alice. I do useful things that can be crucial for my future.”

“For example?”

“Well first of all, I focus on my school!”

Then it was suddenly so quiet. I sat on the chair and said nothing. I didn’t want start any drama, but I think it was too late for that.

“So how was school today?”, asked mom.

“Well chemistry was really bo..”, I got interrupted by my brother.

“It was okay. The teacher almost caught a student cheating on a test.”, said Jacob.

“That sounds like something you would do.”, I replied.

But no one seemed to care. It’s like I’m not even there. I ate all my food and went to my room and no one even noticed. I don’t really know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing because mom complains all the time. I texted my best friend Sophie and asked if we could catch up tomorrow, but of course she had other plans.

...

I hate waking up for school. It’s tiring, especially when I have PE.

“Hey where have you been? Zoe and I have been looking for you.”

“Zoe? *Who is that?*”, I thought.

“Oh sorry, I woke up late today. I’ll be there in a minute”, said my brother.

“Alright, but Zoe left not long ago.”, I heard my mom say.

I think his friend is in front of our house, but I’ve never heard about Zoe. I know almost every friend of my brother, so that’s weird. I go downstairs and overhear mom and dad’s conversation.

“It’s just so crazy that she’s back...I mean we haven’t seen Zoe for almost 14 years!”, said mom.

I need to find out something about that girl Zoe and I will not care if anyone ignores me.

“Hey Evelin, do you want to walk to school with us?”, asked my brother’s friend.

“Um, sure!”, I muttered.

We all split up when we came in front of our classrooms. I sat in my desk where I usually sit, alone, because I have no friends...well besides Sophie.

“Today I will introduce you to our new student.”, said the teacher and then continued after a short but dramatic pause, “Please welcome the new girl in our class: Zoe!”

Aha, bingo! So that’s Zoe? Long blonde hair and brown eyes, just like me! Except I cut my hair. We seem really alike.

“There Zoe, take a seat next to Evelin.”, the teacher navigated from her desk.

Zoe sat next to me and I already felt like we knew each other our whole lives.

“Honestly you look the most mature in this class,” said Zoe.

“Oh, thank you!” I replied and added, “This is probably the first time someone has ever spoken to me.”

“Really? Why won’t anyone talk to you?” Zoe uttered.

“I don’t know...maybe I’m invisible?” I replied.

“HAHAHAHA!” I could hear Zoe’s loud laughter.

I didn’t know if she was serious or just joking around.

“Well, I have just spoken to you so you’re definitely not invisible!” Zoe continued laughing.

“Hmm...that’s true.” I agreed.

I actually liked Zoe. She seemed fun, but I still have to figure out other things about her because my family is being really fishy when it comes to her.

“Hey, would you like to hang out today after school? In the park down the street?” my words came out.

“Sure!” Zoe said.

Well that was easier than I imagined!

...

We were sitting on the bench at the park.

“So, where are you from?” I asked.

“I’m from California!” Zoe answered fast.

“Woah, that’s cool! I think I was there when I was two years old but I barely remember anything...I just remember that my parents were crying so badly that they didn’t speak three months after that...”

“Three MONTHS?! Wow, I’m sorry. Something really bad must’ve happened...”, Zoe responded considerately.

“Yeah...Oh! Do you want to get some ice cream?”, I added to change the subject.

“Sure! I love the chocolate flavour! Everyone says I’m basic, but I think It’s really delicious.”

“Same! I love chocolate! I have once tried the bubble gum flavour and I felt sick for the rest of the day”

“Eww, that sounds bad. Hey, is Jacob your brother?”, Zoe suddenly asked.

“Yes, how do you know him?”

“Well I saw him with my friend Tony, so I went to check what was going on. He seems really nice! Is he a good brother?”, Zoe was curious.

“Oh trust me, he is good with his friends but he is not like that when he’s around me! We argue a lot...Do you have siblings?”

“Sadly no...but I would love to have at least a sister!”

Then a man walked down the street and said:

“Are you two sisters getting along well?”

Sisters? But he was kind of right...Zoe and I looked very alike. We also have so much in common! We looked at each other and went to my house. When we arrived there, my brother Jacob was in front of the house and told me not to come in with Zoe. That was really weird and I asked him why but he didn’t answer. Am I starting to become invisible again? I felt bad for Zoe because she was just standing there doing nothing.

“It’s ok Evelin, don’t worry! We will see each other in school tomorrow.”, she smiled and left.

I hated myself and my brother for being so rude.

“Look what you did! She just left!”

“It’s just not the right time. And don’t talk about Zoe in front of mom and dad.”

I went to my room and texted Zoe to meet up before school.

...

“Look Zoe, I’m so sorry about yesterday. I don’t know what that was...my family has been really weird lately!”, I apologized.

“It’s totally fine! Maybe you can come over to my house after school?”, Zoe offered a brilliant solution.

“Of course!”

And then I got a text...it was Sophie. She wanted to meet up after school, but obviously I can’t! I’ve already got plans with Zoe. I said I’m busy and that we can meet up another time. I hope she won’t be mad! I called mom and told her that I’m going at my friend’s house and she was fine with it. But then Jacob got curious and asked who that friend was. I lied and said it was Sophie. He would probably be so mad if he knew I was hanging out with Zoe and lied to mom about her, even though I didn’t know why Zoe had to be a secret. After school we went to Zoe’s house and I met her parents. They weren’t really nice. I asked Zoe if she was getting along with them, but she said they argued a lot. She must be a strong person. She looks so happy all the time.

“Well...you’re not alone. My family ignores me. When they don’t, we argue.”, I opened up.

“People say I don’t look like my parents at all!”, Zoe confided to me.

“It’s true though, you don’t. You look a lot like me and my parents!”

“Really?”

“Yes! Maybe I can prove that”, I added.

“Woah...but I’m not your sister? We’re not even related!”, Zoe wondered.

“Says who? Let’s go to my house.”, my voice suddenly got very serious.

“But I can’t, remember?”

I came up with a plan and whispered: “It’s ok! We’ will sneak in.”

Just as we got out of Zoe’s house, Jacob spotted us:

“What are you guys doing here? Evelin?”

I hesitated a little bit but answered his question anyway. “I will explain everything, but first, we need to sneak Zoe in our house without anyone noticing.”

My brother agreed. “Ugh fine, I’ll help you.”

We went into our attic and found some really old family pictures. There was me (I was about two years old), Jacob, Alice (she was a baby), our parents and a kid that looked like me...

“Oh my, ...that’s me!”, Zoe screamed in shock.

Now we have figured out the whole story...”Zoe is our sister! She is my twin!”, I heard myself shouting in disbelief.

Jacob finally decided to join in our conversation. “But....how? Where were you all these years?”

Zoe’s face was serious and worried. She just looked down and whispered that she didn’t know.

Then we heard creaking noises...it was Alice.

“What are you guys doing here? And who are you? MOM, DAD, THERE IS A STRANGER IN OU...”

I covered her mouth before mom and dad could hear her. We told her not to tell anyone. Zoe quickly left the house. The next day in school she was really sad. She said that her parents told her that she was adopted. She wouldn’t talk to anyone all day. After school I saw my parents waiting for me in front of the school. Then I saw Zoe crossing the road and a car getting closer and closer with great speed. I ran as fast as I could and pulled her toward me to get her away from the car. My parents were running toward us, even Jacob too, and suddenly, the whole school was gathered around us. Zoe thanked me that I saved her and hugged me. Everyone was cheering for us, and finally, for the first time, I wasn’t invisible. Everyone was looking at me and clapping. All of a sudden, when the crowd disappeared, our parents asked if she

could come back to the family. Zoe agreed and mom and dad burst into tears filled with joy. We all went home, happily...for the first time after a long period.

The next day in school everyone knew we were twins, sisters, and everyone who was passing down the hall would say: “That’s so brave of you!” or “You deserve the world!”. I felt so happy, not just because I wasn’t invisible, but because I had my sister beside me, ready to solve all my problems. Our parents revealed that Zoe went missing on a trip to California. That’s why our parents were so devastated. I finally caught up with Sophie and introduced her to my sister...twin sister.

“Nice to meet you Zoe! And nice to see you smiling, Evelin. Now we’re going to be the most powerful trio!”

“Hahahhahah”, Zoe and I laughed.

I am also glad...I’m glad that I’m happy...and I’m happy that I have the most important people in my life supporting me and being there for me no matter what! At least I’m not the only middle child now!

*mentor: Danijela Erceg
institution: OŠ Manuš, Split*

Dora Božanić

I HAD A DREAM

-Oh, Saint Mother of Unicorns! Harmony Nova, you are late for school again! What book did you read this time? –Ms. Smith screamed.

- The History of Magic. I'm sorry, Miss. It won't happen again. – I said. The teacher was looking at me, but I was completely distracted by my classmates. They were secretly scrolling on their phones. I'm sure they were on TikTok or Snapchat.

- Late again! This is your fifth time that you're late for English class! What were you reading? The what history? Where did you find that book? It sounds so boring! Magic? Nah, that's only for little children. – they said. I wasn't in a good mood. I threw my book on a desk.

- Look. Read. It won't be bad for your phone distracted minds. – I said angrily. That was truth, they were spending too much time on their phones. I don't have one. My parents can't afford it and I'm totally fine without it. They whispered until they noticed I'm cold-blooded.

After the English class, on my way to the library, I noticed a strange old book on the floor.

-Hm, interesting. I've never seen a book like this. – I mumbled. There was no title or text inside, but it wasn't a notebook either. While I was looking in the book, a strange thing happened on the front cover. My name appeared! And then... Swoosh!

- Where am I? What is this place? - I looked around. There were slender trees and various kinds of strange flowers. Ouch, my head is terribly hurting. I wish I had a pillow near me. Suddenly, a beautiful teenage girl appeared in front of me.

- Hello friend! You must be new here! I'm Scarlett. Scarlett Hope. And this is my splendid bunny, Cinnamon. – she said. I was stunned by surroundings and my new friends. Scarlett's bunny was hardly trying to get my attention. Meanwhile, some forest animals came, but there wasn't any time for joy and introduction because the sky was starting to get dark and cloudy. It was looking like it will rain cats and dogs. I absolutely didn't like it.

- Oh, dang it! Not you now! Come on, my new friend, let's move out of here. -

Scarlett grabbed my arm and put me on her beautiful gracious deer with wings. I've never seen such a strange but beautiful creature.

Scarlett said: - Go, Ray, go! – and the deer was flying like a wind. Oh, the sight is beautiful from the heights. You can see the whole kingdom out of here. The trees aren't all green. Some of them are purple, some are pink, some are turquoise and some are green. There are few deep blue lakes. I was instantly falling in love with them. Dear Lord! There are unicorns! Real, living, magical unicorns and dragons! I cannot believe this! It's so beautiful! I want to live here forever! Suddenly, a thought came to my mind.

- Why did you say "Not YOU now"? Not who now? – I was a bit confused.

Scarlett responded: - Ah, you see, I have a twin, Amber. Now, she is requesting from everyone to call her Amber Sharpdoom. I don't know what happened to her, but she isn't the same since I'm the ruler of this kingdom. I hope I'll have my sis back one day. – she said with a bit of sadness. I felt sorry for them.

- By the way, what is your name? – she asked curiously while looking at me with her big green eyes.

- Oh, sorry. My name is Harmony Nova. – I said. She looked incredibly surprised and stunned.

- Well, in that case, follow me. – she said weirdly. I followed her until we stopped in front of one big old tree. She mumbled some untranslatable words and the tree started moving. After few seconds, we could walk through the tree into a big deep hole. I was a bit scared, but Scarlett convinced me to go inside. I didn't even blink and through the tree I fell into some pleasant mystical room. Suddenly, a person appeared in front of us.

- Granny, it's the day. Our last hope is here. – Scarlett said happily. Her grandma was wisely looking old lady. Her deep eyes were showing deep wisdom.

- I don't understand. What's going... - I tried to break the silence.

- Quiet Nova! You are just like your grandma Quartzine. She was such a chatter-box! – old lady smiled.

- You knew my grandma? How? – I responded. I was surprised. I really wasn't expecting this.

- Yes, I knew her. She was my best friend. And my favourite sister. – she smiled warmly.

- Does that mean... That Scarlett and I are cousins? – I asked.

- What Scarlett? Aria Fallenorb, what did I tell you about your name changing? – grandma said strictly. Scarlett, I mean, Aria was suddenly sad because of grand-

mother's words. Grandma continued talking: -Anyways, Harmony, do you want to hear a short story? It will be good for you too to listen, Aria. – she said before a story started.

- Once upon a time, in this forest, there were three young sisters: Allura, Evelyn and Quartzine. Each one was having amulet: a felicity necklace, Hermes' earrings and a portal ring. One day, something terrible happened. An evil spirit entered our world. It was spreading everywhere at lightning speed! Sisters were trying to stop it, but it was very strong. They eventually locked it up in a small box. But it escaped again! You can see its influence on poor Amber. You are our last hope. You can banish that nasty spirit outside of our world. Felicity necklace is mine. You see that ring on your pinkie? Every time it shimmers, we really need your help. Now it's time for you to go, Harmony. Remember us...-

I woke up in my bed. It was just a dream. I think I'll be late for school again. Wait, my ring is shimmering.

mentor: Ajrin Floričić

institution: OŠ Vladimira Nazora Potpićan

Zita Lukšić

WHO IS SHE?

Elena Kate Smith is a 19-year-old girl who has just started college in LA, California. Elena is very ambitious. She wants to be a famous lawyer, famous doctor, famous designer, famous anything. She wanted to be known, liked, remembered. She has beautiful, long, chestnut brown hair, grey eyes just like the sky in the winter, puffy pink lips, and a little mole right on top of her straight-lined nose.

So, when she got into college, she tried everything to get into the most popular sorority, where all the cool, popular girls lived. She got accepted in every sorority but that one. She would've rather slept on the street than live in another sorority. That's how much she wanted to live there. And one day it became true. She got in! Elena was bursting with happiness. When she finally got to the house it was so massive she couldn't believe it. The minute she walked into that house she felt like she finally found happiness and that this is where she belongs. The house was full of popular girls, and when I say full, I really mean it. There were 34 girls living together and Elena was one of them.

In this sorority house, like in any other sorority house, there was the leader of the sorority. The leader in this house was Sasha April Green. She had blonde hair (of course), that fell right above her shoulders, blue eyes like the ocean and one dimple on the left side of her face. Everybody wanted to be her friend because she was always so happy and positive. But she only had few real friends even though everybody knew her, and she knew everybody. She wasn't a senior in college, she was a junior and she still got to be the leader of the sorority, which is rare. So, Elena's next task was to become Sasha's friend. She tried everything, to talk to her and be in her presence but somehow Sasha was always busy and was nowhere to be found even though they live in the same house. But one night when all the sororities and the frats were at the same party, the first party of the year, Elena finally got the chance to talk to Sasha. They talked for a good 15 minutes, but the conversation wasn't so special. They were just talking about school and their major. But they did find something in common. They had the same phone cases, colourful dripping smiley faces. After that, Elena was so happy and returned to partying.

The party ended at 3:45 because the police showed up and everybody escaped as soon as possible. Elena was driving her purple jeep, that she got for her 18th birthday, slowly because she did drink a little bit of beer, but she was mostly sober. As she was driving back to the sorority house she saw Sasha walking on the road. She offered her a ride back to the house, but Sasha declined. Elena insisted because it was 4 in the morning, and she was alone on the street, but Sasha just told her to leave her alone. When Elena came back to the house, she took a shower and went straight to sleep.

She woke up to the banging sound on her door and girls yelling her name. Elena! Dum-Dum! Elena! Dum-Dum! On repeat. When she finally opened the door, she was immediately pulled to the living room where all the girls were seated in front of the tv. Then Amanda came, a girl who was in the same class as Elena throughout high school. Elena was confused about her being here because she didn't live here. She lived in another sorority that was two blocks away from this one. Then Amanda started telling a story about how she and her boyfriend, Ryan, saw Sasha get kidnapped. They were passing by and saw a blonde girl getting pushed into a black van. Elena wasn't sure at first if that was true, but Sasha wasn't in the house. Amanda also added that, at first, she wasn't sure herself that, that was Sasha but when she rewound that scene in her head and saw a gold Cartier bracelet, then she knew that, that was 100% Sasha because at the party Elena wasn't the only one that got to talk to her. Amanda asked Sasha where she got the bracelet because she's been wanting one for years, but they are so expensive, and now she can finally afford it because she worked the whole summer. She stayed another few minutes to answer all the questions that the girls were asking.

When Amanda left, Elena went back into her room to grab her phone and tell her best friend Laura everything that has just happened. Laura didn't get accepted into the same college as Elena, but she did get accepted into a different one (in the USA), and she's currently in the UK, London as an exchange student. When she grabbed her phone, the screen was cracked and the wallpaper had on a cute brown retriever and not a cute orange cat in a pink mug. Then Elena realized that she accidentally swapped phones with Sasha. That must have happened when somebody pushed Elena while talking to Sasha. But was it accidentally? Because the face ID on the phone recognized Elena and that's how she unlocked the phone.

When she's about to go downstairs and tell the other girls a text appeared. And that text was clearly for Elena because it said: "We know you have her phone." Elena was really confused and scared a little bit. But then, an even weirder text appeared. The text said: "*We wanna play a little game. You have 24h to find us and hand over the phone, and we will hand over the girl. No police. No help. Just you. We have eyes*

everywhere so if you break the rules another person gets hurt.” Elena then replied with a text that says that they don’t even know who she is. To that, they responded with a picture of Sasha and a paper above her head that says: *“Happy seeking Elena.”* At this point, Elena got the chills and her legs stopped doing their job, and now Elena was on the floor in her bedroom hysterically crying, alone.

After 20 terrible minutes of crying, Elena finally got the urge to get back on her feet and try to find Sasha. She first got dressed and headed towards Sasha’s bedroom. When she got there everything was so clean, perfect and minimalistic but also really empty. At this point, Elena was in her detective mode and she started digging. She first opened her closet, which was full of designer clothes (of course). When she went to reach a Chanel mini skirt, a text appeared. It said that if she was going to be this slow the police will find them first and then it will be too late to save Sasha. Elena stopped herself from getting distracted and got to work. She found a box on top of Sasha’s closet and letters in her nightstand. In the box, there was a pink pocketknife. It was quite cute actually, but there were also bullets that brought Elena back to reality. In the nightstand, there were three letters. One which envelope was yellowish and two that were white. The first one in the white envelope was just a bill, the second was a birthday card for her 21st birthday and the last one, the yellowish one, had a message.

The message was written with letters from the newspaper, just like in every horror movie. It said: *“Now that you found the letter go to Sasha’s favourite place when she was a child.”* Elena was confused, because how could she know that, yesterday was her first time talking to her. But she continued looking. She looked everywhere for some albums where there might be some photos of her when she was a child, but nothing was there. That’s what Elena thought, cause on her way out of the room she saw the only picture in the room on Sasha’s dresser. In the picture, two little girls were laughing in the park on top of a slide. But neither of them looked like Sasha. Elena quickly put her shoes on and ran outside to the nearest park. When she got to the park nobody was there. She thought that that would be it, she would save Sasha, and everything would get back to normal. But the game wasn’t done, it’s still playing. She climbed on the slide and saw a red box. But she couldn’t open it because it was closed, and the key wasn’t on the slide. She got off the slide and started looking for the key when out of nowhere somebody grabbed her and pulled her aside.

When the person let go of Elena she wanted to scream and run, but she recognized the face. It was Lucas, her childhood friend that lived three houses away from her but they stopped being friends since they went to different middle schools. She

asked him why would he do that and said she almost had a heart attack. To which he replies he's sorry but that he knows why she's here and that he has the key. Elena didn't know what to say so Lucas started explaining. According to Lucas, he and Sasha dated their freshman year, but he ended it in the summer because she was starting to be really controlling and acting weird and wasn't being herself. And, she started messaging him again now that she's broken up with her boyfriend. Also, he added that she probably swapped their smartwatches, because his wristband wasn't pastel green. It was black, and his roommate couldn't possibly do it since he doesn't own a smartphone, just a laptop for school. Then Elena explained how she got here, too. Now that they knew each other's side of the story they got back to the box and the key.

They opened the box. Inside the box, there was another picture and a key. In the picture, there was a little redhead girl by the ice cream truck. In this area, there was only one ice cream truck, an abandoned one. They got there pretty quickly since Lucas knew a shortcut. They used the key to open the truck. The inside of the truck was mostly empty. But in one cabinet there was a USB stick and on its back, somebody wrote *cinema*. So, they ran to the local cinema that was also abandoned. Shocking, I know. When they got there, there was a projector for the USB. They put the USB in the projector and then the video started playing on the projector screen. In the video, they saw 4 sheath papers with messages. The messages were telling them that they don't know who she is, how she got here, or know her story but that they should've been scared of her. But Lucas also noticed that in the left corner of the video, there was a blonde wig lying on the floor, and Elena recognized the building that was outside the window. They wanted to rewatch the video but when Lucas got close it exploded. After that, they went outside and started walking towards the building where Sasha's been kept at. When they got there, Elena remembered that the kidnapers told her in the first message that she had to do this alone. So, Lucas was waiting outside while Elena was entering the building. He was also waiting for her to give him a sign to call the police.

When Elena entered the building there was a man wearing all black waiting at the door to check to see if she was alone. Then, he showed her where to go. After that, she found herself in a room with one desk and four chairs. The doorman told her to sit and that she doesn't have to be scared. She waited a few minutes until a man and a woman wearing all black entered the room. They sat behind the desk and stared into each other in silence until the woman said: "*Bring Chloe Kate George.*" Elena was confused. She thought that she had to do this alone and now there was somebody

else on a “*mission*” just like her and Lucas. When the door opened a familiar figure entered the room, but Elena couldn’t recognize who it was. The girl had red hair, hazel eyes and looked like she was in her late teens. As she got closer, Elena recognized that one dimple on the left side of her face.

That was Sasha! Elena couldn’t believe her eyes, that that was Sasha, but she looked different. The guy told Elena to hand over the phone, so she did, and he gave her phone back. Then she heard the police sirens in front of the building. Then the guy said that they called the police and that she should go as fast as she can. The doorman showed her the secret way out where Lucas was waiting for her. When they came home, they checked their social media and saw that Sasha/Chloe (actually the people from the building) posted the video confession. In that video Sasha confesses that her real name is Chloe Kate George and that she’s all sorts of thieves, she stole an identity, credit cards, clothes... She stole everything that she needed to keep her status of the most popular girl in college. A few days passed when everything settled and everything was back to normal, Elena and Lucas met at the local coffee shop.

They discussed this whole thing and came to the conclusion that she really needs therapy because everything that she’s done is sick and narcissistic and that she needs serious help to see what the trigger for that behaviour was. They were commenting on how they were a good team and they started being friends again and in time maybe more than that. After all of this happened, Elena had a different mindset. She didn’t want to be like Sasha. She wanted to be herself, and only herself.

mentor: Mia Škrinjar

institution: OŠ Remete, Zagreb

Petra Danek

HIDDEN WORLD OF THE DEEP SEA

A long time ago human survival was more difficult than today. Days were shorter and nights were long. If you didn't hide at night, you didn't see the next day. Rules of life were strict. Kill or be killed. It was the hardest during the crisis. The crisis was called the Black Grape Fever. In the past people lived on the borders of the sea. They always ate bread and drank wine. Sometimes wine and bread were not enough for everyone, so sailors went on a mysterious sea to catch some fish. They didn't have water, so they became thirsty and exhausted from trying to make wine healthy. Weeks and months passed with no success.

One guy named Black Bean dreamed about a creature that gives dreams of the future, but it lives in a sea where no one can row with oars. He was sixteen and he was very stubborn. He believed in the legend. He found his team for adventure, one girl and two boys. His team was small, but they had good spirit. Girl's name was Sea Salad, one boy was called Shaggy and the other one was called Blue-Eye (because he had one blue and one brown eye, humans were thinking that he had a demon inside his heart, but nobody was a hundred percent sure). They chose the boat and headed out into the sea. Shaggy and Blue-Eye rowed through the sea. The night fell quickly and it was dark, they didn't see anything. Shaggy said to go to sleep, so they did, and he guarded while they slept. They closed their eyes and started breathing slowly. The sea current carried them slowly across the sea. Black Bean dreamed and woke up fast and started looking at one bright star and he muttered something to himself. He told Shaggy to rest, and he woke up Blue-Eye. They started rowing into the darkness, he didn't stop looking at one bright shining star. Shaggy figured out that they were following the star. Suddenly they hit something, they couldn't see because of the darkness. They got scared and realized that it was just a rock covered with seaweed. That rock was part of a coral reef. Sea Salad and Shaggy woke up. And the sun was almost visible behind the horizon of the sea. Bean was curious, and he stepped on the rock, he almost fell in salty water. Everyone started looking at the rock and sea. They

saw some sardines and jellyfish in the distance and a whale's tail splashing the salty water. Then... they heard weird and strange noises. That was like a whale screaming under the water and they saw something moving under the boat, but it disappeared and behind that thing a shiny trail was left.

The small team of adventurers became hungry. They only had seaweed and salty water and the sun was on the top of the glow. But Black Bean was ready for these situations, his father taught him a lot of lessons about sailing and fishing. From the boat he threw a fishing net hoping that he will catch something. Blue-Eye climbed onto the rock and Sea Salad was watching at the fishing net. And Black Bean was on alert. His belly was loud because he was hungry. Once Sea Salad jumped into the sea and screamed "Sharks! Sharks!", Black Bean jumped into the sea to save Sea Salad, but sharks didn't attack just Sea Salad, they attacked Blue-Eye too. He was screaming and crying, his leg was covered with blood. He was jumping with one leg on the rock to get to the boat. The rock was covered with blood. Shaggy helped Blue-Eye, and Black Bean saved Sea Salad, but one big shark didn't give up. Black Bean knew the species of sharks - that one was the bull shark. The sea became calm, the only thing you could hear was crying from Blue-Eye, his pain was big. Shaggy tied up his leg with seaweed, his leg was hurting because of salt. Black Bean took the pointy stick and jumped into the water. The shark opened his mouth and almost bit Black Bean's arm. Black Bean stabbed a pointy stick in the eye of the shark and it was immediately gone. But another one came and hit the boat and a hole was created. The shark left but water started to fill the boat. They started filling the hole with seaweed and it soon stopped entering. They looked at each other and knew that it was over. With no food, no map, no sign to go back home. They wanted to see their families, but Black Bean didn't. They were crying but Black Bean didn't. The north wind moved their hairs, and they fell asleep... Blue-Eye dreamed about a creature that gives wings and you can fly up above to see the word under you... Sea Salad dreamed about a creature that has beautiful horns and on each horn there is a mocking bird, and that creature can lead you through the fields of lies... Shaggy dreamed about a creature that can defrost forests with its breath or give life to frozen kingdom... Black Bean dreamed about a creature that gives dreams, in a world where a lot of children live in darkness without hope and family...

When they opened their eyes, they froze in place. Their boat was flying! And Sea Salad screamed "THE ISLAND!". They became so incredibly happy, they cried tears

of happiness. And their boat started moving to the island, no one looked down and no one opened their eyes until they stopped flying. They got to the island, and they got out of the boat and felt the warm sand under their feet. They knew they weren't on the same beach and there was a forest in front of them. From the forest came a beautiful deer or something, it glowed and smelled like strawberries. They started following it and soon they started to make a home there. They found food and water... Days passed, and no one died but they had scratches and scars, new clothes, and weapons. They made a weird house between two rocks and there was water coming out of one of the rocks. Months passed and winter came, animals and plants died, the water was freezing... They knew their destiny. And then, a large animal came out of forest. It was a bear. It growled and blew warm wind from its mouth somehow. Snow started melting. And they were safe again. The bear came to the front of the house, and he burned himself, that fire never stopped, and that fire is still burning somewhere today. One night, Black Bean dreamed again! About the person that is reading this story...

...to be continued...

*mentor: Nataša Ćoraš**institution: OŠ fra Bernardina Tome Leakovića, Bošnjaci**Tena Matanović*

THE WORLD OF WORDS, THE WORLD OF BOOKS

Everyone around me is happy that I like to read, but I also had unpleasant experiences because of it.

I was in the second grade when the Bibliobus came to our school. Happy, I ran to pick up a book that is not in our school library. When I told the librarian which book, I wanted (it's Pauline P's Diary), he just measured me, looked at me and sternly said: "It's not for your age!" I got a book about Petra and went to the classroom very sad. All the books I had read about the little girl Petra a long time ago. The teacher knew that and comforted me that she would go with me the next time. My sadness did not go away even when I came home. Mom was angry and immediately called the people responsible for Bibliobus. They apologized because they couldn't believe that I was reading so much. However, I no longer went to the Bibliobus, but for the books I wanted, I went to the City Library in _____, of which I had been a member since the age of three.

My grandmother is to blame for this early membership. Where does the grandmother come from in this whole story? She was a teacher of the Croatian language and knew how much reading helps in the teaching of all subjects. On Saturdays, I went to my grandmother's, and we had a regular ritual - the library - browsing and choosing books. After the library, we regularly fed the fish in a pond near a restaurant. After lunch - enjoyment - grandma and I in an armchair - reading - at first grandma to me, and later I to her. The first books were picture books from which you can also learn a lot. And then I started school, learned to read and since then the book has been my best friend. A friend who teaches me, fills my free time, cheers me up when I'm sad and chases away dark thoughts.

My teacher knew who was to blame for my love of books because my grandmother was her Croatian language teacher. I was so lucky that my teacher also encouraged me to read.

I like to read books with lots of characters. Then, in my imagination, I get involved among them. I experience with them everything they do, joys, sorrows, disappointments, misfortunes. I often wish I had the power to really join them in difficult moments, restore faith in better and more beautiful things. After reading, I often think for a long time about what I read. I like to talk with my mom about books I read. She is also a big reader and a lover of books, so often, while dad is working, we retire to silence and read, reliving the experiences of the characters, imagining the environment they live in and comparing it to our lives.

A book that really shook me and that I often think about is *The Girl from Afghanistan* by the writer Deborah Ellis. It's hard to believe that there are so many unhappy children in the 21st century, and that adults go to war for reasons I don't even understand. Even though the book is painful, I think it is good for children to read it because they will understand, although in a somewhat difficult way, that the world is not rosy and that not everything is always beautiful.

I recently read the book *Chemistry of the Heart* by Krystal Sutherland, which is the first love-themed book I've read. Normally I only read fantasy. She delighted me and made me cry at the end.

"Love doesn't have to last a lifetime to be real. You can't judge the quality of love by how long it lasted. Everything dies, including love."

"You've been poisoned with these things since you were a kid, love is patient, love is good. But love is just biology, man. Or rather, it's just a chemical reaction in the brain. Sometimes that reaction lasts a lifetime, constantly repeating itself and renewing itself. And sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it goes supernova and then starts to fade. We're all just chemical hearts. Does that make love any less radiant? I don't think so."

"Because you deserve stardust, and I can only give you mud"

A book I always go back to is *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. It is a very warm book that talks about family, equality and women's rights, modesty and boundless, sisterly and family love. The book is full of wonderful quotes that I write down in my "notebook for quotes".

"I really think that family is the most beautiful thing in the world."

"However, it seems to me that the more a person has, the more he wants."

"Love will one day make you show your heart, and then the prickly shell will fall off."

My favourite fantasy books are from the Six Crows duology and the Shadow and Bone trilogy by Leigh Bardugo. The series was also based on them, but as always, the books are better because reading the book, I can imagine the appearance of the characters and the places where they are.

“Many boys will bring you flowers. But someday you’ll meet a boy who will learn your favourite flower, your favourite song, your favourite sweet. And even if he is too poor to give you any of them, it won’t matter because he will have taken the time to know you as no one else does. Only that boy earns your heart.”

“When people say impossible, they usually mean improbable.”

I do not understand my school friends who do not like to read. It is tiring and boring for them. Readings are their nightmares. I am happy that I am not among them. Books will be with me all my life.

“A reader lives thousand lives before he dies. The man who never reads lives only one”- George R.R. Martin

mentor: Gordana Grgić

institution: OŠ Dragutin Tadijanović, Slavonski Brod

Barbara Klišanić

READY FOR IT...

It seemed like a peaceful day at the headquarters of Interpol; it was Friday, the sun was shining and there was no work to do. Lily Santorini was enjoying that peaceful afternoon just like everyone else, and she had no idea that that day is going to mark the beginning of her adventure of a lifetime. She was just doing some paperwork when her boss invited her to his office.

“Miss Santorini, I just received a call from Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, and they said that the boss of one of the most dangerous Italian mafias, Alessandro Esposito, has been killed. Since you are one of our best investigators, I decided to send you to Japan to interrogate the case. Your flight is tomorrow at 8 am.”

“What could possibly go wrong?” she thought. And so she packed her suitcase and left to Tokyo. The journey went well, except she fell asleep on the plane, which she wasn’t supposed to do. When she arrived at the hotel she was supposed to stay at, a young, handsome man bumped into her, and they fell on the ground along with Lily’s suitcase.

“I’m terribly sorry, young...” the man stopped at the middle of his sentence and glared at the lady in front of him.

“I believe you meant to say ‘lady’. Apology accepted.” She said as she quickly stood up, picked up her suitcase and helped the man up.

“How very weird. I haven’t seen you around before. Are you new here?” the man asked.

“I am. I’m Lily Santorini, nice to meet you.”

“Raphael Moretti. Where are you from?”

“Italy. Venice, actually. You?”

“I’m from Milan, but I’m staying here until next week for work. So, what brings you to Tokyo?”

“Oh, I’m visiting a friend.” Lily tried to lie the best she could. She couldn’t tell him what she’s actually after, no matter how nice he was. Her task was a top secret and it was her mission to keep it that way.

“Well, maybe I can help. I know everyone in Tokyo. What’s your friend’s name?”

Now she was doomed. She knew what could happen if she invents a name of her own. Right in that moment, a young girl was passing by, so Lily grabbed the girl’s hand and introduced the girl as her friend.

“This is my friend, you see. Come on, bestie, tell him who you are.” Lily glared at the girl, her eyes widening and sending a message to the girl. Much to Lily’s relief, the girl understood her message and said:

“I am Akiza Hiragi, nice to meet you.” She meant to shake hands with Raphael, but Lily dragged her away. “Bye, Raphael!”

When they got to Lily’s room, Lily explained things to Akiza. “I believe it would be for the best if I got to know you better, just in case.”

“In case of what?” Of course, Lily didn’t tell her about her mission.

“In case if more boring men ask me what am I doing here.”

“Oh, I see. Well, if you must know, I am Akiza Hiragi, I live in Shibuya, and I have a brother named Mizael. Is that all?”

“Pretty much. Thank you. You may go now.”

Lily hoped that she’ll never again see either Raphael nor Akiza, but fate seemed to not get along her way. Sort of. The next day, while she was at the crime scene, a young man asked her what is going on. To her surprise, the man looked very much like Akiza.

“A murder. I’m sorry, but you look a lot like my friend.”

“What friend?”

“I wonder if you know Akiza Hiragi?”

“Do I know her?! That’s my twin sister. I’m Mizael.”

“Oh! So you’re the one she told me about! Nice to meet you!”

“I didn’t know Akiza had a friend who’s an investigator. I didn’t know Akiza had friends at all. What’s your name?”

“Lily Santorini. I’ve heard a lot about you from Akiza.”

“Oh really? For example?” Mizael wondered with a smirk on his face.

“She said you’re quite stubborn, but nice.”

“Oh, Akiza, Akiza, Akiza. You wouldn’t believe how big of a liar she actually is.”

“But she’s your sister.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t choose family, right?” Mizael said as he slowly walked away from the crime scene. Lily just stood there in shock; she found Mizael really interesting and even...attractive! ‘*Lily, what are you thinking? He is handsome, but he’s Akiza’s brother.*’ she thought.

The next day, fate really crossed her path. While she was at a mall, she saw Akiza

and Mizaël having lunch. She meant to go and there say hello, but she bumped into someone...again! Of course, it was Raphael. Before Lily managed to get off the floor, he quickly got up and offered her his hand.

"Payback." He said with a smile.

Lily didn't know what, but there was something in Raphael that worried her. As if she has already seen him before, but she couldn't remember where. She got up without his help and asked him:

"Do I know you?"

"Well of course you do," he said with a grin, "we bumped into each other a few days ago. In fact, I was just so astonished by your beauty that I had to see you again."

"Wait, so you're saying that you've followed me around?!" Lily was furious. She made up that whole Akiza thing just so he wouldn't know about her true identity, and now he says he's been following her like a puppy. "Some people want privacy, you know?"

"I know that there is no excuse for what I did, but you must know that I did it for a good cause." He started to apologize, "Can you forgive me?"

"Oh well. But don't you ever follow me around again, okay?"

"Okay. You know, I really like you."

Lily was flattered by Raphael's words. He's the first man ever to say that he likes Lily.

"And I wanted to ask you on a date."

She wanted to say yes, but then she got a flashback of Mizaël and how he affected her.

"Sorry, but I already have a boyfriend."

"Oh, I see. Well, never mind. We can still be friends, right?"

"Right. So I guess I'll see you around."

After she said that, she ran away as fast as she could. The truth was she never wished to see Raphael again. He gave her that weird feeling that something's wrong, but she didn't know what. That's why she went to the place where Akiza and Mizaël were having lunch.

"Hi, guys. Mizaël, can you excuse us for a while?"

"Sure." Mizaël left, and Akiza and Lily were left alone.

"What's wrong? You look pale." Akiza was very worried.

"Do you remember the guy I met at the hotel the other day?"

"You mean Raphael?"

"Yes. He just bumped into me again and said that he likes me. But I don't know, something about him gives me that shivers. Bad ones. Have you noticed anything?"

“No, nothing special, I mean, maybe he’s just into you. And to be honest, I think Mizael is, too.”

“Really?” Lily said with hope.

“Yeah. He’s talking about you all day long.”

“Well, maybe he has a chance...”

“Ew, I can’t believe someone actually likes him.”

“Well he’s cute...”

“Anyways, I think you should keep an eye on Raphael, just in case. He seems kind of suspicious.”

“I will. Thanks.”

Lily did as Akiza advised her. She sent her helper to investigate Raphael, but he came back with no pieces of information.

“It’s weird, because it seems like he isn’t even...alive.”

“What do you mean?”

“I checked him in the system, but there is no such guy either in Italy or here. No date of birth, parental info...nothing.”

“Well at least now we know that he’s hiding something. And I am going to discover what.”

Lily spent days in her room trying to figure out who Raphael really is, but useless. Then she remembered he told her that he’s staying at the hotel ‘till the end of the week, so she rushed to the reception and asked the receptionist where can she find Raphael Moretti, but he told her that no Raphael Moretti stayed at that hotel. When she asked him did anybody leave the hotel in the past few days, he told her that a young man left the hotel an hour ago.

“And what was his name?”

“I think it was Lorenzo Vincenti. He had an apartment scheduled for the next few days, but I don’t know why did he leave so early.”

When she heard the name, the pieces in Lily’s head came together. Lorenzo Vincenti, the boss of the most dangerous mafia in Italy. He was on the suspect list for the murder, and he could easily find her anywhere. The time when she fell asleep on the plane; the man sitting next to her... It all suddenly made sense. *‘But if that’s true, if he’s the murderer and he knows that I know, he won’t waste any time; he’ll escape. But where can I find him now?’* She didn’t have a ride, she didn’t know if he had a private jet or he’s taking the public flight... Suddenly, Akiza showed up and said:

“I really adore my brother. After you left the restaurant, Mizael came in and asked me what were we talking about. When I told him everything, he quickly put a tracker in the guy’s suit. Genius! I know all about it because your assistant can’t keep his

mouth shut. Let's go!"

Akiza had her own scooter, so they quickly hopped on and drove to the airport. They arrived just in time; the next flight to Italy was leaving in ten minutes. Lily showed her badge to the stewardess, and she let her in. But the point was; there was no one there! Suddenly, Lily received a hit to the head with a blunt object.

When she woke up, she was locked in a basement. And in front of her was the murderer...

"Ah, Lily, Lily, Lily... If only you didn't search where you weren't supposed to, you'd make your life last longer. But now, I can't let you live and risk the possibility of my secret getting revealed."

"Lorenzo? But why did you kill Esposito? You have much more influence than him." Lily wondered.

"You want to know why? I'll tell you why. A few months ago, my sister Gabrielle and Alessandro started dating. Al was an old friend of mine, so I considered it fine. But then one day, Gabrielle came home and said that Alessandro cheated on her. I tried to reach him back there in Italy, but he had that in mind, so he went to Tokyo. Oh, and the girl? Dead. Of course, I found him soon after and paid an assassin to kill him. Everything could've gone fine, but then you had to show up and be so observant and figure it out. Like I said, I really don't want to hurt you, but it seems like I'll have to."

He aimed a gun at Lily's head, ready to shoot, but then...

Somebody hit Lorenzo from the back with a chair. It was Mizael!

"Mizael, what are you doing here?!"

"I just thought that you might need a help in hand." Mizael said with a grin.

"Akiza saw Lorenzo's guys taking a garbage bag out of the airport, so she followed them here and called me. And did you know I can pick any lock in the world? Let's go, Akiza's waiting."

"Stop." Lily said as she grabbed Mizael's hand and pulled him in for a kiss. Surprisingly, he kissed back.

"Well that was quite a surprise." Mizael said.

"Let's go. We can't leave Akiza waiting, right?" Lily said as they got out of the basement.

Soon after that day, Lily and Mizael started dating. Vincenti was arrested and the case was solved. Lily even got a promotion! Well, it was quite a month for her. But who says her adventure is over?

mentor: Anna Maria Popović

institution: OŠ Ivana Kukuljevića, Belišće

Iva Vincetić

STORM THE SPARROW

One July evening a storm was brewing. The wind was swaying the linden tree that was in front of the orphanage. The sky turned black in plain sight. Just a moment later it started to rain. A blonde girl named Ines was running on the muddy pathway that led to the orphanage. She covered her little head with her hood to protect herself from the crystal-clear drops of rain. She ran until she stopped under the linden tree. Her gaze softened to the sight of a little sparrow laying in a fallen nest. She carefully picked him up and opened the tall doors to the orphanage which made a loud sound. At the same time lightning struck. Ines has been living in this orphanage for 14 years, ever since she was born. She never feels lonely because her roommates, Lisa and Mary, are always by her side. Ines trusted them so she had no reason to hide her little pet from them. The three kind-hearted girls decided to keep the unlucky birdie and name him Storm. The next day Mary went to the city to buy him some food. She walked across the busy street admiring the lovely summer dresses in the shop windows. Mary knew she couldn't afford them. Anyways, she bought the bird food and went home. As the days passed, Storm grew stronger and older. He was very tame but his favorite activity was eating crumbs on the floor, that was his natural instinct. One day, Lisa was reading a book while the sun was shining on its pages. All of a sudden, she saw Storm fly for the first time. She threw her book in excitement. She told the good news to Ines and Mary. Suddenly Ines's ocean blue eyes teared up in realization. It was time to let go of Storm. Three sad girls stood next to the open window with Storm in Ines's hand. Storm flew away. They knew saying goodbye was the right thing to do. Storm lived a long happy life thanks to his saviors. Nature was his real home because he had his freedom.

mentor: Linda Kuničić

institution: OŠ Petra Hektorovića Stari Grad

Vedrana Rita Bogdan

Hello!

My name is Vedrana, and I live in Stari Grad on the sunniest island on Jadran – Hvar. My town is beautiful in all seasons. In summer when the sun caresses its beautiful beaches with its rays, and in winter while the sea shapes its shores. For me, the most beautiful time in the city is during Advent and Christmas time. Then the city is decorated with colourful candles and lanterns, every square has a decorated Christmas tree, and the biggest square, Tvrdalj, which is in front of the summer house of the Renaissance travel writer and poet Petar Hektorović, is the most beautiful. It is decorated with thousands of lights and Christmas trees proudly rising to the heights, and two sweet little houses where all kinds of sweet and salty treats and mulled wine are offered. Apart from all that, our Christmas carols - kolende are even more beautiful. All the events of that period take place at Tvrdalj. Concerts are held where some of the famous and lesser-known singers perform. Various children's workshops and performances of school and preschool performances take place there. Personally, my favourite thing is to participate in Christmas carols with my parents and friends. My parents' company consists of people of different ages and professions, and they share one thing - singing. They are excellent singers especially of traditional songs but also of some newer hits. The carol season starts already on St. Katarina on the 25th of November and lasts until the Feast of the Epiphany or the Holy Three Kings. Carols are traditional folk songs that are sung without the accompaniment of instruments, and singers are divided into tenor, baritone and bass voices for men, and soprano and alto voices for women. The carol is always started by one person who sings a few words and then everyone joins in together, and the last two verses are started again by the first singer and finished by everyone together. There are several songs that are sung depending on the holiday. The singing takes place outside in front of the entrance to the house, while the person being sung to is standing in the house behind the closed door. As the person being sung to knows the melody and the song, they open the door and let the singers into their home at their own discretion. In front of the Carols, they present the best that the house has, from prosciutto and cheese to homemade cakes that the owner of the house baked themselves. The carollers sit around the table, treat themselves and sing a few more songs while the host pours

their home-made wine, prosecco, and brandy so that everyone is happy and joyful. It can happen that the carollers visit up to four houses in one evening. Carols that are sung in front of houses differ in the text to whom they are sung, and for which holiday they are sung. For example, on the feast of St. Katarina, girls who bear the name of the saint are carolled, and if they are not married, they are called the golden branch, while on the feast of St. Andrew, they are carolled for all those with the same name, and if they are male and unmarried, they are called the green pine. On the holiday of Christmas itself, all carollers sing after the holy midnight mass in the glory of God and the Newborn son Jesus, who was born by the virgin Mary. With that song, everyone in the city and the world is wished peace, happiness, and well-being. During that time, many forget their problems and difficulties, at least for a moment. Everyone supports and cheers each other. People spend time together both in families and in public places. I would love if such an atmosphere prevailed throughout the year.

mentor: Tatjana Mioković
institution: OŠ Retfala Osijek

Eva Lijić

A WILD TURN

The Jones family has calm and supportive parents, Dave and Patricia, both in their 40s. Emma, the older sister, a kind and caring seventeen-year-old girl with normal teenage problems. Also, a big animal lover. Younger brother Lucas is an annoying little twelve-year-old boy that doesn't care about pretty much anything. A cocker spaniel named Luna and an orange cat named Oliver bring joy to their lives every single day. The family is not so perfect, arguing from time to time but still a loving family.

Emma was a junior in high school. She has normal teenage school drama like every other girl there. Boys, grades, teachers, etc. But she didn't have many friends. She likes arts and geography and she also spends her time in the library more than any other student there. Other kids just thought she was weird for that.

One afternoon Emma came home from school and, like usual, went to her room to have a break before doing her homework. While she was focused on her schoolwork, her mom called her downstairs with a furious voice. She was walking down the stairs thinking about what she could have done wrong. Her mind was racing thoughts while her parents gave her a dirty look. "Why didn't you tell us you had an F in history?" Her father said almost yelling. "I mean, we paid for that expensive school of yours just for you to have bad grades!" Her mom stepped in now. Emma stood there in disbelief. She didn't know what to say. "But I have As and Bs in every other subject, history is a problem because it is so boring and I don't care about what happened in the past." Emma said in her defense. „Oh, you better care because we are taking your phone until you fix your history grade!" Emma was shocked by her moms' words. Since he was a calmer parent, Emma looked at her father for help but he nodded his head agreeing with mom. She merged outside in the backyard while rage was building up in her. "This is so unfair!" She thought. Emma just wanted to scream at the top of her lungs. But now she was calm because, in her large backyard, she had not even less than a whole zoo! Emma felt safe with all these animals around her.

One Sunday the whole family was feeding animals and cleaning up the zoo like they do every week. Emma always feeds monkeys, zebras, and giraffes. She always used to talk with monkeys while they did fun tricks thanking her for the food, she gives them. That specific Sunday she was doing everything she usually does with monkeys. “Turn around. “She said to one monkey while holding a piece of mango in her hand. It turned around clapping its hands for the reward. “Good job! Now raise your hand. “Monkey raised his hand getting another reward. Then she went to give food to the zebras and called one of the zebras over. Three zebras came up to her wanting s food. She continued her job with a confused look on her face. “Give me that fruit. “Emma said to the giraffe pointing to the ground. The giraffe did what it was told to do. Emma was amazed. Any other family member couldn’t do what Emma just did. She thought she was imagining things but she wasn’t. She could talk to animals!

The next day the zoo was filled with visitors. Emma was talking with a little girl when a cute boy caught her eye. He was around her age so, like every other girl, she wanted to get closer to him but she changed her mind and continued walking in the zoo. Not so much later, she saw him again but this time he was talking with monkeys. Emma then realized he does the same thing she did yesterday. He can talk to animals too. That night she had a dream about him. “He is so pretty with his almost black eyes and wavy chestnut brown hair. And he had an even better personality! “Emma thought to herself in the morning before school. She then realized she has a crush on him.

That morning in school Emma was in her math class. “Class, a new student is going to join us today, please welcome Noah. “Emma looked up from her paper and saw no one other than the guy from the zoo! The class applauded while Noah sat in one of the seats in the back of the classroom. She sat there stunned thinking about what are the odds that he is the new student. During lunch, she was sitting in the cafeteria with her head full of thoughts when she felt like someone is next to her. Who other than Noah? “Is this seat taken? “He asked politely. Suddenly a single word couldn’t leave her mouth, but she managed to say “No, go for it. “He sat next to her with a kind smile on his face. She smiled back. Then it crossed her mind that she should tell him that she saw him yesterday but he took the words out of her mouth. “I saw you yesterday at the zoo, do you work there? “He asked. “Yes, my family owns the zoo and I help them a lot around there. I saw you too. “Emma responded. “That is so cool! My name is Noah by the way. “I’m Emma, nice to meet you! ““Very glad to meet you! “They smiled at each other and continued talking for the rest of lunch-time. That day they became friends. Their bond grew over time.

One day Noah visited the zoo again but now specifically looking for Emma. “You’re here!” She squealed when she saw him. Noah gave her a bear hug. They were spending time together when Emma brought up “You know, I think I can talk with animals. One day I was giving them food and talking to them and they would do everything I told them to do. But most importantly, I think you can talk to them too.” “What do you mean?” “Hear me out, that day when I saw you in the zoo, I saw you talking to monkeys. They did everything you told them to do. Mightn’t you think the same thing now, Noah?” “Oh well, now when I think about that, your words might be true. That is such a good skill to have! We can communicate with them!” he said excitedly. “Noah, calm down! We can tell anyone or let anyone notice themselves!” Emma said warning him. “Okay, okay, relax!” Noah said with a smile on his face.

Around that time of the school year, Emma fixed her history grade and got her phone back. Also, the junior prom was just around the corner and Emma was wishing Noah would ask her to the prom. But that exact day when Emma walked into the school hallway, Noah jumped in front of her holding a big poster that said “Everyone has their goals, but will Emma Jones go to the prom with me?“, roses and a teddy bear in his hands. Emma was speechless but excitedly agreed. She was over the moon that entire day. The night of the prom she was putting on a gorgeous dark blue sparkly dress when she heard a doorbell. Emma rushed down the stairs but Noah was already standing in the hallway waiting for her. Their eyes met and both of them knew they were in love with one another. Both of them were on cloud nine that night.

They were on the dance floor the whole night when a slow song started playing. They giggled at each other. Then all of a sudden Noah started leaning in. Emma’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t believe this is really happening. He gently put his hands on her waist while she put her hands around his neck. They closed their eyes and then... Emma woke up in her history class. There is no zoo and definitely no Noah, but she is still the good old Emma. “It was too good to be true.” Emma said to herself while starting to pay attention to the board.

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Ana Babić

WATER ISN'T TRANSPARENT

“Take a stroll next to the river. I will be waiting for you there.”

The notes of the mellow and familiar, yet distorted voice echoed in her mind once again. She desperately replayed that sentence over and over. The first and only time she heard it was in a dream she had, but it stuck with her.

Despite searching and rummaging through various decaying books, she still could find no answer as to why a freakish shadow had appeared in her dream only to instruct her to go to the river. The eerie dream haunted her to such an extent that it conquered her every thought until she couldn't think of anything else.

It was too much of a coincidence that it had inflicted her consciousness the very night she decided to stop visiting her husband's grave. She had mourned under the murky clouds that had whirled around in the sky for weeks on end. She'd longed for his presence, outpoured every tear she'd had, and wished the soil would just swallow her whole.

Another piece of the puzzle that logically fit into the baffling mystery was the fact that she knew that the being was referring to the river that was next to her husband's childhood home in a small rusting village nearby.

Not just anyone would dare proceed to the place where a caliginous figure had told them to go, but she had nothing left to lose — except for herself. The brunette's awareness was now drowning in the storm of old memories and the agony of loneliness that overcast her brain. A chilly winter breeze played with her dark curls while her eyes roved around the lusterless scenery. After her body moved a few more careful steps through the mire, her glum gaze finally landed on the dilapidated red brick house in the distance.

The angsty feeling in her chest slowly absorbed her whole body with each step she made while staring at the house; it consistently guzzled all her strength. Even though she hated the depression the old memories with her husband brought, the recollections were still *fond*. She could feel the melancholy consuming every little bit of her body, as if all of the grief locked away in her heart was now escaping. Her

genuine love for him also made it unbearable for her to glare at the reminders of him any longer.

She fixed her empty gaze at the muddy soil again, ignoring the salty teardrops that rose in her waterline. She hated crying and revealing her emotions, but it seemed like that was all she had been able to do since her lover passed. A tired exhale left her mouth, transforming into a mist. The woman descended the village path, entering the tall foggy forest to continue her way to the river.

She couldn't stop her skeletal body from heavily quivering — both from the cold and trepidation. She wandered through a chaos of naked branches swaying to the rhythm of the turbulent wind and bushes whose leaves tickled her legs as she passed through.

The ghastly fog that crawled through the forest began clearing up, revealing the exit out of the creepy woods. She was panting when she stepped out, her eyes meeting the water immediately. There wasn't a single sign of life on this beach; only the cruel winds that maliciously messed up her hair and the tremendous water.

The lady looked around before walking up to the shallow. Assuming that the freezing water would help calm her frustrations, she slipped off her raggedy shoes and let the flow of the river splash her feet. She enjoyed the feeling of the sand getting washed up under her toes, so she stepped in further.

Looking down at the water, she expected an unclear, ugly reflection of the gray traces that painted her doleful complexion.

What she saw instead made her breath completely pause for a few ticks. Her eyes widened in disbelief as her heart throbbed noisily. The reflection staring back at her was not herself. It was her other half.

Her mind went completely silent. All she could hear was the water delicately caressing the shore while resonating the male's complexion back at her through the funereal waves.

She ruffled her hand through the brisk water, desperately trying to change what she saw in front of her. But it was not working. No matter how much she disturbed the reflection, it still settled back into place, and her husband still stared back at her with tender eyes full of love and affection. Undoubtedly, the replacement for her own reflection was her dead lover's. Now that she remembered his gentle looks even better, her lungs felt like they were stuffed full of cotton. Was she dreaming still?

There was no use in hiding her vulnerability. She could do nothing to stop her cheeks from blossoming like ripe roses after numerous pearls went rolling all the way down to her chin. Trying to gulp away the sobs that crawled up her throat, she pressed her hand against her trembling lips.

“I don’t understand!” She cried out, her quivery voice reverberating against the surface of the water. The woman instinctively splashed the reflection, trying everything in her power to get rid of another cruel reminder. “Why aren’t you saying anything? Why do you seem so unbothered when you know that I’d pour my heart and soul out for you?”

No matter how much she wailed and begged for answers, no part of him moved. His translucent figure only shifted ever so slightly with the numerous circles that the bitter teardrops carved in the water after they slid down her face. She couldn’t change anything. Even though he was floating with the motion of the river right in front of her, he was still dead.

She grew quiet. Her thick coat and long burgundy dress were completely soaked. She marched through the water back onto the shore, her knees almost giving out. The raw wind was pitiless; while she shivered and sniffled repeatedly in an attempt to catch her breath, it only harshly gusted more, piercing her skin and bones. Her legs weren’t capable of holding the weight of her whole body anymore so she sat down, curling up. She wrapped her coat around her bony shoulders, clutching her wrists.

The sky was gradually becoming azure and somber. The temperature was rapidly falling below freezing, letting her know that if she didn’t move now, she wouldn’t make it home alive. So, she left, feeling utterly lachrymose.

After thousands of steps, the woman was still misty-eyed and shuddering when she scarcely made it home. She could feel the ice forming on her once-drenched clothes, so she hurried to take them off. The exhaustion was very visible on her face. Her eyelids began involuntarily dropping over her mild, caramel-colored orbs as soon as her head hit the pillow.

“Don’t cry anymore, my dear. I’m here for a reason. So don’t give up yet.”

This time the voice was recognizable, *too* recognizable. “Caden?” The shadow paused, no longer responding despite this being the very first time she had spoken back to him. After long stares filled with flawless silence, the shadow began slowly sliding away.

The woman panicked, her eyes broadening when she saw the shadow move further away. “Give up? On what? I’m so confused,” she grunted swiftly. There was no use in harnessing all the strength in her frail body. She simply could not move.

Her vision was blurred, but she was sure that he couldn’t hear a word she mouthed anymore. “Please come back.” The muffled sobs escaped her lips before her consciousness shifted to the underside of the heavy old covers, she slept under.

Her eyes shot open to beams of twilight caressing her skin. The room was silent and peaceful — a complete contrast to the erratic pounding of her heart and the tears stinging her eyes.

The air outside the comfort of her blankets was frigid, but she shoved them to the side anyway. She had no time to spare; as much as she wished she wasn't forced to go to a place that now brought only negative recollections, she *had* to. The fog of confusion in her mind had begun clearing up as soon as she had figured out that the shadow possessed her lover's voice. The brunette quickly threw on some clothes, not bothering to fix her disheveled hair.

When she stepped out of her house, it was pitch black outside. Not a single star shone and the moon was far below the horizon. She locked the door twice and found herself setting off on the same path she walked yesterday with a torch in her hand. Despite the awful things that had occurred only a few hours ago, she *couldn't give up*. Just like he had said.

Dusk was creeping in on the gloom, the hidden sun lighting it up scarcely. Navy hues beautifully painted the night sky and tinted the surface of the calm water. Her breath thickened and fear curled around her senses while she stood barefoot in front of the shallow. She took a deep breath, feeling the numbingly cold water lapping at her feet. Lifting her dress and gritting her teeth, she stepped until the icy waves reached above her knees.

Despite there being no sign of sunshine yet, she had thoroughly studied her husband's face enough times to recognize that his reflection was still a replacement for hers.

But suddenly, she frowned. It was... different this time? It seemed like a gauzy shadow fluttered on the waves next to his figure. '*Who was that?*' Her thoughts echoed. She curiously extended her thin fingers towards it, only then noticing that... her hand was completely see-through.

Her eyes broadened as she placed her hand in front of the forest, flipping it over in disbelief. Every single branch behind her hand was clearly visible through her skin.

Her gaze landed back on the shadow that the weird transparency of her hand had distracted her from. Its brightness made it much clearer now, revealing that it was... *her*? The river finally worked like a regular mirror. Her *own* reflection was the one shifting next to her husband's while she was fading away in this world.

Right when she began freaking out and freezing, she felt a somewhat familiar warmth hug her body; it was similar to the tender aura her dear husband once radiated. Her stance felt weirdly flowy, as if she was becoming one with the water.

And then — it clicked in her head. The *water* was the one that was making her fade away and become pellucid. It had bled into her skin and slowly drawn her away from this world. She sighed, knowing that there was no way of going back. The best she could do was shorten her torment, so she took a deep breath before diving under the surface.

The limpid woman emerged from underwater, panting. She looked at her lover's reflection, barely having the strength in her arms to wipe her eyes. Her reflection looked so happy, clinging to her husband. It was almost completely opaque while the woman felt dizzy and weak. She knew this was the end.

“Now that I know the only traces of me are fading away too, my only hope is that I'm meant to coexist with you, my dear, in the calm waters of this world.” Her fawn orbs scintillated behind the crystal tears forming at a rapid pace. “I wish death never had to do us part.” She sensed those tears would be her last, so she softly smiled, shutting her eyelids. As the translucent pearls wept down deliberately, every left-over part of her turned into sapphire dust and fluttered through the fresh air. That might've been the last waft of her presence in this world, but the water was no longer transparent.

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Nika Moržanj

TASTE OF EVIL

Angelique arrived home late that night, far past when any ordinary woman would have been asleep. It had been a long day of work, and she was weary and in need of rest. But when she stepped through the threshold of her home, something was off. An unnatural stillness seemed to fill the air and the study was unusually dark.

Angelique flicked on the lights, and then froze. Her husband, a distinguished lawyer, was lying motionless on the floor. There were no visible wounds, but he looked so pale and still that Angelique knew he was beyond help.

Panic and confusion filled Angelique's mind as she dialled the police station. Within minutes, they were on the scene. Angelique felt a sense of dread as she was led away by two officers to answer questions.

"Let's start with the basics," one of the policemen began. "Your name and address, please."

"My name is Angelique Smith, and our address is 441 Beechwood Lane," she replied.

The police officers asked her to explain what had happened. Angelique had been out that night and came home to find her husband dead. She had no idea what the cause of death could be or who could have done it.

The police asked her to provide them with a list of everyone she had seen that day. Angelique provided the names of her colleagues at the office and some friends she had recently made.

The policemen then asked her to describe her husband's behaviour. Angelique explained that he had seemed distressed and preoccupied in the days leading up to his death. She didn't know why, but he seemed to be fixated on something.

The police asked her if her husband had any enemies. Angelique shook her head, saying that as far as she knew he had no one who would wish him harm.

The police thanked her for her cooperation and left. Angelique watched them go, not knowing what to make of the situation. Had her husband been murdered? If so, by whom? Angelique was determined to find out the truth.

The next day, the autopsy results came in. There were no signs of violence, and the cause of death was ruled a natural one. Angelique felt a wave of relief wash over her, knowing she wouldn't be facing any charges.

But the relief was short-lived. Angelique still had no idea what had caused her husband's death, or why someone would have wanted to kill him. She decided to take matters into her own hands and began to investigate.

She started by interviewing her husband's colleagues and friends. Many of them had little to say or nothing at all. But one of the people she questioned hinted that her husband had been involved in some shady business dealings.

Angelique was determined to find out what her husband had been up to that could have led to his death. She scoured through his files and documents, searching for any clues. Finally, she stumbled upon a suspicious document mentioning a meeting between her husband and a shady businessman.

Angelique was shocked. This meant that her husband had been involved in something criminal, something that could have led to his death. She knew she had to find out more, so she set out to find this mysterious businessman.

She tracked him down to a seedy apartment building in the wrong side of town. She went in and found him in his room, sweaty and nervous. He was shocked to see her, but Angelique demanded answers.

"Why did you kill my husband?"

"It wasn't me," he exclaimed. "I swear, I had nothing to do with it. I'm just living here for a short time."

Angelique was still suspicious of the man. She questioned him further, but he had nothing else to add.

"You're nothing more than a common thief," she remarked. "He must have stolen something valuable that you wanted."

"I don't steal. I'm a businessman," he said. "I've been in town establishing business contacts. It's all legal, I can assure you. I'm not involved in any kind of crime. If what you're saying is true, then you must have the wrong man."

Angelique was certain that this man was involved somehow. She asked him what he had been doing the night her husband died. He told her that he had arrived in town early that evening to meet with a client for a business deal. He hadn't seen her husband around but went ahead with the business deal anyway.

Angelique knew that it was time to get to the bottom of this. She would have to confront the businessman.

Suddenly inspector Ajax stepped into the room, carrying a large bag in one hand.

He opened it and pulled out a gun.

“You killed Henry Smith,” he accused the businessman. “He had something you wanted and you killed him to get it. Now tell me what you stole from him.”

“I didn’t steal anything,” the businessman insisted. “And I didn’t kill him, I swear.”

“You may have switched the weapon, or you might have paid someone else to do it for you,” the inspector continued. “Now tell me. What did you steal from Henry Smith?”

The businessman threw his hands up in frustration.

“I’m telling you, I didn’t!” he exclaimed. “Is this really necessary? Can’t you just arrest me if you think you have the right man?”

But Inspector Ajax wasn’t giving up on his line of questioning. He had a gut feeling that this man was the culprit, and he was determined to prove it.

He sent Angelique home to rest assuring her he would get some information out of this man.

Angelique Smith came home hungry and tired. She was still working on the case, and her mind was filled with thoughts about her husband’s death. She was just about to open the door when she heard a suspicious sound and paused.

It sounded like someone was following her.

Angelique crouched down and looked over her shoulder in the direction of the noise. She had heard footsteps; of that she was certain.

Angelique stood up, determined to confront her pursuer. She was frightened, but also furious. If someone was playing with her and trying to prevent her from finding out the truth, then they would have to deal with her wrath.

Angelique strode through the door, walked down the hall, and opened the door to the study. She expected to find the person there, but the room was empty. She was alone.

Angelique switched on the lights and looked around the room. There was nothing unusual. The file cabinets were closed, the desk was tidy, and her husband’s death seemed like a distant memory.

She was just about to turn the lights off again when she heard the sound again. This time, it was louder. It was a soft, muffled noise coming from the corner of the room.

Angelique stood still and listened. The room was quiet for a few seconds, then the noise once again reached her ears. It was definitely coming from behind the desk.

She crept closer, keeping her eyes on the desk. There was definitely something behind it, because she could see a shadow of something moving slightly.

She pulled out the files she wanted. The rest could wait until she had time to go through everything.

As she closed the file drawer, the muffled noise reached her ears again. It was soft, almost creamy. It was coming from the drawers themselves.

Angelique frowned. She couldn't make much of the sound, but she was quite sure now that it was coming from the drawer.

Angelique was curious, but she was also apprehensive. She pulled open one of the drawers and peered inside.

Her breath caught in her throat. There was a man hiding inside the drawer, shaking and begging for his life.

Angelique gasped in shock. She was still tired, hungry, and tired. She wasn't in the mood for this nonsense.

She grabbed the man by the collar and pulled him out of the drawer.

"What are you doing in there?" she demanded.

"Please don't hurt me," the man begged.

He was also shaking with fear. Angelique felt a wave of sympathy for the man, but she was still very suspicious.

"What's your name and where do you come from?" she asked.

"I'm Harold Day. I came to this town to invest in a business," he replied. "I had to borrow money from some very bad people to do it." "And you ended up here," Angelique said. "Tell me Mr. Day, what happened the night that my husband died?"

"I had just arrived in the town that evening," Harold said. "There was a very attractive woman with me. We were hoping to make new business contacts, but it had been quite a while since we had arrived, and we weren't having any luck. Then we ran into this other man."

"What was his name?" Angelique asked.

"Henry Smith," Harold replied. "He seemed to be in a hurry."

"Did he seem distressed?"

"Oh definitely, he kept looking around like he was waiting for someone."

Angelique stopped questioning him for a moment and thought, her husband wasn't the type to be paranoid. Until Angelique's brain suddenly clicks. Harold killed her husband and now he was telling her lies to try and get out of it.

"What did you do with my husband?" Angelique demanded.

"I told you..." Harold begins.

"No, no I know what you told me, and I don't believe it," Angelique says. "You killed him, and you put his weapons back in the drawer and hid in there hoping to

try and get away with it. “

“That’s not true! I wouldn’t do that,” Harold insists. “I didn’t do anything. “

“Oh, but you did. You had to have some kind of a reason to be here, and you were with my husband the night he died,” Angelique says. “If he was involved in anything illegal, I know that you were too. “

Angelique had her doubts about whether the man was telling the truth, but she had a feeling that he was responsible somehow.

Angelique reached down and grabbed the man’s hand and twisted his arm behind his back. As the man screams out in pain, she brings her other hand around and smacks him over the head with her brass knuckles.

“I’m sorry, but I have to do it,” she repeated. “I just need to make sure you’re the one who killed my husband.”

Angelique pulled the man over to the desk and pushed him down. She slammed her brass knuckles down on his face, bringing out another scream of agony. Angelique hit him again in the same place, then again in a different spot on his face.

“I’m not! I swear!” Harold cries.

“I just wanted to get out of here. I didn’t want to be involved in anything illegal,” Harold says. “But Henry...he wouldn’t listen to me. He left me no choice.” Angelique was so furious by now; she didn’t even hear what he said next.

So, when Henry left me alone, I stabbed him,” Harold says.

“I stabbed him over and over again until he stopped moving.”

Angelique grabs the man by his shirt and yanks him to his feet.

Angelique finally understood the truth. This man was the killer, and she was going to make sure he went to jail.

Angelique pulled out her cell phone and called the police. Harold could see the look on her face and began to cry out for mercy.

Angelique pulled the man by the collar and slammed his body against hers. She held him there until she heard the police arrive.

That night, Harold Day was charged with murder and jailed for the rest of his life. Angelique was never certain if he was the killer, but she could never forget the terrified face of terror that day.

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ONCE UPON A DREAM

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Eliana. She was a normal 12 year old teenage girl except, she loved dreaming.

-Eliana! Eliana! Wake up! It's time to go!

-Why are you shouting? It's Saturday morning, let me sleep.

-Did you forget? We are going to grandma's. Get ready!

It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining, the birds were singing and I had to go to my grandma's. Don't get me wrong, I love my grandma but today I had other plans. I was planning to meet my friends at the mall this afternoon. But my annoying sister Anne had to wake me up and disturb my dreams. I love dreaming. That's my favourite thing to do. When I'm stressed or sad, I just dream. I don't have to sleep to dream, I daydream, too. I can just close my eyes and think about whatever I want. I mostly dream about flower fields and butterflies flying around them while some children laugh in the shadows of trees. Those thoughts calm me. But the sad part is when I have to go back to reality and every day problems. -Girls, breakfast is ready! - my mum shouted from the kitchen. She loved to cook and try out new meals. That is why I was never a picky eater. At home, we always ate extraordinary meals like sea shells with sugar, chicken with cinnamon and raspberry sauce and so on. Today she made us scrambled eggs with bacon, cheese and jam. Yummy! After breakfast it was time to go. My sister and I ran to the car because we wanted to sit in the front. Of course none of us won because my mum sat in the front. Even though I am 12 and my sister is 7. On our way to grandma's, the road was very bumpy. We finally made it. She waited for us in front of the house. My grandma was such a nice and smart person. A bit weird and mystical. She would say some weird words and expressions. She was a bit plump with short grey hair and had beautiful green eyes. In her house there was a room where she never let us in. When we would get close she would tell us to leave. She was always baking something, mostly cakes and cookies. I loved everything she made, as I said I'm not a picky eater. Today she made us a red velvet cake and chocolate chip cookies. Those were my favourite! After some tea and sweets we

started talking about my grandma's big 70th birthday. We wanted to throw her an amazing party but she didn't like the idea. She said she was too old for parties and that the loud music would damage her hearing. So, we decided to have a family dinner at her favourite restaurant. Then we needed to decide what present to give her. She loved gold jewellery and porcelain bowls. As they were talking about her present I went off to her bedroom to get some inspiration when I noticed something very strange. There was a picture hidden behind the bed. I never saw it before till now when the corner of the picture was peeking out of the bed. I took it out and was shocked! I saw my grandma smiling with some random girl who looked like a fairy! My grandma was so young, she had long blue fair hair and was very skinny. She was wearing a forest outfit. The fairy girl was very small and also skinny. She was wearing pink and had pink wings. When I saw that picture I almost fainted. I couldn't believe my eyes. I quickly put the picture back and ran out of the room. I sat in front of the room for a little while trying to get my thoughts together, when I heard my granny calling me- Eli, what are you doing back there?- I didn't know what to say so I just said that I went to pet Freedy, her cat. Freedy is a chubby orange-white cat who wants lots of attention all the time. I even think he is a bit spoiled. Meanwhile, I got myself together and went back to the kitchen where everyone was. -Are you okay my love?- my grandma asked. -You look a little pale, like you saw a ghost.-my mum asked with a worried voice. -I'm fine mum.- I said. I'm just a little tired so I will go to my room, I replied. As I was heading to my room I felt a strange sound in my ears. It was so loud that I fell to the floor. Luckily, no one heard me fell because they would drive me to the hospital of how paranoid they were. I managed to come to the guest's room prepared for me. I got changed to my pyjamas and lay in bed with my phone and headphones. The rest of the evening I was lying in bed listening to music till I fell asleep. The moment I closed my eyes I knew what was I about to experience. Dreaming! Finally the best part of the day, me lying in bed and dreaming. I was so excited to see what was I going to dream next. The moment I started dreaming something interrupted it again. A spooky voice woke me up in the middle of the night calling me, Eliana, Eliana come down! At this point you might think that I'm a scaredy cat, but I'm not. You would be terrified if you were me. From that point on I couldn't sleep nor dream again. Because of that I followed the voice calling me. As I was following it, the voice was getting louder and louder. The voice led me to the locked room that grandma was not letting us in, where I saw some sort of a tunnel. When I came close, it pulled me in. I was screaming my way throughout the tunnel. I finally landed hardly on some grass. When I looked up I saw a fairy village with real fairies

flying around the sky. I rubbed my eyes to see if I was dreaming but I wasn't! One fairy noticed me and flew straight to me. She looked a bit worried. She told me: "Oh, finally Eliana you came to save us! Save? What is there to save, I thought, you have a wonderful village and all the fairies live their happiest lives and how do you know my name?" I asked. Oh no, my dear, that's not true. You see, our village is being destroyed by the most evil dragon of them all, Trutan! He has been stealing our powers, too. And I knew your grandma. She saved us a long time ago when Trutan attacked. She said that you would come back to save us today. We tried to stop him with a little magic that we have saved, but he is too powerful and we are too small to defeat him. We need your help desperately! I was speechless. I had all sorts of thoughts going through my head. After all, I accepted the challenge. I asked Harmony, that is the fairy's name, what I have to do. You have a simple task, she replied. You must climb to Trutan's Tower and grab a bottle labeled „Leprechaun's petals“. I need them to make a potion so we can stop Trutan's evil. -Harmony responded. I was speechless for a moment but I said that I'll do it. Harmony gave me a map of my journey and she showed me where the bottle I have to take is. The next day I started my journey early in the morning. Harmony gave me a backpack and all the things I needed for the journey. I walked through a scary forest and in the forest I got into trouble. The forest was evil and alive. A strong tree pulled me inside it and I couldn't move. I reached in my backpack and found a knife that Harmony gave me. I cut the trees branches and it let me. I was so scared so I ran as quick as I could out of the forest. I tripped multiple times and hurt myself. Eventually, I managed to get up and go forward. Now there was just one more obstacle to pass. The mountain to Trutan's Tower. The mountain looked like a Tower of suffering. I had to pass bridges, stone walls... Now I passed my first bridge. It was easy. The second one was much more dangerous. I almost fell off of it. After a long walk up I finally got there. I was so proud of myself that I made it. But my joy didn't last long. I saw Trutan sleeping in front of the cave and there was a little bottle shining next to him. I knew it was the one I needed! I walked past Trutan trying not to make any mistakes but as clumsy I am, I stepped on a branch and woke him up. His huge head rose upon me. He looked very mad. I said: „Um, hello ms. Trutan I'm sorry but can I take that bottle shining behind you?“ Oh really and what do you need it for? - Trutan responded with a mad voice. I need it for my friend. Trutan was furious, he grabbed me in his strong and giant arms and shouted at me: "Why are you really here, tell me or I will throw you off a cliff!" I started crying out of fear and telling the truth; "Alright, I came here because a fairy told me they needed to stop you from destroying their village, and I came to take that

bottle and stop your evil!" So the fairies think I'm evil?- Trutan said with sadness in his voice. He sat me on the floor and freed me out of his arms. I saw something in his eyes. It looked like disappointment. I asked him: "Mr. Trutan are you okay?" No, I'm not. I didn't want the fairies to think I'm evil or bad, I just wanted some help from them. You see I was very bad once and hated fairies. So, I was destroying their village to get rid of them but one strong girl stopped me. I realised that being alone is not fun. Then I wanted to live in their village and open a bakery of my own. Opening a bakery is my dream because I'm a great cook. I wanted to talk to them but they are too small to hear me and they were afraid of me because of what I did long time ago. I don't want them to hate me, I've changed!" An idea came to my mind. I told Trutan to pack his things and we will fly off to the fairies' village. He did and I threw the Leprechaun's petals off a cliff. I flew on his back to the village. When we arrived Harmony was furious at me: "What are you doing Eliana? Are you insane!" I quickly explained everything to her and she calmed down. They were a little sceptical about the idea of a dragon living with them but they quickly agreed. After a few days the fairies started liking Trutan. He fixed the village and gave magic back to the fairies. In return, they helped him open his bakery. I took a photo with Harmony just like my grandma did and went home. And then suddenly I woke up! What, this was all a dream?! Grandma, fairies, Trutan. Oh my ,that's one very good dream. That's the dream I needed. I got out of my bed with a smile on my face and went to the kitchen to hug my grandma. She didn't know why I was hugging her, but she liked it. We have hugged for a long time.

I lived happily ever after in my dreamy world.

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PRINCESS CLAIRE AND THE BUTTERFLY KINGDOM

Just like every story, this story will began with the famous sentence „Once upon a time“ so let’s get started.

Once upon a time there was a princess named Claire. She had beautiful ocean blue eyes and long blonde hair. She was kind to everyone, really calm and a little bit shy. One day she decided to leave the castle without telling anyone because she wanted to explore the world. At night, when everyone was already sleeping, Claire left and her adventure started. She was so happy but at the same time, she was frightened because someone could steal her, but our princess was brave and without thinking twice, she started walking. The night was long and she was exhausted, so she took a little nap near the forest. When she woke up she noticed that she wasn’t in the same place, she was not near the forest, she was in the forest! She thought that maybe she was already sleeping so she dreamed that she was near the forest and not in the forest, but she didn’t really care about it. She started to explore the forest and then she saw an old water well. She wanted to see how deep it was, so she leaned against the well, and then, unfortunately, she accidentally fell in the well and fell asleep. When she woke up she had a huge headache and she also had big bruises all over her tiny body. The first thing she saw was a yellow butterfly that was on her nose. She jumped as soon as she saw that little animal and she screamed loudly with her angelic voice. But that wasn’t the only butterfly that she saw, the second that she looked around to see where she was, she found out that she was in a place full of butterflies, a butterfly kingdom! The kingdom was magical, unimaginable. There were lots of waterfalls, but not like normal ones, there were diamond waterfalls and gold waterfalls, you could take as many diamonds as you wanted, you could even touch the clouds in the clear blue sky and walking through the kingdom felt like you’re walking on clouds, it all looked like a fairytale! The princess thought that she was dreaming so she rubbed her eyes thinking it was all a dream, but it wasn’t, it was all true. She was so cheerful but she didn’t saw

any person, there were only colorful butterflies that were flying everywhere. After a while, she heard a soft and pleasant voice. She turned around and saw an old lady with blue curly hair and a long, light pink dress. Claire ran to her as soon as she saw her and introduced herself.

- Oh, hello! My name is Claire and I'm a princess, can you please help me because I'm lost.

- I know who you are dear.

- How do you know who am I?

- Well, you wanted to explore the world, so you left your castle without telling anyone about it. Once when you felt exhausted you fell asleep near the forest, but I moved you in the forest. Then, when you woke up you started to walk through the forest and you saw the water well and then you fell in it.

- Oh my, how did you know that?

- Honey, I'm a fairy I know everything!

- You're not a fairy, you don't have wings!

- You don't need to have wings to be a fairy, not every fairy has them.

- Okay fine, but why didn't you just come here when I woke up?

- Because I'm mad with you

- Why? I didn't do anything.

- Oh yes you did. You left the castle without telling anyone, what do you think, what are your parents doing right now?

- Oh no, I didn't think about it. Please tell me what are they doing, are they fine? You're a fairy, you can know that, you need to know that.

- They're looking for you, your mother is crying because she doesn't know if you're death or alive! And your father is trying to hold his tears, poor man, you are their only daughter!

- I'm so sorry, please forgive me, I need to see them!

- No! You left without telling anyone. Now your punishment is that you'll become a blue butterfly

The princess was wretched from those words, she just wanted to come back at her castle and hug her parents. She couldn't say anything because of the words that she heard from the fairy. She begged her to forgive her.

- Look, I need to think about it. When I'll make my decision I'll come back to you .

The princess was waiting nervously. After a while, the fairy made her decision.

- Listen princess, I am going to forgive you, but just because I don't want to make your parents even more miserable. Now, come with me and listen carefully because you'll need to pronounce these words: *Livera loginus!*

The princess was so happy and excited to finally see her parents after a long week.

- Now, it's your turn princess, hurry up because it's almost the end of the day!

- Live a long life!

She said that honorably and she was immediately in the castle. The king and the queen started crying the second they saw their beautiful daughter. Claire told them everything that happened and she told them that she did all that because she wanted to explore the world. The princess, the king and the queen thanked the fairy and then, they made a big ball at the castle and everyone was invited. And now to conclude the story. After that, Claire never left the castle without telling her parents and they lived happily ever after.

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THE MISSING PETAL

“Mother, mother! Have ye seen the papers!” I shouted, bursting into her enormous and cozy office. Full of books, old case files, and family pictures. The wall-sized window lets the sun’s golden rays bounce off the marble-colored walls. A grand crystal chandelier hangs in the middle of the room.

“O! pardon me, Uncle Henry. Have ye seen this?” I asked while curtsying.

My uncle is tall and clumsy. He is a man of honor and the deputy chief of the local police station.

“Helen,” my mother and uncle greeted me.

“I’m afraid I have. That’s why thy uncle is here.” mother replied.

One could tell by the sound of her voice that she had expected this day to come. The Brown family will once again face a hideous crook. Before I babble about this new case, I should probably introduce myself. My name is lady Helen Rose Brown of Autumnbow, daughter of lord William of Autumnbow and Evelyn Brown (Owner of the Browns agency). My parents met on one of my mother’s adventures in the 1880s.

“Shouldn’t you be in thy dancing class Helen?” she questioned me.

“Mrs. Smith let me out early when she saw the papers,” I responded.

“If I may ask. What will we do now?” I wondered.

“Don’t even think about mentioning her here. Knowing what happened before, she has her eyes on all of us. Waiting to come out at the perfect time.” Mother interrupted.

“What would thou say, brother? She breaks out of jail the day this ghastly murder happens.” My mother looked at my uncle sitting in the corner of the room on the most comfortable leather armchair and smoking his pipe.

“Thou know very well what I think. Whatever she plans to do we mustn’t interfere with this, the problem is waiting to be solved by her.” uncle confessed in his deep voice, glancing at me. Mother knew what he meant.

After a few silent looks, uncle looked at his pocket watch. “I’m afraid I must go. Take care.” mother got up and hugged uncle.

“I’ll keep you informed if we find anything. Farewell, my brother,” she whispered. “Little lady has a fun adventure waiting for her” Uncle Henry smiled at me before walking out.

Papa walked in and handed a note to mother.

“Shall we visit the fair? You never know what one will find.” papa laughed.

James came over to tell me everything that had been going on in town.

“The whole of Killarney is wondering where the elegant rose went.” he giggled.

“They keep asking me if thou ran off with a nice gent that fit thy taste.” James teased.

“How wonderful one doesn’t go out for two days and they already think I ran off married to some gent. I do wonder if we still live in the 1800s.” I exclaimed.

“Rose calm down.” he confided.

“You know that we all adore ye. Now tell me are you going to the fair or not? One must start a twattle of hope.” James chuckled at his joke.

“Ha-ha. Thy jokes are so amusing. If I go, it’s because of a case. You should know that thyself.” I replied.

“If thou would pardon me. One has a riding lesson to attend and a case to solve,” I added, making my way to the door.

**

“Good day Cora,” I said.

“Good day Helen. Are thou ready to begin?” Cora greeted.

“Always,” I reassured.

Cora has been a family friend for a long time. She is a part of a women’s and girls’ rights club. After my lesson, I went to my mother’s office. We gathered our heads together over the last clue and the case.

“I’m starting to think thy uncle and father were right.” she sighed.

“What do ye mean?” I questioned her.

“The only way to get to the bottom of the case is if we split up. We shall attend the fair. The suspect will be there too. And so might she.” She declared.

I was at the largest event in all of Killarney, the spring fair. The fair reminds me of my childhood. As a little girl, I would watch the parade and the horse races. There

would always be bustling music. We would always dance and laugh.

“Papa. Please, make sure you give this message to mother: Roses are red, Violets are blue, Sugar isn’t sweet, and so aren’t those men in the black suit,” I whispered before going to talk to the suspect.

“Mrs. O’Doherty! How are ye? I was wondering if ye could tell me what happened?”

“I’m well enough lady Helen thank ye for asking. I was opening my shop when I heard Mr. Kelly scream. I ran to his shop to find him dead. Before he died, he pointed to the safe on the wall. I looked at it and found a petal on the ground.” She shivered.

I walked to the crime scene when I saw James come after me

“What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be in here.” I snapped at him.

“I saw you come here alone. Anyways what are you doing here?” he asked worriedly.

“What I’m doing here is not your concern, nor should it be,” I said. All of a sudden, the tall men came barging into the shop.

“Good afternoon, lady Rose.” they snarled.

I recognized those suits - they work for her. They must have seen me come and they come to stop me before I find anything. The good thing is that I have already found something. I looked at James and gave him the clue I found.

“Make sure you give this to mother and only to her. Be careful of who you trust and not a word of this. Am I clear? Until we meet again.” I whispered to him.

I turned to the men “Tis lady Helen for you. And do tell Thornwood. It ain’t over till the fat lady sings!” I shouted and ran for my life. The men came after me.

By the time my parents came to the shop. I was galloping away from the fair to the Irish countryside, running away from Thornwood and becoming a mystery waiting to be solved.

“Did they catch her?” mother worldly asked James.

“No.” he trembled

“O great!” Evelyn clapped with joy.

“Rose told me to give ye this,” James whispered and handed a small white note to Evelyn.

“Thank ye. Now, what do ye all say we go home?” She told the boys.

As my mother tells me: ‘Well begun is half done’. I jumped on the bandwagon and headed toward Kenmare.

The smells and sounds of the extraordinary Irish countryside reminded me of Killarney. The lushes' green pastures with sheep grazing the fresh afternoon grass. I came to the apartment Cora landed me. It had been days since I came across any clues. That's when I saw my uncle's consultation in the papers one morning. It appears a valuable item has been stolen from Mrs. O'Dohertys shop and she has been severely injured during the robbery.

I looked at my map and marked the new clue.

The next day was very peaceful there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the golden sun shone on Kenmare as the birds sang their enchanting morning song. I went out to town.

I was walking when I saw those men from the fair. I knew it was a matter of time before they saw me and revealed my secret. I went to the news office and gave them a letter I wanted to be published. Tomorrow the paper will say I'm staying in Kenmare. This will give me enough time to go to Kilgarvan.

As I came to Kilgarvan, I needed a new disguise. I put on a tight, long, brown dress. The corset made it difficult for me to breathe, move and talk. I walked to a small and charming café the owner knows my uncle and knew I was coming.

"Mr. Connell Bond?" I asked in a clear voice.

"Who asked for me?" a short, round, grey man answered. My uncle was not wrong when he told me Mr. Bond is a cockalorum and one should always be careful around him. I walked up to him and gave him a small piece of paper.

"Tis I Helen Brown, ye know my uncle. I'm the one he wrote to ye about." I whispered.

Mr. Bond looked at me, stroked his beard, and took his cigarette. "Come"

He led me to a small apartment in the attic of the house.

"I hope this fits young lady's taste." He chuckled

"It shall do," I nodded.

"Ye have grown a lot since last time. I'm glad thy attitude didn't change." He smiled.

"If ye need anything. I'm behind the counter." Mr. Bond proclaimed before going back.

The apartment was very cramped and wasn't as luxurious as my bedroom back home in Killarney. It smelled of mole and had a thick layer of grey dust all over it. Besides the candles, the skylight was my only sores of fresh air and light.

On my way back to the café I saw a familiar face.

“Oh, thank the Lord you’re here,” I claimed.

“Tis good to see you too,” James smiled.

“What brings you here? Any news from Killarney?” I questioned.

“I came to give you this.” he gave me a letter. It came from my mother.

I looked at the letter. The Red deer have been acting strange and disappearing.

“Can I ask you something, James?” I turned and looked at him.

“Who is she? We have known each other for a long time, and you know of my power to charm any man whose heart doesn’t belong to another. However, this never worked on you.” I said. I wanted to know who loved the same man as me.

“Ignorance is bliss,” he replied.

I looked at my map again.

“That’s it! The missing petal. It’s a flower. I figured it out! O no! The stags!” I shouted, running to the table.

The clue patterns on the map made a flower.

“Quick James! You must go to Oak Hall and give mother this!” I gave him a note.

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket,” he spoke, taking the note and leaving.

Before I knew it, I was standing across from Mr. Kelly’s flower shop. Waiting for James.

“Look before you leap,” he said.

I made my way to the shop when I heard James saying “Wait. I have the answer to thy question. You wanted to know who she was. It was you, Rose. It always has been I was afraid to admit it. I love you, Rose!” James shouted with joy after me.

I walked into the shop. I started to look at the flowers when I heard someone.

“Mother,” I said

“Yes, now what do ye say we get what we came for and get out of here” she advised.

We left no stone unturned. Suddenly I collapsed clutching a piece of paper with a petal drawn on it. The missing clue. I could hear mother talking to someone and calling me in the background. But all my mind could only focus on how James admitted his love for me, and I didn’t give him an answer.

I woke up in my spacious, glamorous bedroom, and the smell of fresh lavender and roses filled the room. The birds sang on the oak tree outside my window. Next to my bed was the paper.

‘Thornwood is being sent to prison again. This time for murder, robbery, and threatening to kill our Red deer with jimsonweed.’

Jimsonweed is a poisonous flower. Thornwood stole it to poison the deer. Of course, Red deer antlers are very valuable. Thornwood was going to make herself rich.

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THE BOOK OF ODNOM : THE GOLDEN CUP OF ATRAXIL

Our journey begins in another world where there are two kingdoms reigning over it. The first kingdom, loved by those who prefer work over rest, is the kingdom of the God Orion also known as the kingdom of light. The land was a gift to the God of the Sun, Orion, by his father God of the World, Odnom. It was the most beautiful kingdom of the two. The second kingdom is the kingdom of the God Anul, a kingdom loved by sleep lovers and its' citizens, a Nemuri no Kuni*. Its land, as well as the land of the God Orion, was a gift for the God of the Moon, Anul, by his father Odnom, the God of the World. Many believed the land was cursed and that if they were to enter the domain they would become horrid creatures who cried once the full moon would come out; yes I am well aware you are thinking of werewolves, but that's not the case, the creatures are not werewolves, they are kenthanis. The kenthanis are human-like creatures that behave and look like humans but once they see the full moon they let out cries. Their cries are pleasureable to hear, it's like hearing a lullaby, and it's said that whoever hears them, falls asleep immediately and never wakes up. But let us continue our story, these details will come in handy later. As I was saying, many thought of this kingdom as to be insignificant, some thought it might have something hidden within it and started a research, one of them was Lapis. She believed that whatever might be hidden within this land would be passed onto the Temple of the Descendants of the Moon*, a temple she was a part of. This temple, unlike other temples you probably heard of, was more like a university, or a school and a home, where the Descendants of the Moon* were educated and lived. It was as big as the royals main palace and it was located in the capital of the Nemuri no Kuni*. And here it all begins.

„Hey, Lapis, here! Catch! It's our new assignment from Mrs Anne! By the way were in the same group, I need to go now! Bye!“ said Pietas as he threw a book at Lapis and

ran away past her towards the entrance of the temple.

„Hey, don't just throw things on people like that, Pietas! And where are you going, our next class is in the temples' agrarium!“ said Lapis with an annoyed expression.

Well I don't know about you but I wouldn't like it if someone threw something at me, even less if it was a book, I have respect for books.

„I know, but I have to do something first! Don't worry, I won't be late, I promise, hehehe!“ said he while he ran off in the building, laughing. „My, my, this kid, he knows he'll be late, sigh. I guess I'll have to cover for him, again!“ said Lapis while sighing. „Hi, Lapis.“ said a familiar voice, that was coming from behind. As she turned around she saw Julia. „Oh, hi!“ said she in a surprised manner, „Where's Pietas, the agrarium keeper is calling for him?“

„That stupid..., that's why he was running.“, Lapis thought to herself, she dared not to speak of his whereabouts because if she did she knew that her brother would be in trouble, and instead of answering she only shook her head.

„Anyway, let's go to class, or we'll be late.“ said Julia.

„Lapis, I remembered, it's for the assignment, I am a part of your group so if you have some time could we go to Sekai*, I saw some books that might help us. If it's alright with you could we go there this evening?“

„Ok, I'll let Pietas know, if I find him.“ said Lapis sarcastically, knowing that finding her brother would be an almost impossible mission.

-Here's a brief explanation as to why finding Pietas would be almost an impossible mission: Pietas, being a troublemaker, had to master the art of „I'm not here“, it is a type of martial art that allows its user to become invisible, or rather to allow its user to hide from everyone.-

„What do you mean „if I find him“? What am I?! An animal?!“, said Pietas, offended by her remark, who has been eavesdropping on their conversation from a nearby tree- „And above all, I am your brother, do you want to say that you don't know where your own brother is?, he continued. „Oh, and by the way, can we go to Sekai now I have something to do this evening so, if you don't mind...“ said he, while turning his gaze towards Julia. „Of course, why not? I have time now, but Lapis are you free right now?“ said Julia trying to please both of her friends. „sigh, alright, but don't you dare disappear on us like you did on our last assignment, got it?“ said Lapis, annoyed at him.

-at the library(Sekai*)-

„Hmm... Where is this book again? I was sure it was here somewhere...“, said Julia in an uncertain way while looking at a bookshelf next to her, „Ah, here it is, „The book

of Odom: the golden cup of Atraxil“said she in a agitated-like manner.“Wait, this is a forbidden book, isn't it?“ said Lapis, worried,“I heard they had forbidden it because many who tried to read it disappeared without a trace, some even say they were absorbed by the book itself.“added Pietas, who was getting chills just by the thought of being trpped in a book,“Don't be silly, Pietas.A book can't absorb anything, thats rubbish, see...“, Lapis said while taking the book from Julias hands and started reading it.Suddenly, the words in the book began to shine in a blueish light and a few moments later the three friends were gone, all that was left was a book on the floor. And in an instant, all they found themselves falling from the sky.

They were screaming from the top of their lungs, but it didn't help much as they all fell- I mean, I don't know about you, but I would also scream if I were in their shoes, phewI'm glad I'm not, anyways-

„My goodness gracious, that was a close call, I thought I had died.Ah, hmm, where are we?“, said Pietas as he got up from the ground,“Wait, are we in that book?Ha!I told you so, Lapis, it wasn't rubbish after all!“ he smirked at Lapis, looking all proud of himself, but that was not the time for being satisfied or happy, they had a problem, how to return to the real world?, no one knew how to go back, they were stuck in a book.“My, my, that was quite a fall, are you all alright?“, said a rather mysterious voice behind them,“Oh, how rude of me, I haven't introdused myself yet, have I?I am Charlein Jaques, your guide through this adventure, pleasure to meet you all.“.As they turned around, they saw a young man dressed in fancy clothes who was holding a magic staff ih his right hand and was trying to help the two ladies get up.“Umm, excuse me,sir, do you know something as to why we are trapped inside the book?“- said Julia , looking puzzled because she didn't fully comprehend the situation they were in.“My, don't worry about such things now, Julia, we must hurry to the duke Charlottes' castle, we are curently being followed by hes highness' allies, come now , the carriage isn't so far away.“said he.They couldn't believe what he was saying, in fact, they were so stunned to hear him call upon her name when they didn't even introduce themselves, yet they couldn't say anithyng as he made his magic staff disappear and took both Lapis' and Julias' hand and said to follow him.

They followed him to an abandoned alley to witch they had found the carriage and left for the dukes' castle.

When they arrived, they were greeted by duke Charlotte himself and then led to a private room where the duke and Mr Jaques had explained the situation as to why they were“absorbed by the book“ or rather summoned here in this world.

„So, what you're trying to say is that we were summoned here solely for retriev-

ing the golden cup of Atraxil to the Gods, bringing peace to the world, to be more precise to this fictional world?!" said Pietas, angrier than ever when hearing the words of his grace, as he continued: "No, I refuse, send me back into the real world." said he trying not to be too angry. "I'm sorry, I cannot send you back because God Odnom has forbidden me to do so until the mission is complete" said Charlein Jaques. "Then, how can we complete the mission?" said Lapis, "Wait, we're doing this?!" said Pietas in disbelief, but Lapis ignored his gaze and turned hers toward Charlein and the duke. "As I was saying, all you need to do is to find the golden cup of Atraxil and bring it to the Temple of the Gods, and of course, and lord Jaques will help you through the mission and send you back to the real world, so fret not." Said duke Charlotte, "Now then, I think we have talked enough on this subject for today, and I'm sure you are all exhausted, my butler will show you to your rooms." said duke Charlotte while he flicked his fingers and suddenly a man wearing a butler uniform appeared.

As the butler showed them to their rooms, the light of the day soon began to fade and it was time to sleep.

In the morning, after finishing breakfast, they continued their conversation and found out that the golden cup of Atraxil was in possession of the Goddess Morana, the Goddess of Dreams, sister of the Gods, to be more precise God Anuls' twin. She was a wicked God, and given her power she could manipulate peoples' minds by transporting their souls in dreams and giving their bodies another soul, a soul that has already left one's body, a dead person's soul, becoming an unstable creature we call kenthanis.

As they continued talking they got to know oh her whereabouts; a place deep in the forest of Silva iuuantis, the forest of dreams.

While they were conversing they were interrupted by the three friends' desire to return to their world and to get up to go prepare for the journey.

At last they were said goodbyes and expressed their gratitude to the duke and set off for their journey.

They walked for miles, trying to be as careful as possible that no one sees them, beneath the trees of many forests, until they found the gate of the palace.

„Urgh, why did it have to be this way? We could have just asked someone to do the assignment for us, or just not read the book, that could have been better, this is why don't like books?!" said Pietas, who got annoyed yet again. "Could you stop weeping like a child? We shouldn't be thinking of what could have happened, rather we should think on what we can do now." said Lapis as turned her gaze at Pietas. Her expression was serious, she didn't show any sign of being irritated at his remark, she

knew that her brother was saying this because he was scared knowing that it was easy getting killed in this world as the duke had said. But she also knew that it was the only way to return home and that now wasn't the time to feel scared. Because fear is the most useless emotion a human can feel, it causes great disasters. "What we need is a little bit of hope and a lot of courage.", thought Lapis to herself.

The ran towards the gate and slayed any kenthanis who tried to stop them.

At last the entered the „Palace of Dreams“ and found the Goddess of Dreams. The Goddess looked at them with her deep blue eyes; she was a beautiful lady on the outside, but wicked on the inside. "How dare you enter my domain and slay my kenthanis in such a deplorable way. I find it utterly offensive. Ts! Such manners are unacceptable!" finally she spoke. She seemed unsure if they possessed any magic because only does who possessed magic could slay the kenthanis. She seemed serious, but deep down she knew that her life could be at stake. "Your highness, we are terribly sorry to intrude, but, you see, we have a mission we must complete." Said Charlein Jaques in a tone so terrifying no one dared speak up, not even a deity like herself.

Suddenly there appeared a lightning and now standing next to the trio wasn't a man named Charlein Jaques but a God, a god so powerful that the Goddess started trembling out of fear.

-Who was the God even her highness was afraid of? Well it was none other than her creator God Odnom. The ultimate ruler of the world. Anyway, let's continue –

„Give them the cup of Atraxil, Morana.“said the God. her highness couldn't stop trembling. At last, in her hand appeared the cup and flew into Julias' hands. "Here, now begone to your own world, you humans and never come back." as soon as she said those words, the cup started emitting the same bluish light as the book and they disappeared.

They found themselves in the library and found that the time in the real world hasn't changed from when they disappeared. Everything was the same except their hearts.

-The end, hahaha

VOCABULARY: words you might not know

Nemuri no Kuni – land of sleep (眠りの国, in Japanese)

Descendant of the Moon- a noble citizen of the Nemuri no Kuni

Sekai- the temples' library (the real meaning is world : 世界, in Japanese)

mentor: Anna Maria Popović

institution: OŠ Ivana Kukuljevića, Belišće

Nikolina Žaja

MY HOLIDAYS THROUGH THE YEARS

When it comes to winter holidays, we all are expecting them to be fun and we expect snow, but that changed through the years. When i was younger, there was always a lot of snow and i was always excited because i loved playing in the snow. I used to make snowman with my dad and randomly throw the snow. I was also ice skating very often and i met a lot of kids here. My mom never actually showed love for snow, but she knew i always loved playing in the snow so she was never surprised when i came in completely wet and cold, however the thing they never knew is that i was eating snow. On Christmas Eve i always turned into a completely different child, i obeyed my parents and i did everything they asked me to do. I believed Santa Claus exist so i always told my parents to leave the carrots for the reindeers. Every Christmas i got a lot of presents and i spent a lot of time with my family. We went on Advents and i always ate fritters. Before New year, we would buy fireworks and champagne. On the New year i was always so excited and i couldn't wait to watch fireworks, drink champagne and stay up late, i was never that tired so i loved staying up late and a New year was perfect for that. We called my grandparents and talked to them on the phone before bed. The thing i remember the best is that i always used to pretend i'm drunk while drinking the champagne, of course i was pretending because that champagne was for kids. My parents would always laugh at that, they got used to it. New year was special for me not only because i was excited but also because i had a lot of plans for the next year and thought the next year would be better than the past one. However, things drastically changed. It started snowing in spring one year, while the last year, there was no snow at all. Winter wasn't that cold so i didn't have to wear so much clothes and jackets. What didn't change was my excitement for holidays, because i couldn't wait to sleep until lunch time and finally relax. I wasn't excited for Christmas at all and i choosed my present. My mom bought me 2 rings, my dad brought me a mug and Santa Claus' hat. I loved the presents. I also got a lot of sweets from others and my grandpa gave me cents. I spent time with nearly everyone this Chirstmas. However, we accidentally left one of our cats

in our house and it pissed on my bed. I realized that when i had to go to bed and i was sleeping with my parents that night. My mom washed everything and i slept on the couch the other night. I got used to it quickly and it was comfortable so i was a little disappointed when i couldn't lay on my couch like that. We threw the mattress in the trash because it was completely wet and smelly. We brought the new one, it's not that soft like the first one, but i got used to it quickly and now i'm sleeping with no problem. There was one concert in one church so my mom told me to come with her. My grandma came too. The church was actually very beautiful. We went on Advent after that and i ate cheeseburger there. There was also one homeless guy asking for money on the streets and i felt embarrassed just ignoring him so i told my mom to give me money. Before New year, we went on Advent in Osijek and i ate a lot of fritters. There was also Panoramic wheel and me and my parents took tickets for it. It was amazing, my mom was panicking a lot but i really liked the view from the wheel. The New year was fine, but I wasn't excited and it was like every normal day. We didn't buy fireworks or anything and we didn't want to actually. My dog was afraid so she was with us in our house. Unfortunately, my dad was working on New year so he didn't get to spend time with us, but me and my mom splayed Yamb together until New year. I got out as soon as i heard fireworks, there were a lot of them. I didn't know where to watch. My mom was inside with my dog to make sure she doesn't do something bad out of fear. When i came in, i saw my mom opening a champagne in the kitchen, it kinda spilled but she wiped it. The champagne was nice and we were drinking it from some small glasses. I showered and my mom almost fell asleep. My dog was in the hall the whole night because she was too scared to go out. When we woke up, one of our cats returned, but the second one was nowhere to be found. I drank the champagne and spent some time with my parents. We had no idea, what would happen really soon. The next day, our second cat returned but he looked so weak and he was drooling. My mom took him to the vet and gave him vitamins and antibiotics. He thought the cat was in shock, and he told us to bring the cat tomorrow again. The next day, i had lunch with my family and we took a walk around the statue. I ate pancakes as a desert after lunch, i just had to. When we returned home, my mom took our cat to the vet. Unfortunately, our cat died. They couldn't do anything and my mom didn't want our cat to suffer anymore, because he was also once hit by a car a few months ago or more. I cried a lot that day, my dog and my dad comforted me. After that day, the holidays just became boring. I took a walk with my mom to Cinema in Valpovo to drink cappuccino and then we visited my grandparents. As soon as i got there, i asked for food because i was hungry. At

the end of the holidays i studied for geography because i didn't take a test so i knew i gonna take it now. Actually, my holidays weren't that bad, i had fun the only thing that was missing was snow. But that doesn't matter that much.

mentor: Anna Maria Popović

institution: OŠ Ivana Kukuljevića, Belišće

Lana Petranović

QUEEN AURORA

Once upon a time there was a big ginger cat that ruled the world, her name was Aurora. She was the queen of all humans and cats in the world, cats loved her but people for sure didn't. Infact they wanted to be free, of course cats were mad at them for their opinion and then the Great war of humans and cats started. During the war most people were scared to try to fight against the big Ginger cat's army because she had one of the biggest armies of the strongest cats in the world. But just because they were scared doesn't mean that they will not fight. The war sure wasn't ending soon so Aurora decided to sign a contract with the humans to stop the war, in the contract Aurora offers peace between humans and cats but only if humans still worshiped and took care of all the cats in the world. They happily signed the contract and there was no more wars between them. Aurora continued to live happily until she sadly passed away at the cat age of a hundred years old. The humans planed a big funeral for her and invited all the cats and humans to mourn her death. Now in the 21. Century we humans take care of cats and keep them as pets, all due to the contract we signed with the big ginger cat, Aurora.



SECONDARY

SCHOOL

mentor: Anita Kopic

institution: II. gimnazija Osijek

Karla Papa



THE WINDS OF CHANGE

I was about to leave the house when suddenly I felt like something was wrong. It all came to me like the wind. I remembered it all and my vision got blurry. I was trying my best to keep my balance and the only thing I could hear was my own heartbeat. I felt his scent, never so close, never so real. He was behind me. The eerie silence continued when suddenly: *creak*... A door behind me opened slightly. I slowly turned around – no one was there. Just an empty staircase and my ajar flat door that just waited for me to go back. I've been sleepless lately and at that moment realised I forgot to lock the door. Maybe it was just the wind. Neither landlord nor the janitor were around. I was helpless, but if there was one thing I knew than that's that I couldn't run away now, I had to see him to believe it. I slowly started going back to my flat. The old ornate staircase which I would usually just jump over in only a few steps without batting an eye never felt so long. Each picture on the wall, each flower in the vase in the corner and even the old clock on the wall felt alive. They were all glaring at me, waiting to see what comes next. I felt like a stranger in my own home again. I finally came close to the ajar door and with last bits of strength in my body I dashed the door open.

The flat was empty. I was alone, left with a wide-open window and a note next to it. The note just read:

“Don't flatter yourself. Did you really think it would be this easy?”

My heart was still racing. When I looked out the window I saw the same rushing crowd I always do. All walking fast, looking ahead of them, not turning for even a bit. Birds were still chirping even though autumn was fast to come. As the last moments of summer were shining through my window, there I was – nervously searching through the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of *him*. When, suddenly, I noticed that there was a man in the crowd sticking out across the street. The only person standing tall and still, in the middle of the rushed bunch. Looking back at me. Suddenly an old lady bumped into him, dropping all her groceries. He was laughing and offered to help. As he was walking away with the lady he turned to look at me again, but I swiftly walked away from the window.

“As phoney as ever.”

As I was looking at a calendar I realised how close the date was – 11th of September 2023. It was in five days. I knew he promised to find me in a year, but I couldn't believe that that lunatic actually went so far. Since last time I saw him I moved away from London to an old, small town in Canada. I was obviously foolish enough to think changing my name and living in another county with a random university student would be enough to hide. This is when I realised that no one was truly safe from him and that all the stories circling around about him were true. He is ready for everything and is willing to push himself to limits to get what he wants. Even though I had a feeling he would come for me eventually, I never could've expected for him to give this kind of warning. Why is he waiting? Why didn't he end this show right here and now? Why did he give me more time?

I immediately ran to my room looking for that old suitcase of mine. Finally, I found it in the bottom of my wardrobe. When I opened it the dust flew up revealing all the old photos I managed to save when running away a year ago. Photos of me and my mother, my friends, and even the photo of my favourite kitten playing in the sun. All those photos were so dear to me and it pained me I won't ever be able to see them again. Going back to London now is like begging to be found. Bottom of the pile revealed the photo I was looking for. There he was – Haiden Smith. Back then he wasn't as scary. It's interesting that his looks haven't ever changed. Blond curls dropping to his broad shoulders all packed with the wide, sincere smile. I was standing next to him in the photo, trying my best to keep a straight face since his, now deceased, younger brother was making jokes behind the camera. Haiden was the sweetest man I've ever met, we dated for about two years. The picture was taken on our vacation to my home country Greece, just a few days before everything started turning for the worse. Constant calls and emails from his job drove him mad and he fell tired, eventually we started fighting on daily basis. His brother was always the peacemaker, but not even he could've predicted a huge fight and the messiest breakup known to men. After the breakup Haiden has gone insane and promised to take his revenge on me for leaving me at his lowest. He said he will give me a years time to hide, and that he will find me wherever I am and kill me. But if he doesn't find me in that period he will leave me be, I still don't get the point of his game, I guess he wants to make fun of me and prove something to himself to feed his own ego. I've been hiding ever since, with my new life, and new identity. On the back of the photo was a long note his brother wrote ending with words “I just hope you can understand Erisa, sincerely Francis Smith.” Hatred for both of these *boys* boiled inside of me, but,

God, how I love the sound my old name, I really would give anything to go back to the-

“Aella!? What’s going on here why are both the window and the door wide open?!” An angry voice with a thick German accent yelled from across the flat. I quickly put the pictures back.

“Lotta you’re home early. I tried cooking again but it didn’t go well, I opened everything up so it airs out a bit. We can get pizza again if you want.”

“Maybe later.” she said walking up to the window where the note was. *Please don’t notice it.*

“Deal! How did it go with the biology test?”

“Don’t ask... I’m tired.” Saying these words she closed the window. *Wait, where is the note?* “Aella, I’m going to take a nap, wake me up by six if I don’t get up by then, *bitte*. I have another test tomorrow. Another all-nighter awaits!” – “Got you!”

She went to her room. The moment she closed the door I jumped up and hastily searched around for the note. It was nowhere to be found. What’s going on? Did she take it without me noticing that? No, no, no she would’ve asked about it. Did he come back and take it? No wait why would he do that? Wind? No, it’s not blowing. Huh? “Oh, Finally.” I whispered. It fell behind the radiator. I put it in a pocket.

Time was ticking and the tall-case clock in the living room just strook four. I started searching for a bus to Ottawa in hopes of catching one. Great there’s one in an hour. I packed up most of my things in the suitcase, but before leaving I ripped out a piece of paper from Charlotte’s notebook.

“I am sorry, liebe Charlotte, but I have to leave. Something happened back in England and I must go back. I know it’s sudden, but I will call you later and explain everything. Please forgive me for not having a proper goodbye, but I just couldn’t take it now. P.S. If you don’t wake up in time to study today don’t be too harsh on yourself, I’m sure you will do well in anatomy, like you always do. Good luck! - Aella”

Then I left. Fastest way to get to the station was across the bridge and through the park. I should be there just in time. Walking fast I tripped a few times; I didn’t know where I was. *He can’t catch me now.* I began panicking, turning around every few minutes to check if someone was following me. When I arrived at the bridge, I was out of breath looking ahead of me. Sun was still in the sky giving me the strength to keep going. The same way I looked at that rushing crowd earlier I was now looking at the river. It was fast and unpredictable, small, yet witty. Water sprayed all around big rocks protruding out. I started to fall jealous of the river. No matter how small the river is it kept going, circuiting each obstacle, making it look so easy. But it did

even more – as it splashed around it made the rocks shiny. The river embraced each obstacle making itself glorious and strong. In that moment I realised what a fool I was, sitting around doing nothing for a year because I thought my glory days were over from the moment I packed my bags. New beginning was supposed to be just that – a beginning, not the end of my life. In that moment I felt a soft breeze messing up my curly hair after so long. I finally caught my breath and kept walking. The park was empty. Gorgeous tall trees each forming a unique shadow on a ground.

“I see the winds of change haven’t reached you, have they?”

Then I felt a metal gun tip on my back, I froze realising all is over. Haiden was behind me.

“You know I always keep my promises, love.”

I couldn’t run away anymore. Tears started to drop down my cheeks as I remembered the time I was the one behind the gun. Then I was as still as I am now, finger on the trigger. Moments away from shooting through Francis Smith’s head.

The date is 16th of September 2022. Birds were still chirping even though summer was fast to end. As the last rays of the hot summer Sun shined through the curtains Erisa felt her face becoming warmer. The air in the room was stuffy and heavy, and Francis was kneeling on the floor.

“Erisa you know I didn’t mean it, please leave the gun alone. I will keep my mouth shut I promise. Please!”

“I’m sorry Francis but there isn’t much I can do right now. I told you to leave the documents alone.”

Earlier that day while Francis was enjoying his morning coffee he stumbled upon a mysterious folder. He knew Erisa and his brother told him it’s an important business deal and he ought not to touch it. The top secret sticker looked intriguing though... his curiosity got the better of him. At that moment he found out both were working as spies, and that this vacation was nothing else but a killing mission. The target was a member of the French mafia, who came to Greece for an unknown reason. Right when he finished reading his brother entered the room. Francis was so shocked he couldn’t move. Haiden started yelling at him; “DIDN’T WE TELL YOU NOT TO TOUCH THAT!?” he explained to him that no one is supposed to know any of that, and that he will get killed if anyone found out that he knew about it. That’s when Erisa walked in. She exploded and dragged him into another room, locking the door behind her. Haiden was hitting the door begging her not to hurt him. But the only thing he heard in response was a loud gunshot, then silence.

mentor: Karla Tuđan

institution: Prva privatna gimnazija Varaždin s pravom javnosti

Nina Malić

LETTERS



Ellie Roberts and Kai Davies.

They are your typical 16-year-old teenagers that are so madly in love but there is one little problem. Ellie has a bad brain tumour and her whole nerve system was in bad condition since she was a toddler so she is often in hospital, but that never stopped them from finding ways to be with each other. Hospital visits weren't always allowed so Kai would always send her letters to keep her entertained. He would send her poetry, good or bad, keep her updated on every school drama and just everything that was happening outside of her hospital room. She found it funny and silly at first, but over time, it became their thing: something little that meant so much to both of them.

The war, 1st December 2011

“If you want peace prepare for war”: a war can resemble anything but in your case it's the sickness. Some wars are smaller than others, and some can tear the whole world apart. Your war is not only affecting you but almost everyone around you. No one can fight your battle but I can be by your side, holding your hand tight until the war is over.

-I love you, Kai

Heaven, 4th February 2012

Today in English class we had to write what heaven is for us. Of course, every religious person in our class started writing the classic Wikipedia definition “a place where good people go after they die to be closer to God” but I decided to sit back and really think about it first. What is really heaven for me? The closest thing to heaven I've ever experienced is having you and being able to be by your side. Feeling your skin on mine even if it's just holding hands. Feeling my heart beating stronger when I'm with you knowing you can feel it too, and you always knew that every beat my heart takes is always for you. But heaven is not just physical touch. It's also that com-

comfortable silence between us, watching you doing something you love, hearing you talking about something with so much excitement that it feels like you will jump out of your body, just to fully show how you feel in that moment. The closest to heaven for me was never about being close to God, it was always about being close to you.

-I love you, Kai

Happy Valentine's Ellie, 14th February 2012

There is a big difference between loving someone and being in love with them, falling in love with them over and over again. My heart beats a little too fast and a little too loud each time I hear your name, so that I think I fall in love all over again. I knew you will be someone very important to me from the start. It was always something about you that was so interesting to me, something so different from anything or anyone else. You fascinated me. And while trying to completely understand you, I fell in love with you. Simple. I fell for you laugh, smile and those pretty eyes. I don't know when it happened or when exactly you became so special to me, but now you make me the happiest person and I would do anything to see you happy too. I love you, and if anything will ever last forever it's that. I may not have loved you first, but I love you the most. "Love" is a really strong and meaningful word, but I meant it each time I said it. I really want this to last. I know we are young but this feels right. It was never hard to love you; it was harder not to. Loving you was the easiest thing I've ever done, like I was meant to. There is nothing I can write or say to fully express what you mean to me. I'm yours and only yours, and I want it to stay that way forever. I love you.

-I love you, Kai

The sun and the moon, 20th August 2012

While watching sunset and sunrise I've realized something no one ever seemed to point out: by some old tellings, the sun and the moon were lovers. The moon goes up every night giving us enough lighting so we could sleep peacefully, while by the end of the night it goes down just so the sun could rise and shine giving as the beginning of a new day, a new beginning and new possibility of something good. The moon always keeps its distance from the sun so it wouldn't affect it in any way. If it comes too close to the sun, the sun would stop shining. Even though the moon loves sun so much, it still keeps its distance from it for the sun's own good and it goes down every night giving the sun enough space to keep shining brightly.

-I love you, Kai

Flaws, 10th September 2012

Flaws are supposed to be the opposite of something perfect and they are usually not so pretty. Thinking about it, I found a lot of flaws on myself: my nose, the shape of my eyes and of my body. Then I started thinking about you and I couldn't find one thing that would fall under the description of a flaw. It's like me looking through pink coloured glasses every time I'm looking at you.

-I love you, Kai

Calendar, 17th October 2012

I was never good at remembering dates that were about history. Even birthdays, I always had them written down, and I was never bothered enough to learn them. I'd never seen a point in that until I met you and somehow every date connected to you became important. I could remember them all without even trying. They all had a meaning that wasn't important to anyone else but me.

-I love you, Kai

After sending that letter Kai didn't know he will soon have one more date to remember when it came to Ellie. And he also didn't know that it would be the last one. On the October 18th Ellie passed away. Her condition was only getting worse and her body was too weak to handle it all. The same day Kai got a call from Ellie's mom, Mrs Roberts, about the big bad news and she asked him to write one last letter so he could read it on her funeral.

It took him a long time to process it all but, in the end, he wrote it. He knew she would want him to do it.

The honour was mine, 20th October 2012

Myths say that people used to have 4 arms, 4 legs and 2 heads. After some time, the big creator thought they looked weird so they all got separated and started looking like humans look now. That's how soulmates were created. One soul separated in two bodies, two pieces of a puzzle that didn't need anything more but each other. I'm so glad I had the honour to find my soulmate in this life at such an early age. Just like every love story, ours will die with us, but this is not a goodbye, it never will be. This is a simple see you later. And in the end of it all, the honour was mine to be able to say you are the one I love and that I was also the one you loved.

-I love you, Kai

mentor: Sandra Prpić*institution:* Gimnazija Lucijana Vranjanina, Zagreb*Nika Šupljika*

THE ENDLESS STORY OF MICAH MCFADDEN

It started with a drink... or maybe a phone call. Micah didn't remember anything except the curious conversation he indulged in at the table that night. At first, he sat alone, holding an empty glass and turning it in his hand as the music blasted in his ears. Everyone else seemed to be having fun dancing behind him, but he couldn't bring himself to get up and join them. Suddenly, someone collapsed on the chair next to him, laughing at their own clumsiness. Micah didn't pay attention to them, as they were obviously drunk.

About six weeks before that, his phone started ringing while he was laying on his couch. There was nothing good on TV, except for a few sappy romantic comedies, and he didn't like those. He checked the time before he even considered answering the phone.

Micah McFadden was a 24-year-old man who spent most of his day mucking around his apartment. He was slightly overweight but otherwise in good shape. He was also average height with tanned skin and blue eyes that his mother adored. His parents divorced while he was still relatively young, and while his mother was pregnant with her third child – his little brother. He didn't recall having much of a relationship with either of his siblings. He only heard from his younger sister, Maegan, when she needed something from him or when he saw her at family reunions. He wondered what she wanted if she was calling him so late at night. Maybe she went out to a bar and got drunk again.

“What is it, Maegan?” he answered and scratched his forehead. Her shrill voice pierced his eardrums as she rambled about her boyfriend, Oliver. Micah already knew where this was going with how excited she was getting, so he asked her how long they were waiting until they got engaged. Maegan got even more excited then: “That's exactly why I'm calling you – Oliver proposed just yesterday!” As she went on

about how happy it would make her and their mother if he showed up at her wedding, he rubbed his temples and accepted her invitation with a grumble. He knew he would regret not staying home. Even if he wasn't sure if she actually wanted him there, or if she was just being polite, he wouldn't want to aggravate her by not being there.

That's what brought him there: at the white, round table with the weirdest bouquet of flowers he had ever seen in the centre. He had already talked to his mother and caught up with everything he'd missed. His little brother never left her side, seeing how he was around twelve and didn't know the majority of the folks at the venue.

Micah saw Matthias more like a weird neighbourhood kid than his own brother. He had these hollow brown eyes that didn't sit right with him.

At first, his mom left Matthias at the table with Micah as she went outside to smoke. Micah noticed that this has become somewhat of a routine at family gatherings: their mother would leave Matthias with him as she went outside to smoke, or whatever it was that she was doing. He didn't know if he should feel flattered that she saw him as someone responsible enough to look after Matthias, or if he should be disappointed in her for leaving her child just to smoke.

Either way, this time he didn't want to babysit Matthias.

"Don't you want to go dance with Maegan?" he asked him as he swayed the glass in his hand. He put on a very expensive tuxedo that had been in his closet for a long time, collecting dust.

"Why would I want to dance with her?" the pre-teen replied to him as his face contorted in a disgusted manner. Micah was confused, as he always assumed that Maegan and Matthias liked each other.

He shrugged. "Just go and bother someone else, alright?"

Matthias pouted and got up abruptly, turning on his heel to go and talk to his cousins who were in a far-away corner, covering away from the drunk adults. And Micah seemed content with himself. That is, until a prime example of one of those drunk adults dropped on the chair Matthias was sitting on about five seconds before that. Micah took a sip of the non-existent liquid in his glass, hoping the person would just get up and leave for the dance floor. But, as they turned around and poured themselves a glass of orange juice, he realized things wouldn't go the way Micah wanted them to.

They chugged down their drink and slammed their glass on the table, looking at Micah and smiling at him. The man in front of him suddenly piqued his interest,

with his funny-looking tie and button-up which has obviously been unbuttoned and rebuttoned during the evening.

The man offered his hand for Micah to shake, which appeared to be an odd gesture to Micah. But still, he obliged.

“The name’s Paul Pitchler! I must admit, I haven’t felt this young in a long time!” Micah thought that the man’s figure of speech was weird, but he dismissed it as the alcohol talking. Mr. Pitchler looked relatively young, after all. He figured Mr. Pitchler probably wanted to say he hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

“Micah, Micah McFadden.” He was too tired to actually say anything more than his name. Mr. Pitchler didn’t let go of his hand, though, which slightly annoyed him. “A fine name for a fine man like yourself.” He added as he stared at him with a drunk grin.

Micah pulled his hand out of the sweaty handshake and rubbed it off against his tuxedo. Mr. Pitchler laughed at his behaviour and rested his elbow on the table as he made himself comfortable on the chair. He looked back towards the dance floor, sending a kiss and a wink someone’s way, but Micah didn’t care enough to turn around.

“You younger folk are truly something else, my boy, I’ll tell you that.” Mr. Pitchler chuckled, but Micah couldn’t help but feel like something was off about this guy. This time, he couldn’t excuse it with alcohol.

“And what are you, a time traveller?” he scoffed and poured himself a glass of orange juice as well, checking the expiration date.

Mr. Pitchler looked at him and leaned in closer, “No, but I am a sorcerer. But shh...” he trailed off with a finger pressed against his lips. Micah couldn’t help but roll his eyes in agony. He never thought he would witness a grown man playing around, thinking he was a wizard.

“Alright, how ‘bout you make me immortal then? Show me your magic, oh great wizard Paul Pitchler!” he exclaimed dramatically as he swayed his glass of orange juice in his hand. Mr. Pitchler’s eyes widened, and he panicked, shushing Micah. With an amused smile, Micah took a sip of his drink. Paul Pitchler, the self-proclaimed sorcerer, snapped his fingers and pouted: “There you go, enjoy your immortality.” And, even if he didn’t believe in the empty fairytales, Micah felt a slight tingle in his spine. Mr. Pitchler got dragged to the dance floor immediately after as Micah chuckled to himself and shook his head in amusement.

The colourful lights hit his table and he checked the time on his phone. This celebration was becoming pretty boring and miserable, seeing how he was drinking

orange juice and talking to drunkards the entire time. With a sigh, he stood up and waved his sister goodbye from across the room. She ran towards him in her lavish heels and wedding dress, hugging him tightly as she held onto a wine bottle as if it was her lifeline. She kissed him on the cheek and cried out a loud “Bye Micah!” as she returned to her husband. Rubbing off the lipstick that surely stained his face, he walked outside, nodding off to his mother who was leaning against the wall with a cigarette in her hand. He lazily strutted back to his freshly cleaned car and left, driving back home.

Micah went straight to bed, not even bothering to take a shower. The next day he woke up feeling surprisingly energized, but he shrugged it off. Stumbling into the kitchen to make himself some coffee, he noticed the vigour in his movement, the pep in his step as he practically danced through his apartment. A small smile lit up on his face as he thought to himself: “I could get used to this.”

That was three hundred years ago.

Even as Micah McFadden sat on a vandalized bench filled with graffiti, looking as young as ever, he wondered if he would ever actually die, or if this really was just a never-ending cycle of disappearing and reappearing under a new name every few decades. At that point, he had mastered the skill of becoming a new man every time, completely changing his backstory every time. But the only story he cared about was when he still believed Mr. Pitchler was just a drunk childish adult...

Micah was still in his fifties – even if he looked like he was in his twenties – as the morning sun hit his eyes through the window of his home. He drank his coffee and read the newspaper in the kitchen. The light reflected off the shiny wedding ring, and he smiled. His wedding wasn’t as glamorous as his sister’s, but it was still the happiest day of his life. The moment he saw his wife in her dress was something he would never forget. Her bright smile as they exchanged their vows and had their first dance would forever be engraved in his memory.

He smiled as he looked back at the newspaper, reading about all the nonsense going on. Sometimes he glanced at the obituaries, wondering if he’ll find any family members among the unfamiliar faces. He still didn’t really talk to his sister, let alone his brother. Their mother had died about two years before that. Micah wondered if that was what got him to start reading obituaries. Taking a sip of his coffee once again, he wished his son a good morning as the young man walked into the kitchen.

Micah was proud of the fact he could call him his son. He strongly resembled his wife, except for having inherited Micah's blue eyes. Even if his son was relatively young, being only about twenty years old, he had already proven himself to be a good man.

It made Micah think about the day he was born. Lilian, his wife, didn't want to think about any names until the baby arrived.

"I want to see him first," she said, whatever that meant. She had the warmest brown eyes Micah had ever seen, so who was he to say no to her request? He was smitten from the very beginning, willing to go to the end of the world for his spouse. And, as they held their son for the first time, their little bundle of joy, his wife chose the name they would give him – Eric.

But those times were far behind him. More often than not he would forget what day it was, sometimes even what year it was. He tried to move on after everyone he cared about had died. There was no family of his left, at least not those who were close enough for him to care. At first, he swore to himself that he wouldn't fall in love with another woman. After all, he wasn't supposed to live this long in the first place. As time passed, however, he convinced himself that Lilian would want him to move on and find someone else. Especially given his unique circumstances.

During the second century of his life, he started being more open toward people. He always used a different name though, even if nobody knew who he was. Micah McFadden disappeared at the age of sixty-four as Micah Pitchler suddenly appeared in town nearly eighty years later. He was never creative with names, but he felt that his new name should be a small tribute to the man who ruined his life. Sometimes he even wondered what became of Paul Pitchler – did the man use his powers on himself? Was he immortal as well, or did he die a long time ago? And if he was still alive, just like Micah, could he make him mortal again? But, even if he was alive, where would Micah be able to find him?

"He must've changed his name as well. Surely, he wasn't that bold." Micah was convinced that the man was incredibly wise under that friendly and childish façade. If he was a sorcerer, then there should've been no doubt that he was definitely a wise and sly man. Micah would often smile pitifully, but there was no one to pity except for him.

No matter how much he tried to let go, he still found himself clinging to the life he once had. Even if he knew that life was long gone and unobtainable. He considered investing in science – maybe they would eventually invent a time machine, he

hoped. He had even tried counseling. But no matter who he asked for help, they all naturally had the same answer – his wounds would heal with time. Alas, Micah had a hard time believing that.

What hurt him the most was that he would never see his little boy again. People say that nothing is worse than losing your child. But technically, Micah never lost his son – he outlived him. His son ended up being a successful young man with a family of his own. It was a shame Micah had to leave before seeing any of that. He moved to the countryside, declaring he had some work to do there. And as he spent his days writing and receiving letters with his wife and son, promising he'd visit for holidays – which he never did – he looked in the mirror every morning praying that he had aged just a little bit.

But he never did.

For a while, he thought about sending a letter to his family, saying he died. He considered leaving the country altogether, changing his name, and starting a new life. But he couldn't actually bring himself to do it. He loved his family too much for that. He prayed night and day for that curse of his to be taken away, but nothing he did made his suffering go away. At some point, he was sure he had gone insane: no man could stay this young for so long. Maybe he just imagined looking this young, while everyone else saw him as the withered old man that he really was or was supposed to be.

But he could only fool himself for so long – because he got nothing but compliments from everyone else. When he told them how old he actually was, they laughed at him like he just told the funniest joke they'd ever heard. They couldn't understand the look of pure horror on his face, because they would never be able to handle the truth.

At times, he wondered if he was still capable of showing empathy. He always stood at the far back at funerals, avoiding the curious eyes of friends as he remained youthful. He didn't remember the exact point in time when he stopped being affected by their gloomy and depressing atmosphere. Sometimes it felt like he had lost all his emotions altogether. He would remain seated at the bar, right in front of the bartender, as everyone else danced to the loud music behind him. The bartender shot him a glance every now and then but never said anything about his odd behaviour. When he figured he had had enough for the night, Micah would retire to his apartment. He found out that he liked the eerie silence as he roamed the vacant streets, aside from the occasional drunk giggles of teenagers that filled that silence as they walked in hoards down the street or smoked in the park. At first, he couldn't help but scowl as

he saw the youngsters pass by, but eventually, he got used to it and learned to ignore it. Their noise became part of the silence.

His daily routine consisted of going for a morning coffee while reading the newspaper, sulking at home watching whatever show was on TV, and going to the bar to end the day.

Being a man of very few words, it took him by surprise when he found himself having a conversation at the bar. This time, it wasn't a drunk sorcerer. Micah wasn't sure how the conversation began, but he was so glad it did. Somehow, it made him feel less alone in the world. The person's warm and welcoming energy made him feel good in their company. Eventually, he started meeting more people, and he no longer merely sat at the bar as other people had fun in their lives. He thought it was funny how mortals do such risky things when their time is limited, but he was too invested and stuck on something he lost so long ago. People like him, he thought, couldn't afford to get so attached to others. But were there actually people like him?

"No." Micah concluded, "I can't dwell on the past, but I also can't sit around waiting for the future."

With the five stages of grief behind him and a new mindset at hand, Micah started his life anew as Micah Milton. His third name resembled a new page in his life. He started over as a blank slate, no longer dwelling in the past. He knew his wife would be proud of him for moving on. He still made sure to visit her day every Sunday after church, bringing her flowers and making sure her grave was clean and cared for. A century before that, he would've dreaded a visit to her grave, but now he found comfort in knowing he could share all his stories with her, even if she couldn't hear him. He promised her he would spend the rest of his life with her, and he intended to keep that promise, even if that wasn't how he pictured it initially...

The skies were always clear when he went to visit her. There was a certain energy surrounding the pebbled path that made him feel nostalgic. He longed for the way his wife would call out to him and smile at him, but their small one-sided conversations would have to do. Yet deep within, he still felt like she was with him, even if he couldn't see her. Birds always seemed to sing on the tree next to her grave, and the grass and flowers never seemed to wilt. He felt like, even though she was dead, she brought the life around them as he sat next to her grave. Even through the harshest weather, her grave and everything that surrounded it remained intact. She never

failed to amaze him, even in death. Sometimes, when he felt extremely happy, he even brought a radio with him and a small USB, playing her favourite songs. The light breeze tickled his cheek every now and then, but he didn't mind it.

One time he brought her roses, for Valentine's Day. He made sure to wear something nice, too. The other time he brought some carnations, her favourites. Bystanders knew better than to disturb the strange man who couldn't seem to get over a beloved family member, even if the date on the gravestone suggested that the person had died two hundred years ago.

Sometimes, when he was really bored, he would bring a little notepad with him and a pen and start writing little poems at her grave. Sometimes, he would leave the little poems at her grave as a small gift to her.

He knew that eventually, even he would end up alone in this world. Humanity would reach its downfall and its end, but until then he would try to make the most of his never-ending life. Some people saw him as an extremely old-fashioned man, and some saw him as an old soul in a young man's body. But the memory of Micah Milton would surely prevail in people's minds as a memory of a man who seemed to have all the time in the world. Because essentially, he did. At times, it made him feel better than anyone else. Superior, even.

But alas, he knew he was nothing more than someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes he told people about Paul Pitchler – the drunkard who thought he was a sorcerer – as a conversation starter. He barely remembered what Mr. Pitchler even looked like, except for the fact that he had an unbuttoned shirt. Micah wasn't sure if his eyes were green or blue, or if his hair was light or dark brown. He did remember his hooked nose which didn't quite fit his face. He had these pointy cheekbones and thin lips, but Micah couldn't remember more than that. His voice, from what Micah could recall, was croaky, dare he say hoarse. He also spoke in a weird accent that Micah couldn't quite recognize. He wasn't sure if he even heard it before.

Micah's voice was croaky and breathy, so he envied Mr. Pitchler. He was also relatively skinny, lanky even, and he seemed to be having so much fun in that short period that they interacted.

Micah knew that Mr. Pitchler wasn't some family friend, because when he asked his sister about his whereabouts after her wedding, his sister laughed in his face saying she knew no man under that name. He must've snuck in when he saw a celebration taking place in the venue. Micah was amused by the thought of no one recognizing the man, but still going along with it as if he was family. Of course, everybody was too drunk to care, including his sister.

He remembered the look on his mother's face as he left the venue: she was not disappointed, but she wasn't overly proud of him either. She never said anything about it, but he knew she would remember that move. Micah always knew she favoured his younger siblings, especially Maegan. She was her little angel, her perfect little princess. It made Micah sick, in a way, so he wasn't overly sad when his sister died. He missed the woman that raised him, though. His mother became a totally different person once Matthias was born, but Micah couldn't remember what changed, because he didn't remember what his mother was even like before that.

The memories that used to be locked away in the back of his head often came back to him as he walked around the same places his mother used to take him as a child. Sometimes he longed for her warm hand against his cheek as she told him all kinds of things that he never listened to. As time passed, he figured that maybe he should've paid more attention to what she was saying when he was younger.

For the first time in a long time, he realized he was reminiscing about his family. The one before Lilian and Eric. He wondered what became of Matthias – did he ever get married? Maybe he became an addict or a serial killer. Micah always knew that something wasn't quite right with that kid. Not with the way he would smile as he watched all those documentaries with animals being slaughtered by other animals. Or those series with extreme violence and gore. He always spoke in this brittle voice, too. He always sounded like he was about to cry, and their mother would immediately listen to any demand the kid had.

Micah rolled his eyes as he walked towards the cemetery, going to visit his wife's grave again. It was her birthday, so he put on the nicest button-up he found. It took him a while, but he also dug up a tie that she really liked to see him wearing. The carnations he bought for her grave were so colourful, Micah could've sworn they lit up the whole street. He had asked the florist to add a couple daisies into the mix. She did more than that, putting all kinds of small white flowers along with the orange carnations, topping them all off with a white bow.

The streets were really quiet that morning, and Micah enjoyed the silence, occasionally humming a familiar tune from his wife's favourite song. The radio was neatly tucked into the bag he put on his shoulder, along with the USB. Micah could feel himself smile even brighter if that was possible – this would've been a lovely date if his wife was still with him. She would've loved this. He could imagine her holding his hand as the two of them would walk to the park, sit down and watch their son play with the other kids. They would go get some cheesecake after that, maybe even go watch a movie at the cinema. Eric didn't like cheesecake, so he would get some ice cream instead.

Micah slowly trotted to the entrance of the graveyard, silently closing the fence behind him. He took a deep breath as he fixed his tie and headed toward the grave. He thought about all the couples and families buried together when it hit him that he would probably never be buried with his own. He would never be able to rest in peace next to his beloved. Next to his Lilian.

He sat down next to her grave and neatly placed the flowers in the vase that he bought a long time ago. He made sure they looked good, even if he knew his wife wouldn't care how they looked as long as he bought them on his own accord, without her having to remind him. He pulled out the radio and started playing the songs on the USB.

As he took a deep breath and hummed the tune of the song that was playing, he remembered the day he first saw her at the coffee bar downtown. She had a part-time job as a waitress there, and he was regular. At least, he became after that day. It didn't take long for them to exchange phone numbers.

He tapped his foot against the ground, shily singing some of the lyrics he knew. He was embarrassed that by now he didn't know the entire song by heart, but even though he was physically young, he was mentally old.

"I miss you, you know?" he exclaimed quietly as he tried with everything within him to shed at least a single tear for his wife. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone coming – a couple. He gave them a quick glance, smiled, nodded, then went back to spend time with his late wife. He couldn't shrug off the feeling that they somehow looked familiar. As they stepped closer, Micah took a good look at them: the woman was wearing a thick fur coat as she giggled at something her partner had said. She wished Micah a good day by silently smiling and nodding back. But as Micah made eye contact with her partner, something in the atmosphere shifted, and Micah felt like he was suffocating for a moment.

The young woman went on down the path, but the man gently grabbed her by her arm to stop her briefly.

"You go on honey, I'll catch up." His gruff voice rang through the air as the young woman nodded and took one final glance at Micah, then waltzed off down the path.

The two men stood in silence as they stared at each other. Micah was sure he had seen this man before somewhere, but couldn't quite figure out where. Maybe he was the bartender at the bar he used to go to? No, he was sure he attended his funeral just a few years ago. He scanned him over: the young man had pointy features, especially his cheekbones, to the point where he almost looked like a walking skeleton. Even if Micah's memory didn't serve him right, the young man seemed to recognize him immediately. Maybe he was a friend he met at the bar.

“No, surely I have seen him somewhere else. He looks too familiar.” Micah thought as he stared at the youngster more intensely.

His bushy eyebrows raised, and his eyes wrinkled as he smiled – his thin lips almost disappearing. It made Micah cringe at the sight, but he didn’t let his expression change. Aside from that, the man had a genuinely nice smile. A warm one, Micah thought. It almost made him hug the man and strike up a conversation as if he’d known him his whole life. Which, of course, would’ve been impossible. There was only one person that Micah thought could still be alive, but he didn’t know if they actually were.

Micah paused. His jaw dropped as he let his emotions come back to him.

As the light peeked through the foliage behind the man and lit up his shoulders and the back of his head, he appeared almost angelic in front of Micah. In a way, he was his saviour. There was no doubt about that.

The man’s expression slowly turned back into a relaxed one as he offered his bony hand to Micah.

“Remember me? The name’s Archie Castillo, though you may know me better as Paul Pitchler.” He used his other hand to fix his coat, like some kind of businessman. Micah stumbled over his own feet as he brought Mr. Pitchler into a bear hug. He thought about all the possibilities: maybe he would be able to undo his curse.

Maybe there was still hope for Micah McFadden.

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Gabrijela Levačić

A LITTLE MOMENT OF ETERNITY

~ Portland, March 2019 ~

I clench my fists convulsively, crumpling the dark blue blanket decorated with yellow stars, hot tears are sliding down my chin, tickling my neck.

-Five....six....seven.....eight....- I count the stars in my mind until the tears completely cloud my vision. I press my face into the blanket, clenching my jaw desperately. And then I break down. All the agony and pain, all the silent words that should have been said and all those hastily spoken, together with all the accumulated tears burst out of me in one guttural scream... I wouldn't call it a scream as much as it sounds like a painful animal howl. I stand up and quickly throw the blanket to the other end of the room, the spark of ardor in me ignites into a consuming flame. I furiously watch as the yellow stars scatter through the air, knocking over the television in their path. I suddenly turn and stare into the huge mirror, I no longer recognize the girl I see in it. With her red eyes and wet cheeks, she clearly shows a weakness that makes me hate her. Because she is weak. Because I'm weak.

I take the vase from the table and throw it in reflection of my weakness. A muffled sound of breaking glass fills the small room as hundreds of crystal shards slide across the floor. I stop for a moment, with blurry eyes I look at the high walls plastered with photos, all the fake smiles, all the fake friendships that they show fly through my head.

It's all a lie.

I sob and walk over to the wall scratching at it with my fingernails as pieces of photos squirm around my trembling body. I'll burn them, I'll burn them all.

I grab the drawers of my desk, rip them open and throw them at the door with all my might. Through the sounds of my rough breathing, the crash that echoes through the room seems so distant, unreal. I find my old box of photos on the shelf and feel a new rush of anger, the anger and pain coursing through my veins are now uncontrollable. I grab the box and throw it in the air, watching as hundreds of colorful pieces

of paper flutter around me, flying through the air like feathers.

I lose strength for a moment, and that moment is enough for me to succumb. I'm falling. I fall to my knees, I stretch out my arms and meet the cold floor with my palms. I'm inhaling frantically as I feel the razor-sharp air travel through my lungs, which crackle like burning paper. Two tears fall on my open palm.

Staring at the caramel-colored floor, I see one of the fallen photographs among the glass shards. It shows Thomas, staring at the chocolate cake in front of him and me, with arm draped over his shoulder, our lips parted wide in a smile. The muscles of my jaw tighten as I study the hand he wrapped around my waist, a strong tremor shakes my body. He's here. I see him.

After years of convincing myself that he was just a figment of my imagination, that he never existed... I blinked three times to make sure that my own eyes were not deceiving me. But I'm still staring at his dark locks that touch his eyelashes, I can almost hear the sound of his laughter as I slide my gaze over the contours of his lips. Every part of my being refuses to believe that he isn't real.

I slowly extend my palm and run my index finger gently along the line of his jaw. In the empty space beside me.

I shiver as I wipe my wet cheeks with the back of my hand, looking at the photo that was resting on my knee. With a gentle movement, I take the photo in my palm and bring it to my chest. I can feel my dull heartbeats pulsing through the photo.

It all started when I was seven years old. They thought I made him up to soothe my loneliness.

*~12 years earlier~
Portland, July 2007
(Ciara, 7 years old)*

I saw Tara on the swing and approached her, I layed down on the soft grass and watched her. As the swing reached high into the sky, her long dark hair fluttered in the air like a flag, flapping against her elbows.

- Now look at this. - she addressed me with a smile. With a quick movement, she stretched out her legs and, twisting her body, dropped the chain of the swing, throwing herself into the air. Time stood still while, carried by the wind and the power of

momentum, she flew. Like a bird in flight, she floated through the sky, illuminated by the soft rays of the sun. My breath caught when, lithe as a gazelle, she met herself in a half crouch.

Then it was my turn. I wrapped my fingers tightly around the cold chain and pushed away. A warm breeze caressed my face as golden curls danced playfully across my shoulders. I breathed in the smell of cut grass and warm fabric and stretched my legs. I loved the rapid flow of air that made the hairs on my arms stand on end. I swung farther and faster, breathing and observing the surroundings. The silky tips of my hair bewitched my view when I swayed back, the snow-white clouds beckoned me every time I soared into the heights. I longed for the softness of the clouds, the blueness of the sky and the feeling of freedom. I wanted to have wings and fly. I didn't even notice that the playground was completely empty, it didn't matter to me.

I closed my eyes and listened to the gentle sounds that were reaching out to me. The melodious rustling of willow leaves, the soft fluttering of grass, the barely audible creaking of a swing..... and then, a voice.

- Hi.- he said at the moment when I suddenly opened my eyes. A boy with dark hair, emerald eyes and a shy smile stood in front of me. He slowly approached me as I gradually slowed down the swing.

- Hi.- I replied shyly when the swing stopped. He stood next to the free swing beside me and gave me a happy look.

- I'm Thomas. - he said extending his hand. - May I swing with you? - he asked, pointing to the place next to me.

- I'm Ciara. - I answered with a smile, taking his hand. - Of course, go ahead, I needed company anyway.

- Thank you. - he replied satisfactorily sitting on the swing.

- I love to swing, what about you? - he asked me with a curious look.

- Yes, the best part for me is when I fly, like a bird.

- I like that too, especially when I swing at night, you should see the sky at night. - he smiled thoughtfully, looking at the barely noticeable, bright outline of the moon.

- That sounds so beautiful.- I sighed imagining the dark night sky lit up by billions of stars.

- I know.- he answered and then we both smiled looking at the sky.

I will never forget the day I met him, nor the day I lost him.

~ 9 years later ~
 Portland, May 2016
 (Ciara, 16 years old)

As the years passed, I began to understand that other people did not perceive Thomas as I did, they treated him as if he were not there, as if he was invisible.

For them, he was.

Even when I realized that he was only visible to me, I couldn't ignore him, he was my better half..... my best friend. When he spoke to me, I would clearly hear his, at first soft, childish voice, which deepened over the years and became divinely velvety, pleasant like a warm cup of hot chocolate. When I looked at him, his eyes, colored like the warm jade, looked back at me with a look that would make me feel like I could fly away at any moment.

But that still didn't lessen my agony when, with his departure, he left a gaping chasm in my chest.

~

That evening I went into the forest looking for our bench in the clearing, he was waiting for me. My whole body was shaking, the expression on his face tore my insides into thousands of pieces. The brokenness, pain and sadness were clearly reflected in his disturbed gaze.

I approached him and sat next to him on the oak bench, leaning on our names engraved in the dark wood. We sat in silence for a few moments while I listened to his rhythmic breathing. I knew the reason for his sadness, for today's meeting. I felt it with every raspy breath of my trembling lungs, with every heavy blink of my eyelids. I wasn't ready to let him go. Despite a manic effort to hold back tears, two warm streams slid down my face, I let them travel to my chin where they met his thumbs.

- It tears me up to see you so sad Ciara. - the look in his eyes bordered with the look of a man condemned to death. To prevent another burst of tears, I blinked and looked down at his arms outstretched towards me.

- Can't you stay? - I asked desperately, taking his palm that rested on my cheek.

- You know that I would like to stay with you more than anything else, but unfortunately, me and others like me were never meant to fall in love.- he paused for a moment, studying my light blue eyes that absorbed his penetrating gaze.

- But it happened after all.- he smiled as he slowly moved his hand away from my cheek. At the moment of separation, I felt a rush of coldness in the place where

his warm palm was and I wanted him to return it to my face, but in the end I turned my gaze to the stars. With deep breaths, I tried to calm the wild beating of my heart.

- It happened after all.- he whispered again looking at the night sky.

- Thomas, I.....- I didn't manage to finish the sentence when his pleading eyes intercepted me.

- Sssshhh, please, let me finish. Do you know why I came up to you and sat on that swing many years ago?- I slowly shook my head remembering the day I met him as his lips formed the next words.

- I approached you, Ciara, because I knew you needed me, because you were unconsciously calling me to life with your thoughts. - he paused, looking at me significantly.

- You created me.- I didn't even notice that I was holding my breath until the moment it flew out of my lips. For a few terrifying moments, time stood still as his words rang in my ears in slow motion.

- You created me.- it was repeating in my head until the warmth of his palms brought me back to the present. Time restarted along with the starlight gently gliding across his worried face.

- Ciara.- he whispered approaching.

- Are you okay?- he caressed my open palm comfortably with his soft touch.

- Yes, just.....- I didn't know how to finish the sentence, letters, thoughts and memories flew before my eyes like a flock of frightened birds, too fast to catch and keep any of them.

- You are so real.- I finally whispered as salty tears rolled down touching the corners of my lips.

- Of course, I should have been real in order to help you, you needed me, you needed someone to be by your side, to be your protector. - he paused.

- To be your friend.- I felt his warm breath when he planted a soft kiss on my wrist.

- And then I fell in love with you..- he looked at me with his warm green eyes while the breeze played with his hair, carrying towards me the scent of peppermint and hazelnut, a scent that will always remind me of him. His lips lingered on my wrist, pressing another gentle kiss into it. In a beautiful fraction of the moment when his lips touched my skin, I wanted to cling to him and fly away with him to the end of the world if necessary. Every little part of me burned to be near him, burned for his love.

- But from that moment, I realized that I'm not the right choice for you. His words, heavy as lead, were deeply imprinted in my heart, like stones in clay. I tried to focus

on every second spent with him, catching his every movement with my eyes, afraid that he would suddenly evaporate, disappear. I tried to form any words with my sluggish lips, but my tongue, along with my stiff vocal cords, refused to listen to me. I swallowed hard.

- You deserve better Ciara, much better. You deserve a real person who will give you love.... the real love you deserve, I.....- at the moment when he continued speaking, I no longer heard the words he uttered, I could only observe gentle movements of his rosy, full lips.

- No. - I spoke quietly. - I deserve you. I love you. - he was still moving his lips, but I didn't care anymore. I closed the distance between us exactly as much as it took for our lips to meet.

The best thing about last kisses is that you don't know it's your last.

But it was our first.

The first and the last.

He placed his palms on my cheeks and moved away, our noses were gently touching. The look of sadness in his eyes broke my heart. I didn't want to move, I absorbed every little detail of his face. His long, dark lashes curled up to his brows in a perfect arc, his warm breath caressing my lips as his fingers still rested on my cheeks. His eyes..... shone with a brightness more powerful than the stars that surrounded the vastness of space. He moved his fingers slowly, tracing soft lines along my jawline. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in the fresh midnight air, and when he opened them, I knew that I would remember his pleading, vulnerable look for the rest of my life.

- I will love you forever Ciara.- he slid one hand to my palm, hugging it.

- I will love you too Thomas. Forever.- I firmly took his warm palm, wanting this moment to last forever. And more.

Then he pulled me close, wrapping me in a tight hug. He touched my forehead with his chin, planting a kiss on it before speaking again.

- I hope that one day you will be able to forgive me. - he said at the moment when I rested my cheek on his chest, listening to his heartbeat. Thud. Thud. Thud.

And then he disappeared.

My hands were left hanging helplessly, hugging the cold air. Another silent tear slid down my cheek. A tear that he will never meet with his thumb again.

~the present~
Portland, March 2019
(Ciara, 19 years old)

I could not imagine life without him, the pain and emptiness that cut me sharply every day in the past years were unbearable. I went to my room to isolate myself from the rest of the world. The walls were covered with hundreds of photos, my whole nineteen-year-old life was on those warm lavender-colored walls. Kindergarten, primary and secondary school, the beginning of college..... hundreds of different, blank faces, artificial smiles. I felt a sudden burning sensation in my sinuses, none of them were my true friends, or anything more than that. Except for Thomas.

I approach the bed and drop to the floor, staring at the perfectly arranged sheets. Who am I fooling? I lean back on the bed as my vision slowly blurs with oncoming tears. I clench my fists convulsively, crumpling the blanket decorated with yellow stars, hot tears are pouring down my face, sliding down my chin, down my neck.

-Five.....six.....seven.....eight.... - I count the stars on the blanket until I can no longer see them due to tears. I press my face into the blanket, clenching my jaw frantically. And then I break down. An image of his smile appears before my eyes, the outline of his face flashed through my consciousness as strong as thunder, and then all the sadness and pain broke out of me in one guttural scream. I get up and quickly throw the blanket to the other end of the room. I furiously watch the yellow stars scatter through the air as the flickering spark inside me ignites into a blazing flame. I turn to the huge mirror, staring bitterly at the foreign girl I see in it. I hate her because she is weak. Because I'm weak.

I take the vase from the table and throw it in reflection of my weakness. A muffled sound of shattering fills the room as hundreds of glass shards slide across the floor. I pause, with a blurred vision I'm looking at the high walls full of photos. I approach them and frantically scratch them with trembling fingers surrounded by air filled with pieces of my life. I will burn them. I will burn them all. I grab the drawers of my desk, pull them out and throw them into the door with all my might, the crash that echoes through the room seems so distant, unreal. I see my old photo box, I grab it and violently throw it into the air, filling it with dozens of shiny, colorful pieces of paper that, fluttering like feathers, slide towards the floor.

I lose strength for a moment, and that moment is enough for me to succumb. I'm falling. I fall to my knees, I stretch out my arms and meet the cold floor with my palms. I inhale frantically, feeling the razor-sharp air travel through my lungs, which

crackle like burning paper.

I see one of the fallen photographs among the glass shards . It shows Thomas, staring at the chocolate cake in front of him and me, arms draped over his shoulders, our lips parted wide in a smile. The muscles of my jaw tighten as I study the hand he wrapped around my waist, a strong tremor shakes my body.

Thomas. My Thomas. I stare at his dark locks that touch his eyelashes, I can almost hear the sound of his laughter as I slide my gaze over the contours of his lips. I shiver as I wipe my wet cheeks with the back of my hand while looking at the photo that is resting on my knee. With a gentle movement, I take it in my palm and bring it to my chest. I can feel my dull heartbeats pulsing through the photo.

~ 3 years later ~

Oregon City, June 2022

(Ciara, 22 years old)

I take the last empty pint of beer from the table and wash it behind the bar. Summer evenings like this exhaust me the most. I've worked a good ten hours serving those insatiable booze leeches and I'm definitely ready to go home. I glance quickly at my watch. It's four in the morning and I feel like my head is going to explode. I quickly calculate the cash register, praying to God that the numbers match because I don't want to be trapped here for an extra hour. With a tired look, I greet Tanya, whose morning shift has just started. She gave me a worried look with her golden eyes and gave me a pitiful smile.

- Ciara, go home, rest, I'll take over.- she winked at me, tying her light hair in a bun as she approached the cash register with her determined step. I put my elbows on the bar and tiredly rub my eyes.

- You are wonderful, thank you.- I smile at her, throwing the black apron on the bar, I grab the purse that is casually hanging from the chair.

- See you, good luck.- I wave to her, feeling a bit bad for leaving her alone in the cafe.

- Don't worry, everything is under control, I'll see you.- she waves back to me as I open the door and head towards the parking lot. The air is filled by the sounds of my high heels and the soothing scent of Oregon's pinetrees. I turn up the music in the car because I don't want to be in silence. In silence that would lure to the surface the past that I should have left behind a long time ago. And I didn't.

But even the blaring music could not prevent the scene that appeared before my

eyes again after so long. The faint outline of his eyes, the barely audible sound of his laughter..... I take a deep breath, gripping the steering wheel tightly, feeling the blood running through my fingers.

They say time heals all wounds. But scars remain...

With a shaky movement, I turn the music all the way up, trying to focus on the road signs, trying to push away the memory of his strong arms wrapped around my waist. It does not help. I can still hear his soft whisper very close to my ear.

- I love you Ciara.- echoes in my ears like the persistent ticking of a clock. I turn on the blinker and turn into a dimly lit alley. I stop the car in front of the house as the strong beats of my heart shake my body. I take a deep breath and go out. The penetrating drumming of the music was replaced by the serene silence of the night and the buzzing of the street lights. I slowly walk across the threshold towards the front door rummaging through my purse. An irritated sigh fills the crisp night air as my fingers begin to tangle with each other. For God's sake, where are those keys?

~

I leave the bathroom comfortably wrapped in a soft bathrobe, I grope with my bare feet to the open bedroom door. I glance at the mirror illuminated by tiny lights and stop. I don't remember the last time I truly looked at myself in the mirror. The dim glow of the lights cast a golden glow on my tired bright eyes surrounded by dark shadows. The pearly shine of tiny drops of water decorated my bright, freshly washed hair. Picking up a comb, I comb my hair with slow movements, inhaling the calming aroma of a scented candle. The faint scent of hazelnuts and peppermint fills every corner of the room as I approach the bed. The silk blanket clings softly to my body, I stir, tucking my forearm under the light jade colored pillow. I close my eyes.

And then I find myself miles away, on a sunlit spring meadow. I'm wearing my favorite lavender jumpsuit that slowly billows in the warm breeze. Breathing in the air, I absorb the intoxicating scent of tulips and orchids. I look ahead and realize that I am not alone.

Thomas.

He is standing in front of me wearing a tight white T-shirt and dark jeans. His strong tanned arms flash in the golden sun, a soft smile spreads across his face as he approaches me.

- I hope that one day you will be able to forgive me. - he slowly repeated the same

words that he said so many years ago. I feel a tight grip in my throat as I reach for his hand.

- I forgave you. - I whisper gently caressing his wrist. He took a step closer and gently placed his fingers under my chin.

- I miss you.- I looked straight into his eyes, which made me feel a strong stab of nostalgia.

- I will always be with you, I will be here every time you need me. I will always love you Ciara. - he leaned in, bringing our foreheads together. At that moment, all my pain and sadness that I had felt in the past years disappeared and were replaced by warmth, love and fulfillment. His warm breath spread a sweet scent tickling my cheeks.

- I know.- I said firmly believing in my answer. I closed my eyes and rested my cheek on his chest, his heartbeats were so steady, so real. I clung to him tightly, knowing that everything would be fine from now on.

And from that day on, Ciara and Thomas stayed together, enjoying every little moment of eternity.

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Matea Toljan

IT'S YOU

What is life?

We get born into it, live, go through many ups and downs and, at the end of the day, we die. So, what exactly is the point of living? Do we live for a few moments that make us happy? Do we maybe live just to experience things that need to be experienced? Or do we just have to exist so we can be thrown from one corner to the other? Everyone say that there is light at the end of every tunnel but is that really true?

“UGH I’m so exhausted, how much longer do I need to be in here?” I thought to myself as I was looking at my best friend, Elva, solving a math problem on the board. Soon enough the bell finally rang. “Finally!! I can go home and try out the new game I bought yesterday! Come on, Elva, let’s hurry!” I happily exclaimed while walking out of the classroom with Elva by my side. “Seriously, Izanami? Do you even talk to anyone besides me? I feel like the only thing you do is play those videogames...” - “What do you mean? Of course, I do! I talk to all kinds of people! There’s Kyo, Lev, Yuri, Viki, Engrid...oh, and-” “These are all fictional characters, aren’t they? Izanami, you know what I meant. We are in high school and your social life is even worse than it was in middle school! If you’re not able to stop playing all these videogames, why don’t you at least try talking to people online then? You know, like all those voice chat futures. It shouldn’t be that complicated!” - “Oh no, no, no! I can’t do that and you know it.” Elva is my best friend, she’s very pretty and she’s always been by my side. Unlike me, she’s a very outgoing person and has a lot of friends. On the other hand, I am very shy person when it comes to interactions with real people... I’m much more comfortable talking to characters appearing on screen while I’m playing games. Honestly, being around people makes me anxious and that’s only one of the many reasons why I don’t like school. I’m a 17-year-old girl but I’ve never had many friends, let’s not even talk about getting in romantic relationships, but I always liked spending time with boys more than with girls... Girls would always gossip while I would just want to talk about the newest videogames coming out in stores. One of the reasons why I always liked games so much was also because of my older brother,

Yamato. He is four years older than me, and Elva is actually a lot like him. That's probably the reason why I like hanging around with her so much. It makes me feel like Yamato is still here... Oh right, I guess I haven't really said anything about my family, right? I live with my mom and dad. My mom always enters my room while I'm playing and has some chores for me but, oh well. My dad on the other hand, I feel like he doesn't like me very much. Ever since the accident which happened four years ago he's been very distant. He has problems with alcohol addiction and he doesn't really know how to control his anger sometimes but I understand that things have been hard on him. And then there's my brother Yamato. Heh, I still like to talk about him as if he was still here. No, he didn't move or anything like that. Four years ago he died in an accident while trying to protect me. I was playing on my phone outside and he was sitting on porch just looking around when a car with a drunk driver came out of nowhere. I didn't have time to react but Yamato got to me just in time and threw me out of the way. He wasn't able to save himself though and he got run over by the car. Both him and the drunk driver died right there, we didn't even have time to call the ambulance. You may ask yourself: "How do you live with that guilt everyday?" and the truth is I don't know how to answer that question. That's why I let myself drown in the fictional worlds.

"I'm home!" I yelled while entering my house letting the nice smell fill my nose. My mom is cooking my favorite dish again. She's the only person that almost fully understands me and that's why I'm trying to make her as happy as possible. "Hi dear, how was school today?" I smile at her while sitting down and have a nice little chat we usually have while eating. As I entered my room, I thought about what Elva said to me. "Maybe I really should try talking to someone online." I picked up my headphones and, for the first time in forever, turned on the microphone. I decided to download a voice changer because I knew it would make it a lot easier to talk to someone with a different identity. "Well I have nothing to lose, I guess" After an hour of trying to find normal teammates that have a microphone, I got paired up with a random person Yuki_loves_Kyo and to my surprise I heard a female voice in my headphones. "Hellooo! Is anyone there?"- "Oh, hi! Yes, I'm here." For a second I thought about turning off my voice changer but then I remembered I wouldn't be able to say anything if I did. This Yuki person seemed really nice and she was giving of an insanely familiar vibe. Of course I gave myself another name, Baku. They were having an amazing time together and decided to add each other so they can play again sometime and so, the friendship between Yuki and Baku started. What Izanami didn't know, though, was that Yuki wasn't a real person either, but on

the other side of the screen was a boy using a voice changer as well. Next morning Izanami woke up, did her usual school morning routine and got out of the house. "Bye, mom, see you later!" Honestly, why does school have to be so early in the morning, my brain hasn't even processed that I woke up. I had such a fun time playing with Yuki last night that I didn't even realize how long we were playing and now I have to go to school with barely 3 hours of sleep... I wonder why she was giving off such a familiar vibe, though, I don't know anyone with the name Yuki here... Lost in thought I didn't hear Elva calling my name for who knows what time. "Sorry, I was lost in thought." - "Were you talking to your imaginary readers in your head again?" - "Ahh yeah." Wow she really says you are not real... Oh, well, she's not that far from the truth, I guess. As we were walking to school, a big group of people from next-door class walked by. "Who are you looking at? Did you finally get interested in a real-life person?" - "Ha, ha, very funny. You can only dream girl." But the truth was, someone did in fact catch my eye. It was one of the guys in the group and I realized why Yuki's vibe seemed so familiar. "Hey Elva, you know a lot of people. Do you know who that tall dark-haired guy is?" - "Oh, you mean Ide. Yes, I know him. He lives in the neighbourhood next to ours. I know that he moved here after having some problems at the place he used to live. Give up now, girl, he's one of the most popular guys in school and he's pretty mean to girls, you know. But for some reason, girls still obsess about him so you would have a lot of rivals." - "No, I am staying loyal to my boyfriends. I just didn't really recognize him, so I got curious." - "Of course you don't. While everyone is talking about him you are looking at videogame related things..." After that the day was passing pretty slowly, but I had this weird feeling of being watched for some reason.

"Izanami, Izanami, IZANAMI. Hellooo!" Seriously, how can someone be so loud in the morning, I can't even focus on the new story chapter. "Hey, Ide! Man, wait for me!" Oh, great! Here we go. In just a few minutes I had a whole group of people walking beside me and talking. Honestly, I hate hanging out with so many people at the same time. People can be very annoying, but at least there's my brother who can understand how annoyed I can get with so much attention on me. "Seriously, Ide?? Why didn't you wake me up??" - "I always wake you up, Shoki, you can't depend on me you know?" I stayed up late playing games with someone and I have less of a problem waking up than him. But I do wonder what Baku is like in real life. It was very nice playing with him, usually people online get excited hearing female voice on the other side, but he was genuinely just very nice and normal. After school the two of them decided to play together again. Then again the next day, and

again, they slowly but surely became part of each other's daily life and they seemed to like it. "Hey Baku, we've been playing for quite some time now but I feel like I don't know anything about you." That was true, even though they agreed they wouldn't talk about their private lives, there was always a hint of curiosity lingering inside of their minds. And while both Ide and Izanami felt comfortable playing with each other and talking about games, they wanted to make another step in their online friendship. Both of them knew that they would be breaking their own promise, but they wanted to somehow become closer. *If I'm going to be completely honest with myself, maybe I would even allow myself to fall for Baku if he wasn't a guy. Something about him makes me feel at peace and even though he doesn't know anything about me and vice versa, I really feel like we understand each other well. Can this be that thing called a platonic soulmate?* The person on the other side of the screen was thinking the same thing, but both of them were too scared of making the other person uncomfortable to say anything. Izanami decided to answer "Yuki's" question: "That's true, so tell me Yuki what do you want to know about me? I think that as far as we don't ask questions that are too personal, we aren't breaking our promise, right?" Yuki smiled at Baku's response and so they took another step in strengthening their friendship. Since questions weren't allowed to be too personal, they asked each other about their favourite colors, animals, seasons and so on. At the end of the day, there's so many people in this world that like the same things, it can't really help them find each other. Or can it?

It's a rainy day and honestly I'm feeling down too. Yuki wasn't able to get online yesterday so I didn't play with her but now I'm left alone in school because Elva called in sick this morning. These kinds of situations really make me realize how lame I am... Am I depending on Elva too much? Maybe I should get out of my comfort zone and try to make some real-life friends. "Hey, gamer girl!" I turn around and see my usual bullies walking towards me with smirks on their faces. I knew what was coming, after all Elva wasn't in school to scare them off. This time though, they went further than they usually go. From not caring much about what they were saying to them blaming me for my brother's death. *Like it's not enough that I blame myself already. I am the one that must live with that guilt every day. I know he died because of me. Maybe I should've been the one to die that day.* "Hey!! Who are you to blame her? Were you there? Did YOU try to save either of them maybe? Don't you think you're going way too far with this? You're just an insecure boy that wants to look cool but, honestly, you're just becoming more lame." Whose voice is that? I can't recognize it but, honestly, I just don't want to be here now. I quickly got up and

ran away wanting to be alone in the bathroom. I don't care if I will be late to class, I just need to calm down. "Wait, who was that? I wasn't able to see her face." - "Oh, it's Izanami from the class next door. Elva's friend." The bell rang for start of the class so everyone had to go back to their classroom but Ide was still worried about Izanami.

"Teacher, may I go to the bathroom?" I raise my hand knowing I would be allowed to go since teachers like me. Even though I'm new in this class, my grades are the highest and I am always polite. I don't even go to the bathroom, but I'm just too worried about Izanami. Besides, I think it would be nice of me to take care of Elva's friend while she's sick. Both her and her family really helped my mom when we were moving in, so I have to repay her somehow. I walk out of the classroom with some candies in my pocket. They always make me feel better when I'm down. When I got to the girls' bathroom I got a bit embarrassed realizing I'm about to go check up on a girl I barely even know and I have to enter girls' bathroom! "Izanami, are you in here?" I hear sniffles as a response. "I just wanted to check if you're okay. We may not know each other that much, but I'm here if you need someone to talk to. Elva always talks about you when our families hang out together. She really loves you." There was no response but I decided to go on. "It may be hard, but try not to pay too much attention to what those guys said. They have no idea how it is to go through such a traumatic thing. You know, you are very strong to keep on going for this long with barely any support from people around you. I may not have known your brother but I'm sure he would be very proud of you." There was still no response so I got up from the floor. "I understand you need some time for yourself now so I will leave you alone. I will leave the candies I brought here. See you around, 'Nami." At that moment Izanami realized who stood up for her. "Wait, Ide" She quickly wiped her tears off of her face and opened the door. "I feel like it would be better if you stayed for a bit." Ide smiled at the sight of her. "Of course!" - "So candies calm you down? Shouldn't they give you like a lot of energy or something?" Izanami said putting a chocolate bar in her mouth. "Well... I guess it's a habit I got from childhood. My parents would be arguing a lot and those fights would always end up with my mom being hit. You see, my dad is pretty crazy and very violent. I always hated hearing them fight, I would get so scared that I'd start shaking. So one day, I happened to have a lollipop during one of their fights and I realized how calmer it made me so that's why candies were always some anti-stress things." - "Oh I see... What happened with your dad? Was he the reason you moved?" - "Yeah, one night things got really out of hand. He exploded, totally losing his mind. Mom and

dad were fighting about a random bad grade I got so I had to stand between them. My twin brother, Shoki and my older sister were standing a few steps away. At one point, dad took a knife and started walking towards me, he wasn't normal anymore. He was about to stab me and I was ready to take a hit and die already but my sister stood in front of me and got stabbed. The last thing I remember from that night was hitting my dad and running to my sister. She would always say she would protect me since I was the least liked child in our family. She did keep her promise but she ended up dying that same night. I don't remember the rest because I was in such a bad state that my body decided it was the best for me to forget about it. I've been lying to everyone that I don't remember anything from that night so they wouldn't worry." He turned to Izanami with a weak smile on his face and looked at the ceiling. "It feels so nice to be able to talk to someone about it. Especially someone that can understand how awful the feeling of guilt is." - "I...I...I really don't know what to say. I'm so sorry you had to go through that. Did your dad end up going to jail?" - "Yeah, he had to go to the mental hospital first for some tests. My mom isn't saying anything about him, but I have a bad feeling since we moved pretty far away." They didn't stay in the bathroom for too long because they were still in school and they had to get back to their classes. Both of them agreed to keep it a secret and decided they would be hanging out together more. Days were passing and Izanami and Ide started hanging out together in the group with Shoki and Elva.

Everything was finally getting better. Just a few months ago I met Yuki and now I have a whole friend group to hang out with! I've been having a lot of luck lately, but someone is definitely watching. Should I say anything to Elva? No, she probably wouldn't even believe me... For some reason, I feel like she thinks I'm paranoid and am imagining things or something... Maybe I should say something to Ide. He definitely understands me the most, which is weird, my mom was always the only person that I thought understood me. But Ide understands me on an even higher level. He is truly amazing, don't you think? Maybe I should invite him to hang out so I can tell him what's up. Not long after Izanami found herself sitting down next to Ide. He was quick to accept the invitation and so a few days later they found themselves walking side by side in a park. "So, Ide, I hope you can believe me when I say this, but I have had this feeling of being watched for a few years now. You might think that it may be my brother watching me but it's not that, I'm sure of it. It's this weird uneasy feeling, like someone is following my every step and it's starting to creep me out so much that I can't sleep at night anymore. I don't know what to do anymore because I feel like no one will believe me." I realized I had started shaking and Ide decided to hug

me for the first time since we met each other. No words had been said yet, but it really made me feel so comforted and heard. I realized someone that understands me and hears me, exists and that person is a boy hugging me so tightly that I can barely breathe. Now I know, I love this boy. He's been there for me during one of my hardest moments when we didn't even talk to each other once, he makes me feel seen, heard, appreciated and, most importantly, understood. I can be myself around him, he's the reason I got my real smile back and I want to keep on living because of him. I want to hear more of his voice, see more of his face, melt in his hugs and see the side of him that only I am allowed to see. I love him so much that I can't express it with words but this friendship is too precious to be ruined by awkwardness that will arise if I say anything. Just being in his presence is enough for me. "I believe you 'Nami, okay? I will always believe you, even if you feel like there's no one to understand you, no one to comfort you, no one to hear you, I will be there for you. Look, we may not be friends for a long time but I just have this feeling of wanting to protect you. So, if you want, we can start going home together every day after school, when you're at home, feeling scared or uneasy you can always call me or text me. We will help each other heal and try to keep on living, okay?" He said exactly what I always wanted to hear, *we will help each other heal*. My normal is changing. To think that only a few months ago I would be running home from school to play videogames and talk to fictional characters and now not only do I have the most amazing internet friend but I also have a whole group of real life friends AND from today a boy that I like will be walking home with me. Heh, I hope Yamato is watching and smiling to himself now... Ide knew that his normal was changing too. Even his behaviour changed. Well, not for everyone but he definitely made an exception when it comes to his behaviour towards girls.

Izanami really is something, huh? Maybe I found someone my sister would love too. Do I love her though? Well, if I asked myself that questions a month ago I wouldn't be too sure how to answer. But getting closer to her made me realize how much I need her in my life. I know she needs me in her life too. Now I know that I love her. She is special. She isn't like many other girls who would approach me because of my looks or my "attractive personality". But she closed herself in, not allowing anyone to see her little broken heart. Understanding her made me realize how understood I am when I'm with her. When she first smiled at me, my heart almost burst because I knew that I was the cause of that smile, it was just for me to see. It will sound selfish but I don't want anyone in her life to see her the way I do. I want to keep on being the only person that understands her. The only person she

is ready to complain to about her own feelings and problems. I want to be the only one to be able to smell her perfume because of how close we are while hugging. I want to stay the only person she shows her broken side to and I want to fix it by myself. I want to be as special to her as she is to me. But I don't want to risk what we have if there's a possibility that she doesn't feel the same. I love her so much it hurts.

The days were passing by quickly but Yuki and Baku always found time for each other. But today, Baku was ready to say words that he wanted to say for a long time. Izanami knew that it was time to reveal herself. She has been growing as a person and she didn't want to lie to a person that helped her through her growth. It was time to let the mask fall. "Hey Yuki, there is something I want to tell you. I think it's time I stop lying to you about who I am because you are part of the reason why I am who I am now and I thank you for that." Izanami turns off her voice changer letting her Baku identity slowly die. "The truth is, I am not even a boy. I'm sorry, I know I am breaking our promise now but I can't lie to you anymore. My real name is Izanami and for the longest time I wanted to find someone like you in real life because I saw you as a platonic soulmate but the thought of having romantic feelings for someone of the same gender made me uncomfortable. I thought *People already don't accept me for who I am, imagine if I started dating a girl coming out as bi or something. I would probably be bullied to the point where I wouldn't be able to take it anymore.* That one day when we were playing together and you said I seemed off, you were right. I had a terrible day at school because I got ridiculed by my bullies and they involved my brother's death in all that. People have always been blaming me for his death, I mean I am still blaming myself for it anyways, but hearing people that weren't even there blaming me as well... I decided I would end it that night and that was when this boy came in. He doesn't know it, but he really saved my life that day. He reminded me so much of you and I realized how similar the two of us are. Him and I started hanging out more and more with a few other people and I realized that I found exactly what I've been looking for. The real-life male version of you that cared about me probably more than I cared about myself. I know I love him and I want to keep him in my life forever and the same goes for you Yuki. I love you as well, you really are one of my best friends and definitely a kind of a soulmate. I'm sorry I broke our promise and told that much stuff about myself that we agreed we shouldn't share with each other but you deserve to know how big of an impact you have had on my life in the past months." There was a long silence, but then I heard a male voice on the other side. "Heh, so we've known each other longer than we thought. I love

you too, Izanami. You described those feelings that I didn't know how to describe myself so well. Honestly, I didn't think I could fall more in love with you but you just surpassed all my expectations." Now Izanami was the one that wasn't saying anything. Still shocked she managed to say only: "Meet me at the park soon." And she went offline. Ide smiled to himself and ran out of the house as quickly as possible. But things can't go perfectly, right? Just as Izanami was nearing the park someone pulled her in a dark alley. All these years, Izanami knew that something was off. That feeling of always being watched wouldn't just "randomly" appear, she was actually being watched this whole time. And the worst thing is, she recognized the face of the stalker. It was a boy she met a long time ago. It was a rainy day and Izanami was visiting her brother's grave when she saw a soaked boy crouching near another grave. Izanami walked up to the boy and not knowing that he was in the car with her brother's killer she started talking to him making the boy slowly like her more and more. That crush soon turned into obsession and he started stalking her. "I thought the two of us were made for each other Izanami. And now I see you all giggly with a random guy you think *understands* you the best. I am the one that understands you the best. I've been watching your every move. I know you better than you know yourself! And you still leave me for him??" Izanami now finally realized how scary Ide's trauma was. Pulling out a knife, the boy that goes by the name Buer said: "If you don't decide to leave him, you are not getting out of this alley alive." - "No! There's no way I will leave him for the likes of you, Buer. So kill me. Kill me, if it means that Ide can live." After hearing Izanami's yelling Ide quickly ran towards the alley and his smile dropped. Buer started running towards Izanami with a murder on his mind. And then, it all went black.

What is life?

We get born into it, live, go through many ups and downs and, at the end of the day, we die. So, what exactly is the point of living? Do we live for a few moments that make us happy? Do we maybe live just to experience things that need to be experienced? Or do we just have to exist so we can be thrown from one corner to the other? Everyone says that there is light at the end of every tunnel but is that really true?

Now I know the answer to that. The light at the end of the tunnel, the meaning of life, the reason to live... **It's you.**

*mentor: Jasna Polanović**institution: SŠ Zlatar**Laura Završki*

THE FATHER WHO WANTED TO BE A DAD

The Sun rose on a Good Friday. Not one of the household members basking in the warmth of the living room had the death and torture of Jesus Christ on their minds. They were never happier, calmer, more relaxed... There were no signs of Christ returning to save our souls from the abyss.

Seven-year-old Angela was the happiest of them all. It was one of those peaceful mornings, innocent and clear as newly fallen snow. The living room was filled with freshness, comfortable chatter, familial love and a surprisingly blinding whiteness. Her mom helped her decorate the dining room table with a festive white damask tablecloth and a champagne table runner. In the centre stood a white vase with a silver painted tree branch, upon which were hung exactly five Easter eggs in a minimalist, almost modern style. They had a natural porcelain coloured shell which she painted with blobs of paint. Every egg had a name, representing a member of the household. And yet, one egg was missing. One name wasn't there.

Her father has been fading from her mind for a while now. He was rarely even home and on the rare occasions when he was, his mind was absent as if he didn't care for any of them. It's been a long time since he started losing his presence in the family. On the path of losing himself, he lost all his ties to the people around him and had no idea how to bring them back. He didn't know where to even start. My unofficial diagnosis? Middle age crisis. Wanting to rip himself out of her iron grip, he inadvertently ripped himself out of their warm hugs. His greyish hair was his only company in the moments when he would be questioning himself, his roots, personality, beliefs and a 50 year-long (lack of) worth. A cloud of frustration and anxiousness has formed over him and for every single day for 5 years now he has been repeating to himself: "What could I have done better? I missed every good shot I had... why didn't I recognise them?" Suddenly he realised how much he's been needing a massive life do-over. He could have simply dyed his hair, let his beard grow, gotten a new leather

jacket, thrown on some new, expensive perfume and gone looking for some extreme hobby in search of adrenaline. And yet, as he hopelessly reached for a cheap, bitter fountain of youth, his wrinkly, frowned face gradually shifted into a drunken skull with crosses for eyes. Both spiritually and mentally he was constantly sinking and sliding down the alcohol filled waterslide. A depressive euphoria. By questioning his spirit, all he found were his weaknesses. Adorned by the label of reckless and strange behaviour, he was waiting for things to get better on their own... “Everything gets better with time”, as they say. The same time he was actively resenting, maybe even fearing. And yet, when he used to look in Angela’s eyes, back when times were better, it felt as if time had stopped. He felt young again. But all that love was washed away with the sadness he was trying to drown in ethanol.

The light from the fireplace in the corner was shining onto the Easter eggs, whose steady swinging side to side made beautiful shadows on the white living room wall, perfectly adding onto the ambiance of the late afternoon. Suddenly, the Easter eggs started swinging ever so slightly more and in turn casting wildly disturbing shadows. Through the unlocked front door barged in two armed men. For a moment, there was silence; the calm living room ambiance was engulfed by coldness, threatening looks and loud voices of the intruders. In a few moments a third person unexpectedly barged in - it was Angela’s father. Like a guardian angel watching over the family, he shoved himself between his family and the armed men. There was commotion, and then a gunshot. Bright red arterial blood splatted on the porcelain white Easter eggs, spelling out the father’s name in red splotches. The father’s soul sprinkled through the room as his tired body fell upon the wooden floor. His arms were spread wide, as if he was calling God himself to take him away, to repent for his and his murderers’ sins, who rapidly left since, up until that moment, they had not grasped the severity of their actions.

Little Angela stared at her father for a long time, wiping blood and her tears off his face. She kissed him on the cheek and told him: “I love you, dad.” With a look of content on his face, he stared into her eyes. His heart was finally satisfied, he finally felt like he belonged. Time had stopped. His pleased face was forever imprinted onto her cotton handkerchief and the memory of his sacrifice to the family as repentance for their souls from the abyss through Jesus Christ will never be forgotten.

*mentor: Ivana Miletić**institution: Prirodoslovna škola Split**Emma Gita Šimić*

THE MEMORIES OF TOMORROW

nos-tal-gia*A sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past*

Everyone was, has been or will be a victim of nostalgia at one point in their life. It's an inevitable aspect of the human experience. A pain that awaits even the most wary, when they least expect it. There will always be that one person that crosses life paths with you and ends up leaving entirely too soon and that one event that usually accompanies them that you look back on every once in a while. The worst thing that can happen to an individual is to make connections between items or places in their present life to people that belong to their past. That is what I like to call *a direct gateway to misery street-population:1*. The temptation to use these things as a sort of portal that brings us back to the good old days of our past is big, and only few succeed in avoiding doing so.

It was 7:56 am on the 30th of November, the day that was supposed to be Tom and I's 3-year anniversary. Had we not broken up a month ago, that is.

Tom and I had been high school sweethearts since we were 16, ever since he asked me out for the school dance in year 11. We decided to attend the same university in our last year of high school, which I am now deeply regretting considering:

- This uni wasn't even close to being first on my list of schools before Tom convinced me to go here so we wouldn't need to do long distance. He always had a way of softening me up and making me agree to ideas I wasn't exactly a fan of.
- I need to deal with the fact I will run into him sooner or later, whether I like it or not. The only other option was dropping out.

The breakup ensued after I had found out he had been cheating on me with a mutual friend of our's, Clara. Clara and I were never *that* close but we were close enough to the point where I wasn't expecting her to be a homewrecker. The three of us would hang out often, all while I was blissfully unaware of what they had been doing behind my back. Every weekend they would go to her place while I was visiting my parents and do God-knows-what. Tom and I have never exactly been the

paragon of a perfect relationship, but I never expected it to end like this. Not after all the I-love-yous, the secrets we shared with each other, secrets we would never, ever share with anyone else. After entangling our souls together. He left a little bit of himself stuck somewhere between my heart, making it palpitate harder every time I thought of him, and my lungs, making it a hindrance to breathe properly. A piece must have been stuck somewhere in my brain as well, since it was impossible to live a single day without him crossing the crossroads of my mind, the roads that divided the me before him and the me that is yet to be. All the plans we had for our future, all gone. Reduced to nothing more but a memory of what could have been. I felt like that event started a downward spiral, the first domino brick in a series of many. Everything was falling apart and there was nothing to be done about it except turning around, leaving the mess as is, and moving on.

While it had felt as though time had stopped and nothing really mattered anymore, I knew that physically time was still passing and that my professor wouldn't take "I have a bad case of broken-heart-itis, can't make it to class today, sorry." as an excuse. I knew I had to attend my 9am class or else I'd be behind on class material, which would potentially lead to a bad grade, which would in turn mean saying goodbye to my scholarship. I didn't have space for yet another life altering problem, so I pathetically ambled to my college campus with just ten minutes to spare. As I arrived at the corridor, I met my two best friends, Mari and Ava whom I've known since high school. They seemed to be beaming before they saw me, after which their expression turned into one of concern. They've tried long and hard to comfort me through everything, to little avail. I haven't really felt like talking to anyone recently, but avoiding reality and crawling into a hole isn't on the table, apparently.

"Still bummed out because of *the thing*?" asked Ava. They started referring to the breakup as *the thing* after my less than graceful break-down last time we had this conversation.

"Bingo. Is it that obvious?"

"You look like you just attended a funeral. You don't even need the black attire, the rain cloud above your head is more than enough." said Mari with a wry smile on her face

"As humorous as ever, Mari. Really appreciate it."

"Well, someone has to brighten the mood, Miss rain clouds and misery. Said Mari while rolling her eyes.

"You have to stop thinking about it, it's for the best you guys are over and done with. You *know* that." Ava acts as a sort of therapist in our friend group, always trying

to comfort everyone despite the fact she's the one who could probably make use of some therapy herself.

"For real, you need to move on. He sure has." Mari on the other hand enjoys adding insult to injury, not in a malicious way, it's just her way of trying to help. It isn't very helpful of course, but at least she tries.

"MARI." exclaimed Ava angrily while bumping her shoulder.

"We just think you should try getting your mind off of...*the thing*. Y'know, go out, meet new people, start a new chapter of your life instead of pitifully reliving the last one..."

"You know that's easier said than done. We spent 3 years together. I'm not just saying goodbye to the past, but a whole array of potential futures. We could've moved in together. We could've got married. We could have had kids together. We could have grown old together."

"He could've not been a dirty little cheater" replied Ava in a snarky manner.

"Maybe it was just a mistake, it seems stupid to throw everything away just because of a mistake."

"Maybe staying with him would've been the mistake. If he could break your trust once he would probably do it again." argued Mari.

"You don't know that"

"You don't know that he wouldn't, either."

"Let's all calm down a bit for starters. Vida, don't you think you're looking at the whole situation through rose-coloured glasses?" asked Ava.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe you don't really miss Tom as much as you *think* you do. Maybe you're just afraid of the future. Or to be more exact, the *uncertainties* the future holds."

"I- I don't-" I said before being rudely interrupted by the swarm of people passing through the hallway.

"Look, we have to head to class, we'll talk later. Think about what I said, okay?" Said Ava before leaving with Mari for their Physics class on the other side of the campus.

I entered my English lecture hall and sat in my usual place. We were talking about the works of Oscar Wilde, an Irish poet and playwright, but I couldn't focus on the lecture because I was too caught up contemplating whether Ava was really right about what she said back there. Are my memories of everything really that skewed? I wasn't sure anymore.

"In the picture of Dorian Gray, the titular character, Dorian Gray's, biggest am-

bition throughout the novel is to remain youthful and beautiful, as that is what he claims is the only thing worth living for. He wishes to remain young while his portrait ages instead. At the end of the novel, he dies after suffering the consequences of giving in to his deepest desires.”

The professor’s explanation led me down a rabbit hole of pondering about humans, our desires, and more often than not, self-destructive habits. Why did Dorian Gray make his entire life purpose to be pleasing to the eye? Why couldn’t he just enjoy his youth and beauty while he had it, instead of wanting to stay young forever? Why do humans have such a *need* to stay in the present, why are we so afraid of the future? Why was *I* so afraid of the future?”

I looked down at my hands and started playing with the beads of my bracelet. It was a birthday gift from Tom. The beads were made of rose quartz and had a little silver heart charm in the middle. I haven’t taken it off since I got it in April. I don’t know when I will.

“That’s it for today, make sure to hand in your assignments by tomorrow.”

After class I made my way to the campus cafeteria to work on some homework and have a quick snack before meeting up with Ava and Mari again. I opened my laptop to start writing my essay but was quickly distracted by the file I’ve been ignoring for the past month now. It was a file full of pictures of Tom and I that I was planning to make a photo album out of. After glaring at the file for a solid two and a half minutes I finally clicked on it. Before me was a picture of Tom and I on my 19th birthday back in April. In the picture we were eating cake and drinking wine together at the restaurant downtown. I remember we had had a fight just the day before because I wanted to invite more people, but he wanted it to be just the two of us. I click the left arrow button on my screen, and it shows me a picture of us at the amusement park. He didn’t really feel like going but I was able to convince him in the end. The next picture was of us around a week before the break-up, it was just us relaxing on the couch at his place with his dog, Nelly. We look happy in all of the pictures. Almost teary-eyed, I closed my laptop. I start staring blankly towards the tables in front of me. I felt all the emotions coming back. I played with the rosy beads again, feeling them pass through my fingers. I wanted to start crying right then and there but I knew I had to keep myself together so as not to cause a scene. From my peripheral vision I see a familiar face walking through the cafeteria door. It was none other than *him*. This was the first time I’ve seen him in a month, and the vision of him seemed almost unreal, as if he was just a figment of my imagination. It felt like if I were to touch him, my hand would go through, as if he was made of nothing more than

clouds and dust. I thought I would break down seeing him again, but I felt nothing. Hollow, even. Like an old tree trunk that used to be full of life but was completely and utterly dead now. The person in front of me was nothing more than a stranger now. A stranger with memories. Memories I will never be able to revisit. What's the use of anything if it's merely temporary? Tom left the cafeteria after getting his coffee. He hadn't noticed me. After I saw him walking through the door, I felt like he was walking out of my life all over again. But this time was different. I take off my bracelet and leave it on the table. I packed my things and left.

I put on my headphones and started to walk away from the campus and towards the city centre. My first spot was my old high school. I remember despising my high school days, though I do miss them from time to time. It is where I met a lot of my friends after all, including Mari and Ava...and Tom. It's where I spent four years of my life. It's where I failed a bunch of tests, where I got into a bunch of quarrels with my mates, it's where I discovered a huge part of myself, my love of the humanities and my hatred of Maths. I don't think I'd enjoy reliving high school. I guess there's just something about the past that makes it more comfortable than the future. I can think about the past with the relief that it's over, the future does nothing more but induce me with anxiety. A bad past is always more comfortable than an uncertain future. I guess that was what Ava was talking about.

My next destination was the local amusement park. I paid for a single ticket for the Ferris wheel and got on the ride. The park worker secured my seat and signed to his colleague that everything was ready. The view from the top was so striking it almost entirely distracted me from the loud screeches coming from the fear-stroke children who probably weren't enjoying the ride as much as I was. I could practically see the entire city - the same city I grew up in, the city that holds all my memories. The city which may hold my future, too. If I decide to stay here after uni. The future is never certain, unlike the past that's like a scripture engraved into stone.

To think that this is the same ride I was on with Tom, the ride I'm currently thinking about my future on. It's time to leave the old memories that don't serve me anymore. I'm leaving the memory of Tom right here on this ride, and I'm not carrying it with me anymore.

I took out my phone to notice that Ava had texted me while I was on the ride.

"Are you doing alright? We were supposed to meet up 30 mins ago"

"SO SORRY, I FORGOT. I don't think I can make it. And yeah, I'm fine, just clearing out my mind a bit. Again, sorry for the trouble."

"It's fine, I'm just glad you're okay, I was worried. Remember what we talked about."

You can't keep hiding in your memories just because you're afraid of the future."

"You sound like my mum right now, but okay yeah, I know you're right. It just sucks that every time I get used to the now it turns into a then."

"I get it, but sometimes we just have to do away with the old memories to make place for the new ones."

"When did you get so wise?"

"Someone has to make up for the fact Mari is mentally eight"

"Fair enough"

I got off the ferris wheel feeling lighter, not just because the ride made me a bit dizzy, but because it was as though a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I was finally myself again.

It was surprisingly packed in the park considering the chilly weather. I successfully managed to push through the crowd and get to the bumper cars. The heaps of people would've usually annoyed me, but I was feeling unusually hopeful by the fact so many people were surrounding me. Every person was a potential new friend, lover or soulmate. I'd never thought of the world that way before. I spotted a group of teens by the ticket stand, two boys and a girl. They were just getting ready to get into the bumper cars, but they needed an extra person. I decided to come up to them and ask if I could join. They were all very kind and welcomed me with open arms. The most genial of them was probably Oscar, a boy around my age with curly, brick-red hair and a pale complexion.

"Do you make a habit of befriending strangers, or do we have the special honour?" he asked me sarcastically

"No, actually, I don't. I just kind of saw you guys and felt like you'd make fine amusement park companions."

"Is that so? Well, that's still quite adventurous of you, considering we could literally be kidnappers and you wouldn't know."

"Stop scaring off our new victim - I mean *friend*." said the brunette girl, Maia, with a chuckle.

"If you guys are kidnapping me, you're doing an awful job." I replied playfully.

"Sorry our kidnapping services don't meet your standards, Miss... You haven't told us your name yet, strange yet endearing victim." said Oliver.

"Oh yeah, I'm Vida, nice to meet you." I shake Oliver's hand with an awkward but sincere smile forming on the corners of my mouth.

"Nice to meet you, Vida. I hope you don't get sick easily. I'm a God-awful driver."

"I'll manage."

“Not that I’m judging your lone-wolf lifestyle, but how come you came here alone?” Asked Elio, the other boy.

“I had some...business to attend to here.”

“Amusement park business...? Do you work part time as a clown or something?” said the boy, smiling.

“No, I think that would’ve been a less embarrassing explanation.”

“I’m sure it’s not that bad, unless you’re like, one of those people who work the ring toss games that no one ever wins because they’re a scam, in that case you should be ashamed of yourself, and we are no longer associating with you.”

“How are they a scam if I’ve won them three times today?” added Oliver mockingly.

“Shut up Oliver, you’re embarrassing me in front of the new girl.”

“New girl has a name.” I reply while the two boys continue their banter.

“Sorry, Vida, was it? Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it? Who better to share your secrets with than strangers who you could potentially never see again?”

“Are we really strangers now, though? We know her name, we know she exists. Boom, no longer a stranger.” said Oliver.

“We don’t know her *story* though. Knowing a name and the face that matches it means nothing without a story. Proclaimed Elio, genuinely this time.

“We’ve just met, and you already want to know everything about me? We need to leave something for our second outing, don’t we?” I joked.

“Alright, alright, at least tell us why you came here today then” Elio implored.

I explained the whole thing to Oscar, Elio and Maia. They were very sympathetic and listened attentively to my rambles. Not long after we changed the topic to something a bit more cheerful but equally as frustrating – the rigged carnival rides. Oscar and Elio got into a whole 20 minute debate on the validity of the toss-a-ring-on-the-bottle game system, Oscar even going as far as to start explaining the maths behind it and how it’s *so* easy to win, to which Elio replied with telling him to shut up and that he was a nerd. Maia and I just watched the disaster happen and chuckled. Oscar, the gang and I spent the entire rest of the day having fun going on rides, chatting and getting to know each other. I ended up being partnered up with Oliver for most of the rides, to which I had little complaints, to be honest. About four hours had passed since we met up and it was beginning to get late, so we decided to call it a day. It turned out Oscar lives on the same college campus as I do so he offered to walk me home.

“I didn’t think I’d have a new friend by the end of the day when I woke up this morning, to be frank with you.” said Oliver.

“Me neither, but I had fun today. To think we wouldn’t have even met if I didn’t come here today, alone, like a sad little loser.”

“Well you’re not sad and alone anymore, are you? He said while shooting me a smile which I think was supposed to be suggestive, or maybe it was just my mind playing tricks with me.

“So you’re alluding that I’m still a loser?” I laughed.

“You said that, not me.” We both burst out laughing.

“We should do this again sometime.” I say, avoiding eye contact.

“We can go again tomorrow as far as I’m concerned. I think Maia and Elio are busy tomorrow though, so it’ll just be the two of us, if that’s alright?”

“Fine by me.” I said while shooting him a shy smile.

“Can’t wait to make some new memories tomorrow, maybe we can go grab something to eat afterwards? Like something that’s not over sweetened carnival candy” He suggests.

“Sure. And yeah, can’t wait for the *memories of tomorrow*.”

When I came home, I opened my laptop and deleted all the old pictures off it and made a new file, one to contain all the new adventures I was going to have, my life had just begun after all.

I finally start working on my English assignment. We were supposed to pick one Oscar Wilde quote and expand on it, adding our thoughts and connecting it to our personal views and experiences. I was able to find one that I found quite fitting:

“They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever. It is a meaningless word, too. The only difference between a caprice and a lifelong passion is that the caprice lasts a little longer.”

It is my opinion that everything in life, including life itself, is fluid. We often get caught up in trying to make every aspect of our life everlasting, because we can’t imagine a future without it. Love is the most common example of this ubiquitous dilemma. We try to stay in the same place, ignoring the fact everything around is moving, including our loved ones, leaving us behind. It’s hard to part away with people, but as Wilde claims, trying to make an interpersonal relationship last longer than it was meant to does nothing beneficial for either parties involved. The most effective way of fighting this, is to live life one day at a time and letting the future show us what it has in store.

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A GLIMPSE OF LIFE

There once was a young boy, travelling through endless corridors of crystal-clear turquoise water up to his mid-calf and every corridor having two extremely tall white marble pillars decorated with quartz and vines of ivy climbing up them. The only thing in this mysterious place that changed over time was the day and night cycle. The boy didn't know who he was or where he had come from. He spends his days walking aimlessly and peeking down each corridor, hoping he will find someone or at least, something.

Even though the boy was clothed only in a ragged beige shirt and black trousers, he never felt cold nor warm. He only wandered, while a burgundy red cape which covered his shoulders and back flowed behind him. One day the boy, as he was passing through the corridors as usual, came across a dead end. The water under him was murky and greener than usual. A series of images appeared under him, the boy was quite frightened, he had never seen this before. For the first time he saw another person. Even though he didn't recognise this person he still felt relief, knowing someone did exist out there somewhere.

This person was an average office worker, overworked, underpaid and lonely. The pictures depicted this man as someone who goes to work, works from nine to five, doesn't talk to his co-workers and comes home only to be alone once again. One picture showed him sitting behind his cubicle desk working on some tasks, another one showed him at home watching television and eating some crisps. The boy didn't understand what an office worker was or even what television was, but he knew that this person was very lonely. The man didn't have any people around him throughout the whole day just like the boy. The boy understood and sympathised with the man, only now realising how lonely he's been. The last image showed the man sleeping on his sofa. The water dispersed and was once again crystal-clear. The boy was sad, he tried digging through the water to find some images again, but he failed. Distraught by this failure he continued walking.

He walked and walked, corridors behind him getting smaller. He walked for a few days until he stumbled upon another dead end. This time the water was even murkier than before. Images slowly started appearing under him. One after the other the pictures revealed a young girl, a pre-schooler, with a small pink backpack on her back running around the playground with her friends. Her friends were two equally small children. The girl and her two friends were smiling widely as they ran across the playground, trying out every single slide, swing and seesaw. At one point, the girl fell and scraped her knee, she bled and cried but the moment her two friends came to her side she had the brightest smile the boy ever saw. Slowly the images started getting blurry and the last image showed the girl walking hand in hand with her friends to her house. The boy was, once again, disappointed. He desperately wanted what that girl had - friends. He felt helpless since he couldn't do anything about it, there was no one there, except for him.

Many days passed since the boy last saw anything but the turquoise water and marble corridors. This time the boy wanted to find more dead ends, he felt like there was something to look for, a treasure hunt of some sorts. He started running, he ran until he fell face first into the water. The water splashed and his clothes and hair were now completely wet. He tried getting up but failed miserably. He decided to turn around, now his back was turned towards the floor and he, for the first time, looked up. Until now he had never paid attention to the ceiling, so he never noticed that there wasn't one. As he was floating in water, he stared at the abyss of stars above him. He wondered if there really someone was out there waiting for him. As he slowly closed his eyes, he fell asleep.

The night passed with the boy floating through the corridors, once he woke up, he was at another dead end. He quickly picked himself up, completely forgetting about his previous injuries. The water under him was even murkier and darker than before, the colour of water wasn't green or turquoise it was dark marine blue. Every time the boy found a dead end, the water was darker, and the images appeared more slowly. This time there weren't as many images as before, it felt like some images were missing. The first image showed a student walking around a university with his backpack and a coffee in his hand. Another image showed him sitting in the library reading a book with big letters on the cover spelling "Archaeology". As images went by, they showed the student in various locations such as the classroom, in his dorm and in a café. Each time the student was reading something or discussing something with other students. The boy wondered what that would be like, reading books and discussing different topics with someone. He wanted to know more. Just like that the images stopped appearing and the water cleared up once more.

The boy knew he had a mission now. It was to find the other dead ends in this corridor maze. He started running once again. As he ran, he was frantically looking around trying to find another dead end and as he nearly passed it when he wasn't looking carefully, he stopped. There was another one. In anticipation he slowly approached it. The water was dark grey now. As he was standing in front of the dark grey water, the boy sat down and looked at the water more closely, hoping to see someone again. This time the story was a bit different. The first image showed a grandma sitting on a bed in a hospital, tubes were stuck to her nostrils and IV-s were stuck to her arm, but she still had a bright smile on her face. A small girl and her mother were standing beside her bed, both had tears streaming down their faces. The boy was confused. Questions "What is happening?" and "Why are they crying?" were circling around his mind. Nevertheless, images continued being shown. One of them showed the daughter and mother bringing the grandma flowers. She was lying down this time. Her eyes were fully closed and now there was a heart monitor next to her bed, beeping every few seconds. The boy felt something tugging at his heart, he couldn't watch anymore. As he turned his head in the other direction the last image showed the grandma's funeral. He started crying, tears were streaming like waterfalls. He splashed the dark water around, hoping the images would just disappear. Unlike the last time, after the images stopped and the water cleared up, he didn't get up. He just sat there looking at the sky once again.

Three days had passed since he saw the last images, it was now time for him to continue his journey even though he didn't want to see what would be shown next. Now, the boy wasn't running or even walking at a normal pace, each step he took was small. His knees were trembling thinking about the next dead end, his head was now looking down instead of ahead. As he was walking, he saw a wall right in front of him. He stumbled upon the last dead end.

He looked up at the wall and then turned around, the water in front of him was black. He had nowhere to go, nowhere to escape to, he was trapped. The first image slowly appeared; it showed a happy family going on a car trip together. The family consisted of a mother, father and two siblings, one boy and one girl. It looked like the family was singing along to songs on the radio, dancing along to cheery tunes. The next image showed the mother turning around to face the son and ask him something. The boy was intrigued, it didn't look like anything sad was going to happen. Another image showed the view of the road in front of the car, they were driving on a road that stretched along the mountain, next to the road was a steep cliff. As the mother and son were talking another car was approaching from behind. The next

image showed the car being badly damaged. The last image showed the son's face as his head was bleeding. As the boy was looking at the son's face, he realised something important. The son was him. He knew the son's face all too well from seeing his own reflection in the water every day. Soon, he concluded. He was dead.

The boy stood there in silence for another hour, trying to comprehend what he had just found out. Finally, his knees gave out and he fell to the ground below him. The boy started to cry, knowing he could have experienced everything he saw through the last few dead ends. As the tears were streaming down his face, he smiled knowing that he had already experienced the thing he wanted most, family. The light from the sky shone brightly on him and everything slowly faded to white.

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THE BURDEN OF TOMORROW

I. The Alternates

It was a usual Monday, with quite the unusual topic during philosophy class. The world is starting to change, and everyone must be wary. Ms. Indra, the philosophy professor, walked into the classroom with a surprisingly serious look on her face.

“Dear students, we have an emergency to attend to. I am required to teach you about creatures who pose serious danger to us. From now on, we will be learning about the *alternates*.”

The usually chatty and lively classroom quieted down.

“This must be some kind of extraordinary intro to a philosopher!” exclaimed Madi, Ms. Indra’s mentee.

“Unfortunately, I’d be lying if I confirmed your thesis Madi.” “We mustn’t waste precious time.”

The students began exchanging confused looks. Even so, they were all ready to listen to what Ms. Indra had to say.

“You might recall learning about the vortex of atoms when we were speaking about Democritus. Due to an anomaly in said vortex our universe suffers irreversible damage as beings which were never supposed to come to life start forming.”

“These alternates are humanoid creatures who possess the ability to shapeshift.” Continued Ms. Indra. “Once they target you, their true form is a dead giveaway.”

“How do we know what their true form is? How do we even know we’re being targeted?” asked Madi’s friend Raven in panic.

“Take it easy, Raven. I’ll explain everything you need to know. Or what we can know, anyway.”

“There are different classes of alternates. For now, we can only define 5. The first, and most difficult to deal with are the Doppelgängers.”

“Meaning they’d look exactly the same as their target?” asked a student.

“Not necessarily their target. They can also pose as a loved one, and they often

resort to exactly that.” “What I advise to do from now on is to always ask your loved ones a question only they’d know the answer to. It’s the least you can do to make sure you’re safe.”

The students were beginning to panic as the situation was setting in. This was now their reality.

“Class two are referred to as the “Unspeakable”. “They’re very easy to spot, since their form comes closest to the “true” form of others.”

“And that would be?” Raven demanded to know. “Why are they “Unspeakable”?” said the boy next to her, Victor, almost as if interested rather than scared.

“The “true” form I’ve mentioned manifests itself as a vaguely humanoid silhouette with white eyes. That’d also be the only thing you can make out if you encounter the “Unspeakable”. “

“What do we do if we encounter it?”

“Run. And do not look back.”

“Is there really nothing else to be done?” asked her mentee.

“No, Madi. I believe there must be ways to distract the being, but first you need to become familiar with each class.” answered Ms. Indra strictly.

Madi frowned while glancing over at her friends, looking for comfort.

“Going on, we have class 3, the “Flawed Impersonators”. These entities are, as their name suggests, extremely flawed copies of their counterpart. They possess biologically impossible features such as oddly long limbs, heads without a face, or even a completely upside-down anatomy.”

“I suppose we should run away without looking back...” mumbled Madi in a worried tone.

“That sounds absolutely horrifying!” added Raven.

The students were visibly becoming more panicked.

“I know my dear students. Remember our lessons about critical thinking, please. I need all of you to be alert and to hear me out.”

“And how exactly do they pose serious danger to us? What are they capable of?” inquired Victor.

“Patience, Victor! Don’t let curiosity kill you.”

“To continue... Class 4. The “Tulpa”. These alternates are uncommon and are mostly a threat to children. They can appear as shadowy faces on television screens, mirrors, and other reflective surfaces. They cannot take physical form, unlike other alternates.

“Meaning they’re only here to deceive?”

“Good thinking. Last, but not any less dangerous are the “Mimics”. These alternates disguise themselves as inanimate objects and can only be identified via audible breathing.”

“Objects? Breathing? Excuse me?!” said Raven shakily.

“I wish I was making this up. Even more that it was an introduction to some contemporary philosopher. Unfortunately, this is our reality. We mustn’t give up on this cosmos.”

“The most important thing to discuss now is the M.P.D., acronym for Metaphysical Perceptive Disorder.”

“I’m guessing that said disorder is a threat?” added Victor.

“Exactly. The alternates can bring upon this illness by giving humans verbal information they did not desire to know.” “Beware, this is the most disturbing factor of all. Only some alternates are able to hurt you physically. The main goal of the majority seems to be getting their victims to kill themselves. A person under effect of M.P.D. will first start to detach from reality, seeing or hearing things that the alternate wills.”

The classroom went completely silent.

“Unexpected answer, Victor?”

No response. Complete, utter silence.

“Unfortunately, we will have to continue working as usual. The state claims they’ve got it under control. If anyone has any questions about this extraordinary situation, I’m here for you at all times.” Ms. Indra spoke out.

“They’ve got it under control?! Doesn’t sound like it.” Raven pointed out.

Ms. Indra was silent for a minute.

“The best we can do is stay alert and fight for ourselves, Raven. I’ve prepared some of Descartes’ writings for today, but it seems to me that the best thing we can do is do nothing.”

“I’d like a copy of his writings, please.” asked Madi politely. Her friends sighed and chuckled, having a sense of familiarity for a brief moment.

“Of course. Give his method a thought.”

“Will do!”

After a few minutes of continued silence, Ms. Indra spoke out again.

“Please, take care of yourselves. Avoid the alternates at all costs. Do whatever you can for yourselves. Don’t give up.”

After a final warning, class was dismissed.

“Ms. Indra, could I ask you something?”

“Yes, Madi?”

“Who is your favourite philosopher?”

“That would still be Plato. Excellent thinking! Stay safe and keep thinking critically. I’m here for you.”

“You two too, Victor, Raven. I know you’re waiting for her.”

“Goodbye Ms. Indra!”

“Goodbye dear students.” said the professor, smiling at them as they left. She was anxious, nonetheless. Not knowing whether she would see them again tomorrow.

II. Under control

Victor came home to a message posted up on the fridge

“Please stay safe my dear! I am so sorry. Nothing is worth the risk.”

“Nothing is worth the risk?” Victor uttered out loud. “What a weird thing to say?”

He turned on the television, hoping to see some useful information.

“Oh great, the politicians are speaking about this too! Like they’d have something so helpful to say.”

Having been stressed out, he kept switching channels until he came across an unusual broadcast.

“They’re explaining alternates. Precisely as Ms. Indra did. What even is this channel? Has it always been there?” Victor was intrigued.

Some policeman was speaking.

Victor texted a group chat that him, Raven and Madi have had for 3 years already.

“Hey, switch to 006. Unnamed channel, just came across it.”

“Weird vibe...” responded Madi.

“I think I’ve heard enough today... (Switching now...)” added Raven after a couple minutes.

“We are always at your service and encourage you to call even us if you think it might be a product of your imagination. There is nobody who can assess the situation better, trust us.”

“They’re really adamant about getting the citizens to trust them. If one was truthful, they wouldn’t need to emphasise their claim so much...” Victor thought to himself.

The screen went black for a split second. Chills went down Victor’s spine. It felt as

if something looked back at him. It couldn't be.

"If possible and safe to do so, try to stop alternates from moving close to you. You can barricade the alternate's way with furniture, anything that happens to be nearby."

"This is so nonsensical, how am I supposed to hinder the movement of a deadly entity originated from the vortex of atoms?"

As the broadcast continued, Victor saw a shadowy figure move across the TV screen very briefly. He thought it wise not to react whatsoever.

"Are you guys believing this?"

"It seems reasonable enough, we can't just sit still if we encounter an alternate." replied Raven momentarily.

"Use of firearms is encouraged, if available of course. It has been confirmed to be the most viable self-defence option."

"Because it's so easy to get a gun ..." Victor said sarcastically.

The broadcast appeared to suddenly be cut off. It glitched multiple times before it switched to another low-quality broadcast. A panicked dispatch officer could be seen.

"I don't have much time. You mustn't listen to them; this is all a ruse to fool you people!"

"What is going on??? Victor, Madi, am I going crazy???"

"We are directly instructed not to help anyone. The alternates are immune to anything you can think of. I cannot sit here and keep on lying to thousands of people, comforting them, and reassuring them that help is on the way. Nobody is coming to help you! Nothing is worth the- "

Suddenly, the woman got shot through the head. She could be seen dropping dead before the broadcast switched back to the policeman going on about the problem.

"When noticing fear, the alternates can bring upon the Metaphysical Perceptive Disorder. This disorder..."

Victor turned off the television. He'd heard it all from Ms. Indra.

"Surely this cannot be. They wouldn't broadcast something like this. Maybe I'm getting tricked right now. It could be this Tulpa playing tricks on me." he said out loud.

“Not crazy for sure. Saw everything.” Madi replied.

“Are they really inevitable? And why would the government lie about something that could wipe out the entire human race?”

“I have no idea, Victor. Nothing is clear to me. Should we meet up? I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“Still here, Raven?”

No response.

“Stay home for the time being, Madi. Let me try something. I’ll text back ASAP.”

“Text us when you see this, please Raven!”

Victor was overthinking. He didn’t know who or what to trust anymore, so he decided to check if he could trust himself. He went up to the mirror and immediately saw a shadowy, distorted figure that looked zombie-like.

“Well, I’m lucky it’s just you, class 4. Right?” he smiled looking at the mirror. “So, you like pretty much all of the reflective surfaces in my house...”

“I am not scared of you. You don’t pose a threat to me. Just... just what exactly are you?” Victor said as he was touching the mirror.

After figuring out that he hadn’t been affected by M.P.D. he quickly picked up the phone and dialled

911. He started shouting frantically and made it seem as though he was attacked by an alternate.

“Don’t worry, help is on the way. Try to hinder its movement.”

“Try to stay calm! Fear makes it stronger.”

He kept it up for a few minutes, while the woman kept saying the same thing over and over, “help is on the way.”

Suddenly, Victor slammed the phone down on the floor, making it seem that he’s done for.

After waiting for almost half an hour, nobody came.

“The woman was telling the truth after all. Just me and you Tulpa, huh?”

III. Breathe

Raven came home, still under the influence of what she heard.

“Mom, Dad I’m home!”

She realised nobody was home.

“Oh, great. Now my family’s missing.”

When she got to the living room, she turned on the TV, hoping to see something other than the apocalyptic news she'd been seeing all day.

"Hell's kitchen, a classic."

She got up to make herself some lunch and saw that her mom left a message for her on the counter.

"We were instructed to go as far as possible. Please text me as soon as you see this! Stay home dear. Don't let them get to you."

"How responsible. I understand that I'm a young adult, but how could they just leave me alone?" Raven thought to herself.

"I'm safe at home Mom. For now, at least... Where are you??" she texted after reading the message.

As she was making lunch, strange noises could be heard from the living room. Or so she thought?

Suddenly, Raven heard a loud thud.

"Ah! Really?!" she shouted, after having burnt her hand due to being overwhelmed.

"I'll just settle for a tuna salad."

She went back to the living room and just as she started calming down, her phone chimed.

It was not her mother, Victor texted.

"Hey, switch to 006. Unnamed channel, just came across it."

"Weird vibe..." responded Madi.

"I think I've heard enough today... (Switching now...)" added Raven after a couple minutes.

"This channel has such a weird feeling to it. I've never seen it before. Gosh, just how does Victor come across such things? Willingly?!"

As the man kept explaining the principle, it got harder to breathe. Raven couldn't bare this being her reality. What's there to do? She wanted to trust the authorities, but she had a crippling gut feeling and she couldn't shake it off.

"Are you guys believing this?"

"It seems reasonable enough, we can't just sit still if we encounter an alternate."

As the broadcast continued, Raven couldn't make out what the man was saying anymore.

All she could hear was her shuddering breath.

Her phone kept on chiming so loudly she thought her head would explode. Everything seemed to be too much.

When she glanced back at the TV, she saw the screen go blank for a second, and then a panicked dispatch officer.

“I don’t have much time. You mustn’t listen to them; this is all a ruse to fool you people!”

Raven quickly grabbed her phone. Her hands were shaking.

“What is going on??? Victor, Madi, am I going crazy???”

She got no response, as the woman on TV kept talking.

“We are directly instructed not to help anyone. The alternates are immune to anything you can think of. I cannot sit here and keep on lying to thousands of people, comforting them, and reassuring them that help is on the way. Nobody is coming to help you! Nothing is worth the- “

Raven dropped her phone.

“No. No. No way. I must be going crazy.”

Her breathing was unsteady, her ears were ringing, and she felt she was not alone.

“I did not just see a woman get executed on live TV.” “Breathe, Raven, breathe.”

She stood at the counter, staring into a glass of water.

As she was about to drink it, she felt a strange sensation on her lips.

“This glass of water is *not* breathing.” “No way.”

The glass dropped to the floor and shattered.

Shallow breathing could still be heard.

Raven’s phone kept chiming.

...

Raven wasn’t answering texts, nor Madi’s phone calls. Madi took things into her own hands and went to Raven’s home, hoping her friend had just fallen asleep.

“Raven, it’s Madi! Open up!”

“Please, Raven! I’m worried sick! If you’re unsure, I absolutely love the philosophy of Rene Descartes! I promise it’s me!”

“Victor... either she’s not home, or she’s in danger.”

“Why’d you leave your house? Wait for me.”

Madi kept thinking about what Ms. Indra said to her. She tried her best to be rational and not let fear overcome her. After a few minutes, Victor came to Raven's place as well.

"So... I have a Tulpa in my house."

"Thanks for sharing that delightful information with me!" "Wait, are you joking? I can't tell."

"It moved from my TV to my mirror. Seems it didn't mean me harm."

"Or you're just fearless!"

Victor knocked on Raven's door.

"I've tried knocking..."

"Manners, Madi..."

"Let's just go in somehow, please!" "She must be in there!"

"You'd expect the door to be locked..." said Victor as he simply opened the door to Raven's house.

As soon as the two got in the house, disturbing heavy breathing was heard.

Raven's TV was still on, and there was an open tuna salad on the living room table.

"I feel like I'm being looked at from each and every corner of this house, Victor."

As they were entering the kitchen, the air was getting heavy.

Victor and Madi saw Raven lying on the floor. The breathing was so loud their ears started ringing. It sounded inhuman.

"Raven?" Victor's voice trembled.

The two were confused by what was in front of them. It took them a few seconds to get the courage to get closer to their friend. Up until this moment, they hadn't noticed her wrists were severely injured.

"Oh, Raven..." Madi's eyes were tearing up.

"It seems that she'd used glass shards to cut her wrists. Do you think it could be a mimic?"

Silence.

"Madi?"

Victor walked around the room and saw the message Raven's mom left for her.

"It seems to me that many people left at the time we were in school. It's such a contradiction, Madi. Why do they run before encountering anything... isn't staying at home the safest thing to do?"

"Do they *want* people to die?!" said Madi, quite fed up.

Both of Raven's friends couldn't hold back tears. They felt hopeless.

"I'll text her."

“Text who?”

“Indra.”

“Ms. Indra?” “How can she help? Why?”

“God, Victor! I don’t know! One of my closest friends just killed herself!” “I trust that woman. Maybe she knows more than we do... She’s taught me the most about life anyway.”

Victor only nodded.

“I don’t know whether I’ll see her, or you, or anyone dear to me tomorrow.”

“Ms., Raven fell victim to M.P.D. What are we to do?”

IV. Determined

In this state of the world, in which she could no longer be sure of anything, Indra desperately wanted to find an answer to the problem of mysterious alternates.

“Could it be that Spinoza was right about our fate being determined? Is it possible that God had planned this for people, that this tragedy is something that was always inevitable? Is this even the way to think about an apocalyptic state of the world? I wonder how long the government will be able to avoid mass panic...”

Having found no answer within herself as she usually did, she resorted to cigarettes. She hasn’t been this clueless for a long time. Minutes seemed like hours, nothing felt real.

“It’s difficult to admit to myself that I’m afraid. What an interesting world this is.... And I’m expected to go back to my everyday life knowing that both my students and I are unsafe.... But then again, it seems to me we’ll never go back to the comfort we had just the previous day. What a shame.”

Indra picked up the stoic Epictetus’ “Of human freedom”, started casually reading it and lit another cigarette.

To her surprise, her phone suddenly lit up.

“Ms., Raven fell victim to M.P.D. What are we to do?”

Indra’s eyes widened.

“This couldn’t possibly mean what I think it means...”

“Dear Madi, I am terribly sorry. This time I cannot provide an adequate answer for

anything. What happened, do tell. I'm here to listen."

"Victor and I are at her house right now. We just found her... lying there... I'm scared."

"My dears, it was a mistake going out of your houses. I'm not sure if what I'm telling you now is correct, but I've given it a thought and found that the natural chaotic state of people feeds these beings."

"You mean our fear?"

"Not only our fear. They feed off our flaws and imperfections. They seem to know everything about us."

"How?"

"If they didn't, it would be impossible to make a person commit suicide."

"I kind of see where you're going."

"Could you identify any alternate in Raven's home?"

"It was a mimic. But it got shattered. We suppose that was needed for it to make Raven end her life."

"Poor girl. I need you two to get out of there right now. I wouldn't say it's gone."

...

"Madi? Please get yourself and Victor out of there."

"I did, Miss. You stay safe too! See you tomorrow." "If you figure something out, tell me. I want to hear what you have to say."

"This cruel fate could not have been determined from the start of our wonderful cosmos. It surely couldn't have." "Yet she stays optimistic, trusts me even... this can't be how life as we know it ends." said Indra, lighting another cigarette.

Left pondering the cruel fate of her world, only the faint sound of birds chirping could be heard.

Her phone chimed.

"Victor and I stumbled upon an odd broadcast. There was some sort of... intermission... a dispatch officer was talking about how the government is tricking us!"

"I don't doubt it... Seems to me the only way we can defend ourselves is not to let them inside our heads. Do you think coexisting with these malicious entities is possible, Madi?"

"I wish this was a philosophy question! I'd rather coexist than cease to exist!"

Indra cracked a smile.

"I concur."

V. Dead end

“So? What’d she say?”

“She thinks they feed off... our negative emotions? She sort of confused me.” Madi showed Victor the text exchange.

“What does she mean by that? How could they know everything about us? Like some sort of false god is upon the world...”

“Nothing is impossible...” “She says we should get out of here.”

“How can we be sure that we’re safe?”

“We have to take a chance Victor.”

“Nothing is worth the risk.”

Madi got taken aback by the words that came out of Victor’s mouth.

“What?”

“I said it would be worth the risk. Are you okay?”

“Yes, my bad. Just in thought.”

For some reason Madi wanted to run. Everything felt uneasy.

“Hey, you can trust me. I understand how you’re feeling, but in case your mentor is right, we should try and act as normal as possible.”

“And go where?”

“Well...as logic suggests, home.” “Although I don’t recommend going back to mine.”

“Do we... call Raven’s parents?”

“We’ll deal with that later. First let’s get ourselves somewhere we can let all this sink in.”

“Heartless!” said Madi jokingly.

“Rather coexist than cease to exist, right?”

“Ha-ha Victor.”

Victor and Madi left Raven’s house and headed to Madi’s. Since both her parents worked in a different country, it was no problem having Victor spend the night. As they were walking, they saw multiple news reporters trying to logic out what was happening before them. People were starting to panic.

“These kinds of reports will only ensue more worry and panic... People will doom themselves!” said Madi seriously.

“Has Indra *really* made you consider coexistence?”

“Well, if they primarily harm us through mind games, wouldn’t it be great if we just trained our minds? Surely you wouldn’t rather die...”

“To be honest, I don’t know what to say.”

“I understand... I haven’t encountered any, so I can’t really say what it’s like...”
 “Although seeing the consequences of only a mere Mimic... Soul-wrenching.” said Madi, ruefully recalling the sight at Raven’s house.

“I don’t know if people are strong enough to keep living with this burden everyday of their lives. If death seems like a better option in any given moment, the situation is pretty hopeless.”

“We’re here.”

“Thanks for letting me stay with you, Madi.”

They entered Madi’s apartment and exhaustedly sat on the couch right away.

“On as scale of 1 to 10 how bad of an idea is it to turn on the TV?” asked Madi.

“Well, depending on how much you want to see the world slowly fade.”

“That’s so dark, Victor...” said Madi, then started laughing.

“What’s funny about that?”

“I just don’t believe it. What do you think will happen? Will these entities we’ve heard about just today just take over the world as we knew it?”

“After everything I’ve seen, pretty much.” sighed Victor.

“So, how should we spend our potentially last day alive?”

“Don’t joke like that. I care about you, you yourself said that you considered co-existence.”

“Not joking, just pondering. The longer I think about the alternates, the more scared I get.” “I don’t think I’m strong enough.”

“Unfortunately, I think none of us are.” said Victor and giggled a second after.

“And what’s so funny to you?”

“Well, we go to school tomorrow.”

They both started laughing. Their life became absurd.

“Look, Victor, do you remember the stoics?”

“Barely but do continue.”

“They claimed that we shouldn’t worry about what isn’t under our control.”

“Well, does that count in an apocalyptic state of the world?”

“I think so.” “I’ll miss philosophy...”

“Look on the brighter side! You’ll get to meet all your favourite philosophers!”

“You are ridiculously mean!”

Surprisingly, Madi and Victor were laughing again.

“I miss Raven.” uttered Madi after a couple of minutes. “I am so confused I might just cry.”

“I think we should get some rest, don’t you?”

“You must be crazy if you can fall asleep calmly...”

“Just tired.”

“Understandable...”

After talking for a little longer Victor was feeling drowsy and he fell asleep soon enough. Madi was twisting and turning, unable to fall asleep. It hit her suddenly that she didn’t lock the door.

As she was locking her door, she heard cutlery clattering.

“Victor? What are you doing?”

No response.

She headed to the kitchen and realised someone was there. Victor was sound asleep.

“Hi Madi.”

Madi froze in the spot. She couldn’t even call for help. She was petrified, watching as a being that appeared to look exactly like her was approaching her.

“Run. And do not look back.” Ms. Indra’s words echoed in her head.

Madi swiftly unlocked the door she locked just a moment ago and began to run as fast as she could. She had no idea why. Dealing with this sort of thing is almost impossible. She kept running and running. It was dark outside; she barely saw in front of her.

“Why am I running? Shouldn’t I stoically face this?” her mind was spiralling.

“What about Victor? I’m so scared. If the doppelgänger is following me now, at least it won’t be with him.”

She stopped for a minute to catch her breath.

“I don’t remember Ms. Indra saying if running actually works... Does this thing really know everything about me now? I hope Victor is okay.”

When she thought of Victor and of the people dear to her, she kept on running. It felt as if she could lead the alternate away from her home. Far away. But was she kidding herself?

“... Seems to me the only way we can defend ourselves is not to let them inside our heads. Do you think coexisting with these malicious entities is possible, Madi?” she remembered Indra’s words again.

“It seems like I was wrong about coexisting... This world is theirs now. The human

mind isn't strong enough. Why does the sight of another me scare me so much?"

Madi couldn't keep running. The thought of people dear to her couldn't keep her going, since she concluded everyone will face the same faith. Not even a minute passed, and she noticed her lookalike strolling towards her.

"You are so terrifying!! It'd be nice if you went away or something!"

No matter what her reason told her to do, she took another turn.

"Are you kidding me?!" Madi found herself at a dead end.

Knowing what was about to happen, she quickly took out her phone from her pocket and started typing a message. Unfortunately for Madi, time ran out the second she saw her doppelgänger.

"Why didn't you listen Madi? Was it worth the risk?" said the alternate in a gravely, distorted voice.

"You cannot make me kill myself. I hope you're aware of that."

"You really are such a star student!"

Madi's phone dropped to the ground.

"Thank you for everything! You made me see the world differently." stayed a draft message.

VI. Not fond

Victor woke up just in time for school.

"Good morning, Madi! How are you feeling?"

"Excellent, Victor. Let's hurry up and go."

"Sure... Excited for philosophy today?"

"Not much."

Victor was taken aback.

"How so?"

"Let's just go! We'll be late!" she said as she was smiling at him.

"Sure. I'm sure you wouldn't like Ms. Indra getting mad."

"Of course not! I'd hate for that to happen."

A lot of things went through Victor's head. He was anxious the whole walk to school. Every time he'd ask Madi about something, she seemed to be responding with a yes or no.

"Madi, honestly, has something happened last night? Are you really feeling okay?"

"Yes, Victor. I'm good." she said as she entered the school.

First period was philosophy. Most of the students were absent. A few minutes after the bell rang, Ms. Indra came into the classroom.

“Good morning, dear students.”

Indra tried to turn the state of their world into a discussion topic, but nobody was willing to do anything.

“I know this is really hard on all of you. I’m out of ideas. We can’t act normal, can we?”

After a few minutes of dead silence, Indra dismissed class way too early.

“Be with your loved ones. Stay safe. I’m still here for all of you.”

“Madi, don’t go yet.”

Victor looked at Ms. Indra with panic in his eyes.

“It would be nice of you to wait for me, Victor.”

“Will do, outside.” Victor said and left quickly.

She seemed to be annoyed.

“Madi, dear, who’s your favourite philosopher?”

“I’m not fond of philosophy.”

“Is that so?” Indra asked calmly, as she realised that Madi was long gone.

mentor: Antonio Shala

institution: Upravna škola Zagreb

Natalija Horvatinović

THE HIDDEN REALM

PROLOGUE

Aaron Adkins was an ordinary lawyer who lived in London. Every day he would wake up, go to work, go home and do it all over again. One “problem” that Aaron had was that he was an introvert. He rarely went out with his friends and kept his friend circle small. As a child, he would always read fantasy books before he went to bed and like every child, he wanted to be a superhero with amazing powers, but that dream went down the drain as he grew up. Well, that was what he thought until a random Friday night.

CHAPTER 1

Aaron woke up from his slumber and looked at the clock that said it was 4pm. “Oh, no!” he exclaimed. He got up tugging the blankets he was wrapped up in and fell onto his rough blue carpet that adorned his apartment floor. Muttering profanities under his breath, he stood up and almost tripped over his cat Felix who ran away from him and hid under the couch. Aaron was moving fast. He had to be at his company’s Christmas party at 6pm. He started to get ready and hopped into the shower. After the shower he moved to his bedroom to pick the outfit for the night. He took out a few different coloured suits and ties and laid them down onto his bed. “What do you think Felix? Which one should it be?” he asked his cat who had wondered into Aaron’s room a mere minute ago. Felix meowed, turned around and left the room. “Yes, thank you very much. That was very helpful.” said Aaron while rolling his eyes. Finally, after contemplating for a moment he decided that it was best to keep it simple and go with a black suit, white undershirt, and a black tie. After dressing himself and combing his hair, Aaron poured Felix some water into his bowl and petted the cat. “You have to be a good boy tonight, Felix. I don’t know when I’ll be back so try to behave and do not destroy anything.” Felix just ignored him, and

Aaron once again rolled his eyes. He took the gift bag that contained champagne and some homemade cookies that were a gift for his boss. “I’m going!” yelled Aaron as he opened the door to his apartment, but he heard no response. He didn’t think anything of it because he assumed Felix was busy eating, so he got out, locked the apartment door, and went to his car.

CHAPTER 2

Finally arriving at the company’s parking lot, Aaron sat in his car for a few minutes calming himself before entering. Eventually, he got out of the car and walked towards the entrance. Once he got in, he admired all the Christmas decorations that were put up. While he was looking around, he didn’t see a woman that was doing the same and they bumped into one another. “Sorry!” they exclaimed at the same time and started laughing.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there. I-... um... I’m Aaron. Yes, that’s right. My name is Aaron Adkins.” stammered Aaron. He had never in his life seen a woman like her.

“Hi I’m Aerith. Aerith Raynordottir.”

“Aerith, huh? That’s quite an unusual name.” Aerith eyed him suspiciously and at that Aaron regained his composure, realizing what that might have sounded like. “I mean, not that it’s bad thing. I’ve never heard it and...oh I give up, I’m making it even worse by babbling, right? You see, that’s what I do when I get nervous. I babble and nobody can stop me and I’m doing it again, I’ll stop.” Aerith laughed at him. “No, no, no, it’s okay. I do the same thing, so no problem.”

Aaron smiled sweetly and really looked at Aerith. She was tall, almost the same height as he was. She had long, dark brown hair and eyes so blue he thought he was looking at the ocean.

“Aaron? Are you okay?” asked Aerith.

“Wha-, what? Oh, yes, yes! I am perfectly fine. Sorry, if I made you uncomfortable, but I was wondering about something. I haven’t seen you around here...”

“Oh, yes, I am new here. In fact, I just started working here last week.” said Aerith.

Aaron smiled at her and said, “Well, I guess we will see each other more often then. Have a lovely evening.”

Aerith thanked him and went to get herself something to drink. After the encounter with Aerith, Aaron decided that it was time to greet his colleagues, to mingle a bit and to eat something. Later, as people started to leave, Aaron realised that it was already 1am and that he should also go home. He had fun and was sad that he had

to go, but the party was dying down and only a handful of people stayed behind. He got into his car and almost started driving when he realized that the gift bag, he was initially going to give to his boss at the party, sat at his back seat. He decided that he was going to take it to his boss, but when he was about to grab the bag, something black jumped out of it. Aaron screamed loudly and jumped out of the car. At first, he thought that it was his imagination playing with him and that he may have drunk a bit too much, but then he remembered that he didn't drink tonight so it couldn't be that. When he realised how silly he was acting he got back into the car. He looked around and didn't see anything. As he was about to get out of the car once more, he heard a low meow. At that he froze. He turned his head around and realised that Felix, his cat, was sitting at the backseat of the car.

"Felix, what are you doing here? How did you get here?" exclaimed Aaron loudly, but the cat did not budge and just sat there looking at him.

"How did you even manage to get into the bag?" Aaron sat there and decided that it was best to not think about how he got there but to give his boss the bag and go home.

"OK, I am going in and when I return, we're going home." said Aaron, but Felix climbed into his lap and started rubbing his head against Aaron's head. "Come on mate, I'll be back in 2 minutes." said Aaron, but Felix wouldn't budge. "Fine." muttered Aaron and took Felix with him. As he was walking with his cat in one hand and the gift bag in the other, Aaron didn't see a construction sign indicating there is a deep hole in the ground. He fell into it along with Felix and they both yelled. What was strange, was that they didn't hit the ground as fast as they should have. Aaron passed out during the fall, and they finally hit the ground which was soft as velvet. Felix started licking Aaron's hand and after what seemed like eternity, Aaron opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" asked Aaron lowly. Grunting he got up and when he rubbed his eyes, he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"What the-?"

CHAPTER 3

Aaron looked around confused. Thinking it was just a dream, he pinched himself. He yelped at the pain and didn't wake up realising that this really wasn't a dream, but reality. "OK, someone must be messing with me. Did Beelzebub put a devil in my mind to play with me?" Aaron said, but then he felt his whole body

hurt and food poisoning couldn't explain the feeling. Then it all started coming back to him. He fell through a hole, some really, strange hole. He had only seen this in movies before. Somebody fell through something, "a portal" and ended up somewhere else. His brain felt like it was on fire, because of everything that had happened, so he stopped thinking for a minute. Then the reality started to sink in. He fell through "doors" to another reality, another world with his cat. He landed in some field from which he could see some buildings in the distance, so he presumed that it was a city he was looking at. Unlike on Earth, or London specifically, it was day here. Looking around, Aaron noticed that this world, whatever its name was, looked almost the same, yet nothing alike Earth. The place was full of vegetation. He also noticed a lot of animals running. Most of them were small, but as the night started to fall, he didn't want to risk his life and be attacked by some larger animal. So, he took Felix into his hands and started walking towards the city. Once there, he realised that the city itself was much alike London. One of the main things that stood out to Aaron were people, who were very tall and gorgeous, both men and women.

"Felix, what is this? Where did we end up?" said Aaron "These people look like they all came of the runway!"

At that moment someone bumped into him. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I wasn't loo-..." Aaron stopped talking and he thought he was hallucinating once again, but he quickly realised that he wasn't.

"Aerith?!" yelled Aaron while bawling his eyes out.

"Aaron?" exclaimed Aerith while looking at Aaron with wide eyes.

"What are YOU doing HERE?"

"What am I doing here?! What are YOU doing here?"

"Well, I was about to go home after the party, and I fell through some hole and the next thing I know I'm on some random planet! If this even is a planet, I mean it could be underworld or something-...what is this?! WHERE AM I?" screamed Aaron loudly. While he was yelling, people started to turn and watch them. Aerith quickly took him by the arm and dragged him to some alley. There she put a hand on Aaron's lips to cover his mouth so he would finally shut up.

"Aaron... Aaron..." said Aerith calmly as Aaron was still struggling to tell her something but it only came out as a mumble and very incomprehensible.

"Aaron, for crying out loud, would you stop for a second and listen to me?!" At that Aaron finally stopped wiggling and making any noise.

"Thank you. Now, I am going to remove my hand from your mouth, and you will be quiet while I explain everything to you, deal?"

Aaron nodded his head and Aerith removed her hand.

“I don’t think this is a conversation you’d want to have in a dark alley. Let’s go somewhere else.” Aaron once again nodded and followed Aerith.

CHAPTER 4

They ended up in some local, which looked very much like a pub. They sat down and Aerith ordered some drinks and something to eat. “Alright. I am going to take things slowly. First of all, yes, my name is Aerith, and I was on Earth with you just a couple of hours ago, so you are not imagining this. As you told me earlier you fell through some hole and ended up here, right? The hole was the doors to this planet. You are on Realm Eternal, commonly known as Immortale. The people who live here are nothing alike mortals on Earth, at least in terms of lifespan. The citizens are called the Immortals. Yes, very original, I know.” said Aerith sarcastically while Aaron looked at her. “Immortals live up to 5000 years, so yes, I have been around for a very long time. I’m 1450 years old, which would be equal to 24 years on Earth. The reason why you ended up on Immortale is most likely because our worlds line-up every 500 years and this is the year another line-up is happening. Also, certain people whose destiny was written in the stars have access to this planet.” Aaron just sat there while Felix cuddled in his lap. “If I understood correctly, I am on a planet no one on Earth knows exists, with my cat.” Aerith nodded and Aaron continued “I ended up here because of some astronomically related phenomenon I am not going even ask you about. You mentioned that only people whose destiny was written in the stars have access to this planet?”

“Yes.”

“WHY ME?!” whisper yelled Aaron “Why should it be me a normal bloke from London who has nothing to do with anything end up here on this planet no one knows about?! Excuse me, but I would like to go home so if you could find another portal, whatever, that could bring me back to Earth would be delightful.” Aaron said breathlessly. Aerith just chuckled “Oh darling, I would, but first we have to go to King Liv and see why you have been summoned here, silly!” Aaron looked at her like she was crazy.

“A K- A KING?!”

“Yes, a king. I thought you were familiar with that term on Earth.”

“Well yes, but it’s not everyday that you meet THE king. Even better a king of the foreign planet you never knew existed and just landed on...” said Aaron staring at

the table they were seated at. At that moment Aerith really looked at Felix who was now laying on the table sleeping. Her eyes widened suddenly, and she gasped.

“What’s wrong?” asked Aaron.

“Is this your cat?”

“No, I thought of a cat laying on this table, so I magicked him 2 minutes ago. Of course he is my cat, whose else would it be?”

“Aaron, do not be cocky. I don’t think you understand the seriousness of this situation.”

“What is there to understand? He is a cat, and his name is Felix. What is wrong with that?”

“Um hate to break it to you,” said Aerith sarcastically “but “Felix” is not a normal cat. He is King Liv’s long lost magical pet who can talk if King Liv allows him and when he tells him to shut up, he loses his ability to speak and goes back to meowing. And his name most definitely isn’t Felix, but Magnus.”

“Oh Lord, you are talking nonsense. How could Felix be King Liv’s cat when he is MY cat?” said Aaron confused.

“How did you come in possession of him Aaron?”

“Well, if you must know, I found him one day when I was walking home from work in some box shivering and wet since it was raining that night so I took him home with me and since he didn’t have any collar on his neck, I assumed someone must have abandoned him and left there to die. He has been with me ever since.” Aaron said remembering fondly.

“Look, this boy here went missing 4 months ago in Earthen terms and King Liv has not been the same since. I mean he is his old self, but lonelier and more lost. Not even Queen Randi herself or his two sons could not help him with his grief.” Aaron stared her and started laughing like a mad man.

“You must be joking! Do you really think I would believe for a second, that I have a cat from another world? I mean, yes, he would never eat anything from a can, he would eat only freshly made meals, but that doesn’t mean anything, right?” Aerith just smiled weakly at him and nodded her head.

“He would always get those kinds of meals here every single day. He is king’s cat, of course he would have special treatments. He meant the world to King Liv.” Aaron now just sat there sulking and thinking about the time spent with Felix or better said Magnus.

“I mean, now that you say it makes sense, but how do you know it’s him?”

“He has a scar on his left front paw. It is from when he was abducted by these

monsters called the Ferals and kept as a ransom. I saved him from them.”

“Who are the Ferals?”

“They are creatures like boars with wolf heads and they live in caves. In the past couple of years, we have had a lot of problems with them, since their leader wants to kill the Royal family and take over the throne so he could be the ruler.” Aaron just wanted to go home, sleep and forget everything that has happened.

“Oh no...,” said Aerith.

“What is going on?” asked Aaron.

“We have to get out of here. They have found us.”

“Who? Why was anybody trying to find us?” said Aaron while his heart raced with fear. “The Ferals,” said Aerith calmly “they must have sensed Magnus’ presence.”

“Why do they need Magnus for? I mean Felix.”

“I cannot explain this to you, we have to go. NOW!” said Aerith angrily. The Ferals looked around and noticed them. They were heavily armed with weapons. They started walking towards them and Aerith got a hold of Aaron’s arm before forcefully pulling him to stand. Aaron quickly took Felix and started following Aerith. The plan was to get out of the pub and to run away before making a scene, but that was impossible. The Ferals picked up their pace and went after them to try and catch them, but Aerith suddenly stopped. Her eyes turned bright purple and she blasted her magic which momentarily froze them which gave her and Aaron more time.

“WHAT IN THE-!?” Aaron yelled running after Aerith.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you. I am a magician.” said Aerith. Aaron almost stopped in his tracks but once again Aerith took a hold of his arm.

“Come on! We don’t have much time before they unfreeze!”

Back in the pub, people scrambled away when the Ferals started to unfreeze. Their leader growled and barked orders to his followers.

“Quick! Find them and bring them to me. Be careful with the cat! I do not care if you bring the girl and boy dead or alive.”

CHAPTER 5

Finally, after what felt like hours of running, Aaron and Aerith stopped and leaned against the wall to catch their breath.

“Is there anything I should know before we enter the palace, so I don’t make a complete fool out of myself?” asked Aaron angrily.

“Most people here are master magicians. Also, we are all gods and have our titles.

I am the Goddess of Nature and Justice.” said Aerith breathlessly.

“That’s fantastic. Bloody amazing!” yelled Aaron.

“Anyways, the palace is right around the corner so a few things before we get in. The first thing you’ll notice is a lot of guards, I mean after all that is the King’s residence. I’ll ask the guards to speak with the King and you will keep your mouth shut. If they ask who you are, I’ll tell them that you are my friend. Once we are allowed to get in, you’ll walk right in front of the King and curtsy. You just stand straight and bow your head. Do not raise your head until King Liv tells you to do so. After that I’ll explain the situation to king, and we’ll see how we shall proceed. Are you ready to meet the King?”

“No.” replied Aaron.

“Great!”

Walking to the great hall, Aerith and Aaron were stopped by the guards. “What do you want?” asked one of them.

“I seek an audience with the King.” said Aerith.

“Wait here.”

“King Liv is waiting for you, my lady.” announced the guard and they went inside. They stopped in front of King Liv and bowed.

“My king.” said Aerith

“Aerith dear, how many times have I told you that you do not have to bow in front of me if the rest of court is not present. You are one of my most trusted warriors and like a daughter to me.”

“It’s a habit I cannot seem to get rid of.”

“It is quite alright. Now, who did you bring here today?”

“He is a friend of mine, my king and he has something that belongs to you.”

“Raise your head boy. Now what is your name and what do you have for me?”

“My name is Aaron Adkins, sir. I come from Earth, and I have this.” said Aaron while presenting Felix to him, who was hidden in Aaron’s coat.

“Magnus.” said King Liv, not believing his eyes “My boy, come here.” Magnus jumped out of Aaron’s arms and padded to King Liv and started purring as King Liv stroked his back. “Oh Magnus, how good it is to see you again. You have my thanks for finding him. I believe he would also like to say his thanks, wouldn’t you, my boy?” At that moment, a green mist swirled around Magnus.

“Aaron, my friend, thank you very much for helping me when I was in trouble and providing me with shelter and food.” said Magnus.

“Wow, that’s cool” said Aaron while zooning out “I mean, yes sure, no problem. That’s what friends do, right?”

“Aerith said you are from Earth. How did you end up here? You know, not many people are allowed to come into this realm.” As those words left King Liv’s mouth, Aerith launched into the story about how Aaron got here.

“Oh my, that is very strange. However, since it is very late, I would suggest that we all go to our chambers and get some sleep and in the morning, we can discuss this further. You see if my lovely wife and my sons weren’t on a trip, but here, maybe we could have solved this mystery tonight with the advice they could have given to me. Since they aren’t present, I have to contact them so they could help me with this conundrum. Aerith, please be a dear and show our guest to his chambers, will you?” Both Aerith and Aaron agreed to this and after Aerith escorted him to his chambers, Aaron threw himself on the bed and almost immediately fell asleep.

Meanwhile...

The Ferals were in their cave deciding when to attack. Their leader, Mistjester, sat in his chair listening to his followers’ ideas. Finally, he had enough of them. “Arghh, you are all incompetent. We strike tomorrow before lunch. That way we can feast when I take the throne.” said Mistjester smirking.

CHAPTER 6

In the morning Aaron woke up to someone knocking on his door.

“Go away!” mumbled Aaron.

“Good morning, sleepyhead!” said Aerith when she came into Aaron’s view.

“Jesus Christ, it’s you.”

“Who else? Come on, let’s go down and have breakfast. Oh, and King Liv will be joining us.”

Aaron got out of bed and found that Aerith left some new clothes for him to wear. It was more of an armour than normal clothes that people wear on Earth. It was a green leather kind of suit that fit him perfectly. She also brought him some combat boots to go along it.

Reaching the hall where the breakfast was held, he walked over to table where he saw Aerith and King Liv along with Magnus waiting for him.

“Good morning! I hope you didn’t wait for me too long.”

“Of course not. Please, sit down and help yourself.” said King Liv.

Looking around, Aaron saw a lot of different food presented on the table and divided in.

“I contacted my family and we have found a solution. I will have to send Aaron

back to his home using my magic. I believe the reason you were allowed in this realm is because you had Magnus with you. That's why you got sucked in through the portal along with Magnus." said King Liv while Aaron nodded his head.

"The other problem are the Ferals. You barely got away from them. They don't give up that easily. My army is ready if they decide to attack again."

"Excuse me, in case they do attack, how will I be of any help, I can't fight." said Aaron.

"Yes, that is quite the problem, but-" stopped Aerith. They heard a low rumbling noise and people screaming in the distance.

"They are back." Quickly, guards prepare for the impact. We are under attack!"

"Liv! Give me the cat and then we can discuss your future!" yelled Misjester.

"As if I would ever fall for that trap. You can have him only over my dead body."

"At least I'll have some fun before I kill you."

"Come here, take this!" said Aerith giving Aaron a sword and shield."

"I don't know what to with this I told you already."

"Use it and take Magnus with you!" Aaron ran, trying to get to somewhere safe while Magnus followed him. Suddenly, one of the Ferals stopped him and looked him dead in the eye.

"Hello there. Give me the cat. Now!"

"No."

"What did you say?"

"I said no."

"Oh, you'll regret this boy." said the Feral before attacking Aaron with his claws. Aaron quickly put the shield in front of himself and stopped the attack. While he was trying to get away from the beast, Aerith noticed him struggling and ran to him, but before she got to him the monster managed to hit Aaron and he lost his consciousness. The beast cackled and got ready to kill Aaron with his sharp claws. In that moment Aaron's body started to rise in the air. Aerith and the beast looked at Aaron while his body floated. Then, Aaron started to slowly regain consciousness and opened his eyes. His eyes were glowing. They were bright red. Suddenly, Aaron straightened his body and turned to the beast. Fury and hatred could be seen all over his face. Aaron yelled and blasted a ball of magic towards his opponent eliminating him. Aerith's eyes went wide as she witnessed what was happening before her. Aaron then helped others to defeat the Ferals. In the corner of his eye, he saw King Liv pinned down to the ground with Mistjester above him. "You foolish, old man. I bet you didn't think this is how this battle was going to end,

now did you? I will make your people my servants! They will fear me. I'll get rid of each and every one who dares to go against me!"

"Urghh..." grunted king weakly.

"Any last words?"

"I wouldn't agree with you..." said king.

Suddenly, Mistjester was thrown back by Aaron's magic. Once he got up, he realised that he was badly wounded and was bleeding heavily.

"You worm!" howled Mistjester

Aaron then threw the biggest ball of magic into Mistjester, killing him. After that, Aaron turned around, his eyes no longer glowing.

"Huh, interesting." he said and fainted.

CHAPTER 7

Aaron found himself in an unknown room looking at the white ceiling. He thought he was hearing voices so he closed his eyes thinking he must be going crazy.

"Aaron, are you awake?" At that Aaron turned his head and saw Aerith sitting on a chair.

"Where am I?"

"Hey, take it slowly. You are in the infirmary. You've sustained some wounds. "

"Is King Liv alright??"

"Yes, he is alright. He also had some wounds, but nothing serious."

"Why do I remember having magic?"

"Because you have it. When that Feral hit you, he wounded you, but Magnus was right there so he licked your wounds, transferring his bacteria to you which resulted in you having magical abilities now. "

"That is..."

"I know it's a lot to take in..."

"...AMAZING!"

"-you will have to learn how to- wait what? You're happy?"

"I mean yes. Who wouldn't be?"

"I was not expecting that, but since you're happy I guess it's alright. We have to see the King now that you're awake. He has something special for you." winked Aerith.

"Aerith! Aaron! I'm so glad to see you! I want to thank you for helping us in the battle and in defeating the Ferals. Their leader is now dead, and the rest didn't like him anyways, so they'll be looking for a new one. I hope that Aerith explained the

situation with you gaining magical abilities?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Now, you understand that I must send you back home, right?”

“Yes, absolutely. I yearn to go home as much as it was lovely being here.”

“Good. I cannot let you go with Magnus as much as you would want that. He is still very precious to us. So, as a thank you gift you’ll be given this.” Golden mist surrounded Kind Liv and his lap appeared a little black kitten.

“This is for you. I hope you become good friends. I know it’s a poor substitute for Magnus-”

“Oh no, thank you! We’ll become good friends.” Aaron took the little kitten into his hands. It’s a he, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” they all laughed.

“Well, that’s all. You get ready and I will send you home.”

Aaron nodded and turned to Aerith.

“I also have to thank you. I will have to take you to Immortale every weekend, so you can practice your magic. We want you to be able to use it.”

“OK. Hey, could you explain something to me?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Well, I wanted to know what were you doing in London 2 days ago?”

“Oh, that’s a story for another time. Now, the King is ready. Have a safe trip and don’t forget about your lessons in magic.”

“Thank you, I won’t. It was lovely meeting you all, but I must go now. Take care.”

“Goodbye Aaron.”

In that moment, Aaron nodded to King Liv indicating that he was ready to go home and was engulfed in white mist and teleported to his home.

“Ah, it’s good to be home. Now, how are we going to name you, little one?” asked Aaron while the kitten looked at him.

“How about Felix, hm?” At that the kitten meowed and licked Aaron’s hand.

“Felix it is then.” smiled Aaron to the cat and sat down on his couch. He was finally home and that’s all he wanted. Everything else could wait.

mentor: Ivana Opačak

institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola, Slavonski Brod

Emma Tomašić

EVERYTHING IS BETTER IN BOSTON

I got my first tattoo when I was 15 years old. It was a doodle of the cityscape on my left hip. I have always loved the thought of getting lost in a big city where no one knows me. I have also loved observing people. The big windows in my Boston apartment made that easy. I would sit down with a cup of coffee in my hands and wonder where everyone was going, what the main problem in their life was, or why they chose a grey shirt with those pants when black would go much better.

I suppose that could explain why I have always wanted to be a psychologist. But when you grow up in an orphanage, chances of getting into college are pretty low. I moved to Boston after the quote “Everything is better in Boston” started haunting me. I tried a few different jobs, but, as it turned out, I was bad at all of them, so I started working as a librarian. It was not as bad as it seemed at first, and, even though I had read only a few books in my life, it turned out reading wasn’t as dreadful as the school had made it seem.

As I was putting away some new books that had arrived, I heard someone crying between two rows of bookshelves. I looked down and found a girl shaking and almost choking on her tears. I had just stood there until she noticed me. Before I could say anything, I heard the library door violently open and a loud voice went straight through my veins.

“Charlotte, where are you?!” The man yelled.

“Please, don’t let him find me.” Charlotte looked at me with fear in her eyes while tears were still going down her cheeks and made pieces of long black hair stick to them. She wore a white summer dress that was covered with green grass stains at the bottom and a long silver necklace with a heart-shaped medallion.

I took her by the arm and pulled her off the floor so she would follow me. We snuck in between a few rows of shelves until we came to a door that went to an area for staff members. I could still hear the man calling Charlotte, so I pulled a chair and motioned for her to sit there, then I went out of the room and locked the door just in case he tried to get in.

“What seems to be the problem, sir?” I walked toward him, “This is not appropriate behavior for a library. Please, calm down, otherwise I will have to ask you to leave!” I tried to sound as professional as I could. After all, I didn’t know how violent he could get, but I supposed Charlotte wouldn’t have been that terrified of him if he had been a reasonable person. The man was much taller than me, had blonde hair and jade green eyes.

“I know she is here! I saw her come in. Look, I just want to talk to her. There’s been a terrible misunderstanding, but she won’t let me explain!” The man carefully observed my every move. I knew there was no time to think through my responses if I wanted to help poor Charlotte.

“I don’t know who you are looking for, but if she was here, you would see her. Now, please, stop disturbing other people while they are trying to read!”

“This isn’t over!” The man said angrily as he was leaving.

I waited a few more minutes and went back to Charlotte. The poor girl was shaking with fear, so I passed her a bowl of homemade cookies that Ms. Mallard made almost every day and a cup of coffee.

“So... what happened out there?” I tried to sound as careless and calm as I could, but, on the inside, it felt like my blood was going to boil.

“I am terribly sorry to put you in this position. That was my brother, he gets angry sometimes.” She explained while taking a bite of a cookie.

“What happens when he gets angry? Why don’t your parents do something about it?” I regretted the sentence the second I said it aloud. He looked well over 21, and I wasn’t so sure she was a minor either.

“Our parents died six months ago in a car accident. Now, it’s just me and Liam.”

“How old are you?” I tried to ease the tension by taking one of the cookies, but the second my hand got closer to Charlotte, she flinched.

“I’m 15.” She responded.

“Wow, um... okay. Well, do you have any other relatives, someone you could go to when your brother gets angry?”

Charlotte shook her head and gave me that puppy look. I felt so bad for her. I wanted to save her from that monster, but I didn’t know anything about what was truly going on in her life, so I decided it wasn’t my business to play her psychologist.

“A good book might cheer you up. Besides, I don’t think my boss would be thrilled about you being here.”

Charlotte stood up and went back to the library, leaving me with half empty bowl of cookies and coffee she hadn’t even touched. I took the cup and went back to putting new books away.

After that day Charlotte started coming to the library regularly. At first, we didn't talk much, but sometimes I would sit down with her if I wasn't busy and she would tell me everything about her day. We never talked about her brother again, but I could see from her mood if he had had a bad or a good day.

"Did you know that Delaney means dark challenger?" She asked as she was returning *The last girl* by Nadia Murad. I wondered if she liked to read books based on other people's lives to make her life seem more bearable.

"No, I didn't. However, I found a book I thought you would like. *Rebel* by Rahaf Mohammed. It's about a girl who escaped from Saudi Arabia." I held the book in my hands, but she didn't take it.

"Thanks, but I'll take it some other time. I was wondering if you would like to go shopping with me this afternoon. We are having a school dance in a couple of weeks and I don't know what I should wear." Her cheeks flushed as she was trying to get the question out in the open.

"Sure, I will pick you up after my shift is over." I smiled and put the book behind the counter.

Charlotte put down her address on a sticky note and left.

"Should I even question why she asked me to go with her and not some of her friends!? No, Delaney, you are reading too much into it."

After I locked up the library, I went straight to Charlotte's. She lived in a suburban area 20 minutes away from the library. I rang the doorbell, and her brother, whom I had completely forgotten about, opened the door. He looked at me in disbelief, but Charlotte came before he could say anything. Just as I thought we had got away with it, Liam snapped back into reality.

"Lotta, what is she doing here?!" He yelled after us.

"I asked her to take me shopping since you were too busy." She responded quickly.

"So, she was there that day after all." Liam looked at me. Surprisingly, I couldn't see the rage in his eyes. I slightly nodded and opened a car door for Charlotte. As we drove away, I decided to bring up the day we met.

"Are you ever going to tell me what happened?"

"Liam doesn't like me talking about it."

"Well, he is not here, is he?" I replied, looking one moment at the road and the other at her.

"You know what? I think this was a bad idea. I shouldn't have bothered you. Let's just go home." Charlotte's mood changed very abruptly, and this wasn't the first time I noticed her mood swings.

“No, it’s not a bother. I won’t bring it up again if you aren’t comfortable talking about it, sorry.” I felt like I messed up this time. The more time I spent with this girl the more of a mystery she was to me.

Charlotte kept insisting on us going back, so, eventually, I gave in and turned the car around. Once we were in front of her house, I noticed that Liam’s car wasn’t there anymore.

“Would you like to come in for a cup of tea? I would like to make amends for wasting your time.” She kept eye contact while waiting for my response. It seemed as if she hadn’t blinked for 5 minutes. Something inside me started yelling to get out of there as soon as possible. But maybe getting in was the only way to get the mystery to the end.

“You get comfortable and I’ll make us tea. Would you like some honey?” She asked as I was sitting down in her living room.

“Honey would be great.”

I browsed around the room and noticed a notebook with a marble-looking cover and Charlotte’s name on it. When I made sure she wouldn’t be back for a few more minutes I took the notebook and started going through it. It was a collection of poems that, I suppose, she had written. One got my eyes stuck on it:

Countless

I wrote countless goodbye letters
And I will probably write
Countless more

I emptied so many liquor bottles
I stopped counting a long time ago

Counting the thoughts in my brain
That make me not want to stay

Saying that I will
Saying that I might

Trying to stop the time
Just so I could decide

Counting people's steps
Every time they walk away

After they had counted
All my flaws
Saying I'm too much to bear

So why shouldn't I push you away
So the counting can stop
Before it's too late

"That's private, you know." Charlotte's voice snapped me back to reality and I dropped the notebook.

"It's... Wow... I don't know what to say. Sorry."

Charlotte handed me the tea and took the notebook so she could put it away.

"Are you okay?" I asked, still not knowing how to handle the situation.

"I'm splendid," she replied cheerfully, "I just thought we could be friends. I like you, you helped me when no one else did. But if you think it's too weird for you to hang out with a 15-year-old, I'll back off."

"No, you are just a mystery to me, that's all. I would like to know what happened the other day, though. Especially after reading this. I think you should talk to someone."

"I want to talk to you, but not in the library with all those people around." She said taking a sip of tea.

"So, there is no school dance." I assumed.

"True. I hoped Liam would be gone by the time you came to pick me up. Sorry for all the driving around."

Her eyes seemed like they were looking through me and not at me. If I hadn't been with her for the past hour, I would have thought she was on something.

"You didn't have to lie. Next time just be honest, okay?"

She agreed and I was ready to finally find out what happened.

"Liam gets angry at me sometimes. He never says it, but I know he thinks I've ruined his life and blames me for my... well, our parents' death."

"But you said they had died in a car accident. I don't know who, in their right mind, could blame their little sister for something she had no control over."

“A year before that I tried to end my life. Sometimes I get so overwhelmed by everything, I don’t know how to function, and I feel like a bystander on the outside looking in. Liam said it was just a pathetic way of attention-seeking and mom agreed with him, but dad convinced her to take me to therapy. She agreed after she found out I could go for free since I was 14. Anyway, the day they got into the accident they were going to pick me up from my appointment. After Liam got custody over me, he forbade me to go to therapy. If I hadn’t been there, none of that would have happened.” Charlotte said that like she was reading a chapter from some book she couldn’t quite connect to, with no emotions whatsoever.

“It was a terrible mistake for him to tell you all that. You know it wasn’t your fault, right? And it wasn’t attention-seeking. Sometimes speaking up can be the hardest thing a person has to do.”

“The day we met, I asked Liam for a permission to go to therapy again. I had started feeling bad lately and I didn’t know how much more of a chemical imbalance in my brain I could take. Long story short, we got into one of the worst fights we had ever had, and I knew I had to run away from him before he got too angry.”

“Would he have hit you?”

“No!” Liam yelled. His voice froze the blood in my veins and I abruptly jumped from the sofa.

“Lotta, go to your room, now!” He said sharply.

“I don’t know what sort of lies she has been telling you, but I can assure you she’s an unreliable narrator.” His voice became calm again. He motioned for me to take a seat and he did the same.

“And why is that?” I asked almost amused by his little speech.

“Her version of the truth can’t be trusted. Her view of the world is distorted. Sure, the body is very intelligent, but it can’t tell the difference between an actual situation and a thought. It reacts to every thought as if it were a reality and it responds accordingly. Since the danger is only a mental fiction, it has no outlet, so she thinks she needs to go to therapy.”

“How can you say that? She needs help that you can’t provide, which is only making things worse.” At that moment I felt rage rushing through my body.

“True, she has some mental health problems, but doesn’t everyone? Everyone has something. You can’t live in this world and not be affected by it.” Liam replied.

“I won’t give up on her, not now, not ever.” I said as I was about to head out.

“You are only going to get sucked into her madness. It is not worth it. Our brains are made to keep us alive, they aren’t made to keep us happy!” He yelled after me, but

I was already in my car.

I looked toward the house one last time and saw Charlotte looking through the bedroom window. I hoped she would survive the night and come back to the library the next day. I couldn't get over the fact that she had tried to take her life and her brother wasn't bothered about that at all. Nor had her mother been. The only person that had ever cared about her was her father and she had lost him.

"This poor girl has been all alone, all this time, and I've made myself believe it's not my business. Well, now I'm making it so!" I was determined to keep that promise to myself.

The next couple of times Charlotte visited the library we talked about everything but what needed to be addressed. That girl was really good at avoiding her problems and I was still tip-toeing too much around her to be brave enough to bring them up. She showed me some poems she had written. The one that I liked was called *Eyes*. Mostly because it wasn't as dark as the first one I had read.

A shining diamond
Reminder of your eyes

Blue as the deepest water
Or the brightest sky

Green just like baby leaves
That our graceful fairy
Doesn't want to leave

With a bit of brown
Stuck in the corners

Just enough to make some borders

"It's really beautiful," I said after she had read it to me, "You know, I could ask my boss to organize some sort of poetry nights so people could read their stuff."

"Stuff?!" She looked at me condescendingly.

"My apologies, Ms. Austin. By the way, I know you don't want to talk about it, but it would ease my mind if you had my phone number. Just in case something happens." I wasn't sure how she would react to the idea or if that was the best way to bring that up.

“I love you, Delaney.” She said and gave me a firm hug.

“Aww, love you too Char.” I decided to call her Char since Lotta was too big of a reminder of Liam.

After my shift was over, I drove Charlotte home since the nights were getting colder and went straight to my apartment. At about 2 am my phone started ringing and woke me up.

“Hello?” I answered half asleep.

“Ma’am, I am calling about Charlotte Addams. We found your number on a piece of paper, but no name next to it. Who am I speaking to?” A man asked. It was hard to understand his words since there was so much noise in the background.

“My name is Delaney Stonem. What happened? Is she alright?”

“I would like you to come to Massachusetts General Hospital. We need to talk to you.” The man replied.

“Okay, I’m on my way.” I quickly put some clothes on, grabbed my purse and car keys, and left in a hurry. I almost forgot to lock my apartment. As I was driving to the hospital a ton of scenarios and questions went through my head: “Did Liam hurt her? Did they fight again? Why were there so many cars on the road that late?”

I took the first parking spot I could find and ran to the hospital. I walked toward the first nurse I saw and asked her about Charlotte. She walked me to the second nurse who called the doctor that was on duty in the Emergency room. After what seemed like an eternity, we located the doctor who knew whom I was talking about.

“Hello, I’m Gabriella Demar. Are you Charlotte’s mother?” I was a bit offended by that comment, but it wasn’t the time to argue about it. Gabriella looked like she was in her late forties and tried to cover the fact with hazel hair dye and way too much bronzer.

“No, we aren’t related, Charlotte’s parents died. What happened? Is she alright?”

“I don’t know how to put this lightly, but it looks like Charlotte tried to overdose on painkillers. Luckily, someone found her in the park and called the ambulance. It’s still too early to say if she is stable or not. Are you aware of any family members who have suffered from mental illness?” The doctor talked with a calming, slow voice, it almost hypnotized me. I just stood there, not knowing what to say so Gabriella continued:

“You will be allowed to see her soon. We just need to run a few more tests to make sure we’ve got everything out of her system. It would be best if we could test if your blood type matches hers, just in case.” It was sort of a weird request, but I had no strength to question it. After she had taken a sample of my blood, I went back to the

waiting room. After two long hours had passed, I saw Liam walking towards me. My body went into a full-attack mode as he walked closer to me.

“What is going on?” He looked genuinely confused.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, ignoring his question.

“I woke up and saw that Lotta wasn’t at home, so I tracked her cellphone. Are you going to answer me now?”

“You did this to her, didn’t you!? I saw her going into the house because I drove her there. What is wrong with you? Do you think you are so much better than everybody? Do you thrive off making her life miserable?!” By that point, I was yelling at him in the middle of the waiting room and I didn’t care at all. He was standing there, not affected by my words at all. As I was about to push him out of my way so I could get some fresh air, dr. Demar approached us.

“I thought you said you weren’t related.” She looked at me, not giving Liam any attention, which made him visibly irritated.

“Is this about Charlotte? You are right, they aren’t, so she has no right to be here, but I’m her brother and a legal guardian. Can you, please, explain what is going on and why we are at the hospital?” Liam stood in between me and the doctor. I moved to the side so I could see her and tried to ignore his presence.

“Well, your blood types weren’t a match, but, from what I can tell, you are half-sisters.” The doctor told me.

“Hello! I’m still here,” Liam waved at the doctor, “Sisters? What are you talking about?”

After Gabriella had told him everything, he sat down and put his hands over his face.

“Sisters?” I said after 15 minutes, still standing at the same spot where the doctor had left me.

“Half-sisters! I mean, it isn’t impossible,” Liam said, “I have always known our mother had another child. She never talked about it and I wasn’t allowed to bring it up, so I never found out what happened to it.” His eyes were following me as I was pacing around the room.

“What do you mean what happened to it? It’s not a toy you misplace, it is a living being!” I didn’t know what I meant by referring to that baby with “it”, TO ME, WITH “IT”?!

“Can we focus on Lotta now instead of you? We will go back to that, I promise.” His voice was calm again, so I agreed with him and sat on the chair next to his.

“This is the second time she did it. Liam, she needs help! You can’t keep denying it,

she needs to go to therapy.” I told him, not taking my eyes off him. I soaked up every move he made, trying to figure out what he was thinking about.

“She does this all the time. The minute something’s not her way she is going to pull a tantrum. I told you, you are not helping, you’re only getting sucked into her madness.”

“Why are you like this? Who has hurt you, Liam?! Even if that’s true, even if she is pulling attention-seeking tantrums, don’t you think a professional should talk to her and figure out why she feels the need to do so?” By this point, I was convinced that talking to a wall would give me better results than talking to him.

“Delaney, stay out of this!” His eyes filled with rage. He stood up and went to talk to the doctor to check when he could take Char home.

I knew he wouldn’t let me go anywhere near her after that. And if it were his way, we would never talk about the sister fact. I thought about how I could be related to that monster... and why anyone would get rid of one kid and then have two more...

I spent the night beside Charlotte’s bed. Liam was long gone, and I hoped he wouldn’t return. One minute I would look at Char’s graceful face and the next I’d look at the beeping monitor next to her. She seemed so innocent lying there. If I could focus only on her, I would fool myself into thinking I was just observing her as she was resting from a long day at school. There were so many questions floating around in my mind, but I promised myself I would only focus on Char. Yet, how not to bombard her with questions when I wanted answers fast, and I knew she wasn’t the one to offer them willingly?!

“Can she hear me?” I asked the nurse when she came to check on her.

“I don’t know, but talking can’t make any damage.” She smiled at me and went out of the room.

“I guess everything IS better in Boston. At least it gave me the most perfect sister in the entire world,” I took her hand and felt a tear going down my cheek, “Please be better, Char.”

As the sun went up, the hospital became more crowded. Two doctors and a nurse told me to wait in the waiting room, so they could check her up. I took advantage of those few minutes to get some coffee and call my boss to say that I was sick and wouldn’t make it to work.

“You have been looking a bit pale lately, take all the time you need.” Ms. Mallard said over the phone.

“Wow, thanks.” I said sarcastically and hung up. I knew I had just lied to her, but that comment wasn’t necessary.

As I was walking back from the cafeteria, I noticed the crowd of doctors running down the hallway. I rushed to Charlotte's room, but no one was there. I stopped the first nurse I saw to ask what was going on. Doctor Demar walked toward us and told the nurse she'd take it from there.

"I'm so sorry." Those were the only words Gabriella said. It was all I needed to know what had happened. I felt like I wanted to scream, but suddenly lost all the ability to control my voice. Gabriella sat next to me for 20 more minutes. She said that she needed to talk to Liam from there on because he was her legal guardian.

After that day I couldn't force myself to get out of bed for a week. The most irritating thing of all was the fact that I couldn't even force myself to cry. I just stared into space for a whole night and slept through the entire day. After a week had passed, Ms. Mallard called to check when I was coming back to work. I knew I couldn't stay in my bed forever, but I still wasn't ready to go back to my everyday life and pretend as if nothing had happened.

Boston gave me a chance for a better life, it gave me the best sister and the worst brother, but it also took them away from me. It took a piece of me I wasn't sure I could ever replace. I thought about the most sensible thing to do at that moment and, after a week of being completely isolated from Boston, I decided to pack my suitcase and go as far away from that city as possible.

Now, a year later, my name is Adeline Caddel, I am 25 years old and I work in a small bakery outside of Paris. Everything is better in Paris.

mentor: Veljko Vuković

institution: Prva sušačka hrvatska gimnazija

Vito Crnić

THE BLACK FOREST

The night was pitch black, as the crescent moon was shyly looking down on us, and our petrol lamps did not help with the fog. We had been wandering for hours, trying to find someone after our car had hit a tree and stopped working. The silence was broken by occasional eerie noises resembling an owl's call, but much louder and more ominous. Every time we heard it, it seemed louder, closer.

After the lamps had run out of fuel, we were just about to lose all hope. Just then, we came across a clear patch of land with a run-down shack on top of the hill. It looked like a farmer's estate with rotten, old wooden fencing. To our surprise, the inside of the shack was stacked with food and drinks, enough to last for days. The fireplace was on and had plenty of linden, walnut and maple firewood in reserve. We had made ourselves at home and celebrated. Soon we got tired and entered the bedroom, which had four beds with duvets and down pillows on each one. What was somewhat weird were the dozen portraits spread around the walls, portraits of some medieval knights and nobles, all staring at us. We had fallen asleep quickly and slept like babies for a couple of hours, until the sound of glass shattering woke us all up. We lit the candles at our bedside, only to discover that there were no portraits, only a dozen windows. A few minutes later we got up to investigate the noise, when we saw an entity at the other end of the room. It looked like a humanoid black skeleton with bits of flesh loosely hanging from it. Although its eyes were glowing red. It was accompanied by the owl-like noise we had heard earlier, resembling a siren. After I had turned around all my friends had disappeared and the entity had taken their place, unhinging its jaw, ready to eat me. Just then, I felt a shock at my chest and woke up in the back of an ambulance. The sirens sounded exactly like the one that the entity made, just high-pitched. The paramedics told me that I went into cardiac arrest and that they had to defibrillate me. My best buddy was in the ambulance, too, relieved that I had woken up. Later in the hospital they said that I hit a tree with my head and started bleeding profusely. My other two friends joined us soon and were happy to see me alive and well. I was in the hospital for a week until they let me out.

Sometimes I still have nightmares of the monster. It lurks in the back of my mind. Some nights I must take sleeping pills to get any rest. I am never visiting that forest again.

mentor: Antonio Shala

institution: Upravna škola Zagreb

Andelina Vuletić

VIXX

Chapter 1:

„Goodbye mom!” I closed the door of my house and headed towards Garry, my friend. I’ve known Garry for as long as I can remember. Garry is forty years old blonde guy who has the ability to teleport wherever he wants. Sometimes, I wish I had that ability. Imagine teleporting on top of the Eiffel Tower and looking at a beautiful view or on some beach on Hawaii. There I would dance the hula dance with other ladies with that grass skirt. I would sing a song while the others would listen my beautiful voice.

In a middle of my enumeration, a lady came out of nowhere and screamed: „We are under attack! Run!” Everyone started running in all directions.

We are actually attacked, but by who? Who would attack us? I thought that we’re safe here. Nothing bad can happen to us! I know that this is all sudden and you don’t know what’s going on. I should go back in time and tell my story.

Hi! I’m Charlotte. I am 13 and I live in the village called “Lei Shi” in Nepal. I have my mom, dad and two older sisters. My mother is the leader of Inhumans, people born with a power inside them. We live in a place hidden from the entire world... where nobody can hurt us... where we can live in peace. And now the biggest mystery had just come. How are we attacked and who are those guys? We are about to find out.

Suddenly a big plane shows up. I have never seen a plane in my life. I did not imagine that a plane could be *that* big. Instead of running like the other people, I was just standing there. I don’t even know why. I just froze there. So many thoughts were in my head, countless of them.

They started shooting and the house to my left exploded. I was lying on the ground helpless. I tried to scream, call for help, but I was too weak. I could have run... find my mom and the rest of my family and friends, then find a safe place. Garry would teleport us somewhere safe. It’s all *my fault!* I stood there doing nothing... and now I’m injured and helpless. I don’t feel so good. I feel like I’m going to pass out.

Chapter 2:

„Wake up little girl!” Someone was shaking me. I opened my eyes, everything was blurry. I barely could see anything. There was a woman who was smiling at me. I couldn't see her face, but I could hear her Russian accent. In Lei Shi I knew everyone, but she was someone new.

„Let me help you up” she said and reached her arm out.

I took her hand and now I was up. My vision got clearer. There were 2 beds. On the table was a plate with food. The room had perfect white walls where there wasn't any filth on it. In front of me was this glass. It is like the whole wall was a window! The door was weird. It had grids and something that looked like a dog door. It also had a handle on it. I am confused, does this room have a dog or something? The whole cell was futuristic. I must admit, I liked where I am right now. My thoughts were interrupted by a woman's voice „What's your name?”

I looked back at her. That woman was blonde and a bit taller than me. She had green eyes and a ponytail. She was pretty. Back to the question. I did not trust her at all, but she seemed nice. I decided to stay quiet and not to say anything.

She starts first: „Uhm, well my name is Karine. I'm your new cellmate.”

She said her name, so I had to say mine. Wait, who said I have to do that. I can do whatever I want. You know what, I don't care. I'll say my name no matter what.

„My name is Charlotte”, I say with a confidence. But now when I think about it, was that a good idea? I can't just say my name to the person that I don't know. I mean, she could be dangerous. She could hurt me.

„Charlotte is a very pretty name” Karine smiles.

I looked to my left and I was terrified. There's a girl, she looks like she's crazy. She has a brunette hair. That girl was staring at me. She looked scary.

There was also a boy with brunette hair like the girl, but his hair was wavy. He was in the other cell speeding around the room and his hair was fluttering. He stopped speeding and looked at me. He also seemed crazy like that girl. When I took a closer look at his face...I saw that they both looked like each other. A boy and a girl seem to be the same age so *they must be twins*.

They have a power that they can control. I'm jealous.

„Where's Garry to take me home?” I whispered to myself, but I think Karine heard me.

Karine sighed and put her head down. Something was going on; I could feel it. A shocking thing is about to happen. I was not ready for this, but here we go.

„Charlotte, he won't come to save you...” she said it with a sad tone.

She is lying! It must be! I don't trust Karine! I do not even know her!

„He will, he would *never* leave me behind!” I said in a repulsive voice.

„Charlotte, this is a Vixx base with a lot of armed agents. If he goes in here, he's going to die.” Karine said, trying to approach me and hug me, but I backed away.

„Leave me alone!” I said almost breaking down.

This cannot be happening! I don't believe her! Garry will come to save me! I know that and nobody will tell me otherwise! For the first time in my life, I felt so sad and broken. In Lei Shi everything was perfect! I would always laugh with my friends! We would have fun! I can't live with this feeling!

Everything started to shake. I can't believe it's happening again. Karine was shocked, everyone was looking at me: a boy and a girl, Karine and two guards.

„GARRY!” I screamed and the glass cracked. Guards pointed a gun at me. I felt someone backing me away.

„I know it's hard, but hey, you have me” Karine said and hugged me from behind. For the first time in my life, I missed my family and friends immensely.

Karine looked at cracked glass and whispered to herself: „She's something special.”

Chapter 3:

After some time, I calmed down. I felt better because I threw that sadness out of me. It was an awkward silence in the cell and Karine breaks it:

„I didn't know you had powers”

„U know nothing about me!”

She started stepping towards me. I walked backwards, away from her.

„Well, let me get to know you” she said getting closer to me.

„I don't trust you, you're dangerous!”

Why am I behaving like this? She is good to me... and this is how I respond to her? Just then, two guards entered the cell and grabbed me. The guards took me into another room with a bunch of scientists and a bald guy.

A room had a table with some bottles on it. Those bottles were in lots of colors. There was another table with medical stuff. This reminds me of consulting room of my dad. He was a doctor. When I was little, I'd see what he was doing. He would get a lot of patients with problems. My father would help them. They would leave happy and without any pain.

„Hello Charlotte” the bald guy said.

That bald guy had a monocle. I would say that he is in his mid 30s. He also had

blue eyes and a Russian accent like Karine. He was wearing a leather jacket with a lot of pockets.

„Who are you?” I asked without any fear.

He looked at me and responded: „My name is Windward.” After that, he turned to scientist and yelled: „Begin!”

Begin? What is that supposed to mean? Begin with what? I have a feeling that something bad is coming. Guards grabbed and put me on a table. They tied me up. My feeling was right. Scientists came and started putting some pipes in me. They started taking away my blood. It was so painful! They were draining me for hours. I was screaming so loudly in pain. Windward put a cloth in my mouth to shut me up.

„That’s enough! We don’t want to kill a golden goose.” Windward said annoyed.

The guards untied me. With my eyes, I found a mirror and looked at myself. It’s like I saw a dead body.

I was so pale you could compare me to white color. I looked like those skinny kids in Africa that my mother had been telling me about. I didn’t know how my eyes were still open after all that horrible process.

Guards took me back to my cell and placed me on the floor. Karine quickly runs over to me to see if I am okay. To be honest, I wasn’t okay. I felt so weak, I couldn’t move. It’s like I’m paralyzed! Karine was mumbling something. I couldn’t understand her. My breath quickened. I felt like I was burning. I was tired of everything. A little sleep cannot hurt me, right?

Chapter 4:

I woke up and everything seemed so bright. Again, I felt weakness. Karine was with me; she was still sleeping. I saw her holding my hand. She woke up and yawned. As soon as she saw me, she started smiling. I must admit, she was cute with that smile.

„Are you feeling any better?” Karine asked standing up.

Her voice was so calm, full of love. Like an angel was speaking. I could fall asleep if she continues talking.

„A bit” I answered.

„I’m glad” unrecognizable voice says. I look behind myself and see the girl in her cell. She was calmly smiling at me. Everyone is suddenly being nice to me. I thought that she was weird, dangerous and someone you don’t want to mess with.

„I’m Lia. If you have already noticed, I have a power of reading mind.” she says. I figured out how friendly she actually is. She also had Russian accent like Windward

and Karine. If everyone has Russian accent here, that means I must be somewhere in Russia.

„Lia, do you know why they drained me?” I wanted to get straight to the point.

„I read guard’s mind; they want your power on stronger people” she continues „This is the beginning; they’ll drain you every few days. After they collect enough blood, they’ll create an army of people who have your power.”

This all sounds so upsetting. How am I going to stop them? I’m too weak to do anything and I’m outnumbered.

„Could you show me your powers?” Lia tried to change the subject.

Deep inside me I wanted to say no, but I knew that would be rude. I didn’t want to think about it, so I put my head down. Karine was looking at me with compassion. I felt her hand on my shoulder.

„Don’t worry, you can tell us” Karine says with a calming voice.

„My mother doesn’t allow me to use my powers because they’re dangerous” I finally uttered.

„Can you control your powers” Lia asked.

„I can’t”

I heard a voice in my head saying: „Don’t worry, you’ll learn.”

I thought I went crazy. How am I hearing a voice in my head? I knew that talking with Lia will make me crazy!

Again, there was a voice inside my head: „I can also communicate telepathically you dummy! And I heard what you said about me!”

Karine started giggling „This is so funny! I can’t breathe.”

I looked at Lia with a shocked face and said: „I take it back!”

Lia put a finger on her mouth. I knew I had to be quiet.

„Talk to me telepathically! We have to figure out how to escape this place” Lia started yelling through my mind. The experience was so weird. Imagine communicating with someone without saying anything or opening your mouth. It was like an advanced technology!

„So what’s the plan?” I asked telepathically.

„We don’t know yet” Karine said without opening her mouth. So Karine can also read minds like Lia?

„Maybe I could help” I heard another voice in my head, but this voice was different. It was young male voice.

I looked to my left and saw speedy boy. How can he also read my mind? Does everyone here have the same power?

„Wait how can you guys read my mind?” I asked with confusion.

I guess that this all mind reading thing is just not for me.

„We don't have a power of mind reading” Karine was smiling at me.

„Lia can open a telepathic channel where we can all communicate freely” speedy boy explained.

„My name is Maxim.” he continues: “And if you are going to ask, no I have only super speed”

„Back to the plan guys” Karine interrupted us.

Chapter 5:

A few months had passed, I didn't feel weak at all! I felt stronger and ready to fight! We came up with a plan. It was so boring in the cell. The three of us talked every day! We became closer and now we are like a family! I consider Lia and Maxim as my siblings, but Karine is like a *mom* to me. She cares a lot about me, but she didn't let me eat the food by myself! She said that I was too weak and started feeding me like a baby! I wouldn't say that this was about me being weak, she liked to take care of me. It was like I was her own child! I also asked Karine if she had any powers. She said „no”, I was surprised!

Guards left for a break. It is time to finally escape from this place! Please do not expect that our plan was professional. The whole idea was to escape from the cell, take down guards and leave the base. We are finally going to escape this horrible place.

Lia breaks the lock of her cell door and does the same thing to Maxim, Karine and me. The alarm went off.

„This shouldn't have happened” Karine said leaving the cell.

We all started running towards the exit. Luckily, they all knew where the exit was. I was new here and I didn't know where I was going. I heard some guards behind us. I turned around and saw a horrible thing. They started to shoot. I was unprepared, I couldn't go anywhere. I was scared. Bullets were so fast; I didn't have enough time to react. Fortunately, Lia created a shield that protected us. I sighed in relief. Another power that I didn't know Lia had. Lia is such a mysterious person.

„Thank you, Lia” I smiled at her. She's my savior. She protected me from bullets.

One of the bullets pierced the shield. I felt a sharp pain in my belly. I fell on my knees. The feeling was so painful. This is it; I'm going to bleed to death. I have always wondered how I'm going to die. I was hoping that I would die in my sleep or die from

the poison. But no, I'm going to die in the most painful way.

„Charlotte! No!” I heard Karine's voice screaming. She bends down to me. I was feeling so dizzy and almost collapsed, but I felt Karine's hands holding me. She picks me up and carries me like at a wedding.

„We need to go.” Karine said and the twins started running.

„Charlotte, sweetie, I need you to stay awake” Karine said trying to catch up to the twins.

„I'm...trying” I answered with barely any energy.

They were running towards the exit when someone stood in front of them.

„Windward!” I heard Karine's anger in her voice. She screamed and I was shaken, but I needed that to keep me awake. I noticed how she moves her lower jaw forward and backwards when she's mad. I've never in my life heard someone with so much anger in their voice. She sounded so pissed, like she could explode.

„You thought that you could escape that easily?” Windward pulls a gun from his pocket. „I can't let you just walk away.”

What do you mean walking away!? We were running for our lives! And he calls that walking!? I figured that this Windward is so rude and evil. But unlike the others, I don't want him dead. I just want to get out of here.

„Maxim...” Karine turns to Maxim „I need you to take Charlotte to our place.” She gave me to him.

„I can't just leave you here!”

„Keep her safe”

„Karine, no! Please don't do this” I groaned and tried to squirm out of Maxim's arms.

„I'm sorry Princess, but we must leave them do their thing.” Maxim speeds off with me in his arms and exits the Vixx base while Lia and Karine stayed with Windward. I felt stressed because I didn't know what was happening. I was scared for the girls being there all by themselves.

In the middle of running, Maxim suddenly stops. Are we already at their place? I must admit, that was quick. I opened my eyes; we were in the middle of the forest. There wasn't anything except trees.

„Why have we stopped?” I asked, but there was no answer. Maxim looked in one direction and I decided to do the same thing. I was terrified. I saw a “little explosion.”

It looked so small because it was miles away. I could hear a little boom.

„No!” I screamed with tears in my eyes. They rolled down to my face and I started sobbing. „They're dead! Karine and Lia are dead!”

„Don't think like that Princess” Maxim said trying to calm me down. “What matters now is that we're safe.”

I can't calm down. They're dead! They were like a family to me! I cannot just lose them! Especially Karine, she was nice to me from the start! I wish that we could spend more time together. I started breathing fast. Again, I wasn't feeling that good. I think I'm going to have a panic attack. I was pale and everything started to go black.

„Charlotte, calm down. We're okay, we are safe. Nothing bad can happen to us.” Maxim's words calmed me down a bit. I was so preoccupied by this shock that I forgot that I was dying.

„Help...me” I said with a dead tone.

Maxim was panicking. He continued speeding across the forest. I closed my eyes. It's like peace is calling me. I wanted to go to sleep so badly, but I was fighting against myself. I knew that I was going to die. But if I die then I'll see the girls! I'll see Karine and Lia. But what about my family and friends? They'll keep looking for me. I must choose life or death, but whatever I chose I knew that I was going to be with people I loved.

Again, Maxim stopped. I made my decision. I have known these people for months. But my family. I cannot leave them! I have known them for as long as I can remember! I was opposed not to fall asleep, but it was so strong! Everything went black and I lost consciousness.

Chapter 6:

I woke up. Everything was still black; I couldn't see anything. I heard a voice, a familiar one. That voice was saying something, but I couldn't understand it. Eventually I opened my eyes and saw Karine. She was holding me in her arms. She was smiling at me, everything around her was so bright.

„Am I dead?” I asked her.

Karine laughed a little then said: „No! Why would you be?”

„Because you are?” I was now confused. What's going on? She was dead and I'm not dead and we're both not dead. How this all thing happened? Didn't she die in that explosion with Lia?

„Is Lia also alive?” I asked

„She is”

„How!?! Didn't you both die in that explosion?”

„We didn't Charlotte” she continued „We both escaped before the explosion happened.”

Of course, that makes sense! Why didn't I think that in the first place? I can't believe that I had a panic attack because of this! I was sobbing so hard for nothing! Are you kidding me!?

„Where am I?“ I asked, trying to get up.

Karine stops me from getting up and pulls me even closer into her arms. She quizzes me.

„You're not going anywhere! You're too weak!“ she continued: „We are in a hut, far away from here. „Our place“ if it's a little clearer for you.“

„What happened when Maxim and I arrived at this place?“ I asked because I overslept that part.

„He was panicking, but then found some bandages and covered the place you were shot. He wasn't good at it, but he succeeded. The problem was he didn't squeeze hard enough so the whole attempt was for nothing. After that, we came, and I took the whole thing in my hands. You were bleeding a lot, you almost died. I was trying my hardest to save you and I eventually did it. The most confusing thing was so much blood came out of you, you're supposed to be dead. I don't know how you survived. It was a miracle.“

„Thank you, Karine“ I softly smiled at her. She saved me!

She smiles at me back. The whole situation was sweet. It was so peaceful. I could fall asleep again. The feeling was like heaven. I questioned myself again „am I dead?“ Our eye contact ruined the door opening.

The twins came in. Maxim runs to me and says: „You look more alive than before“ Lia opened her mouth in shock „Maxim!? What is wrong with you!?“

Karine gives him a death stare „You shouldn't have said that.“

„Leave it girls, it's okay“ I said trying to calm the whole situation down.

Lia also approaches me and asks: „Are you feeling any better sweetheart?“

„Much more alive than before“ Maxim and I started laughing so hard. I had to say it, I couldn't resist. I barely survived. The girls sighed. They couldn't believe what we were laughing at. Maxim pulls something out of his pocket. „Charlotte look! I found this delicious candy. I know it expired 5 years ago, but I don't care.“

I wanted to laugh so bad, but I was trying not to.

„Let's go Maxim“ Lia said and pulled his ear. They left the room.

Chapter 7:

A week passed and Karine let me walk. My health was better than before. I was wondering about something for days and wanted to ask Karine about it. I was watching TV.

„What about Windward? Did he survive?” I speak out.

Karine was looking at me with a confused face. What’s so confusing about my question? I just asked how Windward was? As I said, I didn’t want anyone to be hurt. Not even Windward. Karine turns off the TV and started speaking: „Don’t worry, he won’t hurt you again.”

Why did she break eye contact? Something is wrong with her. I need to question her more to see what happened with Windward.

„Tell me what happened to him?”

„Why do you care about him so much!? He hurt you, Charlotte; you need to know that! He was a bad person.” Karine started yelling at me.

I tried to be calm and said with a nice tone: „Please tell me what happened to him.”

„Do you really want to know? Okay I’ll tell you. He’s dead! I killed him!”

I was shocked at her words. Why did she kill him? He didn’t deserve to die! No one does! I can’t believe she’s a murderer.

„Did he really had to die?” I asked with compassion

Karine was now in even more confusion. She looked at me with a face “are you okay?” Karine clearly doesn’t understand. I thought that she was a good person. She was good to me, but now she wants revenge. I don’t want that! That’s bad, that’s awful!

„I don’t understand” Karine said with a still confused face.

„He didn’t deserve to die! Nobody does!” I opposed

„Charlotte he’s evil! He did an awful thing to you! I would never forgive him what he did to you!”

„I would” I said, Karine says in quiet. She had no words.

I continued: „Why did you kill him? What was the reason to do such a horrible thing?”

„I didn’t want him to hurt you or the twins” she said

I shake my head in disbelief. It all makes sense, but I didn’t want to accept the truth. This is all too much for me. I need a break.

„I can’t deal with this right now!” Karine says leaving the room. I didn’t know where she was going, so I curiously followed her.

She went to another room and started packing some useful things. I didn’t know what she was doing.

„Goodbye Charlotte”

„Where are you going!?” I asked in fear because I knew what was about to happen.

„Away” she said and my heart broke. Why is she leaving me? I didn’t do anything bad!

„What!? Why?“ I asked crying. She could hear the pain in my voice.

„I am not a good person, I didn't kill just kill Windward, I killed other people, innocent ones“ she said closing the bag.

I couldn't move. I felt hurt. As much as I was in fear and shock, I wanted her to stay with me so badly.

„You're safe, away from Vixx, your friends will find you and take you home“ She starts heading towards the door.

„No, wait! Don't leave me! Karine!!“ I screamed with pain in my voice.

„I love you so much baby“ Karine says leaving the house.

„No!“ I started sobbing so loud like a baby. She left me here! I wanted to scream so hard, but I couldn't. So, I stayed broken on the floor. I knew my family and friends would take me home, but it wouldn't be the same without Karine. I was always afraid of losing someone I loved. That happened before I expected. How am I going to live without her? First time in my life I felt depressed. If I look on the bright side, I still have twins. They'll take them too. I knew that.

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AD ASTRA

It had started without a warning, without a sound.

Astronauts from China, on a mission to carve out a new frontier – dead upon breaching the border to the outer universe. Then, the Russians. The proud Russians on a mission to establish a colony on an uninhabited planet in the far corners of the galaxy – only bits from their ship discovered, floating near Bermuda.

The burial rites were a mere formality.

Their bodies remained there, in the galaxy, hidden among the stars.

Rovers and probes provided little explanation to these mysterious disappearances and body cameras on the astronauts' suits, while recording their last moments, only caught glimpses, snapshots into the sprawling void which had swallowed them.

Unimaginable colours, pouring into one another.

A viscose, effervescent miasma, and smouldering lights.

Vast collections of stars, gas, and dust, stretching towards the abyss.

Records of their conversations, what was salvaged from the wreckage near Bermuda, was a sole clip no longer than five seconds – a garbled whisper, barely audible through the deep hum, droning in the background.

It is so bright. I do not know what it wants, the astronaut's voice rang, If it wants.

It horrified the scientists to discover this because it forced humanity to confront our own nescience, to admit to our limitations.

We explained it the only way we knew how, with methods we thought were infallible, absolute.

We hypothesized explanations, that the astronauts were swallowed by a black hole or stranded on some isolated planet in outer space, driven mad...

We comforted ourselves with explanations understandable to our fragile minds.

We buried any uncertainty.

I know, now.

I know better.

You see, in the farthest stretches of our universe – in corners ancient and forgotten

– there are things most people would never believe, and fewer would understand.

Old things, old truths.

Old beings.

Beings like the one I had encountered on my final voyage.

How do I describe this in a way you will believe, much less understand? Perhaps, I cannot. Perhaps, it is impossible. Perhaps, I should not even try.

So, instead, I will describe how I encountered The Universe.

I had grown up believing that the world I was born into was cursed.

Earth was dying. Over the decades. Eroded, withered.

Humanity had debilitated her, allowed the wounds we had inflicted over millennia to fester and pustulate as we continued to topple her mountains, desiccate rainforests, and burrow into her core until our bellies were bursting with her saccharine flesh.

We laughed as she pleaded to be saved, continued to worship our golden calves with clouded eyes.

Still, not enough.

Humanity turned to the stars, guided by our own destructive hubris, our own insatiable curiosity.

We explored and discovered as we always have – with a desire to chart celestial bodies, to soar through the cosmos on iron wings.

We excavated the corpses of dead stars, drilled through planets in search for materials, invaded the orbits of moons as pale as bone with steel shuttles and pressure-resistant satellites – and, as decades passed, we thought we had discovered all there was to know about the universe surrounding us.

No constellation was foreign to us, no star innominate...

So, a race had begun. A race to claim, to purchase, to colonise.

Private investors, narcissistic billionaires – those with enough money to invest in a voyage across the stars developed projects – to conquer the unknown. These had been distractions, I realised, to force our attention away, squash whatever hope remained for our planet.

No one remembered the countries drowning beneath the pearlescent ocean, the barren soil, and desecrated ecosystems once the competition was announced.

Several locations in the galaxy had already been claimed in an international auction, exclusive to those wealthy enough to afford the invitations. The United States, Russia, China, Germany... They had all participated and separated the Milky Way among themselves, and soon enough, they had begun to weld steel frames, create

iron caskets for their astronauts to inhabit – to expand more, claim more.

They had guaranteed our safety.

They had promised us a new future.

We believed them.

So, I was the last astronaut on Earth brave enough to sail across the cosmos, aware I may never find my way home.

The world had commended me after I volunteered to venture into the ‘Glowing Sea’ – an area in the outer universe which had eluded human grasp, where my comrades had vanished. We knew nothing about it, and with absolute certainty in our knowledge and expertise, we had decided to conquer it. One last time.

World leaders had praised me, with sickening grins stretching across their faces.

Brave, the media had claimed, when my voyage was announced to the masses.

I was not brave.

I was a *coward*.

I had not decided to participate in this suicide mission, with a hollow smile on my lips, in some altruistic pursuit to benefit mankind. No, it was a selfish desire – one I had thoroughly deliberated on in my mind, passing through each excruciating detail as a comb through tangled hair.

I had peered out the window that evening, before my voyage, chewing my nails to the bone. The sky had been blank, polluted by the invisible particles floating through the atmosphere, while cracked concrete stretched on without end.

The truth was... I wanted to escape from Earth, from humanity.

I was just too afraid to outright end it.

I had been preparing for months. The letter I had written was on my nightstand, along with my wallet and the keys to my apartment.

It was all I had.

My last connection to humanity.

Even that word – ‘humanity’ – I hated by association.

I hated humanity, hated my existence and the world into which I was born.

To travel outside its ever-growing reach, to untether myself from these people... Was it so bad, to want that? Human companionship exhausted me, and I discovered early on I could not love fellow humans on an intimate level, could not allow them to be so close as to form attachments.

I could only love humanity from afar, engrossed in the sounds of its laughter, staring at its shadows to appreciate their beauty, yet unable to step closer than that.

But, above all, I despised myself – for harbouring so much hatred.

This rage had been boiling inside my, corroding my thoughts, poisoning my heart for so long that I cannot recognise myself without it, without this burning desire to either abandon, or destroy it all.

I was a vile person.

I deserved to disappear without a trace.

So, I had learned to stich a shadow over my eyes, to escape from these thoughts and the world. Pretend I was there, when, in reality, I was soaring through the night sky, catching cosmic dust on my tongue as I rode comets through space, escaping, leaving everything behind me.

I had always imagined it was quiet. Space, I mean. Enormous and dark, quiet, and black – pitch-black, blacker than the blackest black anyone could have ever hoped to imagine.

It was where creation had started and where I was the closest to glimpsing what it was like at the very start of the world.

When the time came for me to depart, I beamed as the engineers motioned towards the shuttle, their solemn eyes passing through me and straight to the massive steel entrance. I climbed into my seat, enthusiastic as I fastened my seat belt.

They closed with a hiss, and a voice greeted me from the comm link attached to my helmet.

Are you ready?

Affirmative. Good to go.

Roger that. Prepare for lift-off in three, two, one...

The shuttle vibrated, the clangour reverberating across the walls and forcing my body to shake. The metal husk clinked and clanked when as the exhaust system began to spew liquid fire from its maw.

Godspeed, astronaut.

I bid the Earth farewell with one last glance to the ground below me, sailing away from the last remaining vestiges of a world I would never return to – at the scientists and engineers, who remained chained to the ground, far enough down that I could only describe them as ants now, little blotches in white coats and yellow hard hats.

The colours changed from a piercing white as I passed the sunlight petering down to Earth, to a divine blue littered with bulbous silver clouds, then to a stunning orange and then, an ethereal black.

Breaching the surface was intense, as the shift in gravity was a violent transition from a relaxed position to my body lifting up from the chair, which was prevented only by the safety harness.

The spacecraft ventured further, weaving through cosmic debris as a needle through thread. I unfastened my seat belt as I adjusted to the sensation of my body being untethered from the ground and inched toward the widows.

I never believed in the divine; had never attended Sunday mass, nor had I celebrated Christmas and Easter... To me, it was absurd – but not in the childish way most people thought, I did not forgo religion because I laughed at the notion of an old man in the sky judging my every decision – no, I renounced religion because it all seemed so... pointless.

What was religion, if not a desperate attempt to explain away the anguish which had followed humanity through history, from the very beginning up until now, our end?

It was a futile attempt at giving that suffering some divine meaning, a purpose.

The Church always claimed this intrinsic connection to God, this heavenly thread, was something you sensed all around you, down to the very bone. They claimed God was everywhere, perched on glass blades, washing his face with dewdrops on fresh autumn mornings; that he rode the wind as it rustled the leaves, and that he sung to every single person on Earth in an angelic orchestra, inviting us to join, sing along.

I had never challenged their beliefs. Though, in secret, I understood they did not know about our cosmic purpose any more than me. I understood they craved to have those burning questions answered for them, rather than confront that universal fear that we, and the world around us, was a mere fluke, that our lives had been nothing more than the result of a coincidental collision. They refused to admit it was all... pointless.

I envied them, at times. I could not see what they saw, could not believe in something with a burning passion as earnestly as them, without witnessing it, touching it.

I had decided they were comforting themselves.

Though, I had comforted myself, as well; on those occasions, when I had lied in the meadow outside the city as a child, where barns and silos remained as silent vigils; hollow, abandoned. Where moss and rust had clambered up these impassive titans, devouring their forms, as nature reclaimed what had been stolen. I remembered a particular evening, as I was gazing at the stars, when a torrent of meteors washed over the night sky, plunging beneath the grey clouds from which they sprung, towards the quiet dark that had birthed them. I remembered tittering at the sight, imagining they were dolphins, splashing in the ocean and chasing each other; that the plump clouds were jellyfish, drifting along the horizon in slow motion.

I remembered closing my eyes and exhaling, imagining the dry summer breeze

swooped me from the ground and thrust me toward the sky. I remembered that sensation, the dull gusts cracking across my face, as I swooned toward great expanses of bright cosmic nebulae, picking the stars from constellations as though they were seashells on a stony shore.

It was a sensation I never could explain. Language, mere words – they were too limiting for such a transcendental experience.

It was... peace... acceptance with my place in this world.

I remember inhaling soon afterwards, as though I were swallowing down massive gulps of air after breaching the ocean's surface, and with the slow blink of my eyes, I was there, in the meadow, still bound to the ground.

These vivid dreams had morphed into haunting nightmares as I continued living, as I transitioned into adulthood and scolded myself for even daring to imagine such frivolous things – such escapes from this crushing reality.

They haunted me, still, each time I stared at the night sky; haunting me each time I unfurled my arms to greet the horizon and envelope the sky...

I sensed this realisation poison my heart, force my muscles into atrophy with its overwhelming weight.

Things have changed since I was a young child, from those times I had gazed at the sky on gentle evenings, and those bright stars which had clumped together in clusters reminded me of fish, glittering fish shoaling together, while the planes flying overhead seemed like sharks, attempting to tear them apart.

I was difficult, living with the fact how vast the universe was – beyond me, beyond humanity, beyond this world I was born into.

That was God.

That inexplicable connection between the world and the universe – the spiritual aspect to life on Earth most people seemed to have forgotten, or abandoned in favour of the material, corporal one.

The shuttle rumbled, pulling me from my thoughts.

In a split second, I collided with the steel-lined wall behind me. My head smacked into it with a thud, a sudden burst of white coating my vision and then –

falling

falling

falling

then black.

Astro – hhrk – t. Yo – th – chhk – re?

Glow – hrrrk – ea – chhhkgh – interr – transmis – hhhhhk!

I awoke with a blunt ache spreading across my forehead, the shuttle spinning around me. I could not discern the faint silhouettes of objects as they poured into one another before me, morphing into an incomprehensible blur – a mixture of pure white and black, pounding against my eyelids.

I hissed, wanting to soothe the bruises bubbling on the back of my head, but unable to due to the helmet and heavy suit – and suddenly I remembered where I was – why I was there.

Right away, I floated towards the window, even as my joints ached, and my body wished to rest.

Anxiety began twisting my stomach into knots as I approached. Something in my body, my nerves, warned me not to approach, to stay away. I resisted the urge to run, deciding, instead, to indulge my curiosity.

Something compelled me – invited me, *sung to me*.

The icy temperature outside crept into the shuttle, nipping at my nose and fingers. My breath clouded the window. I pressed my hands against it, a shiver crawling up my spine.

My eyes widened; throat corded, dry.

I gulped.

Shock, astonishment, and wonder were not enough to describe the remarkable sight, and what I felt when I laid my eyes upon it...

The border to the Glowing Sea! It existed! The scientists, they were right!

But, it was not a black hole, or the product of a mind driven insane by isolation.

No, no, no – it was – it was some type of bubble.

But... a bubble... in outer space?

What the – How could...?

The astronauts before me, they must have entered it without knowing. Though, how could they not know...? It was difficult to miss.

It was bright, so bright it almost blinded me with its intensity, and enveloped in a substance which glowed with radiant pinks, blues, and whites. They emanated from its undulating form; greasy and liquid, billowing and swelling to a massive size, before the mass ruptured and decreased, all in a continuous cycle – as though it were rearranging its structure, forever changing.

I stared, mouth agape, as the mass rippled, as though made from thick sludge.

When I strained my eyes, behind it, I noticed movement.

Was it... Were the astronauts still alive?

How...?

I continued observing, unable to turn my gaze elsewhere.

Astro – chhhhhk – na – hrrk – t? Rep – ghzzzzzt – eat. Th – kghhhhh – re?

*Te – ghzzzt – us – kghhhk – wh – chhhhhk – er – fzzzzzt – e. Los – iiiinkgh – khht
– sig – kghhhhh – nal.*

I clasped my hand around the comm link and tore it from the helmet, crushed it against the wall. It was distracting me, stealing my attention from this – this –

Was this God?

Was this where God was?

In this indescribable myriad of clashing colours and lights, and star dust sprinkled throughout? This tidal wave, retreating before a sudden push forward, collapsing and swallowing itself whole?

It was...

Beautiful.

A quiet, almost inaudible, hum emerged from some distant corner, though I was not sure where from – from my mind, the shuttle, or the sprawling mass outside. I shook my head in an attempt to drown out the noise, my eyes remaining glued to the mass as it changed colour and burned even brighter.

Louder. The noise grew ever louder, penetrating the silence. Then, it changed. Fractured into a million different sounds – hums, croaks, groans, thrums... All dissipating and melting and... and singing *to me* in a broken cacophony.

My head spun, ears ringing as the noise became unbearable.

I wanted to clasp my hands over them, protect them, but could not... move my muscles.

I laid my pounding head against the wall, entranced by the melody. I swayed, lips stretching out into a grin.

Was this how I die? Listening to this melody?

Closing my eyes and exhaling, I recalled that childhood memory – floating, staring at the stars.

How happy I was, in that moment.

Oh, how happy I wanted to be like that again.

Oh, how I craved that inner peace.

Would that sludge be soft to the touch? Would my hands sink through it? Would my body disappear?

That beautiful glow... It was inviting *me*.

Singing to me.

I must see it.

I must touch it touch it touch it touch it touch it touch it touch it touch it tou-

*The universe... was **singing to me!***

I tore myself from the wall and paddled to the sealed entrance. My gloved fingers gripped the valve until my knuckles turned white beneath the fabric. I gritted my teeth and began to turn.

Oxygen did not matter. The temperate did not matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing but basking in that warmth. Touching that undulating bubble *nothing nothing nothing nothing*-

The ringing crackled like static, morphing into an angelic voice, inviting me to cross the barrier, giving me strength to turn the valve one last before the door hissed open, sucking me outside with a violent pull.

You came here to die? The voice beckoned, Come, then, *my little astronaut. I await on the other side.*

God. That was God. In the bubble, writhing inside it.

I bit on my lower lip, tasting the blood as I swam until my calves cramped and my arms surrendered from exhaustion.

I swam until I saw it – saw the bubble, saw God.

My breaths grew strained, laborious. Lungs bursting at the seams. Gasping, struggling to breathe.

So close...

So, so close...

Within my grasp, that beautiful light. Close enough that the warmth enveloped my body and shielded me from this cold nothingness. Everything... going white, so white... searing my retinas, burning.

What was this?

.

I came here to die.

Was I dead?

A blinding light.

Falling inside, being submerged.

A struggle to breathe.

Burning sensation... Water in my lungs?

A primordial darkness.

Welcome, child.

I opened my eyes to find I was in a vast ocean, except, I was no longer bathed in eternal darkness; I was floating in an otherworldly blue light which flickered and pulsed, as though alive.

I blinked, confused, my hands moving to my throat. It was burning just a moment ago. It was fine. My eyes, too.

What was going on? Since when can people breathe underwater?

“Am I dead? What is this?”

You need not worry about that, now.

Startled by the booming voice, the same one which had invited me across the barrier, I turned to find an enormous eye constructed from several rings, each with a different pattern, burning in various colours and whirling around its axis – an effervescent centre, which spewed a red mist into its surroundings. The iris appeared to gush stars, dust, gas, and other materials – no, not just cosmic debris, but flesh, bone, and sinew.

“I don’t understand...” I coughed, tasting salt on my tongue. “Where am I? What is this?”

I squinted my eyes.

There were other creatures floating around.

I recognised a whale’s lumbering silhouette, gently drifting past me as it wailed, giant sea turtles with overgrown thickets on their shells, and then some beings which were completely foreign to me. Some appeared to be unrecognizable monsters, with mutilated torsos constructed from protruding bones and writhing flesh, while others had a humanoid form...

What struck me, however, was that they floated around, despite the fact that they appeared to be... Well, unfinished. When I say that, I mean that some lacked *whole* bodies, and waddled around as outlines filled with cosmic dust and debris; while others drifted along with exposed muscle and bone, with blood and entrails dangling behind them.

Then, there were those who were unravelling before my eyes, with bloated skin and decomposing flesh tearing from them in chunks that smelled of sweet rot and decay.

Plants were present, as well; ones I recognised from the meadow in my childhood memory, and ones which had been extinct for millennia, clambering up from the darkness below me and stretching out far above.

“What are you?”

These are difficult questions to answer. I am not a 'what', though I am not a 'who', either. I am a little of both – I suppose – as well as neither of the two.

I am Creation. I am Chaos. I am their infinite continuation. I am their Cycle.

*I **am** The Universe.*

“Are you...” I swallowed. “Are you God?”

I was given many names. One of them was, indeed, God.

“I must be dead...” I laughed from the shock and sheer absurdity. “This cannot be real.”

A silent moment passed between us; I spoke again.

“Where are the others? Are they dead?”

Death is simply another stage, little astronaut. There is only another phase after it, another form you – in your totality – shall take.

“Quit babbling nonsense! Just tell me what I’m doing here!”

*You are the one who wondered into **my** realm, little astronaut. What are **you** doing here?*

“I... I was in the shuttle, on a mission to reach the Glowing Sea – and then I hit my head, I think. When I woke up, I saw this bubble, and a voice was singing to me. Your voice. I had to see...”

Ah, you ventured beyond what your corporeal form can manage, little one. Humans were not created to reach this place... Is that why you followed my voice, to end it?

I hesitated, avoiding the eye’s burning gaze. “No. I was sent to see what happened to the missing astronauts. To recover their bodies.”

I hear your thoughts, little astronaut. I know the truth. Why do you seek to destroy yourself?

The voice grew soft, fracturing in two – one masculine, and the other feminine.

Tell me, why do you hate my creations? I made you; do you know that? I moulded you from the finest materials – hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen... I sprinkled gold, calcium... sulphur. There is organic in you, and there is cosmic; interwoven, observing life, witnessing it.

In you, in all my creations.

*I made you perfect the way you are. You **must** cherish what I have given you, little one.*

Please, do not break my heart.

From one, to two, and now, to three, the voices split. Shattered, fighting to speak.

The little astronauts before you... I claimed them, returned them home. My little creations... They had ventured far astray. I had to crack them open, build anew. To

allow the Cycle to continue.

The iris turned to a corner where several human-shaped constellations lied, with sinew and bone pushing out from their hollow forms, spilling out into The Universe. Farther away, there were two wreckages – the Chinese and Russian space shuttles, hidden behind dense vegetation.

I am afraid I have to reclaim you, as well, little astronaut.

“Wait, I don’t... I’m not sure I want to, anymore. To die, I mean. I want to go home.”

The voices combined into a singular voice once again, and this one sounded... strange, ethereal.

I am sorry, little astronaut. Humans cannot survive the journey to my realm. My fragile, little creatures... You perished on your way here. Your lungs had been deprived of oxygen. I have to take you back.

“But...” I sobbed; everything I had seen and experienced crashed down onto me, bringing me to tears. “I wasted so much time feeling like... *this*. Horrible and bitter and – Can’t I make up for it, somehow? It can’t end like this! Please...!”

Hush, little astronaut. Close your eyes.

My legs disintegrated beneath me, slowly, as I stared at The Universe in desperation.

You shall return to Earth, in some form or other – be it an atom, or an oxygen particle, or another creature entirely. Whichever form you may take; we will meet again.

You reside in my every creation, and my every creation resided within you.

“I can’t... I can’t make peace with it.” The rot inched upwards, my bones cracking and unfolding to reveal brilliant stars and new constellations emerging from the sinew in my exposed muscles. “What about the Earth? What about all the suffering going on there?”

Remember, my little astronaut. Life is agony. It is hard. It contains great despair beyond our control.

It is Chaos... sudden and overwhelming.

Images of war, destruction, poverty, and starvation, flashed across my mind.

Suffering.

So abundant, and ever-present.

Components, both organic and cosmic, tore from my ears, nose, and eyes, in chunks, leaving nothing behind, but sodden cavities.

Only a single, wiry thread kept me from collapsing in totality.

It is beautiful. Intriguing and profound.

It is Creation.

Childhood memories of meteor showers and celestial spheres swept over my rotating mind.

It is their infinite Cycle.

With a sudden pull, I unravelled at the seams.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, one final time.

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institution: Ekonomsko-birotehnička škola Slavonski Brod

Noa Midžić

WILD WEST

Once upon a time, three outlaws, Micah O’Craig, Jason MacGuire and Blake Johnson, were wanted dead or alive, because of terrible things they were doing... They were often stealing supplies from general stores, robbed two banks in two different towns and managed to escape the law so many times... They even robbed a villa of an aristocratic family and took all the money and valuables - even their expensive and beautiful horses. That was 10 years ago.

Now, they moved to a new camp near Hunter’s Creek. One day, they were just waking up after a long nap, preparing to rob a wagon full of fire weapon.

“Alright, fellas, let’s go!” Jason said. They were waiting for the wagon to arrive to the gunsmith’s, in a little town called Deadwood.

“Boys, do you hear that? That must be it! Masks up!” Blake whispered a bit loudly.

A wagon was noisily going down the main road. The gang pulled up with their horses, wearing black, dusty bandanas to cover their faces. They pointed their guns at the gunsmith and asked him for his name. He said his name was Jack Granger.

“Hands up! Open the trunk! Boys, take the weapons and run, I’ll catch up with you!” Micah yelled. Jason and Blake did what he said, took all the weapons and ran away.

While Micah was confronting Mr. Granger, he heard someone riding really fast near him. Micah knew someone had been following them, but he thought it was just because of whiskey. But, it was not. Sheriff Duke had been following them for a long time. He was behind them all the time, riding so silently, the gang didn’t notice him at all.

The old sheriff pulled up and arrested Micah.

“Where is the weapon, you little Irish scoundrel?” he asked aggressively. Micah said there were no weapons. However, the gunsmith said that the other two masked cowboys had taken all the weapons and ran away with them.

Sheriff Duke tied Micah and put him on his black, long-haired mustang. He threw

Micah in a dark cell, next to his little office. Micah was so anxious and upset, knowing that he would be executed next day.

Later that night...

Jason and Blake were at the camp, cleaning the weapons they had stolen, while celebrating and drinking whiskey they had also stolen in one of their earlier adventures.

“Where is that boy... Micah?” Blake asked himself loudly.

“I don’t know... Should we go for him?” Jason answered and asked back.

“No. It’s not safe yet.”

Blake decided that it would be safer to wait until the sun came up.

Besides, they saw someone in the dark, near the camp, holding the torch. At first, they thought it was Micah, but that was Red Eagle, a Native American from the reservation far away from the camp. He was getting closer and closer.

“I am coming in peace, brothers,” Red Eagle said.

“Good evening, brother, sit with us by the fire,” Jason invited him politely. He gave him some hot coffee and some water and apples for his horse. Red Eagle told them that Micah would be executed the following morning. When they heard the sad news, they were so upset and nervous. Micah was like a son to them. They found him as a little boy, after he had escaped from Ireland because his parents had been killed in front of him.

After sitting and thinking in silence for a while, they suddenly looked at each other and realized that they had been thinking about the same thing. Jason, Blake and Red Eagle suddenly stood up, took their weapons, untied the horses and went to Deadwood to save Micah.

Early next morning...

When they arrived to Deadwood, they saw a big crowd of people, standing in front of the gallows, where poor Micah was standing with the rope around his neck, waiting for the executioner to pull the handle. The executioner was scary-looking. He was dressed in black, with a mask covering his face and a shotgun on his back, just in case. He was so big and fat, like a circus strongman.

Red Eagle told the gang to get on the gallows and kill the executioner before it was too late. Blake got up on the gallows and pointed his gun at the executioner, but he didn’t want to kill him because he was kind-hearted.

He knew that the executioner was just doing his job, even though he didn't want to. He was doing it for his family, so he could bring them food. At least that is what Blake was thinking.

Jason also got up on gallows and pointed his gun at the priest that was asking God to have mercy on Micah's soul. Of course, Jason did not kill him, as he was the only one who was religious and had been raised by nuns. Red Eagle took his knife, cut the rope that was hanging from the top of the gallows, and he put Micah behind him, on his horse.

Deadwood is a small town, there was only one sheriff and one police officer, so they didn't have any problems escaping with Micah.

They got back to camp easily. Micah was so happy, and had so much luck. If they had come a minute later, he would have already been hanged.

In the meantime, in Deadwood, things were also happening fast. Not having enough of his own men, Sheriff Duke hired some big guys to go after all of the gang members.

One week later, at the camp...

"Hey Blake, let's go for a hunt! Sharpen some arrows!" Micah commanded.

"Don't go too far, fellas, they could hang Micah, but this time for real!" Jason laughed.

And we have come to the end of the story. Lives of these men changed a lot. A few years later, Micah got deported back to Ireland. He was so sad because he needed to go back to the country he had forgotten about. He made sure his parents got a proper burial. Blake Johnson became a bounty hunter, and started working for the law enforcement. He was not proud that his life had gone on the wrong path in the past and blamed nobody but himself for that. Now, he was a changed man. Jason MacGuire had built his own ranch, but Sheriff Duke managed to take all of it from him because of his criminal activities in the past. Now he is a hunter and a salesman, living in a small room above his godfather Elijah's saloon. Red Eagle was captured by those big guys Sheriff Duke had sent. They didn't kill him, but they used his hunting skills, so they could survive in the woods and the mountains.

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Antonio Baćac

TAWNY THRONE ROOM BARGAIN

CHAPTER 1:

Where it all began

As the clock struck midnight Alexander Knight clocked off from work, his headache was all but better, and his tired eyes scoured the street as he opened the door and walked out of his office. It was a night – black as a raven, and the only things that could be heard were sounds of distant sirens and the occasional owl’s shriek. Alex knew what the sirens meant - the fire that broke out this morning in the city park was still raging on. While working Alex found out that the fire was quickly spreading towards houses, but the fire chief said that *his boys* were about to ambush the fire and put it under control. As he locked the office, he thought about that statement and concluded, ‘*Seems as if they weren’t fast enough.*’ After locking the office Alex began the silent walk to the joyful after-hours joint, he was invited to, he sent a message to his cherished, telling her not to wait for him as he would be heading out to hang out with his friends. Walking through an intersection he looked at his phone, Jessica, his girlfriend sent him a photo, and upon opening it a smile sneaked itself up to his tired face, the photo contained the results of her latest exam - she passed with flying colours. He exited the photo and went to call her, but at that moment he heard tires screeching and the world went black, the last thing he felt was the coldness of concrete on his skin, he also felt a burning sensation, adrenaline, racing through his veins before it all went quiet again.

He woke up in a dark, misty place, he jumped to life and jumped up, almost as if he was propelled by some sort of a jet engine. His heart was racing and he looked around. ‘*It can’t be, I can’t die... not now...*’ the thought barely grazed his mind before it disappeared into the mist, he found himself staring at. It was a dark room, Alex couldn’t see anything, well, he couldn’t see anything he recognized, just vari-

ous shapes and colours partially hidden by the never-ending cloud of mist that was spread around the room. As his eyes did their best to make anything out of the shapes and colours exchanged in front of him a pair of bright yellow eyes appeared from the grim darkness. A figure approached, it was unclear to Alex if this figure was a man or a woman, or even if it was a human, either way, there was a special feeling awoken in Alex when he felt the warmth of the figure's eyes. It made Alex feel as if he was completely safe and nothing would harm him.

“Mr Knight!” a deep and deeply disrupted voice spoke out to Alex, it made him stutter.

“Y-yes?” somewhat intimidated by the mysterious eyes that were now only a short distance from him, staring straight into his soul.

“Oh good, I already thought I had the wrong man killed!” The man spoke with a sarcastic manner to his tone before bursting out into laughter, soon enough calming himself down.

Alex froze, unsure of what to do, not knowing if he should laugh or not, if he should say anything or just stay quiet, maybe even try, and run, after thinking about the options he made a quick decision to just fake a smile, not even a laugh, just a plain smile.

“I see you're not the sarcastic type. Well, let's just get down to business then... As you've probably come to realize you've died, but do not fear, this is not the end. To be honest it's far from it. It's just a new chapter in your life, from this day forward you'll have a new purpose... a new life... and a new opportunity to achieve whatever you want. But listen to me carefully, for you will not get the chance to hear these things again, and you certainly won't get another life. Once you wake up, you'll remember little to nothing from your past life, all you'll remember will be talking to me. Your new life will be rather difficult even though such a life can be very deceiving and often makes people think it's rather easy. You'll be a king, the ruler of a small kingdom, and since I know you'd like to go back to your old life right about now you will get the chance to do so, but only after proving to me that you're worthy of a second chance.”

“W-what do you mean that I'm worthy?” Alex demanded, hoping he'd get an answer but deep inside thinking he wouldn't.

“Well, well, well... If I were to tell you it wouldn't be fun, now, would it?” the man would laugh again, soon calming himself down just like the last time, but this time making a strange gesture with his completely black hand before slowly walking off

into the mist. Alex felt a weird sensation, a wave of lethargy swept over him and put him to sleep, he barely got the chance to react before it happened.

CHAPTER 2:

A new day, a new world?

The light breeze woke Alex, he felt it gently running down his body before moving on through the air with no barricades in its way, flowing like water, adapting to all obstacles. He opened his eyes and without hesitation, jumped up and looked around, unsure of where he was. He put his currently jobless hand to his forehead, realizing he has a pounding headache, but it was somewhat masked by the fact that the landscape he found himself staring at was completely unfamiliar to him. It took him a moment to realize he was on a balcony, observing a mountainous landscape covered in vast forests and massive fields used for agriculture, below him, was a bustling city, its streets were made of stone, and so were its buildings, the only exceptions were the eventual shacks which were made completely out of wood, every house had a simple wooden roof. Alex concluded, this was some sort of a medieval city, but he could not recognize any landmarks that would point him in the direction of where he exactly was.

With that, he sighed and turned around, heading into the strange medieval-decorated bedroom, a large banner was hung on the wall across the bed, a black dragon on a tawny background, and below it a shield with the same markings, Alex continued looking around, spotting a specially made cushion on which a crown was laid, he slowly approached the shining golden crown and picked it up, placing it on his head and looking at the nearest mirror, approaching it and looking at it. His reflection showed the crown was a perfect fit, sitting on his head like it was made just for him and him alone. As he watched himself in the mirror, he noticed an open birdcage next to the bed behind him, he turned around and approached it, looking around for the bird that was at some point in there. As he got closer, he noticed black feathers were thrown around in the cage, they were as black as that silhouette of a man from before, nearly identical to him. And right at that moment, on cue, a raven with the same colours flew into the room and landed on Alex's shoulder, looking at Alex with curiosity in the same yellow eyes the man from before had. Although Alex felt somewhat confused, he also felt awfully familiar.

The raven spoke into Alex's ear, and as if some miracle happened Alex understood him: "So, today is your first day as King. Don't freeze up and you'll do fine..." the ra-

ven said and flew away. Alex picked up a royal coat that sat on the bed, it also had the same tawny colour that the banners had on them. He put on the coat and went over to the large wooden doors, decorated with fine wooden carvings, he grabbed the handles and opened the doors, on the other side were multiple servants, they were all waiting for him, and he was a little confused, but remembered the words spoken to him by the man with the yellow eyes. He was now a king, and he had to act like one, even if he was unfamiliar with the complete situation. A servant walked up to him and offered him a glass of water, Alex reached for it and noticed something strange, he knew exactly where he needed to go, and he knew exactly how to get to the throne room, but putting that aside he took the water and drank it before returning it to the servant, as Alex arrived to a large door he was greeted by guards who opened it for him and let him in, the large room had the tawny banners hanging on each wall, in the middle was a large throne *'Alas, a place to rest a little, my legs feel like I've been walking the whole day...'*, aside from the large throne there was a large queue of people waiting to see the king, Alex sat on the throne and noticed a map placed on a table next to him, he quietly observed it for a moment before waving his hand at the guard to let the first subject come and talk to him. The guards did so, and a peasant walked up to Alex and kneeled before him.

"My lord, I come from Calcheth, the village elders sent me to seek your attention and immediate help, since the great floods, our village hunters have claimed to have seen the forces of our neighbouring kingdom, Rhatlia scouring our lands, but these were all but stories up until yesterday when Calcheth was attacked, they pillaged our village, burnt it and left, heading back into the mountains, Sire."

Doing his best to keep up with the villager was Alex, who was still at this point looking for Calcheth on the map he found next to him. But pretending to know what he was doing and what the villager was talking about, Alex spoke out in a stern voice, hoping to install a sort of feeling of safety in everyone in the throne room.

"You will get what you seek. A detachment will be sent to deal with this, so you can plough your fields without fearing for your life," said Alex.

The military man sat on a chair next to Alex and looked at him with little confusion, "But Sir, are you sure this is the right thing to do with the war on the Northern Border?"

Alex's eyes and head quickly turned to the general and thought about it for a second *'Of course, wherever there are knights there will always be wars.'* His eyes returned to the map just so he could look at this "Northern Border" as they called it.

"Yes, I am sure. Even with this war I cannot let my other neighbouring kingdoms

pillage my lands and kill my citizens. Send a detachment at once.”

And with that, the general stood up, nodded and left, the villager left too, happy with the results of this visit to the great tawny throne. A couple more subjects passed through, nothing of importance nor anything that was challenging, Alex felt excited as his first day came to an end, but as the end got closer, he realized it wouldn't be an easy job, he went back to his bedroom and laid down on the bed, the raven flew to the balcony and stood upon it, looking at Alex with those yellow eyes of his.

“So, how was your first day of the rest of your new life?” the raven bent his head slightly to get a better look at Alex who had already been sleeping tight, dead to the world.

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institution: Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

Fran Blažić

FRIDAY 13TH – THE DAY MY HEART STOPPED BEATING

I have never really been superstitious. Things like Friday the 13th, black cats crossing the road and broken mirrors have always been foolish nonsense to me. But there was one Friday the 13th that completely ruined my life, as much as a teenager's life could be ruined.

There was this girl that I liked. She was perfect in every way that a human being can be perfect. Her golden hair illuminated by the warm rays of the sun; her sparkling blue eyes with which she looks at you like an angel and pierces your heart and fills it with calmness, joy, and love. Everything about her was simply perfect.

School had just started. Usually, I would not be so excited, but this time it was different - I knew she would be there.

I was walking up the stairs when I heard a sweet high-pitched voice.

'That sounds familiar,' I thought to myself.

I turned my head and there she was. My heart started pounding so hard that it felt as if it was going to jump out of my chest and spill all my feelings right in front of her. I covered it with my hand to stop it from its intention. It was a feeling that I have never felt before but one that I enjoyed. It was a sign of love.

After a few moments of deep thought, I finally continued my journey to the classroom. As soon as I arrived, my friends showered me with comments on the colour of my cheeks which turned bright red. There was no need to explain it.

The first week of school passed by quickly. On Saturday we decided to go out. Without much deliberation, the go-to place was a local club called 'Alfa'. We arrived around 9 PM. The club was full to the brim. It seemed as if everyone wanted to

mourn their social life so suddenly murdered by the beginning of the new school year. We started to push through the swarm of people, getting stung every now and then by their unpleasing glances upon interrupting the best dance moves of their life. We stopped somewhere in the middle. At least that was what I thought. I could not tell from the vast sea of people surrounding me.

‘So, what are we going to drink?’ one of my friends asked.

‘Whatever there is to drink,’ I answered with a smile on my face. Then I took a deep breath. Suddenly my lungs were filled with an airstream of heavy stifling air. I could not breathe. I lost control of my hands and soon found them on my neck. They were wet. I realized that I was sweating and took my jacket off.

The drinks came and went like the time. I opened my phone.

‘Impossible!’ I thought to myself when I saw that it was already half past two. We soon left.

My eyes were being tortured by a bright source of light. When I opened them, I realized that the sun was the tormentor. It was shining on the sky, smiling evilly at me through the window of my bedroom.

‘Wait, wait, wait...,’ I said jumping out of my bed and reaching for my phone. It was 01:13 PM.

‘WAKE UP! LUNCH IS READY,’ my mother screamed confirming that I slept for far too long.

Although I was awake, I was still quite confused. I didn’t know where I was or what had happened. Everything that I could remember was the first drink and the cold shower I took once I came home. I knew that they were both refreshing.

I was going to text my friends, to confirm that last night really happened and that it wasn’t just a dream when I saw her name among the last conversations. Sweat started dripping down my face. I pinched my left arm hoping that I would wake up from this horrible nightmare. It didn’t work. I was still lying in my bed and her name was still on my phone. I clicked on her name. There were a dozen messages on my screen. I must have texted her last night while I was drunk. I started reading them. It felt as if I was reading my own death sentence.

‘I really like you’

‘Text me sometimes’

‘Why don’t we go out’

I read the last text. And just when I thought that things couldn’t get any worse, I saw, written in small letters, the word ‘seen.’ I fell deeper into despair.

Someone knocked on the door. I quickly put my phone away. It was my mother. She bawled out once again. This time I felt glad about it. It was my salvation. It saved me, at least for a bit, from the atrocity that I felt. I finally got up and headed for the kitchen.

The soup was cold. It must have been waiting for me for far too long. I didn't even bother to check what time it was.

Once the plate was empty, I returned to my bed. My phone was once again in my hands. This time I was texting my friends. They didn't know whether they should cry or laugh.

Some time had passed. This time I dared to take a look at the clock. It was 04:13 PM.

I had only now realized that tomorrow was Monday. That meant that I had to go to school and see her. Usually, I'd look forward to seeing her, but things were quite different now, to say the least. She knew that I was into her.

It was easy to love her and express my feelings while in the shadow, but now that it came to light it became my biggest fear. Perhaps it's because deep inside I feared that she would refuse me. If she were to ask me right now whether my feelings for her were real, I would deny them and betray my love and my heart.

I spent the rest of the day reviewing every possible way that I could avoid our encounter.

Monday welcomed me in the right manner. The sun was blocked by a thick fog that had descended upon the town. The weather was depressing. It was as if my soul had taken a brush and painted the sky in its monotonous colours overnight.

I woke up sooner than I wanted to. It was time to get ready for school. I moved so slowly in hope that it might delay my departure. My plan failed.

Soon, I found myself on the bus. The ride is usually rather long, but this time it passed by in the blink of an eye. I felt as if time itself was moving faster. Perhaps the universe broke all of its fundamental laws just so that we could meet sooner. I smiled at the thought that the universe wanted my love to work out.

Finally, I arrived at school. The first period had passed, and I didn't see her.

'You're doing great. You just have to keep it like that for the next two years,' my friend said mockingly.

'You can laugh if you want, but I'm in real trouble here,' I said trying to defend myself. But deep down I knew that he was right. I couldn't keep avoiding her for the rest of my life.

The whole day passed, and I didn't see a glimpse of her. But, so did the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that.

It was now Friday morning. This time I woke up to a completely clear blue sky. I looked through the window. The sun burnt my skin. I had a feeling that it was going to be an exceptional day. I left the house wearing jeans, which were tighter than usual and suffocated my legs, and a plain T-shirt. As soon as I stepped out, I got chills from the cold breeze that bathed my naked arms. The sun had tricked me. I returned to grab a jacket.

The first few periods passed as usual. There was no sight of her. We were waiting outside the chemistry classroom when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around expecting it was one of my classmates.

It wasn't.

It was one of her friends. She said something, but the words just passed through my head from the shock that I received. Suddenly, her mouth stopped moving. Her eyes were focused on me.

'Yes, of course,' I said realizing that she asked me a question.

She nodded and left. My friends surrounded me. A huge wave of sounds of different colours and pitches hit me. I ignored them all.

I found out later that I agreed to meet with the girl I liked after school. I was actually quite excited.

'But wait, what am I going to give her?' I panicked half an hour before we were supposed to meet.

'Nothing. Why should you give her anything,' my friend answered, disturbed by my question.

'Well, I can't show up empty-handed,' I said taking money out of my pocket.

I went to the local flower shop and bought the most beautiful rose there was.

'It must be for someone very special,' the saleswoman said winking.

I blushed. My cheeks had almost turned to the exact same blood-red colour as the rose.

The time had come. I was walking toward the place we were supposed to meet when I saw her. She was standing there in the distance completely alone like the most perfect flower blooming out of the thick winter snow. She was on her phone. The light from the screen illuminated her face. I hesitated. Then I opened my phone to check that I was there in time.

'Ha! Friday the 13th,' I said quietly once I saw the date on my phone.

Finally, I reached her.

'This is for you,' I said extending the hand which was holding the rose.

She moved it to the side. I trembled.

‘Look,’ she said moving her hair behind her ear, ‘I want nothing to do with you. I don’t like you at all. You are far too bad for my standards. I mean you’re not even attractive. You’re just a stupid moron. If you thought that I liked you,’ she giggled, ‘you were fooling yourself.’

My heart stopped beating. I was not sure whether it was from the words that so cruelly entered my ears or because everything that my heart knew how to do was love her and that love was now betrayed by the only person that kept it alive. I took a deep breath and tried to say something, but the words got lost somewhere in my mouth. Only a few words managed to jump out.

‘But....I... I brought you a rose.’

I tried handing it once again.

This time she took it. But then she broke it in half.

‘I don’t love you,’ she said ripping off the petals.

I felt as if I was the rose. The strings of my heart were ripped apart one by one.

She left.

I stood there in silence for who knows how long. I felt dead. My heart felt dead. I put a hand on it just to check that it was still beating. Nothing. I couldn’t feel a single heartbeat.

It really was Friday the 13th.

But although a horrible thing happened to me, I was enlightened. I finally knew love.

She was perfect, but only in her looks. Her character was spoiled and rotten to the core. I made a giant mistake. I realized that one may search for love with his eyes, but he will only find it with his heart.

‘With love. And forgive me,’ a broken female voice said folding the 10-page letter from her son. Her hands were shaking.

A man was comforting her.

‘He will be greatly missed,’ someone said from the crowd of people surrounding the hole in the ground.

The woman left her husband’s embrace. She stepped forward. Her legs were trembling. Her hand reached for a rose that was lying on the ground. She picked it up and threw it in the hole – the eternal resting place of her dearest son.

*mentor: Anamarija Brzica
institution: II. gimnazija, Split*

Kiara Rogač

AND I FINALLY UNDERSTOOD IT...

“Are you aware?”

...

“That you did it?” Brian asked all the while studying his magnificent self.

“Did what, Brian?” He could be a real pain in the neck sometimes, but I couldn’t hate him for that.

“Oh, Millie, you’ve finished that useless university of yours after five years of complaining.” He was right, I did, I had despised it for so long, and I finished it. Finally.

It has been almost two months since Brian moved from Boston to LA to be with me on my graduation day, and honestly, I could not be more grateful to him. I put on a dress he’d bought me for our second anniversary and was ready to leave the house. We were late, as always, because Brian was unprepared. He wasn’t supposed to do anything during the ceremony, just being there for me and applauding after I finish my outstanding speech.

After what seemed like an eternity, we finally left the house and he made me feel like an idiot because everyone was shooting menacing looks at me after I’d interrupted a girl who was talking. That’s what you get for being late. There’s nothing fashionable about it.

All I wanted was to take that useless piece of paper, throw my mortarboard, and force Brian to go to Boston with his parents. At first, I really loved LA. After all, it had been my home for almost 23 years and made me feel like I had genuine friends and family. But then, my dad cheated and moved somewhere only he knows where. Still, he did not forget to leave me and mom to think about our future.

“We are here, Millie,” Brian interrupted my deep thoughts.

“I know, Brian, I’ve just embarrassed myself in front of everyone only because you are always late, ugh...” I could feel frustration creeping its way through my entire body.

Ms. Hammington called out my name, but I froze and could not move for a couple of moments. Slightly anxious, I stood up and went to the stage. I was waiting, patiently, with thoughts buzzing in my mind and sweaty palms, heavily breathing. Somehow, in a split second every moment in my life felt like a scar on my aching skin, each thought and memory cut deeply until I could not fight a river of tears streaming down my face any longer.

A few moments later

Guns firing, blood-curdling screams piercing the air, and blood. What was happening? The first thing that came to my mind was Brian. *Where is he? Is he alive?* I could not move. *If I move, I am dead.* Could not shout his name, what if I die? I hid behind the curtains of a building that turned out to be a crime scene. Situations like these were made to be for movies, not for my graduation day, without a hint a hint of sarcasm because there was no time to be humorous.

I blacked out for a while, but it became a usual thing for me. A few moments after, I heard my name, it was Brian, thank God he was alive.

I stayed behind the curtain but still tried to give Brian signals so he could find me. He did not see me and, I stayed there for a while.

While I was crouching there, behind those black curtains, heavy thoughts of my past started to flow through my mind, and at that moment, I believed everyone who said that you would suddenly recall every piece of your life, every moment and memory, the happiest and saddest situations, issues, every heartbreak, was absolutely right.

I was only eighteen when I decided to turn my back on everything I had ever wanted, and not because I did not do enough or did not know what to do because I knew it. I knew it from the very first day. I wanted to prove to my father that mom and I were happier after he'd left, but I did not because he never called or texted.

My mom had only me, and I had her, but after meeting Brian, my life changed. Brian taught me how to deal with life after a traumatic relationship with my father. One my wonder why I did not do anything, but what could I do? A father who left my mother and me when I was seven and did not even bother to call or text for almost sixteen years. I was too proud and respectful towards my mother.

My parents... My mother was a true blessing, I could not say anything less, and I

am not saying it only because she was my mother, she was Everything. She replaced every crucial role that I needed in my life. She'd been my best friend until I found Gaby, but my mother always held the most important place in my heart: she was my father, savior, teacher; a life path. I felt loved and appreciated solely because of her. In 2015 all of this changed when she died. I went through the most heartbreaking period of my life, and it took me over a year to pull myself together and be my old self again. Moreover, Brian was not part of my life back then; he only appeared two years later, but the time period before we met affected me the most.

The first thing I had to do was to go back to my normal routine. It was difficult at first. Therapies twice a week and hanging out with fake friends was something I got used to throughout two years of recovery. Don't get me wrong, I was not mentally ill, or, out of my mind. Simply, I wasn't in the best place back then, so I just needed a shoulder to cry on. After my mother's death, I started to care about myself seriously, and it felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off my chest. I could *breathe*. Once I started to care, a lot of doors opened for me, and six months after, I came across Gaby. Gaby was like a breath of fresh air in my life when I was at my lowest.

A couple of weeks after I'd enrolled in university, we bumped into each other in a hallway and started a conversation. It seemed like Gaby understood me, and at the time I found it difficult to open up to new people. Gaby acted like she knew what I was talking about back then. She was the one to deal with my problems whenever she thought I needed her. Even if I said I was fine, she would listen.

And she was the one to introduce me to Brian. It all started two weeks before the Christmas holidays. She had begged me to join her at a party that her then ex-boyfriend was organizing. It took me over a week to decide, but at the end she actually started to cry and compelled me to go.

I did go, but I'd had a sort of an anxiety attack a half an hour before we went.

She hadn't noticed it, which was better because we would not have gone if she had. The party was insane, I swear I'd never seen so many people in one place, even in nightclubs. I mean, Chris, her boyfriend, was known for making such parties, but he was also known for having to deal with the police because of such parties.

We entered the house, and Gaby vanished within a second. I had known I would be left alone at some point because Gaby was always the outgoing type of friend, the life of the party.

I did not want to seem like a plus one, so I mingled a bit and said hello to people

I knew. Before I said anything, my eye had caught a figure of a good-looking man, who was already looking at me intensely. He scanned me from head to toe and came closer, but I acted like I hadn't noticed anything. Instead of saying hey, he passed next to me and gave me an overconfident look. He was a fine-looking man, there was no doubt about it, but his behavior seemed slightly odd.

A message beep interrupted me as I was trying to greet the only friend I knew.

Gaby: Where are you M? There is a friend I want you to meet. PS. he is a walking god.

Me: I'm talking to Jenny, but I'll be in the backyard in a minute. It's too smoky in here.

Gaby: Fine, but act surprised when you meet him, he is such a great guy.

Me: Can't wait...

I took a deep breath and made my way to the backyard. I will not lie, I was nervous because Gaby's and my taste in men was completely different, and I didn't want to act conceited or rude if I didn't like him.

When I stepped outside, they were already laughing their heads off, and that encouraged me to approach them. Once Gaby saw me, she ran to me.

"Remember, if you feel uncomfortable for any reason, just say that you need to use the toilet." Going to the bathroom was our secret code when we wanted to save ourselves from uncomfortable situations. I nodded and made my way towards them.

My eyes caught the silhouette of the guy who had scanned me in a house before. I felt something bubble in my stomach.

He was outright staring at me, which sent shivers down my spine. Gaby introduced me to them, and everyone's reaction was so delightful. Only then did I become aware that his name was Brian, and that was the moment we met. His smile and gestures made him even more attractive, and for the first time, I felt like I owed Gaby for bringing us together. Besides that, he invited me for a drink, and I could not say no. In short, Brian got his chance to impress me, which is not something I usually do. There was something special about him.

Five hours later, Brian drove me home and asked for another meeting that week. Usually, I would refuse and say I'd already made plans, but I wanted to give him a chance, and I did.

By the end of the week, we were constantly texting each other and talking a lot. For someone, our relationship may seem too impulsive and fast, but we did not end up in a real relationship immediately. Brian knew about my "situation" and respected me.

Back to my graduation ceremony, I felt like I was in a burning house, it was so hot behind the curtains, and I was fighting for fresh air. However, I could not move because the sounds of gunfire could still be heard somewhere in the room. Instead of looking for Brian, I stayed here, but besides gunfire sounds, no other sound could be heard. There was a tiny hole in a curtain that I used to look around the room and find someone I knew, but it was empty. The phone was in a pocket, but when I reached for it, a new wave of thoughts washed over me.

I was seventeen now, very much presentable, tall, and awkwardly shy. I was in my English class, and my favorite teacher told us to write a short composition about being a teenager. I knew what to write about, but the fact that I had to write about it made me feel frustrated. I was wandering around when an idea came to my mind, and I started writing the moment I was back in my room.

Adolescence is bittersweet and stressful, right? The ways of expressing ourselves may have changed on this path we call life, but isn't that the purpose of teenage years? Being overdramatic, sensitive, and finally responsible because that's just one step away from being "a real adult". For many teenagers, "The Edge of Seventeen" is just a movie by Kelly Fremon Craig, but how many of them could really relate with the protagonist of the movie? Many movie lovers will say that the story about young Nadine is overdramatic and unreal because everything is different. Is it? Drugs, depression, loneliness, etc. It is, but it is hard to accept it. Most people who love these movies are teenagers who have many problems with accepting and understanding themselves, but it is easier to watch a movie about a girl whose life is much worse than yours. Depression, bullying, or pressure of being a teenager are quite common and neglected issues at the same time. Teenage years can reflect on your life on many different levels if you find yourself hopelessly alone such as Nadine. "A real person" is an odd form when you want to explain your part in society. For many people, you are irrelevant until you turn eighteen. It is unfair and selfish because teenagers are real people in every aspect of their life, but it is hard to explain it to the world. Doing anything in the most vulnerable years can be incredibly challenging. Comments about how good or bad they are will disappear at the same time they become adults. Time to start again with a clean slate. Nadine or not, every teenager has issues that will define them in the future. Are we here to push them and put more pressure on

their backs? They will say they are Nadine, but they are real and much more than that. The most important thing is how many of those who are reading this will find their edges and realities.

After I jotted down the ideas that I would get back to later, I went straight to the bathroom. As soon as I entered the bathroom, Gaby came too.

I was once again back behind that heavy curtain. I still didn't know why I had recalled that exact situation. Why was it happening right now, in the middle of finishing university? This was supposed to be a peaceful moment. The ringtone from my phone interrupted my wondering. This time it was not my imagination, it was Gaby.

Gaby: "It is time for your speech. I called your name at least five times."

Gaby: ANSWER ME!

Gaby: Millie, you are online. Where are you?

...

I was not sure why I hadn't answered, but I was sure she would kill me later. It came to my mind that I should look around and try to find Brian. The curtains were still down, which meant I could move through the back door, but there was still a chance of someone seeing me. I did not want to die, but if I didn't move, the shooters might see me. Hm, shooters... True, I did hear guns and screams, but I did not see anyone in the room when it happened, so I couldn't be sure about anything, which made everything even worse. I made my way to the back door of the hall. Ten feet from there, I noticed someone's hand. A person was wearing a silver cross bracelet around her right wrist, and I knew that it was familiar from somewhere. A person moved a little, and it was the perfect time to come closer and see who it was. While I was approaching her, a smell of vanilla and jasmine hit me and sent me back to a time when I was with my mother. When I got closer, a black shadow appeared behind me. I turned around and could not believe my eyes. My mother was standing in front of me, and the smell of vanilla and jasmine was still lingering in the air. I was speechless, and tears were rolling down my face uncontrollably. She did not say anything but stepped forward and held me close. When I felt her hands on my back, I remembered the most beautiful days of my life. Five years later, on my graduation day, and the moment when my life will change forever - my mother appears.

"It is okay, sweetie. You do not have to say anything now. I came here because I felt

your pain and urge to see me, but do not worry about my being here for now. The only thing you should know is that I will not be here for long, so you have to listen to me carefully.”

I got lost in her eyes while she was telling me all of this, and it felt like I was dreaming. She took my hand and put it in hers, but I did not feel it. It seemed like she was and was not here at the same time. The eyes were so realistic, but the face and hands looked transparent, water-like. Moreover, her voice echoed in the empty hall, as if not a second before thousands of guns hadn't been fired, and thousands of bullets hadn't flown in the same room. My mother felt my tension, she saw it in my look even though I tried not to let her see it.

“Millie, let it go. I know what you are feeling, and do not let it overcome you. You finished the university finally, and I am here to give you the warmest hug left in my heart. Instead of thinking about your past and planning your future, stay in the present. You are rushing because it is not everything about decisions, think a little about what you want, and not about what is best for others. Whenever you need help, remember me. You know you can count on me, and if you do not see or hear me, remember that you can feel me. Memories will never fade.”

I so firmly wanted to believe that she was there and that I could truly hear everything she was saying, but deep down I knew that my mother was far away from me even though I could sense her presence. She was looking at me with those ocean-blue eyes, and the light that emanated from them gave me a sign she would not stay here much longer.

There was another noise in the background, but this time it was not gunshots and screams, but it sounded like a large metal door being opened. My mother turned, and her hands trembled, but she did not let go of mine.

We both turned and saw a light in the distance. It seemed so strong as if it could swallow us both.

The silence slowly made my mother's voice fade, but I was still overwhelmed by her presence. Instead of looking at me, she was staring at the stage and empty hall. I wanted to ask her for the last time, why was she even here, but she stopped me again. It felt like she was allowed to talk, but she could not respond to my questions.

“Mom, please tell me something. Why are you here, and how is this even possible?” My voice almost cracked.

“I am sorry, sweetie. I am not allowed to give you any answer, but I am here to free your soul and mind from these thoughts you have been fighting against since I left. I am aware that you did not like this university, and you went through the most difficult period in your life after I’d left, but please listen to me because we don’t have much time.

Five years ago, when I left you, I didn’t want it. All I ever wanted was to make your life the best I could after your father had left us. This entire time I have been by your side and made sure you are alive and happy. The first thing I did was Gaby. Gaby is an angel in a person and, I knew if I sent her to your life, everything would finally make sense. A couple of months after that Gaby brought you Brian, which was the first time I saw a smile on your face. He loves you, and I love you too, but you must let go of me. By saying this I do not mean to forget me because I will make sure I am always in your heart, but you must go there and deliver your speech. Millie, you must stand in front of everyone and speak from your heart. Everyone in this room somehow affected your life, so do not stand here and think about it. Just go and don’t forget what Brian told you in the morning. You’ve made it, Millie, you’ve finished that university of yours, you can finally turn a new page in your life.”

I heard every single word she’d said, and at that moment the world around me went silent. My name traveled around the hall, but it took me almost thirty seconds to come to my senses. Brian on my left side, and a hundred staring eyes looking at me in shock.

“Millie Jones, it is time for your final speech, so please join us.” Gaby’s voice is still in my head. Brian was still on my left side, but I could not move.

Brian followed me to take the microphone and stayed by my side. Shaky hands and a trembling voice did not let me speak.

“Dear everyone, I know that many of you have had an enormous impact on my life both before and after my loving mother died. This has been a long a difficult period of my life, not just because of the university. Many did not understand it until now, but if it helps, I felt confused, too. Simply, I call it life. This has been my school of life. I’ve gone through a lot, and all of you, especially Brian, Gaby, and my mother were a significant part of it. I want to make it short and clear, so here goes. Every second and minute of my life has been affected by someone. I’ve spent almost six

years of my life thinking and caring about others, but from now on, I will focus only on myself. One day my entire life will become a story, a story that will include these five years and many more that are yet to come. Until then let us meet where the sky touches the sea and stars write their own stories.”

Your Millie...

mentor: Antonio Shala

institution: Upravna škola Zagreb

Luka Čović

THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

*I love all those torments, all persecutions,
I love the bitterness of those miseries,
I love the pain of those wounds...*

~Marija Jurić Zagorka

Why do I let them crucify me in these torture places? While I was walking down Broadway street, these thoughts were spinning around my mind. What is the point of everything that I was going through? What is the point of life? Sometimes I think that I'm overthinking too much and that I cannot be relaxed, but I don't know how to help myself. My brain is always active when he remembers me to think about my past. Two months ago I was in church and the priest said one quote that has been stuck in my mind till today:

You know brothers and sisters, people who lived in the past are always depressed, and people that spend thinking about what would happen in the future are anxious.

Still, I am struggling to understand the message of this quote, but I don't know how to find the meaning of it. Only that I know is that my soul is sad about life and of a sour world.

These evocative emotions of sadness and misery were always my prayers. I always had that one prayer for God:

Please, good Lord, give me strength in my misery. I don't have anyone to lay my head on; I don't have someone that would wipe my tears off; someone that would give me words to put courage in me... Why did you take my parents from me? Please, give me someone that would make my miserable life happy again...

I finished my prayer and ran out of the church feeling the same emotions of emp-

ness. While wiping my tears off, I accidentally collided with an unknown man. His eyes were blue like the water in Hawaii, and the smell of his perfume was like my father's one (Blue spirit from Zara).

eyes.

Oh, sorry, I didn't see you. - I said, while I was looking into his magical
Don't be sorry, it is okay. Is everything alright?

Yes, it is.

Well, from your red eyes, I can't say that.

Hahaha, are they so awful?

Oh no! They are beautiful.

Aww, thank you very much.

By the way, my name is Aaron. Nice to meet you!

My name is Rebecca.

So you from church or?

Yeah, I go there often to find some peace.

I feel you... I usually go here also to find peace. It is funny because we have never seen each other before.

Yeah, it is really strange. But we have met now.

I don't know how his appearance cheered me up, but I felt something different about him. His appearance radiated positive energy.

Well, I need to go now. I have an agreement confession with father Simon. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

Same to you.

Will I ever see those eyes again? I asked myself that question while I was going downstairs. Who knows? I just know that I am hungry. I went to the bakery near the church to buy myself my favorite cupcake. After I had sat down, I realized my phone is not in my jacket.

Oh, no!!! It must be on the bench in the church.

I ran out of the bakery with my cupcake directly to the church.

Oh! What a relief!

Thank God it was there where I left it. I was going through the doors of the church and putting my phone in my jacket. I didn't look in front of me and I hit directly in Aaron.

SORRY!!! I didn't see you... - I crashed with my cherry cupcake on his white shirt.

Hahaha, again you. It is okay. I have water and detergent at home.

Yeah, but it is cherry... It will take a whole eternity to remove it. Can I repay somehow? What do you say about a date? SORRY... Not date... Ummm...Going out somewhere, maybe for a walk around the lake in Central park? I heard that there is a good cafeteria.

Hahaha, yeah sure. It will be fun.

What do you say about tomorrow at 2 pm?

Yeah, sure.

Here is my number and address in case you want to pick me up at myhouse.

Here is mine too.

Alright then, see you tomorrow Aaron.

See ya, Rebecca.

My heart was beating so fast like what the hack. I just met him. He alters my feelings and I don't know how. I was going home with a strange feeling of mildjoy. Usually, I was going home thinking about my miserable life and how couldI reduce my sadness. But now I was just thinking about his enlightening appearance and beautiful eyes.

The next day, I woke up at about 10 am. My grandma had already made me breakfast and my favorite tea. That was the same smell of tea that my mom usedto make me when I was a little girl. Now I just imagine her pure soul in that steam of tea. Oh, what a beautiful memory. Too bad it didn't last till today...

Hey Becky! Did you eat the breakfast that I made you?

Yes nona, I did. - I called her nona because she is from Croatia and shedidn't like when I call her grandma.

Alright moja lipotice. Was it good?

It was marvelous, just like always.

How are you feeling today? Is anything better?

I don't know how to describe my feelings today.

Hahaha with words lipotice. Sometimes is hard to say what is in our heart, but give all your sufferings to Him. He always knows our misery, but hekeeps us there to find strength from that suffering.

She always knew what she need to say at the perfect time. Thank God mymother got her genes and traits.

During the week, I felt a bit depressed, but somehow there is a newemotion.

Really?! Well, that is something new for you. And what is that feelingor emotion?

I felt some mild fortune after a long time.

That is great to hear. And what caused that?

Well, yesterday I met a boy named Aaron, and I asked him out for a walk around the lake in Central park. I wouldn't ask him out if I hadn't collided with him with my cherry cupcake.

HAHAHAHAHA!!! Clumsy you... That is so great to hear. I am so happy for you. And did he accept?

Yes, he did.

Oh yeah, my Becky is back again. I am so thankful and happy that you find joy again. - nona starts to cry with her magnificent diamond-blue eyes, just like Aaron's.

Oh, nona...! Please don't cry, your mascara will go away.

It's alright. God blessed me with hands to put it again. Now it is more important to make you shine as lipe šinjorine from Split. You know that

Dalmatians šinjorine shine and amaze just like your nona.

We went upstairs to my room to choose an outfit for me.

That autumn-red dress looks so good on you. Put that beige coat on you.

Don't you think it is maybe too solemnly?

Of course not. The second impression is more important than the first. Now put some makeup on, not too much and not too little. After that, put your black boots on and you are ready to shine. I am going downstairs to make lunch. Show me the whole look when you are done.

Hahaha, I am going to.

After I have done all that stuff that my nona suggested to me, I came downstairs to show her the whole look.

Oh, Becky... You look just like your mother when she was your age... -We both had tears in our eyes.

Don't cry, lipotice. Thankfully, you are alive and I think that your mother wants you to be alive and happy for her.

These words hit me because my mother used to tell me she wants from me to be joyful and free like a bird.

I will try to nona, the memory of her crossed my mind, so it is hard not to cry.

It is already 1.20 pm. You need to go, Becky.

I am nona. I will come home at 5 or 6 pm.

Okay darling, have a wonderful time and remember shine, and amaze. I hugged and kissed my nona and I drove directly to the gate of Central park.

I parked my car and went out of the car. I could see those diamond eyes and his auburn shiny hair from the moon. I was thinking, what does this man have that-

made me feel something? I just hope that he is normal. Or maybe isn't good to expect something from people, because you will always get in some way disappointed. I think that is safer than expecting people to be like I think they are.

I closed my car's door and went straight to him. I don't know why was I nervous. That feeling wasn't a part of me for a long time. Probably, I wanted to make a good impression. That's good, right? It is not something wrong?

Heey, Rebecca! - he waved at me

Hey Aaron.

I must say, you look fabulous.

Aww, thank you. You are also good-looking. - he had a beautiful long beige coat, just like me, white dolce vita, black pants, and boots. When I first saw him, I knew he cares for himself and that he has a sense of fashion.

Oh, thank you. So, are you hungry, thirsty, or in the mood for a walk?

Maybe, for a walk? Usually, I don't have a chance to walk with someone.

Sure. I enjoy walking and it would be sad to waste this beautiful autumn-sunny day somewhere inside.

I agree with you. We started walking.

So, how is life going? What do you do for a living? Probably you are studying, I guess?

Well, I should be in the 3rd year of social anthropology, but I have had some private problems so I am 2nd now. What do you do?

I am in 3rd year of psychology here. Officially I'm from Pittsburg but I came here to study that field. I love helping people and giving them advice to make their life better is incredible. Especially when it comes to solving their traumas and wounds.

Whit his last sentence, tingles went through me and I think that is because of the word wound. That word has been following me for the last two years, so it is not strange that I've got that reaction.

So, social anthropology? And why did you decide to study that field?

I was always fascinated with other cultures, religions, moral beliefs of other people on the Earth, etc. And also, languages. I love languages and also learning them is a story in itself.

Wow. You sound like a real nerdy.

Well...I don't know what to say about that. I just love to learn and to know about the world. What is wrong with that?

Hahaha, I'm just kidding. You just fascinated me, and I love your desire for learning and life at the same time.

Hahaha well, that is debatable...

What do you mean by saying that?

Never mind. Just my stupid jokes.

Well, in fifty percent of jokes, there is always fifty percent of the truth.

So, from my understanding, there is something true.

Hahaha, you are a psychologist, aren't you?

Officially, in two years I will be, but at the moment I'm just a half-baked psychologist. You can be honest with me. If you want to. Everything will stay between us, I promise you. - he gave me a pinky promise.

Deep inside me, I felt I can trust him.

Well, I feel I can trust you, but you must know that my story isn't that easy to absorb.

I will try to understand you and help you if I could, so no worries about that. To help each other, that's why humans are created.

You know, life was not always a dream for me. Well, it was until two years ago. It has been a tough time for me these past two years because I lost both of my parents in a car accident.

Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

Yeah... I'm also sorry. I'm sorry.

The tears went down my eyes.

Why are you sorry?

Because I didn't die with them. I am guilty because of that car accident...

What do you mean you are guilty?

My father... He was a good father but not a good husband. When I was returning home, I saw him in the car kissing a woman. Sadly, it was not my mom, and that made a pain in my chest because I didn't know how could he do something like that to my mom.

Oh, the situation is pretty complicated.

Yeah, and you know what is the worst part? My mother knew that, and while we were driving back home from a friend's party, they announced to me they got divorced on my eighteen birthday. In that pain, only I could do was yell at them and scream and ask them how could they lie to me. They were also yelling and screaming at me. Suddenly, my dad lost control of the steering wheel, and the car flipped over. The only thing I can remember is that I was in the hospital in my hospital bed full of bruises and the doctor said to me that my parents were dead. I was in such pain. I could not put that sentence in my head. The worst part is that I also found I was not

their child. They adopted me. At that moment, tingles of loneliness ran through my veins. Never have I felt such an evocative void and confusion. I didn't know who I was. I still don't know who I am, but one thing I know is that I felt like an orphan, I became an orphan and I will die an orphan. And now tell me I'm not guilty and that I didn't deserve to die...

Some people are born into this world and are so antipathetic to their surroundings that everyone takes out malice on them. Life took away their joy and satisfaction. But that doesn't mean life stops. Don't feel guilty. You simply didn't know how to react to the force of the emotional shock.

But, I am guilty. They are dead because of me!

No, they're not dead because of you! They are dead because they didn't want to face their reality in time! Unfortunately, they forgot they are only travelers in this world and that mistakes should be noticed and solved in time.

I was aware of that, but I could not accept that they were gone. They meant everything in my life. The most painful part is that I didn't make an apology to them. Now, they just live in my memories, and that is the hardest part to accept when reality becomes a memory. It is hard to live alone and I'm exhausted because of that. I'm tired of giving my all and never being enough.

I'm tired of trying to change myself and not seeing the change. I'm trying to cry myself to sleep at night and waking up in the morning and not recognizing myself. I'm tired of not being enough... I just miss myself and I miss my enjoyment...

We cannot wait until life is no longer difficult to be happy. Stop giving your brain the power to control you. You are the creator of your thoughts and you need to decide to be happy. Happiness is a choice. You need to forgive yourself. I think that is the hardest part for you and that is the beginning of your healing journey. Forgiveness is a higher dimension of freedom. If you want to see the change, you must forgive yourself first.

Wow... I never thought about that in that direction.

That is why I am here. To open you to different sides of the story. When something is black and white, you need to find the colors to put in that blackness and whiteness.

I am grateful for this conversation and I will need time to process your advice. Sorry if I was aggressive. I'm not usually in that mood. I just felt the need for someone to listen to me and understand me.

No need for an apology. I can feel your pain and the emotions you went through. There is nothing you should be ashamed of.

Thank you, Aaron. This conversation means a lot to me. I haven't opened up to someone like this in a long time.

I understand you completely because your thoughts blocked you.

Exactly... They pressed me until I burst now.

My advice to you is to calm down and enjoy the nature we are currently in. Try to practice when your thoughts suffocate you, to go for a walk and concentrate on the beauty of nature. If you want, we can just walk now and listen to the sounds of nature. The murmur of water has a positive effect on people.

I'd like to try that because I'm feeling emotionally drained right now

While we were walking, I asked him if I could hold his hand because I needed someone's warm touch after experiencing emotional stress again. He accepted, and we continued to walk. He was so nice to me and his sense of people was strong. He knew exactly what made the biggest suffer for me, and that was only what I needed - someone to understand me.

We walked a little more, enjoying the sounds of nature, but he had to go because he had something to do, but he didn't tell me what.

It was very pleasant to talk to you and to hear your story.

Thank you. You are more pleasant than me, and of course more decent than me because I didn't give you a chance to talk about yourself.

Don't worry. I was irrelevant today. You needed help, and it was an honor for me to help you.

I appreciate that and I will never forget that. Next time we will talk more about you hahaha!

Hahaha, sure we will. Maybe here in the park or maybe somewhere else.

Only God knows.

He was such a poet, and I didn't understand the last part, but it sounded magical.

We walked to the beginning of the park gate and said goodbye to each other.

See you soon Aaron!

I hope we see each other again.

Two weeks have passed since I haven't heard from Aron, and during them, I have been thinking about his words. Everything that he had said was true. I gave control to my brain to control my life. Now, I took control of my life. The

healing process will be hard, but I know that I'm doing this for myself. I want to see myself happy again. I send a message to Aaron to see how he is doing and if he wants to go out again.

Hey Aaron! We didn't talk for a while now. I hope you are doing well. I wanted to ask you if you want to go out somewhere. Please, text me back when you will be free :)

After that, I put my phone on my bed and waited for his response. Suddenly, someone rang my doorbell. When I opened the door, there was a young, beautiful woman with a long black coat and the same eyes and hair color as Aarons. She seemed pretty exhausted and her eyes were full of redness.

May I help you? - I asked her.

She responded:

Are you Rebecca?

Yes? And who are you?

I'm Gabriella. You don't know me, but I know you.

Um, what do you mean you know me?

You know my brother Aaron? Am I right?

Yeah? I know who he is.

I was really confused when she mentioned Aaron, and some negative feelings rushed through my body. Her eyes were full of tears when she mentioned Aaron.

Well, Aaron... My big brother... He died three days ago...

No... You must be joking?! Tell me you are joking, right?!

I wish this was a joke, but sadly, it is not...

I felt strong vibrations of sadness running through my blood vessels. My eyes were full of tears. Everything became stormy in my soul. I could not stand on my legs and I fell to my knees. Gabriella sat down next to me and she hugged me. We both cried.

How is he dead? That is impossible!

He suffered from lung cancer for a long time.

From lung cancer? He didn't mention anything about that.

Only my family knew about his diagnosis and he didn't want everyone to know that he had cancer. Cancer was his silent killer, and he was a silent sufferer that was killing cancer with his happiness. Unfortunately, he didn't win the battle. - she sobbed in bitter tears.

I feel so bad right now because I burdened him with my problems when he had so many.

Don't be sorry. He wanted to help you. He didn't want you to suffer. He said so many good things about you.

He did?

Yes, he did. Also, the reason I am here is to give you this letter. She gave me an envelope and there was written with a golden marker:

"For my dearest friend Rebecca. Please, open this envelope on my grave."

He especially emphasized that you open this when you come to his grave.

I... I don't know what to say. I can't even think about the fact that he is underground now.

I know. It is really hard to absorb that assumption. But I think he will be thrilled if you visit his soul at the cemetery.

Where is he buried?

At the Green-Wood Cemetery, under the big Japanese maple.

I think I am not ready to see his grave.

He said to come to him three days after his death. Please, Rebecca. Do this for him. I need to go now. I have to go to work. I'm already late.

Thank you for letting me know.

No need to thank me. Thank God. He connected us.

After Gabriella went to work, I climbed up the stairs and lie on my bed. I never felt such an emptiness since my parents die.

Lord. Why are you taking people who make me happy in this suffering world? I can't do it anymore. I am again alone, like an egg, when the bird disappears from the nest.

Something deep inside me was pushing me to go to the cemetery to see Aaron. I couldn't imagine that he was not here anymore...

I put some black clothes on myself, grab the envelope, and went straight to the cemetery by my car.

When I came to the cemetery, the weather was just like the day we went out, a sunny autumn day with a light wind. Only the feelings were different.

When I went through the big door of the cemetery, I saw a beautiful Japanese maple in the distance that Gabriella had mentioned to me. The tree was so big that its branches could touch the sky and the redness of the tree leaves reminded me of his hair and warmth. When I came to his grave, I couldn't help but cry. I couldn't imagine that he was underneath that black ground. When I saw his

picture on the grave, he was smiling as if he was not in pain. I took the envelope that Gabriella gave me and I read the letter from Aaron.

Dear Gabriella,

Probably, you are standing over my grave and I'm glad that you are here. You might think now, why did I say that you need to open this letter over my grave? I will answer that question at the end. You entered my life unexpectedly, but I think it was meant to be. As you may now know, they diagnosed me about two months ago that I had cancer in each lung. I was shocked, sad, and angry at the same time. I asked

God: “Why me? I fear dying. I didn’t make everything that I wanted to do in this life.” Of course, I didn’t get an answer, because God doesn’t work like that. I needed to find the answer. I tryto find the answer in prayer, in books, and similar kinds of stuff, but also I didn’t get the answer, because I was forcing God to answer me. Suddenly, one day I was walking through the forest and thinking about my life and the meaning of life. I concluded that everything in this world has a beginning and an end. That’s how my life will also be ended. It doesn’t sound nice, but it’s a harsh reality. The thought of death was always the last thing I would think about, but now I regret that it was not the first. I always thought I had time, but when death knocks on your door, you realize how much time you don’t have. I took everything for granted, thinking that I would achieve everything I wanted. But I was wrong. The purpose of what I am telling you is not to make you aware that you are thinking about death, but to tell you that life is too short to be constantly stiff and sad. My problem was that I didn’t use it every day like it wasmy last. I always thought about work and success and that having money meanssuccess. But I was wrong. Success means choosing happiness over sadness.

Success means finding yourself and the meaning of your existence. That’s a success. Those who will look for it in material things like me will quickly lose themselves. I finally understood why I got sick. It’s not God’s fault for my illness, it’s my fault for allowing others to make me sick. I always put myself lastto please others, but I lost myself there. From that moment on, I no longer saw the disease as a burden, but as a blessing, because it helped me realize that I should slow down and think about myself and my well-being. I want to remind you not to blame yourself for some actions in your life, but forget them. They are in the past anyway and should stay there. God gave us the present and the future to use in the best possible way and to change ourselves every day because no one is perfect in this world. From this day forward, I want you to take life seriously. I want you to be joyful and fulfilled and to leave everything that worries you in the past. Everything in this world has its purpose. Every person, every event, every suffering, and every sadness is here for a reason.

When you think that you have nothing, just remember that you have the blue sky, sunsets, moon, paper to write, new beginnings, your angelic parents, your beautiful self, and me as your angel. My favorite bird was the white dove. It is so beautiful, and it fascinates with its purity and cuteness, so whenever you willneed my help and when it will be difficult for you, I will ask God to come to youin that way. Unfortunately, I have to go. But this is not the end. I continue to live. I hope somewhere where is no more suffering and pain. May joy and peacebe with you always.

With love,
Aaron

Tears streamed down my cheeks, knowing that my friend was no longer with me. I fell on my knees and lay down next to his grave, remembering how God had taken another angel from me. Unfortunately, it makes sense, because God always takes the most beautiful angels for himself. He didn't want to leave him so that he wouldn't get even dirtier in this disgusting world. He took him because he didn't want him to suffer anymore. I barely knew him. I barely knew the sound of his voice or the softness of his touch. He was someone who the world doesn't deserve. He had that spark in his soul that could heal broken souls. I fell in love with him. I fell in love with the light that he had. I fell in love with the way he made me believe in myself and the world again.

As I was looking through the branches of the maple tree at the beautiful blue sky with tears in my eyes, a beautiful white dove flew by with miraculous ocean eyes. She lay down next to me and cooed like she was talking to me. I knew he had come to comfort me. From that moment, I knew he would forever be with me in my heart.

Aaron - the one who enlightened my soul.

mentor: Davor Štifanić

institution: Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

Viktorija Kavain

THE LAST BREATH OF HOPE

I hurt people. That's what I am best at. I don't mean to, but it just happens. It's like a force inside me that I can't control. It starts with a feeling of anger, a hot fire in my chest that spreads through my body until I can feel it in my fingertips. That's when I know that I'm about to lose control.

I try to fight it, but it's like trying to hold back a dam that's about to burst. The pressure builds and builds until I can't contain it any longer. And then, something snaps. I lash out, saying and doing things that I know will hurt others. I can see the pain in their eyes, and it's like a knife to my heart, but I can't stop. I can't turn back.

It's been like this for as long as I can remember. I've tried everything to stop it - therapy, medication, even meditation - but nothing seems to work. I've pushed away everyone I've ever cared about, and I'm all alone in the world. I'm a monster, and I know it. I was always kind of a person who hates happy endings. It's not that I enjoy seeing characters suffer or that I want things to turn out badly for them. It's just that happy endings feel too neat, too easy. They wrap everything up in a neat little bow, as if all of the conflict and drama of the story never really happened. Real life doesn't work that way. There are no neat little bows to tie up all of our problems. There are no fairy godmothers to wave a magic wand and fix everything. So when I read a story with a happy ending, it feels false, like it's not really reflecting the reality of the world we live in. I prefer stories that are a little more complex, that don't shy away from the messiness of life. Stories that show characters struggling and overcoming challenges, but not necessarily in a way that everything is perfect at the end. Those are the stories that feel the most authentic to me, because they feel more like real life. Because they feel more like MY life. It's maybe because my own stories never ended happily that I was hesitant to become a part of someone else's. But when the opportunity presented itself, I couldn't resist. It was a chance to rewrite my own narrative and perhaps, just perhaps, have a happy ending for once.

As I sit here, pen in hand and paper before me, I am struck by the weight of my own thoughts. They swirl around in my mind like a tempest, dark and tumultuous. I am Nalani Eha, I lived the most perfect circumstances that most of the people can only dream about and yet, I have been struggling with depression for as long as I can recall. My story starts on 11th February 1999. I was born and raised in Honolulu, for me, the most beautiful town in the world. I was the only child, and lived luxurious and happy life. At least, back then, I thought so. At the young age, I moved to Boston with the hope to enter Harvard University and become a journalist like I always wanted. Right on the way to pursuing my dream I have been diagnosed with depression. And just like that, my life turned into a big therapy industry, in which profit and money had a bigger role than myself and my recovery. I had always felt a sense of disconnection from the world around me, despite being surrounded by a loving and supportive family. Growing up, I had everything I could ever wish for; popularity, good grades, amazing parents, tons of friends and magical charm that helped me attract boys around me. For a typical teenage girl, it sounds like the perfect life, right? But, for me, that wasn't enough. I don't know what made me such a selfish, ambitious freak, because my parents never spoiled me, even though I lived in perfect conditions for that to happen. As I was growing older, I was becoming more crestfallen and dejected. All my enthusiasm for further education, for becoming a journalist and publicist, for working and living the life I've always dreamed about was gone. I barely had any energy to eat and drink. I was too tired to sleep as well, so I just stared at one dot for the whole night, a couple of nights in a row. I am wondering how am I still alive, because I did the bare minimum for a person to live. Actually, when I more think about it, at that point I wasn't living - I was surviving. Since that year, I have completely lost myself and couldn't find myself ever again. Depression is like a snake's venom, which, when you get bitten, slowly but surely, spreads through your body. At the beginning, you don't feel it, you even try to ignore it, or pretend it is not there. That it doesn't exist. But, it is a constant companion, a shadow that follows you wherever you go.

But despite the pain and sorrow that it brings, when I was younger and still not so experienced with the poison of depression as it is, I had learned to find moments of beauty in the world around me. The glint of sunlight on the water, the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze, the gentle purr of a contented cat – these small wonders use to bring me solace on my darkest days. When I got older, as the poison of this invisible pain expanded, I started feeling worse and worse. Anger issues, common outbursts

of rage, saying too hurtful things to my loved ones - that's something I am still not able to control. That's something I am constantly battling with.

In all of that darkness, that I am entirely blinded by, how can I see anything, especially anything good?

I found myself thinking back to a family trip we took many years ago. The memories flooded back, happy moments of us laughing and enjoying each other's company. We had all piled into the car and drove to the beach, laughing and joking the entire way. We had built sandcastles together, swam in the ocean and spend the nights roasting marshmallows and telling stories around the fire pit. But my mind lingered on the end of that trip, when something had triggered my anger. That was the first time I felt that way. I had felt frustrated and overwhelmed, and before I knew it, I had erupted in a fit of rage. I shouted at my family, accusing them of not understanding me and not taking my feelings seriously. My words were hurtful and cutting, and they had stung them deeply. I had stormed off, leaving everyone in shock and disappointment. I was in a desperate pain afterwards, nevertheless, that wasn't the only time my behaviour got out of control.

At that point, depression has emerged all over my body like a dark fog, suffocating me from the inside out. It's a feeling that I've become all too familiar with, one that I've tried to ignore for too long. It always seems to find its way back, no matter how hard I try to shake it off. After it took over every area of my body, it took over my whole life, consuming every thought and action. It was like a heavy weight that I couldn't get rid off, no matter how hard I tried. I went through the motions of my days, going to school, coming home, and going to bed, but it all felt meaningless and empty.

I stopped doing the things that used to bring me joy, like hobbies and socializing with friends and family. It was just too much effort to even pretend to be happy. And the worst part was that I couldn't even pinpoint why I was feeling this way. It was like a deep, all-encompassing sadness that I couldn't shake.

I wasn't like that all the time. I remember being happy, excited, even in love at some point.

Yes, love. That mysterious feeling that a person experience, unintentionally and unpredictably. Love - a force as intangible as it is indelible. It is a flame that burns

bright within the human heart, a spark that ignites the soul and kindles a passion for life. It is a feeling of deep connection and affection, a bond that defies all boundaries and transcends all boundaries.

As I walked through the park, I couldn't help but feel my heart skip a beat as I saw him for the first time. He was standing under a tree, his eyes closed as he basked in the warm sun. His hair was a golden blond, styled in a messy yet intentional way that made him look carefree and wild. He was tall and toned, with muscles that rippled under his shirt as he moved. I couldn't take my eyes off of him as I approached, and as I got closer, he opened his eyes and looked right at me. In that moment, I knew that I was falling in love. It was as if the world around us had faded away, and all that mattered was the two of us. I felt my heart race as he smiled at me, and I knew that this was the beginning of something special.

His appearance was completely different than mine; my hazel brown, long hair, olive toned skin, freckles all over my face, honey bright shine and charm that I had at that time matched his whole figure. His name was Kai. Three simple letters, combined in such a beautiful word, meant everything to me. Those three letters, symbolized for me my present, past and future. I never believed in a love at the first sight. For me, that was just some corny, hyperromantic product of somebody's imagination which only existed in fairytales. We started talking and hanging out, fell in love and became everything to each other. I had just started to realize that I was getting happy again, but as I said before, my stories never ended happily.

It was our first year anniversary, when I got a phone call.

"Nalani, honey, I am so sorry. I have to tell you something." I heard my mom saying from the other side of the phone.

"Kai died in a car accident."

The only thing I heard was muttering after that sentence. I could no longer understand the words. My ears started ringing, chills ran through my body and then I passed out on the floor. God knows what would have happened to me if Luna didn't come almost promptly.

My best friend, Luna, is the most amazing person I know, not because she is undeniably perfect, but because she is directly opposite of me in every way possible. She was always there for me, no matter what. Her short, blonde hair, eyes blue like the

Atlantic ocean, snub little nose, rosy cheeks, pale skin and petite body made her look frivolous compared to me. Nevertheless, she never cared how she looked, especially not how she looked next to me. She had a great sense of humour and could always make me laugh, even on my darkest days. She knew just what to say or do to lift my spirits and bring a smile to my face. She was also fiercely loyal and protective of those she cares about. She would do anything for her friends and family, and I know that I could always count on her to have my back. She was beautiful, both inside and out. She had a bright and radiant personality that shined through in everything she did. She is the light in my life, and I am so grateful to have her as my best friend. Her greatness and our friendship were not meant to stick with me forever. Although I knew that all the way, there was consistently a little flame of a faith in my heart that hoped otherwise.

Luna appeared on my door that day. I was still lying unconscious on the floor, when she entered my flat. She woke me up, gave me water to drink and a chocolate bar to eat and hugged me, squeezing all of her positive emotions into me, and squeezing out all of the negative emotions which made me feel heartbroken. I don't know how much that hug lasted, but I surely needed it. Even though I was incredibly lucky to have her as a friend, as someone I could rely on, I started feeling *it*. That feeling. That disgusting feeling that took over my body. I pushed her away from me and started yelling at her, throwing things all over the place. I behaved so disrespectfully towards her, yet I couldn't stop myself. She started quietly crying, while she was trying to find a safe spot to hide from me. She gets it. She gets me. She knows that five minutes from now, I will start crying even more, trying to convince her to forgive me. She knows me better than I know myself. I really mean that, but the words which were coming out of my mouth said otherwise:

“You never got it, and you never will! You only hurt me with your help, and I don't need it! When you are so perfect, how about that you try to be in my shoes just for once? For God's sake, just leave already! Aghh!” Every single word that I said at that moment, was directly opposite from every single thought that was going through my head. Not even ten minutes later I was shattered, crushed, ready to pray for forgiveness.

“I wasn't planning on going this far. I swear. I am so sorry.” my voice was weak, it was cracking. Luna glared at me. She didn't move. Probably because she couldn't move. She would never say anything to me but this time, these vicious, sharp words slipped over her lips:

“Your eyes can be so cruel sometimes... I can never do anything right, can't I?”

She left. I stood completely frozen, in the middle of my messy living room. All of the stuff that I threw was lying on the floor, mocking me and making me remember the crime which I had just done. I didn't have a place to run to, neither could I. I would probably trip over a broken CD player or ripped magazines. I never heard from her again.

For me, love, somewhere deeply inside me existed, but the part with “happily ever after” never entered my game called *life*.

As I entered adulthood, I struggled to find my place in the world and to make sense of my own desires and ambitions. I tried various paths, such as going to college and starting a career, but none of them seemed to bring me the satisfaction and happiness I craved.

As my depression deepened, I turned to unhealthy coping mechanisms in an attempt to numb my pain. All I did was partying while hoping I would become my old-self by doing so. I began using drugs and alcohol to escape my thoughts, and engaged in self-destructive behaviour that only made me feel worse. I was only sixteen years old when I tried drugs for the first time. Back then, alcohol and cigarettes were my well-known old friends.

It was a Friday night, and I was out at a club with my friends. We had been dancing and drinking all night, and I was feeling pretty good. The music was loud, the lights were flashing, and I was having a great time. I notice a small package with little candy-sized pills inside it, lying on the counter. I noticed that people who I knew from the club, were taking those colourful, mysterious candy sweets, dissolving them with a drink they've been drinking. My friend took my hand and hand me over one, showing me how to take it.

“Don't worry, it's just some Molly,” he said. “It will make you feel amazing.”

I thought about it for a moment. Everyone at the party seemed to be having a great time, and I didn't want to be the only one not joining in.

“I don't know,” I said. “I've never done drugs before. I'm not sure if I should.”

My friend gave me a reassuring smile. “It's totally safe,” he said. “And you'll have a great time. Trust me.”

I was still hesitant, but I didn't want to be the only one not participating.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

My friend handed me a pill, and I swallowed it with a gulp of my drink. I wasn’t sure if that was the right decision, but it was too late to turn back now.

The next thing I knew, I was feeling incredibly good. The music sounded even better than before, and I was dancing like I had never danced before. I was laughing and joking with my friends, and I felt like I was on top of the world.

But as the night went on, I started to feel increasingly paranoid and disoriented. The pressure of the group, the alcohol and the drugs made me feel overwhelmed. That feeling has stuck with me ever since. Yet I couldn’t help myself, I couldn’t stop. Even though I knew my problems would not solve themselves, it was so pleasurable to escape from it all for a couple of hours, minutes or even seconds. How I was feeling afterwards, as bad as it was, it couldn’t compare with the way I was feeling ninety nine percent of the time.

At first, drugs were like a magical escape from my depression and my disgusting life. Everything seemed to fade away when I was high, and for the first time in a long time, I felt a sense of freedom and joy. I didn’t have to face my problems or my feelings anymore; I could just escape from them.

I started using drugs more and more, and soon they became a regular part of my life. I would spend all of my free time experimenting with different types of cure-alls and chasing that feeling of escape. I didn’t care about anything else anymore; all I wanted was to be high.

I felt trapped in a cycle of despair and despair, and began to wonder if life was even worth living.

There is nothing I hate more than therapy and psychology. I can’t help but feel that some therapists and psychologists seem to play mind games and manipulate their patients for their own gain. I don’t understand the use of talking with a stranger and telling them your darkest secrets, which they can use to their advantage. What is the purpose? Aren’t the journals, notebooks, friends and family enough?

I lived with those thoughts for a very long time. I hated the concept of therapy in every single way possible. I didn’t see it’s point. It was at my lowest point that I reached out for help. I began seeing a therapist and started the difficult process of healing and self-discovery. As I sat in the therapist’s office, I couldn’t shake off the feeling of despair. I had been to therapy before but nothing seemed to change, and I was still struggling with the same problems. I felt like a failure, unable to fix myself

despite trying so hard. At first, I couldn't bring myself to open up to the therapist, fearing that it would be pointless and that nothing would change. I left the session feeling emptier than before, convinced that therapy was not for me and that I was destined to feel this way forever. Sometimes I would come to my session and just not say anything. That still felt nice. It felt satisfying to sit in a quiet, calm place and not to think about anything else other than weather, anything other than how the chair in which am I sitting is very comfortable and how there is a fly on a bookshelf in front of me, which still hasn't move since the last time I was there.

"You know there is a dead fly behind you, right on that shelf, right?" I asked my therapist. She turned her head and acknowledged the fly, with a surprised and apologetic expression. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't notice that. I'll get rid of it right away" she said. I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation, how something as small as a dead fly could distract me from my own problems. My therapist joined in the laughter, breaking the tension and making the session feel a little more light-hearted. When she picked it up, she noticed that fly wasn't actually dead, but it was hurt, and wasn't been able to fly. She gently put it on the windowsill and closed the window.

"I know it is a bizarre example, but that fly is just like you right now."

"I am so rotten from the inside, that I am practically dead?"

"No, Nalani. That fly would have been lying there for who knows how long until someone finally notices it and decides to help it to escape."

I gave her questioning look.

"Sometimes, we don't see in how much of a trouble we are. But that doesn't mean somebody else doesn't see our trouble or pain. It is just up to us if we are going to let them help us. And who knows, if you had noticed that fly a day or even an hour later, maybe it would have been dead now."

I didn't like her symbolic way of describing life, death, happiness, sadness and depression, yet it somehow worked for me. She helped me to understand that my struggles were not unique, and that I was not alone in my pain. Slowly but surely, I began to find meaning and purpose in my life once again.

Couple of months passed by, just as I was starting to turn my life around and find hope for the future, I was dealt a devastating blow. I was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and was told that I had only a few months left to live.

"I'm sorry, Nalani," my doctor said as he broke the news to me. "There's nothing more we can do. It's just a matter of time now."

I was in shock. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. How could this be happening to me just when things were starting to look up?

“Is there no hope?” I asked, my voice shaking. “No chance of a miracle?”

The doctor shook his head. “I’m afraid not. It’s important that you start thinking about your end-of-life care and what you want your last days to be like. Is there anyone you’d like to spend your time with? Any special wishes you’d like to make?”

I was overwhelmed by a sense of despair and hopelessness. I didn’t want to think about my last days or make any special wishes. I just wanted things to go back to how they were before.

“I think there’s something going on,” I told my therapist. “I keep having these strange dreams and coincidences that seem to be connected to me in some way. It’s like there’s a hidden message or purpose behind them.”

My therapist looked at me thoughtfully. “It’s possible that these dreams and coincidences are your mind’s way of trying to make sense of your situation and to find meaning and purpose in your life,” she said. “It could be a way for you to find hope and healing during this difficult time.”

I nodded, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to it than that. Still, what could I do?

“Beep....beep...beep...” I heard beeping sound of a monitor right next to me. I slowly and cautiously opened my eyes, trying to figure out where am I. My head was hurting as hell, I felt a strong pressure in my ears and didn’t know what was happening. I was lying in a hospital bed, tied up with tons of different types of wires, going from my nose to my chest, down to my arms. I was breathing slowly, following the rhythm of beeping sound that was still going. The room had one big window, wide bed, shelves and little sofa, big enough for one very small person to sit in. Across my bed, there was a little mirror. I looked over and was completely stunned, I couldn’t recognize myself. The person at who I was looking like was looking completely different then me; she had short, blonde hair, blue eyes, snub little nose, rosy cheeks, pale skin... She looked so familiar to me. Obviously *my* bright hair, was covered by a pair of big headphones. At that moment, I noticed that I am hearing somebody talking, but there was just me in the room. I tried to concentrate on the whispers coming out of the headphones.

“I am Nalani Eha,... circumstances that most of the people can only dream about... at that point I wasn’t living - I was surviving... We had all piled into the car and drove to the beach, laughing and joking the entire way...It was like a deep, all-encompassing sadness that I couldn’t shake...my hazel brown, long hair, olive toned skin, freckles ...

honey bright shine...His name was Kai...Kai died in a car accident...When you are so perfect, how about that you try to be in my shoes just for once?...I wasn't planning on going this far... I am so sorry...I can never do anything right, can't I?...My friend handed me a pill, and I swallowed it ...I felt trapped in a cycle of despair...began to wonder if life was even worth living...I am so rotten from the inside, that I am practically dead?...Sometimes, we don't see in how much of a trouble we are. But that doesn't mean somebody else doesn't see our trouble or pain. It is just up to us if we are going to let them help us...It's just a matter of time now... “

I waited and waited, hearing the voice all over again and again, when I notice - it has been repeating itself.

Suddenly, doctors entered my room. I closed my eyes, pretending to be asleep.

“Still no sight of awakening. It has been four months now.”

“We will let her stay longer. Nalani said to wait until she wakes up.”

As they left, I thought to myself: “Nalani? But, I am Nalani. What-”

My thoughts were been stopped as somebody entered the room. I heard careful steps getting near me, then sitting into petite sofa. Somebody took my hand and with their finger started making circles in different directions on my palm.

“You know, Luna, when I met you, I knew you will be the one who will change my life. I never had any luck in my life, yet I had everything else. Now I got nothing, except you. You are my only hope, Luna. Once you wake up, you will be the one who will end my story happily.

And you know I've never liked happy endings, remember. So fake, so wrong, so excessively beautified. I never liked that. Maybe that's why I've never experienced it. Now, when you have my whole story and experience in your head, you are practically me. My life will soon come to an end, but it's up to you to make my name brighten up in a good light. But I just want you to forgive me. When the opportunity presented itself, I couldn't resist. Your coma made me realised that I still have a chance. It was a chance to rewrite my own narrative and perhaps, have a happy ending for once. All my work is done here, we are waiting for you L.”

I was always kind of a person who loved happy endings. I find that when everything is tied up neatly in a bow at the end of a story, it leaves me with a sense of satisfaction and closure. I also find that happy endings tend to be uplifting and make me feel good about the world in general. Whether it's a movie, a book, or a real-life situation, I always find myself rooting for the characters or people to find happiness in the end. It's

something that brings a lot of joy to my life and I believe it's important to have hope for the future. One of the reasons I think I'm drawn to happy endings is that life can be unpredictable and chaotic. When I'm reading a book or watching a movie and I see the characters go through their struggles and triumph in the end, it gives me a sense of hope that the same can happen in real life. It's a reminder that even in the face of adversity, good things can happen. I also think that happy endings provide a moment of escapism from the reality we live in and that's why it makes a sense of comfort. I love happy endings because they often serve as a reminder that it's never too late to change the course of your life. So many stories have characters that learn valuable lessons, take risks, and make difficult choices, ultimately leading them to a place of happiness. It's a reminder that the choices we make can have a powerful impact on the direction of our lives, and that it's never too late to change the way we're living our lives and make it a better one.

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Tea Tomljanović

A BLEEDING HEART STILL POUNDS

Returning to the village isn't as easy as he thought it would be. He doesn't remember what home feels like. He supposes it's this: the leaves falling as late summer declines slowly into autumn, golden and raining against the grey setting of the sky. The smell of rot, but sweet; the death of summer, autumn's first breath.

It's all mist, low and hanging over the small nest of civilisation settled in the sweeping watercolour hills, like a sepia photograph left on some forgotten window sill. Or leaf fall, no longer crunchy underfoot and wistful in that way of early autumn. From the wooded hilltop, it feels like a tiny world has opened before Jude as the road winds out of the forest for the first time in three hours and a paper-delicate view of small stone buildings unfolds like origami that a whisper of a breeze could send flying away.

Yet, Jude knows this town has seen storms and gales and heartbreak.

The road winds down into the meadows surrounding the town –a ribbon cutting through the autumn grass and shrubs. His car, with its faded cherry gloss, roof down despite the chill that numbs his fingers as they clutch the wheel, fits into the surroundings better than Jude can picture himself doing ever again.

Coming home is a dread, cold and pooling in his gut, like the first frosts of November. Creeping and damning. Home has waited a year for him.

He passes the sign, looming up and shrouded in mist. The words, painted across in black, faded with wind and rust, imprint themselves on his mind as he speeds away, echoing behind his eyelids.

Enjoy your stay.

He doubts that he will, somehow.

I.

The first person he goes to see is Tye.

Walking to the cabin feels like walking right into a photograph, a sight gone to sleep the moment he drove out through the forest to escape to any new and different

country he could find. And it's only just waking up again now. He passes the post office, with its red door and curling notices taped to the windows; the funeral home windows glimmer in their stained greens and blues as he drives up the high street.

He remembers watching them carry the coffin out of that building, the honey wooden box that Yvann had paid too much for because it's so unbelievably expensive to do something as innately inevitable as die, and the blank whiteness of the gloved hands that held it. He remembers Jordan standing next to him, crying quietly in that hollow way of grief; how cold he had felt, just cold and nothing else, his hands buried in his pockets.

It hurts, awfully and deeply. He swallows down the feeling that he can't quite define — half sadness and half displacement — but drives on, leaving the stained glass and the ghosts behind.

As he pulls over into a tiny parking lot around the back, the little cabin is just as he remembers it. Tye's truck, silver and battered with a huge pickup back that Seiko used to use, enlisting his best friend's help at least to load up plants whenever he had a delivery at the garden centre. Jude stares at the truck far too long, wondering if they still do that. Tye, laughing, pulling Seiko into a hug, wiping away the dirt he'd inevitably gotten somewhere on his face.

The sign is still there above the bottle-green painted door, the words *Nature In Time: Offices*, in a clean bronze serif. Jude feels everything he's suppressed for the last year, all the gut-curdling bitterness and coldness that settles into the marrow of his bones and makes an unwelcome home there, rise again like winter flurrying in his stomach. He freezes with his hand on the bronze doorknob, fingers cold and stiff as his chest.

He pulls back. After seeing through the large windows that all the lights were turned off, his attention turned to the garden centre next to their cabin.

The garden centre is a sprawling series of low glass greenhouses, nestled between the wide sweep of the hilly landscape, glimmering in the dull autumn light.

He has faced thunder in Geneva and sandstorms in Texas, yet he's more scared now than he can remember ever being in any of those unfamiliar, crashing places.

His breath is white on the cold air as he treks down to the greenhouses, avoiding the muddiest patches of the path. They're lined up in a row that isn't too long but feels endless as he looks down at the clouded glass and vague shapes of dark green swaying beneath it. For a moment, he wishes he had his camera, to capture the way they all look: diamond and emerald, sparkling murkily underneath the grey sky.

Seiko and Tye are in the third one he passes, stopping to enter.

They're both wearing suspenders, black against the white of their shirts — definitely Tye's influence, Jude thinks — and are digging softly into the soil of one of the long wooden trays that run all along the length of the greenhouse. Probably weeding. Jude's knowledge of gardening comes solely from conversations with the pair. And there haven't been too many of them recently.

He doesn't know exactly where to start, how to break the silence of the greenhouse and the past year, so when Seiko turns around, all he can feel is gratitude.

"Jude?" Seiko says, his voice a little hoarse. At the mention of Jude's name, Tye turns around swiftly. The shovel falls from his hand with a clang that rebounds against the glass walls, forming a sparkling dome around them, the three men and the lush greenery of the plants.

II.

In pursuit of food, having admitted to himself that he can't survive on pastries from the bakery two streets down from his current residence, he ended up at the grocery store.

It's a far cry from the huge, sleek supermarkets of New York, and worlds away from Poland's tiny Saturday morning markets; something in between, achingly familiar. Shopping is mundane, he thinks, and yet shopping here — in this home of colourful price signs and wooden crates of vegetables — feels very comforting. Like going through the motions of being alive, in a place he fits.

He tosses a box of cereal into his basket, wonders whether he'll have enough rice for the week, and turns the corner of the aisle. And immediately spins back to hide behind stacks of cardboard boxes.

Jordan.

Just the back of his head, the soft blue of a denim jacket and the closing of the store doors behind him. A quick breeze running along his skin, but gone so quickly that Jude wonders if he has just imagined it.

No, it was too real. The feeling of pain surging at the sight of Jordan, holding a grocery store bag in each hand, nodding a goodbye to the cashier, vanishing out of the store. Jude knows that tiny image, the motif of mundanity; he had been shopping enough times with the man he used to call his best friend.

Best friend, confidant, diaper buddy. The one who always made him buy extra bread when it got to November because what if they got snowed in and ran out of potential toast? Hi other half. The thousand names for another chamber of his heart.

Jude tightens his grip on the shopping basket and puts away the extra loaf he took earlier. It won't snow yet, it's only October. Too early for any sudden colds.

III.

Reuniting with them all feels like going through the motions of redemption. Like he's ticking off a checklist of duties (two out of six — no, five, he winces in a way that's become familiar over the past year and a half). And he hates that, hates how he dreads each one. Because he loves them all, more than he could ever love anything else in the world, and reducing that love to cold, sickly anxiety seems almost blasphemous.

He finds his way to Nero's house almost accidentally.

All he wanted to do was walk a little, the crispness of the day and blue skies above an incentive to get out of the little apartment. Yet, somehow his feet have done the job for him. Nero lives at least twenty minutes away at a speedy pace, and all he wanted to do was sit in the village square for a little while, but — never mind. Here he is.

It's still as idyllic as ever. A detached, two stories, narrow and tall. Made of stone, with a now-dead rose trailing up a trellis around the red front door. On the steps outside, there are three pairs of wellington boots, lined up in a perfect Goldilocks formation: large, medium, and baby-sized. The smallest are cherry-red, and glitter in the morning sunshine.

Jude swallows the lump in his throat. He knows that Nero has had a baby. He remembers Kamala's stomach, round as the sun, right before he left.

He remembers Kamala on their wedding day, years ago now: both she and Nero, as beautiful as the spring day they chose to be bound together on — it's sweetly ironic, Jude thinks, that *kamala* means garden. She always made Nero seem more alive, not just rid of the tired eyes and dusty books, a shell of himself that he used to recede into when they were college students, too young and dumb to see that there was anything more to life than the present.

Jude misses Kamala as much as he misses Nero.

"I'll get it!" he hears a voice carrying from the inside, and his breath catches in his throat all over again.

The door opens, and Nero's smiling mouth drops open.

Silence hangs between them for several long beats. Nero has flecks of paint on his blue jeans; they're cuffed, still trailing over his sneakers. His hair is a more honeyed brown than Jude remembers it being before, but everything seemed ten times more dismal than it really was. Maybe Nero was just this bright before. Maybe he just didn't noticed.

"Nero," comes another voice from further in the house, feminine and sweet, "Who is it?"

Yes, Jude wonders, who is it? Who's calling on them? He's not sure himself.

"Jude," Nero whispers, the nickname half-stuttered. "Jude. Jude? It's Jude!"

Everything happens in steps, and all Jude can really comprehend is how warm the morning really is as he stands in the sunshine spilling over Nero and Kamala's doorstep. Then there are footsteps, running towards him. Nero still looks perplexed, as if he's just seen the sky turn purple.

"Jude?" Kamala bursts out of the house, and he's engulfed by her short figure. The first thing he notices, stupidly, among the rate of his heart beating near out of his chest and the sweet coconutty smell of her hair as it tickles his nose, is that he can actually hug her fully — as in, wrapping his arms all the way around her.

"You had the baby?" he sounds shocked to stupidity, and in all honesty, he is.

Kamala laughs against his chest, and it sounds like crying. "That's what tends to happen after nine months, Jude."

IV.

If Nero's house seemed fuller than he'd left it, crammed with young laughter and the warmth of happy embraces, then Yvann's is skeletal in its ghostliness.

There's a kind of coldness that lingers on, chilling right through him, as Jude unlatches the garden gate and ambles up the path towards the door. Weeds are growing between the stone slabs, like a rolled-out carpet of neglect, settled into place; he wonders if the alder tree hanging over the fence was always that... dismal.

A deep, irrevocable sadness seems to pervade everything. It seems that the house and its surroundings just gave up on trying to be anything but miserable. Jude shoves his hands deeper into the pockets of his jacket, but the coldness still seeps through, raising goosebumps at the back of his neck and chilling the marrow of his bones. This cold is aching.

He doesn't hesitate to knock this time, because it's too unbearably sad outside to linger on and even though he doesn't expect the inside to be any different, it must be better. The green paint of the door is peeling. The rapping of his knuckles sounds too harsh in the quiet air.

The door opens after a long, long pause. Jude can taste the tension in the breeze.

Yvann looks just as haunted as his house.

He's small as Jude remembers him, short in the doorway and drowned by a dark hoodie that looks at least two sizes too large — Jude doubts that it was even his, somehow, and that hurts unbearably. What also sends a sharp pain through his side is the way Yvann's eyes barely widen, with the dark hair drooping over his forehead

almost obscuring them. How the small, sad line of his mouth doesn't shift. He just stands there, pale, and entirely unsurprised.

"Jude," he breathes out, his voice low and quiet. Like a light, dimmed right down. "You're back."

"Yeah," Jude replies, and he can't help the low heat starting to smoulder in the pit of his stomach — like embers rekindled at the sight of Yvann's dark hair, his cat-like eyes and small stature being smothered by the soft relics of a ghost long-gone. At the sound of Yvann's voice, unwavering despite his appearance, he can't help the anger. How it makes his fists clench in his pockets, his jaw set.

"Why?" The question is blunt, not pointed, but dismal in its blankness. There's no greeting, no trace of warmth. Jude wonders if the Yvann he used to count among the inner circle of his friends died along with their best friend.

The anger is as bitter as the house, as Yvann himself.

"Why do you think?"

Yvann fixes him with a look — ntirely empty — yet something behind it, something Jude can't quite pinpoint still makes him flare up. He swallows heavily and tries to smother the heat. "I don't think I know. Do you?"

Jude counts to ten and unclenches his fists, trying not to make any more eye contact with Yvann. "Can I come in?"

Yvann just steps aside and lets him brush past.

He was wrong: the house is just as lonely on the inside as it is on the outside, even more so. The framed photographs that used to line the hallway are all gone, leaving empty nails gouged deep into the brick that Jude strides past. Stopping to think how Yvann must have had to take them from their places one by one would break the dam inside him, and the last thing he wants to do right now is start crying in front of Yvann.

So, he just carries on, down the cold, blank hallway and into the cold, blank living room.

"Do you want a drink?" Yvann asks. Going through the motions; Jude knows what it's like to rely on them. Habits. He still does it too, sometimes.

"Not really." At least they're not pretending. Yvann shrugs and doesn't look phased; Jude could always count on him at least to cut the pretence.

Couldn't rely on him for much more.

They sit on opposite ends of the dining table, like they're on a stage and this is the sole prop to support the tragic performance. Improvising.

"So," Yvann breaks through the silence falling between them, like the coldness of

the air freezing solid, “How have you — how have you been?” The question is unsettling because Yvann seems to be trying to word everything as clearly as possible. Like he’s trying for transparency. A little too late, Jude thinks.

“Okay,” he says, mechanically. He must keep his voice steady. He can’t spill over, can’t let this corroding heat overtake him. “I’ve been back a few days.”

“Huh,” Yvann nods, slowly. Jude chances a look around, notices the way there’s at least two millimetres of dust settling on the bookshelves that hold all of the art theory volumes. The walls are lacking the bright, square canvases that he remembers. It’s all devoid of colour or at least bleached out. “Who have you seen?”

“Tye and Saiko,” he says, and doesn’t even wince at the stiffness of his own tone. “Nero and Kamala. Nari.” He can’t help the tiny smile forming at the mention of the couple’s daughter, how his lips curl a little at the edges. He doesn’t think he is imagining that, for half a moment, Yvann has brightened a fraction too. A split second.

Yvann clears his throat. “Have you seen him?”

Him. Jude grits his teeth.

“No. I haven’t.”

V.

As he walks away, the day chilly and bright around him like a gaze too ice-sharp for its own good, the heat of his anger rolls off him slowly but so palpably that he feels he can almost see the steam rising from his clothes. The afternoon is bitter, biting like steel, like a camera shutter. Jude feels impossibly lost; a grain of sand gone drifting from his ocean.

Tired. He’s tired. And angry; a sour mix. The world tastes grey.

The graveyard is small, overlooked by an elm older than the most time-worn stones that dot the overgrown grass like silent guardians, watching Jude undo the latch on the gate. He wishes, inexplicably, that he wasn’t alone, but who would be here with him? They’ve all probably haunted this place like living ghosts among the dead, while he’s been trying to lose himself in places unknown for the past year. Him? He’s a new caller at the support centre for the helpless souls left behind.

It’s only as he steps out from the cover of the entrance, a little stone archway, that he sees a figure standing by the grave he’s subconsciously made this journey to visit. A slight, short person, stooping over the stone and clutching a bunch of white lilies.

It’s Jordan.

Jude backs up unwittingly to hide behind the stone pillar while still able to see him, at an angle. He can’t quite make out Jordan’s face, only a little of his profile, but he can see that his hair is a little longer than it was when he left, that soft downy

shade of brown. And that his sweater sleeves are too long, reaching halfway down his thighs. Jude feels something awful and warm twist in his chest, like a hot knife.

He's come back, like Tye said, to come home. But driving in and seeing the little town appear through the hills, he was not too unsure what that even meant.

Yet for a moment, uncertain and stupidly uncaring, Jude thinks that maybe that is where home is — right there, small and wrapped in a sweater, still amongst the graves. He lets himself savour the thought before letting it slip to the breeze, without hating himself too much.

He doesn't stop to think but starts to walk towards Jordan. The golden, frost-bitten leaves crunch beneath his boots with each step.

Jordan turns around before he can announce his arrival, so he stops no more than ten feet away from the man who made him the happiest person alive, and the saddest. Angriest. Hurt. A thousand words that he can't pin down: he's never been good at words. They were always Jordan's forte.

Jordan hasn't changed much. He looks a little world-wearier perhaps but healthier than when Jordan left him crying in the cottage doorway. Less gaunt, less hollow. His mouth is the tiniest bit agape.

"Jude," he breathes, the words casting white steam into the air between them. "Oh, my God." He drops the lilies onto the grave, and they settle like snow on black earth.

No *Judie*, then. Playing strangers.

"Hello, Jordan."

The elder of the two men just stares, as if he's stolen the world and is holding the globe in his hands. "You — you're — you're back."

"Yeah."

Jordan's skin looks etched with a burden sitting deep in the marrow of his bones. He just looks at Jude, his breaths quick and sharp with surprise. "Oh, God."

"You thought I'd gone for good?" He casts his eyes down at the grave behind Jordan. The letters sketching a name out in silver across the dark stone make something heavy in his chest grow icy cold. "Not all of us have that privilege."

Jordan winces. "Just thought you'd take a little longer."

"Why?" He stares back at Jordan, who is shaking, ever so slightly.

"Because I messed you up so badly," Jordan utters in a hoarse little whisper. "Didn't I?"

"Yeah," Jude's words come out blunt, empty. "You did."

Jordan's eyes fill with tears, and Jude wishes he was still staring at their dead friend's grave.

“You still think it was all my fault?”

“Who butchered me mentally, Jordan?” He plays with a loose thread on the cuff of his hoodie sleeve, Jordan’s eyes following the movement with no ready answer.

“Who disappeared?” Jordan’s voice is soft. Just asking a plain question.

“I was right there.”

“But you weren’t,” Jordan whispers, wiping his eyes with the cuff of his sweater. “It was like living with a ghost. You’d sit at the kitchen table for hours and just... say nothing. At all.”

“My friend had died, Jordan,” he sighs, “I’m sorry I didn’t snap back to it like you.”

“Don’t you know how much it hurt me?” Jordan whispers. “I just needed you there. Wanted to be there for you. And you shut me out for half a year. I messed up,” his words come out in half-sobs. “I messed up our friendship and trust so, so bad. But can’t you see why?”

Jude looks past him again, staring back at the grave. It seems almost to be listening. “Not really.”

Jordan nods, small and shaky, then turns away to go, stumbling a little as he moves away. “Okay. Okay, Judie.”

Judie. The nickname burns between them as Jude watches Jordan walk away through the graves and out of the gate, wiping at his eyes as he goes. He can’t shake off the feeling that he’s just let something important slip right through his fingers for a second time.

Jordan’s calla lilies are harsh against the dark gravestone, scattered. Jude kneels in the grass to arrange them in the little golden pot, melted frost soaking through his jeans but he barely notices. The lilies nod over the edges of the container like drooping heads.

The second thing he’s let slip through his fingers, Jude knows the first, and it haunts him every second of every day. A face, a laugh. A crash.

The words are etched on the stone like his penance.

Hayes Joensten.

VI. (Flashback)

Everything is fragmented, shardlike, sharp as grief and rage and annihilation around his feet.

“You said you’d fetch him,” Yvann whispers, his voice hoarse. He’s still crouching against the wall of the hospital, in the cold of the night, post-panic attack. Jude stands, caught halfway between numbness and shock.

Nothing is making sense. The world has just got hacked up to ribbons and slivers of life as they knew it. Inside the hospital, all clean white lines and corners and sympathy, lay Hayes’s body, that is now entirely not Hayes any more.

“You said you’d go and get him,” Yvann is staring, staring. Staring away into nothing. “You told me you would.”

“What difference would it have made?” The words fall from his mouth, a panicked rush that is too hot for how cold he feels, all over. Frozen, numb — Yvann stares.

“He was tired!” Yvann stands up suddenly, shaking all over. Jude recoils unknowingly, takes a half-step back as Yvann’s eyes, dark and bloodshot and empty, turn on him. “You wouldn’t have crashed! You would have —” he chokes, his words cut off sharply, like they’re stuck in his throat.

“What...” Jude asks in a dull voice. Everything around him seems to be happening slowly, as if coated in thick fuzz — it’s all a shade detached, too far away for him to grasp. “What would I have done?”

“I don’t know!” Yvann screams, splinters of broken glass in the quiet night, turning guttural and raw enough to make Jude wince. “I don’t know what you would have done, but you didn’t do it and now he’s—” He screams again, no words but a tearing, anguished sound, wrenching itself from his throat. “He’s dead! My best friend is dead!”

Jude doesn’t know what to do. It’s all falling through his fingers.

He doesn’t know what to do.

“My whole world,” Yvann sobs, hands at his head. His hair is ruined from his dragging his fingers through it. “It’s all gone.”

“He’s gone.” Yvann shakes with the force of the words.

Jude’s world is at his feet, its shards as bitter as dead stars. Dead suns.

“He’s gone.”

VII.

When the winter begins to thaw out to an early spring, Jude and Jordan sit on the bench beside Hayes’s grave.

A bunch of lilies lies between them across the wood, their petals startlingly white. The air is quiet, tinged with a breeze that still chills the tips of his fingers and the early morning birdsong. Everything is stained a vague, hazy gold from the rising sun.

Jordan's hands are folded in his lap, like a pair of swan wings, unsure of where exactly to land.

Jude feels settled in now, planted firmly into the earth. Less likely to get caught up in a flurry of wind and be swept away.

The grave is a steady reminder of it all, basking before them in its stoic permanence. They both look down over the dark stone with a kind of immovable, sorrowful peace that is almost tangible between them, like the promise of springtime.

"It still feels weird," Jordan says, breaking the lifetime-long silence. Jude doesn't know how long they've been sitting here, the cold slowly numbing him all over. "Him being gone. And right here too."

"He's never too far away."

Jordan chuckles so lightly it's little more than a puff of March-white breath, tumbling from the tiny gap of his perfect lips. Jude watches him from the corner of his eye, in that way he's become accustomed to.

"I just wish I could hear him. That's the only thing." Jordan shakes his head ruefully. "I talk to him all the time, just stuff under my breath. But he'll never reply again, will he?"

He lets the graveyard's silence offer a reply; a lone bird sings back as if to reassure him.

"It won't be like before," Jude says. His eyes trace the curve of the name etched across the gravestone, as permanent and immovable as Hayes' own mortality. His mortality. Jordan's.

"No," Jordan admits.

"I miss it all," Jude says. It's less of a confession than plain admission: him, breathing the deepest, most locked-away corners of himself out into the sun-lit morning of the graveyard. "Us. The cottage."

Jordan doesn't gasp, shriek or even start at that. He just keeps quiet for a long, long time. Then probes in an unsteady voice, "What else?"

"What else what?"

"What else do you miss?" Jordan mumbles as Jude watches him wring his fingers in the lap of his jeans.

Jude bites his lip. "I miss... sitting by the fireplace. You showing me your work. Asking about mine."

"I guess," he starts again, then breaks off because he doesn't want to say this lamely but he doesn't really have a way of making it sound impressive. Jordan is the one who has always been good at words, leaving him to fill in the empty space with colour and ink. So, he just swallows and says, "I miss you."

“I’m still not—” he goes on quickly, too quickly, stumbling over the words. He tastes them in his mouth before speaking carefully. He is not going to let his mind fall from his tongue anymore, in the rough, jagged way of back when he screamed at Jordan while the storm raged outside the cottage. “I’m still not okay. From everything. I don’t want to be angry anymore. I’m not. I’m just...”

“Lost,” Jordan offers, and Jude is struck dumb for a moment at the sheer truth of it: lost. He has been, hasn’t he? Throwing himself as far as he could possibly reach, to the very corners of the globe, just to escape the surreal displacement of every solid thing he’d treasured in his life. Only for the memory of them to follow him every step of the way.

Lost. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he still doesn’t know where exactly he belongs. Whether he should have come back at all, or just let himself stay displaced on some mountain somewhere.

Jordan must have felt lost too, to know the feeling so well. Maybe he still does. Jude barely remembers the sixth-month blues of his apathetic withdrawal into himself. He only has fragments to piece together the time he spent sitting at the kitchen table for hours on end while Jordan screamed at him. But coming home later and later, Jordan too must have felt his entire world had been set adrift.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Lost. Exactly.”

VIII.

Running away was the only option in Jude’s mind, after having Yvann blame him for the death of their friend and Jordan cursing and screaming at him while he was still grieving the sudden absence of Hayes from all their lives. Jude couldn’t forget it nor could he go on with his life.

Running was the best option.

But coming back didn’t turn out so bad, did it?

mentor: Željka Getoš

institution: Elektrotehnička i prometna škola Osijek

Ivan Ivanović

THE WAY OF ROCK

It was somewhat late at night, it being around 10 pm. People were gathering in the biggest concert hall in the city. Over 100 000 people could fit and there would still be plenty of room left. It was required, since all the tickets were sold out. It was expected, really, seeing as one of the biggest hard rock bands was performing tonight. The place was packed with numerous young rock fans. Everyone was dressed in various types of outfits. From leather tight pants, to ripped jeans and snakeskin boots to band shirts and various types of chains. And of course, you can't forget the leather jackets and mall bangs. While everyone was gathering in the arena and taking up space for themselves, there is also a lot happening backstage.

Backroom

When one would walk in, the first thing they would see is a numerous hanger of clothing and a giant mirror. On the other side of the room, one would find a lot of sound tech and instrument. Numerous guitars being one of those things. That's when the door burst open, revealing a man with a wild blond hair, a pair of ring earrings, which had a couple of pieces of bandana tied to it. His shirt had been unbuttoned a few buttons where you could see his necklaces. His pants were simple leather pants with a studded belt and bullet belt over it, and as for boots he went with black doc martens. He also had a couple bandanas wrapped around his arms and wrists. This was Nathan called Nate, the lead singer of the band F.A.I.R.Y. That's when the rest of the band walked in. They were dressed similarly as the singer, only having minor changes in outfits, colour of jeans, hair colour and such. It was still about half an hour before the show, so they had time to prepare and warm up. The guitarist, Magnus called Maggy, grabbed one of the guitars off the stand and began his warm-up, running scales and going over the set list for the show. The drummer, Scott called Scotty, and bassist, Taylor, on the other hand practiced the timing and rhythm together. The only one left was the vocalist, he was doing vocal runs and warm-ups' as he went through the lyrics of the songs once more.

Once the time was up, the band all bumped fists and started walking to the dark stage. They could hear the screams of the audience once they realize that the show was beginning.

Once they were all in their position, the drummer started the count down.

“One, two, three, four” counted down Scotty, as Maggy did his magic on guitar and began making the sound that clearly resembled the motors.

The audience screamed, just as Nate stepped up to the mic.

“They can be heard in the distance, like thunder. They’re heading down the highway, like the wind.” as Nate sang, he walked to the front of the stage and began singing for the audience in the first row.

“They’re leaving on the long road, who could know that? Only some angry hitchhiker that follows them with his finger.” With the last part before the course sung, Nate ran back to the middle of the stage and raised his hand in the air while screaming.

“Let me hear you sing it!!” now Nate, along with everyone else sang the famous course.

“Motors, motors, motors!”

“Oh yeah!” Nate ran around like a madman, before returning to the mic.

“Worn out jeans, jackets, boots, heated helmets, leather bags”

“They’re leaving on the long road, who could know that? Only some angry hitchhiker that follows them with his finger...”

“Now let me hear only you sing it” said Nate in mic, just as the band quieted down, and he pointed the mic at the audience.

“Motors, motors, motors...”

“Louder!!”

“Motors, motors, motors!”

“Even louder!!”

“Motors, motors, motors!!”

“That’s right!” with that, Maggy took the moment to get into the solo, everyone was shaking their heads around and jumping up and down as guitar master killed the solo.

“They’re leaving on the long road, who could know that? Only some angry hitchhiker that follows them with his finger”

“Motors, motors, motors” as the end of the song was nearing, currently, only drum and bass held rhythm as Maggy, and Nate clapped their hands above their heads and sang into their respective mic. The audience soon followed and the whole hall was

filled with the sound of clapping. Everyone was clapping and jumping around and having a great time. When Maggy finished the final riff, everyone screamed and applauded the band. Nate grabbed the mic and spoke to the audience.

“Alright! That was our song Motors from our first album. Next song. All out of spite!” Maggy began the opening riff as Nate let his voice loose and sang as he showed off his vocal range.

“Ooh, if you were, princess of love. And me Romeo. Oh, I would love that!” when he finished his line, Nate banged his head along the fast-paced rhythm of the song.

“Ooh if you were, a queen of rascals. And me cassava, keeper of dreams!”

“All out of spite. All out of spite. All out of spite. To you out of spite.” Everyone sang the course and as the riff progressed, Nate did his part and showed off his vocal skills once more. So, he grabbed the mic.

“Yeah!” “Oh, if you were, Fairy tale beauty. I’ll on the horse, play the prince.” Now came the moment for Maggy, as he masterfully played the solo. He got on his knees in front of the audience. When he finished, he got up and ran to the other side of the stage and continued playing the main riff.

“Ooh, if you were, Lady and Mrs. I’ll be, the cleaner of city windows.” And once again, banged his head along the rhythm of the song. When the song was nearing its end, Nate took the mic in his hand and started talking to the audience.

“All right. You know how it goes. So, on the count of three I want to hear you all sing it. You got it?” when his only response was a loud cheer, he smiled and got ready.

“And 3, 2, 1” when he said one, he pointed the mic at the audience as everyone sang as loudly as possible.

“*All out of spite! All out of spite!! All out of spite!!!*” “To you out of spite!” when Nate finished the last part of the song, Maggy and the band finishes as well.

Everyone was cheering and clapping at the great performance.

Out of nowhere, Maggy started the riff to the next song. It was fast paced and catchy. Everyone was banging their heads along the beat of the guitar as Nate sang the lyrics.

“Come on doll, take your shoes off. Don’t be ashamed, let’s dance, it’s sweet.” After a short pause, as everyone raised their heads in the air, the riff continued strongly and the lyrics continued, along with everyone headbanging.

“The band is already playing rock, but you’d still like to drink some juice. Come on take me, let’s dance, it’s sweet.”

“Aaah, touch me, touch me” Nate sang, and when the riff slowed down for a second, drums kicked in and did a short, but powerful drum solo. And as quickly as the

solo went by, guitar kicked in again and was back with the main riff.

“Come on doll, get off that chair. Stop doing your make up, let’s dance together.”

“You can even do it bare foot, well it would really please us. Look, everyone is sweating, let’s dance, it’s sweet.” Nate’s voice rang and was fading out, that quickly turned into, yet another, guitar solo that was skilfully executed by Maggy.

“Aah, touch me, touch me...” Nate’s voice rang and faded out as the song ended, which was met with a hit on the guitar for the shock effect.

The people were cheering, as the band all turned to their drummer, on who the lights were turned to, as he began to play a 10-minute drum solo, effectively showing off his skills.

When Scotty finished his part, everyone clapped, applaud and whistled. Everyone could now see Nate, as he walked up to the mic and began to hold a little speech.

“As you probably know, F.A.I.R.Y is always coming with something that we share with everyone. Does anyone know what that something is?” the people were screaming left and right. You could hear the shouts of answers, ranging from ‘money’ to ‘energy’ but that was when Nate heard one girl scream the right answer. “That’s right. Love. F.A.I.R.Y brings love for everyone whenever we go. So, this next song is called Smile.” The screams of girls could be heard for miles. That’s when Maggy, who had an acoustic guitar on a stand, began playing the song intro.

“Let the queen of dawn, sink into the sea. Leaving behind her, a trail of stars. While my hands are looking for yours. I found out in your eyes. That I am dear to you. Mmm” as Nate was singing, he lifted his arm in the air and with his hand made slow left and right motion, signalling to everyone to sing along.

“Let the shadows walk, leave into the night. And the sleepy midnight wave, calm down now. The hours are late, you must leave.” Everyone had an arm wrapped around the shoulder of the person next to them and were slowly swinging left and right.

“The harbour and town are long since asleep, the harbour and town...” with that Maggy switched back to his electric guitar and kept the same rhythm while Nate sang.

“Hey, hey, smile. And even if I had made mistakes, smile. Hey hey, smile.”

“And I shall whisper to you what nobody whispered to you before...” with that, Maggy began a beautiful solo on his guitar. As it got higher and higher, Nate came along and sang.

“Ooh, hey hey, smile. Even if I had made mistakes, smile... and I shall whisper to you what nobody whispered to you before...” Nate had his head bowed down before the mic as everyone applaud the band for the beautiful song.

“Thank you everyone, thank you for coming here tonight. This next song is special one, it’s called Kiss me, my dear. Now, I want to see everyone dancing, it’s beautiful night for that. C’mon!” finished Nate, his voice going higher and higher as Maggy started the song off with a catchy riff.

“Rrrrrraaahhh!!” screamed Nate as he ran along the stage, stopping by Taylor and Maggy while banging his head back and forth, feeling the music. The crowd matched Nates energy and were dancing and running around, banging their heads as well.

“Hurry up doll, you’re already late. You have to be in bed by nine. Alongside Chopin playing quietly, while reading a book. Insist on having your way to your heart’s content, it’s too late.” Nate sang with his full chest while standing beside Maggy, who was really feeling the music, seeing as he was really killing it on guitar. The crowd was wild, as expected.

“Kiss me, my dear, a cold wave will hit. Kiss me, my dear, were not sweet anymore.” As he was singing the course, Maggy and Taylor joined him on vocals, providing a beautiful harmony.

This made Nate smile. It all reminded him of the good old days, back in high school, when they were just starting out as a band. It was rough and tough for them to break out, seeing as the music at the time, was mostly classical. It was almost unheard of for a rock band to succeed, but in the end, it was worth it. It was all thanks to their desire and stubbornness to succeed that they are where they are today. Their start as a band was common story. Maggy and Nate met in high school. They became great friends and eventually started practicing together. One day, during the spring break, the decision was made to form a band. That’s how Scotty and Taylor came into the picture. They saw listing in the newspaper that musicians were looking for members to join. And, as they say, is history. They went on to practice during the entire spring break, and even wrote a couple songs, some of which would one day end up becoming their biggest hits.

Back to present, the concert was slowly coming to an end, with Maggy talking to the crowd, introducing the band, and giving a speech.

“...it was beautiful tonight with everyone, one beautiful bandana. To introduce the band. On drums, Scott...” he paused for a moment, to give the audience time to applaud. “Bass guitar, Taylor” a moment for applaud “the number one voice of Europe, and I believe wider, Nathan” this time, the clapping and screaming increased significantly, which made Nate give a small bow to the crowd. “Guitar... me, Maggy.” The applaud was almost the same as Nate’s.

“Now for the last song for tonight, it’s a song that hasn’t been released yet. It’s on our new album that we are currently working on. It’s called Wild boys.” It started off with a slow guitar riff while Nate sang.

“Heyy girls, look at all the wild boys...” and with that, the riff kicked off. Nate was banging his head around, Maggy and Taylor were running around the stage, while Scotty went wild behind the drums.

“Summer in the city, girls are lookin’ hot. Gonna get some action, give ‘em all we’ve got.” The riff and drums intensified and headbanging increased.

“Needle in the muscle, walkin’ down the highway. Got to beat the Mustang, driving through the fire.” The drums descended and guitar followed.

“Wild boys! Wild boys! Wild boys! A-na-na-na! Wild boys!” the drums and guitar descended again, and the main riff returned.

“Look at all the wild boys, runnin’ through the night. Living in the jungle, keeping out of sight. Lovers and the angels fighting to the top. Life is not a love song; they just want to rock.”

“Wild boys! Wild boys! (WILD BOYS!) Wild boys!” the guitar descended again, “Yeah!” and the guitar solo started.

“Wild boys! (Wild boys!) Wild boys! (A-na-na-na) Wild boys! yeAHHHHH!!” with the mightiest and highest scream of the night Nate, once again, surprised everyone with his vocal range and control.

“Wild boys! Wild boys! Wild boys! Wild boys!”

“Look at all the wild boys (YES!) they just want some action! They just wanna rock. Right!”

And with that, the final strum of guitar hit of drum was taken tonight. The people were going wild, jumping up and down, screaming at the top of their lungs and clapping.

Nate, Maggy, Scotty and Taylor all gathered in at the front of the stage, put their arms around each other and all bowed to the crowd. They repeated it several times, and then ran off the stage, all smiling whilst doing so. They totally rocked that performance. And they did just that, because people were smiling like fools as they left the stadium. It would be talk of the week and more in the town.

Back in the dressing room, the band were celebrating another successful concert done, but now, there were more people present. Namely, the four girls, and each of them was in a side hug from their respective band mate. Nate was sitting in a chair drinking beer while in his lap sat blonde haired girl, Nancy, decked out in an all-leather outfit. Hair spikes going in all directions as she laughed at something

Taylor said. Nate smiled at her; it always filled him with joy when she was laughing. It was probably his favourite sound. She was his high school sweetheart, like in all cheesy American love movies, only for them, it worked out. They couldn't be happier together. Same went for the other couples in the room. As a matter of fact, all of them knew each other from high school. It will be a story to tell, one day for future generations to talk about. Returning from his mind, Nate looked around the room. On the other side of the room stood Maggy, while next to him on a table sat brunette girl, Robin, drinking and laughing along everyone else. Next to them, on a couch, sat Scotty and Taylor, each holding close black-haired girl, Lexi and Jessica, respectfully. They were all relaxing together, enjoying their time after the show, talking, drinking and laughing. It was sort of a tradition for them to just hang out after the show and catch up with their significant others. Despite their rock star statuses, they all were loyal to their significant others, unlike some of the other bands and the public opinion. Nate wasn't lying about what he said, F.A.I.R.Y did bring with them love. And everyone in the room firmly believed that the world would be a lot better if everyone learned to love instead of hate. Nate sighed at that thought, it was only wishful thinking, but at least the band could unite some people for one evening.

The next morning, F.A.I.R.Y group was heading to the airport. That was life of a rock stars, they were on a constant move whilst on a tour. But it also didn't come as a surprise that they were all walking towards a private plane waiting for them. There were, of course, a lot of privileges for a rock star. One of them was having enough money for the luxury travel. As they were getting in their seats, everyone had similar thoughts.

On a road again, new places, new people, new adventures.

I would like to credit this story to the band that brought me an inspiration for this story. "Divlje Jagode" I would like to thank them for their music and love that they share with their fans all over the region. Thank you.

mentor: Davor Štifanić

institution: Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

Lucija Karlović

A SEAGULL THAT NEVER LEARNED TO FLY

After losing someone that was so deeply immersed with your life that their existence was necessary for the creation of your everyday emotions, you will never truly live again. Days, as well as the months will pass but you forget to notice their presence. Your conversations will become shorter, your words shallower and your thoughts more egregious. You can try to disregard the pain. You may as well succeed. But that feeling is temporary. The pain you have is not caused by a wound but rather an unstoppable bleeding. The bleeding that is sooner or later going to demolish your already too shallow being. You can try to reassure yourself with plethora of reasons why you can still feel something apart from the immense emptiness that has completely dominated your other feelings whose existence you now may even begin to question. But how could the emptiness ever leave your heart when you know that the crystal blue eyes are now only a part of your memories. When you are forced to understand the cruel reality in which the smile that is buried deep inside of your chest is forever lost in the unstoppable force of the past. Also knowing that the outcome of those unfortunate events would have been different if you had chosen not to go home that night.

July 6th, 1998. (present)

The symphony of blue and green is merging on the rocky coast, creating a new turquoise color while the sea is imitating a bright blue color of the sky. Small, rhythmic waves are travelling towards the shore, crashing into impenetrable, hard rocks and creating a white trail of foam. A few seagulls are resting on the coast, fatigue arrogating their small bodies due to the unbearable heat of the outside world. An old, faded boat is fighting with the small amount of waves that are still on the open sea, disturbing the tranquility of the once intact nature.

My half-open eyes are hiding from the sun rays under the black Ray Bans I bought last week; tiredness slowly overpowering my body. My tired gaze slowly looks up towards a single seagull freely flying under the endless blue. Its wings proudly swinging and showing the power they hold. The sudden Déjà vu I felt is making my mind form the pictures of the last summer again. I feel her presence looking at the seagull. Her cold presence that is sending shivers down my spine even under the hot sun that is warming my features.

It was 27th of July last summer when it happened. I can still feel cold raindrops sliding down my skin and the sharp rocks under my feet. I can still remember exactly how it felt to stand on that high cliff. In the moment when my whole world stopped and then exploded and broke into million little pieces. On the day that I will forever know as the one that took the part of me I love the most. The cruel reason behind it unbeknownst to me. Four days before the start of an August, a month and five days before the start of a new school year and 344 days before this moment right now. That was the last day I experienced pure, honest happiness.

July 27th, 1997.

I looked at my best friend with a smiling expression on my face as I once again took the dice in my hand and threw it across the board that was resting on the dusty floor of Taya's bedroom.

The dice elegantly rolled a few times before showing the same number for the 5th time in a row.

6, the highest number. With that, I moved my small blue figure towards a field that had „finish“ written on it with bright red letters.

„Oh, come on. At this point it's not even fair anymore.“ – said Taya with a grumpy face because this was her 3rd time losing today.

„Well, you know I'm the lucky one between you and me.“ – I said teasingly while laughing at her funny grimace.

It was our tradition. Every Wednesday morning when the Sun was still lazily replacing the Moon we were sitting on the wooden floor in her small, carefully decorated room. The old board game my grandpa gave me for my 10th birthday called „Snakes and ladders“ was between us while we played for hours. Snakes and ladders is a typical game everyone played back then. The board is divided into one hundred squares that are full of different traps and tricks you have to go through. You had one dice that had numbers from 1 to 6 engraved on it. Everything after you start

the game is simple luck. And that was what we loved the most. The intense and the unexpected.

I have known Taya for as long as I have known myself. We both grew up on the same island in the same village where we made our first steps and said our first words. Taya lived in a ramshackle, bright yellow house that was situated in the isolated part of the island right by the sea coast. She lived there only with her grandparents since she was 5. Taya never mentioned the situation at home but one night she opened up to me saying that her mother was an alcoholic who left Taya and her father when Taya was still too young to remember her. Unfortunately, one night, three months after her mother left, Taya came in her father's bedroom because she couldn't sleep. Her father was peacefully laying on his bed. She called him a couple of times just to hear nothing but an old clock that was ticking on the wall. Only 10 minutes later her grandmother was already in the room. She told Taya that his heart stopped beating because of the tremendous sadness he couldn't bare but Taya knew she wasn't telling the whole truth. Her grandmother forgot one little detail. She forgot the empty pack of Fentanyl that was laying on the floor under the bed. With the cruel injustice of her childhood, Taya was forced to grow up and face the bitter taste of adulthood too early. After Taya told me the whole story I found it quite strange that her lips were still somehow always pulled upwards into a wide smile. When she laughed, her eyes were almost completely closed, covering her deep blue orbs that were almost the same color as the crystal ocean on a calm day. She wasn't very loud person and she didn't talk when she didn't have to but she was bringing positive energy to every room she entered. She loved to draw. That was one of the rare things she genuinely loved talking about. Taya always gifted me her drawings for every birthday and I kept all of them. There was one thing about Taya that she mentioned only once.

It was one of those summer days when the temperature was so high that people were either at home, watching new TV shows under their air conditioners or they were at the beach, cooling their heated bodies in the sea. I was in Taya's room looking at her drawings when suddenly one thought crossed my mind.

„Taya, why don't we go to the beach today for a short swim. We are never going.“ – I asked looking at her drawing of one seagull with his wings wide open that stood out on the blue background.

„Oh, but you know that my skin is sensitive to the Sun so I can't stay long outside.“ – she said with a tone in which I recognized a hint of nervousness. A few months ago Taya told me she was diagnosed with some skin condition that prevented her from being exposed to the Sun too long but I knew there was something else she didn't want to tell me.

„That’s okay, we don’t need to stay longer than 10 minutes. Come on, you won’t regret it.“ – I said decisively and took her hand, quickly going towards the entry door.

„Wait!“ - This was my first time hearing her voice raised and panicked.

I stopped in front of the large wooden door that separated us from the warmth of the outside world and looked at her. She took a deep breath as if trying to think of the way to tell me something really important.

„There is something I have been planning on telling you.“ – the atmosphere in the room suddenly thickened. The tension was spreading through the air while I waited for her to start talking. I was looking at her while her gaze was scanning the floor. A few more seconds passed before she got the courage to tell me the sentence I am still hearing in my dreams.

„Layla, I can’t swim.“

From that day until 27th of June 1997., I was the only person who knew that Taya couldn’t swim. On the island where almost every activity was connected to the sea, the inability of swimming was an embarrassment. The embarrassment for the family and the embarrassment for that person. Taya was aware of it. That is why every time when our friend group went cliff jumping and swimming, Taya made a different excuse onto why she couldn’t swim that day. I remember a very few times when she entered the water only up to her ankles. Although Taya felt the sea on her skin only a couple of times in her life, she loved it more than anything. She always told me that she feels a special connection to that magnificent blue cover of the Earth and the depths of it. She also loved seagulls. She knew how to describe the way their wings widen in the sky to the tinniest details. The only problem was that she never had a chance to physically experience the world she admired so much. That was the reason why all of her drawings were always decorated with blue colors that were forming differently shaped waves or the line of the horizon that separated the blueness of the sea from the brighter blueness of the sky. Those blue colors were giving away her only inconsolable longing.

The sweet scent of a summer breeze met our nostrils, simultaneously cooling our sweaty features and reminding us of the warm Sun that has completely engulfed the surroundings. The old tires of our bicycles were living a pale, grayish trail on the concrete while Taya and me rode, the fastest we can, towards the usual hanging spot of our friend group. A small cottage that was situated near the abandoned school. Five year ago, two of our friends received it as a present from a local mayor. The

place inside was really narrow and the furniture had the smell of a moisture but we repainted the walls and decorated them with a bunch of photographs and a couple of Taya's paintings.

Our friend group was consisted of three boys and two girls. Heron, Eagle, Sparrow, Taya and me. People that didn't know us, didn't have a lot of positive things to say about us. Older people from the village always complained that we spent too much time in the big forest doing various of things we weren't allowed to. That wasn't entirely true. At the very end of the forest there were stone cliffs that were almost five meters away from the sea level. It was where we spent the majority of our time enjoying the pure adrenaline of jumping from the hot rock surface into the refreshing depths of the summer sea. The only person that was watching us from the shade of an old oak with a small pink notebook and a yellow pencil in her hands, was Taya.

As more and more drops of sweat found their place on my forehead, I caught the sight of a broken windows and graffiti-full walls of the once-called school.

Finally, I thought to myself as we left our bikes leaning against the broken fence.

Slowly opening the rusty, metal door of the small building, we were slightly taken aback with the sight in front of us. Heron, Sparrow and Eagle were sitting on the faded, torn sofa filled with black traces of cigarette butts while smoking and petting a small white cat I haven't seen before.

"Who's that?" – I asked sitting next to the Heron on the couch.

"Whitey. She was sitting outside in front of the door when we arrived, so we let her inside." – said Heron while drawing a long puff of smoke from a cigarette in his hand.

Heron was the latest to join the group. Unlike the rest of us, he didn't always live on the island but in a city on the other side of the country. He moved here with his mother a couple of years ago. We actually met Heron by accident one winter, three years ago, when he tried to steal the money from the shop Eagle was working in. If any of us disliked any form of injustice, that was Eagle. After he caught Heron with full pockets of the unearned money, he took him aside to talk. Heron apologized several times saying that his mother needed the money because she got fired 3 months ago and now, they didn't have enough to pay for their everyday needs. Eagle wasn't always benevolent, but he liked something about Heron and he believed him. Later that day, Heron had already introduced himself to the rest of us and we accepted him under the condition that he never steals a single coin again. In the end it turned out that Heron really had financial problems, but his rebellious personality hid the fact

that it bothered him. Heron didn't look like the people we usually see on the island. He had both of his ears heavily pierced as well as his bottom lip and he always wore the same trousers he painted himself. Most of his time he would spend here in the cottage listening to rock music or writing some of his controversial thoughts in his notebook. And one thing about Heron was: that guy was never seen without a cigarette between his lips.

"Are you guys going to the cliffs today?" – asked Taya curiously after a while, in the same time looking at the photographs on the wall that showed the local football team from 1967.

"What do you mean by "you guys"? You won't swim with us again, right?" – said Sparrow with a little bit of anger in his voice as Taya quickly moved her gaze from the photographs and looked at him.

"Come on, you know she has problems with her skin." – I said, standing in her defense, noticing how tensed she was but Sparrow seemed unusually persistent today.

"No, she could swim if she wanted to. She is hiding something." – at this point he was obviously attacking her in front of everyone that were present in the room.

"Since when do you allow yourself to address others like that?" – sharply said, so far completely silent, Eagle.

Eagle and Sparrow were brothers. Eagle was the oldest one among us. He was turning 18 this year but we always teased him saying that he is a 60-year-old trapped in a young body. Even though we joked about it, Eagle was, just like Taya, forced to grow up when he was only 9 because his and Sparrow's mother fell in a coma after the car accident and their dad found comfort in gambling and other women. That is why Eagle took care of both Sparrow and their mother while still going to the second grade of primary school. Everyone from the group learned a lot from him and we looked up to him, so no one really resented him jokes or teasing. His thin lips were regularly pulled upwards into a slight smirk with anything smokable between them and I am not sure if his eyes were dark brown or fully black because I never really saw them due to the thick, black dreadlocks that were completely covering one part of his face. Eagle proved many times that he knows how to act mature in certain situations we did not. He understood the people and the way they're functioning and he truly believed in karma. Sparrow on the other hand was completely opposite from Eagle. He didn't know much about the world and his thoughts were rather shallow. He was a sport person and he had quite a good physique for a 16-year-old. Every night before he came in our cottage, he played football with his teammates on the playground behind the old school. He was often quite rude to Taya or me and he didn't know

when he crossed the line, but Eagle would always warn him if he overdid it. However, Eagle was respected here, and Sparrow was obligated to listen to him.

Despite all of that, Sparrow didn't look like he was giving up today.

"Come on Eagle, we all know she's been hiding something for a long time and you always say there shouldn't be secrets between us." – he said while looking at Taya, making it clear that was an open question directed to her and not Eagle.

"That would be enough." – said Eagle, but there was uncertainty in his tone.

Sparrow reluctantly gave up on the topic and stood up, taking the ball that was resting on the shell above the small table and left the room. Taya remained silent just blankly staring at the edge of the sofa while everyone else looked at her for a short moment before starting a new conversation. One thought remained in the air and we were all aware of its presence. As much as Eagle and Heron wanted to be on Taya's side, they knew that Sparrow was partially right. Taya was hiding something from them and they knew it. *There shouldn't be secrets between us.* Those were the rules and Taya didn't follow them. One who does not follow the rules cannot be a part of the group.

A couple of hours later we all went to the forest like we usually do. The only difference was that Taya didn't say a single word the entire time. The forest was unusually quiet that day because of the cold summer rain that refreshed the dehydrated flora of the island. The usual song performed by the residents of the forest wasn't heard, so the only sound we were listening to was a dull echo of rain and the tires making their way through the slippery path overgrown with plants. There was something else felt in the surroundings. Something new that contributed to the silence but I couldn't quite make out what it was then. Now I understand that the forest already knew about the events that are going to take place in it later that day.

When the Sun calmly commenced to descent below the far horizon, leaving the sky to the darkness of the night that will cover it with its mantle made out of the myriad stars, I disturbed the stillness of water's surface with a jump.

"That was risky Layla!" – I heard Heron's agitated voice from the top of the cliff.

"Oh, come on, just because there isn't as much light as before, it doesn't mean I can't jump." I answered but I knew it was dangerous to do it when the visibility was low.

I came out of the dark blue water and saw Heron, Sparrow and Eagle with towels in their hands. Taya was, as usual, sitting under the big, old oak but instead of draw-

ing, her eyes were fixed on some distant point in the sky.

“It is getting too dark, I think we should slowly start heading home.” – said Eagle that was drying his dreadlocks with the already wet towel.

Everyone immediately agreed; only Taya remained silent and continued looking into the distance. After we all got dressed up and somehow dried our hair, boys headed towards the place where we left our bicycles.

I confusedly approached Taya, who didn’t look like she had any intention of getting up and asked:

“Taya, are you coming? Everyone is waiting for you, they are already on the bikes.”

She turned her head towards me and I looked at her light blue eyes which I could never read. Maybe if I could, I wouldn’t spend the countless nights after that day awake. Maybe if I could, that wouldn’t be the last time that I was looking at deep crystal orbs that were hiding so much secrets beneath them.

Taya never lied to me but that night she told me that she is going to stay there a little longer to paint a picture she had been inspired to do for a long time. After that, I did something that made my conscience slowly destroy my mind for months later. I left. I believed her and said:

“I will come to your house later today to see the picture. I’m interested. Don’t forget it.” That was the last thing I ever said to her. She gave me a small smile after that and only now after so long when I look back at that night, I can see how terribly sad that smile looked.

At exactly 9 o’clock that same night, I knocked on the large, wooden door of Taya’s bright yellow house but only the echo of my knocking could be heard from the inside. I knew that Taya’s grandparents weren’t at home because she mentioned they are going to come late that night. The only option left was to go back to the forest and see if Taya was still there. If only I knew back then that Taya really was still there. But not even my worst nightmares could imagine how.

The drive to the cliffs felt like an eternity even though I was driving as fast as I could. When I was already halfway there, a heavy, cold rain started to mercilessly fall from the dark sky and trees were forced to dance under the influence of the strong wind. When I finally reached the edge of the forest, I was already completely wet. I threw my bicycle on the floor and quickly ran to the place where I last saw my best friend. The rain was getting heavier and the wind was getting stronger as I had a hard time fighting with a mass of air that was pushing me in the other direction. When I

reached the well-known tree Taya sat under every day for the past two years, I saw something familiar. There, on the wet grass under the crown of the old oak, laid a small, pink notebook. Its covers were completely soaked and the paintings were slowly starting to wash out. I quickly lifted it off the floor and saw something that doesn't quite fit in with the paintings that Taya drew. On the last filled page of Taya's notebook, there was something written. I looked better and saw that it was a letter addressed on my name. It didn't take me long to realize the intent of the letter. My brain didn't have enough time to process the information it just received because I was already running in panic towards the edge of the cliff. I felt like I can't breathe, like my mind suddenly went blank from the overwhelming. My eyes were expeditiously scanning every part of the turbulent sea, my mind maybe convincing me it wasn't too late. But when my widened eyes stopped and made out a small, lifeless figure that was carried by the rushing sea current, all my hopes were forever buried. In that short moment my whole world stopped and collapsed onto me. My breathing was already too shallow to be aware of what is really happening around me and before my body hit the cold, hard ground, falling unconscious, I was sitting on the floor of Taya's dusty room again and we were playing our favorite board game together.

I woke up in the hospital the next morning. I looked around the room, searching for anything that could prove the falsity of yesterday's events but the only thing I found was the pink notebook that was laying on my nightstand. I carefully took it in my hands, noticing that it completely dried from the last night's rain. I slowly flipped through the pages that showed Taya's drawings and stopped at one particular drawing that stood out from the rest. The drawing showed Taya swimming in the blue sea. It was her only drawing of herself. When I scanned the picture a little bit further, I saw a little seagull with a broken wing in the right upper corner. I think she referred to herself with it. When I reached the final filled page, I tried my hardest sustaining the tears that just kept warming my cheeks. I started reading the letter.

My dear Layla,

Neither the complexity nor the simplicity of the words could describe the importance of your being for my miserable life. I am aware that my selfish acts will leave a strong impact on your future life and I can't even describe how sorry I am for that. Exactly one month ago my skin condition got worse so I was necessitated to go to the hospital. Doctors have noticed the abnormal growth of my skin cells and after only three examinations that same day, I was diagnosed with stage 4 skin cancer.

That's when the already too heavy burden I have been carrying my whole life finally brought me down to the ground. Doctors have told me I have only 2 months left if I refuse to do the surgery which I did. I never got the courage to tell you this and for that I sincerely apologize. I am currently sitting on the place where you will later find this notebook. A light summer breeze is cooling my hot tears and carrying the fragrance of the sea waves while the Sun has almost completely settled. My exhausted mind can't help but think about the life that I'm forced to call "mine" that never once looked at me as a friend. I'll be honest. I fear the death that is already too close. I fear the impossibility of feeling. The thought of complete physical absence is at the times changing my decision, but realizing that in just a few weeks the outcome would have been the same only in a monotonous hospital bed, I am looking at the steep cliffs barely visible under the weak moonlight again. I have always loved sea. You were the only one that knew how much I longed for something I couldn't have. I hoped that you would also be the only one who could understand why I choose a calm blue sea with a single seagull above as the last picture my eyes will be able to see. Since my thoughts are slowly coming to an end, I can only say one thing as a most genuine way to say goodbye to you, my dearest friend. Thank you. Thank you for showing me that in this unstoppable darkness of my life, there is a little bit of light that gave me hope. I guess you were right. You really are the lucky one between us and I couldn't be more happy because of that. Please promise me that the sadness is not going to stop you from continuing your life because success is the least you deserve. However, if your thoughts sometimes become too heavy to handle them alone, go to the sea coast behind my old house and look at the sky. Somewhere there, between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea, I will freely fly carried by the wind.

Your Taya.

A plethora of times people do not understand the injustice of fates. They try to find an explanation for an inexplicable event or justify the cruelty of incurable diseases with the example of something understandable to people. What they don't want to hear is that people can't bring themselves to understand the things that were simply never meant to be understood. I have always wondered why Taya was destined for that unfair life she couldn't handle. I have always looked for a villain in her short story who created her terrible fate. But of course, I never found one. I didn't want to imagine the pain she went through and I could not come to terms with the fact that she was going through the last moments of her life alone. The way her life ended was her own decision and that was disturbing me for a long time before I realized that jump fulfilled her last and only wish. The wish she knew is going to kill her.

Taya was the girl that lived by the sea. During the day, she would sit in the shade of an old oak while drawing the open sea with two seagulls in the background. During the night, she was listening to the sounds of sea foam that whispered to her the secrets of the island. She was the girl that dreamed about the sea but never learned to swim. She was the seagull that wanted to see the world but never learned to fly.

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THE LIVING ABYSS

“For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” (Friedrich Nietzsche)

Hello, dear reader. There aren't that many people left willing to hear my story. So, how about I tell it to you? It's the story of how I defeated an eldritch abomination.

It all began a week ago. Back then I was just a regular worker in a retail hell at the local S-mart. Oh, yeah, I guess I haven't properly introduced myself. My name is John Doe, age forty.

To continue with the story. While I was going to my regular hellhole job at S-mart, a brown piece of parchment flew into my face. Now, I am no believer in fate, but I just so happened to have read a lot of cosmic horror stories, and this really felt like I was being thrown into a cosmic story, what with the things that were written on it:

The First Seal of the Living Abyss

*Ever since I gained form from the primordial ooze, I recall having no face.
I have journeyed over yonder, I used to think over my place.
I seek death no longer, my lust turned tame.
I always used to wonder from whence had I came.
Through the double pillared gates of ages, I have scoured the vast mortal planes.
I have gone through my life without slumber, my being with countless names.
I have seen the dark universe yawning when the planets were still being made.
Time was ever changing, the space started to fade.
Omniscience was always my being, to my knowledge I have been clinging.
When the time began, I was creating, my age never changing.
Great is my appointed duty, the abyss of no pain.
And even if thou sayeth I am forgotten, thine memories of me will remain.
I have transcended the echelons of space, time for me but a game.*

*I have witnessed lightning rending when the sky was but a vaporous flame.
 I have drunk from the crimson covered mountains when the first battles came.
 Ever since I have been living, my fate was to be lone.
 The transience of earth is never ending, there is no hope left to be torn.
 I have haunted the tombs of ages, in Hades where the Cerberus rages.
 Oh, great is the sin of my spirit, my pride fills pages.
 Beware all ye who read this parchment, for thou hath now opened the first of the six
 seals!*

Now, I would usually just throw this piece of parchment away, but something about its message made me get butterflies in my stomach, or it could just be the ten-day old beans I ate? So, there I was, contemplating what I should do. Good old Lovecraft really liked to hammer in the point that non-Euclidean abominations are unbeatable, but I wasn't planning to let some liquid abomination ruin my week.

After that little shock, I went into the S-mart. There I was greeted by my pal who was also a drunken sailor in his free time for every horror story must have a drunken sailor in order to be good. After our little chat, I went to get my work uniform. While walking to the dressing room, I saw a weird poster which read: "*The Great Old One is coming, beware!*". What was even weirder about it is the fact that it was made of hide. I thought it was just some new type of advertisement for a rock concert or something, so I ignored it and continued walking.

After a little while I finally arrived at the dressing room but was surprised to find a small letter near the door to the dressing room. I was thinking about ignoring it, but morbid curiosity got to me, so I opened it and took a peek.

The text inside the letter was somewhat weird and read as follows:

A warning to humanity

If you are reading this letter, know that a terrible fate awaits your world.

The Great Old One is coming, and he hungers for souls.

I don't have much time since he has already manifested in your world, but I do have useful information that might help.

The eldritch beings have both weaknesses and strengths depending on the type of manifestation they choose.

The strength of a being is directly tied to its mode of existence.

There are two types of eldritch beings: incorporeal and corporeal.

Incorporeal ones must be summoned to be able to interact with the physical world, but in compensation for this weakness, once it manifests itself, it's nearly impossible to defeat.

Corporeal beings have the advantage of already possessing bodies.

The Great Old One is known to be a corporeal type and therefore has already manifested somewhere.

The good news is that corporeal beings also have another weakness. That weakness is the fact that they can only manifest as a normal human being, but obviously, the more parchments you read, the stronger they get, until finally they can release their true form.

Knowing this, I warn you, be careful of every person who interacts with you, for they can always be the being in disguise.

Good luck!

Now, you can call me naive for believing the parchment and this letter, but I wasn't planning on breaking the old saying: better safe than sorry.

Whoever this person was, I was thankful they gave me this information since it would prove to be very useful in fighting against the horrors from the outer space.

Besides being thankful to the person, I was also a little worried after carefully reading the almost incomprehensible words. They were even harder to read than the Abyss' which were written by the Great Old One. I knew I didn't want to let it gain full power and make huge mistakes along the way.

After all those distractions, I finally put on my uniform and started working.

Followed by seven long hours of hell, ahem I mean work which included dealing with annoying customers, cleaning the toilets, chasing rats away from the warehouse, I was finally free to go back to my camper van which resided in a run-down trailer park.

While going back from work, I ran into another parchment. It was also about the so-called Living Abyss.

The parchment contained the following text:

The Second Seal of the Living Abyss

The restless planets turn with fright, covered with an everlasting lustre of fear and my might.

The moonlit gaze of my eyes guide everything towards new revelations.

*I made a singularity finite along the way, hopping across endless realities every day.
 Life keeps on turning every day, never realizing the folly of its way.
 It all came to me at the end as if to say: escape from the unstoppable reality decay.
 It will taketh eternity for my form to turn anew, there is nothing that infinitesimal
 worlds could ever do.
 The wild stars fall from the skies, full of regret and longing for the truth out of sight.
 I know my duty must be right, as righteous, and powerful as the most radiant light.
 It has always been said might is right, destruction comes but the new being takes
 flight.
 Beware mortal, for thou hath opened two out of six seals!
 Good luck!*

At this point I was dumbfounded mostly because this parchment could somehow predict that I would read the first one, which is pretty insane and improbable, and also because the eldritch scribbles were talking about it having infinite love for us and also asking us not be afraid. This, if you ask me, sounds a little ominous and kind of stalkerish.

Even if I wanted to do something about it, I didn't have any equipment to deal with something of that magnitude. I decided to do the best thing possible: I went back to my van to drink beer.

After having walked for two hours, I finally arrived at the trailer park. Ah, home sweet home! Since I was so tired from both work and the weird parchments, I decided to take a long snooze. Needless to say, reading parchments that are possibly eldritch artifacts wasn't the smartest thing to do.

During my hibernation period, I was attacked by visions of a slimy villain who wanted to ruin my mood. Inside the dream world, I was still lying in my bed, but the environment turned into a completely white void, almost akin to Limbo. The Living Abyss was sitting on a black throne and drinking from a cup filled with mysterious liquid which he called the divine tea. He even chose a humanoid shape and wore a tuxedo, and, bizarrely enough, he spoke like a stereotypical gentleman.

That was probably one of the scariest dreams I had ever had, partly because it seemed like the Abyss was trying to woo me, but also because he offered me join him for a tea party to celebrate the end of all life and the unification of reality inside it. I, as a man who wasn't planning on giving up on earth so soon, refused the offer, and was promptly forced to wake up.

From that night on, I decided to summon the little rascal, all in order to get rid of

him once and for all. My plan seemed smart at the time. I was planning to collect and read all the parchments, and I knew it wouldn't be easy. It was guaranteed I would run into opposition.

I also suddenly remembered that I had the even meaner and tougher Great Old One to deal with. Knowing that, I decided to recruit my pal, the drunken sailor. If there was anyone who could prove to be monumental in hunting horrifying abominations, it would be him.

Luckily for me, I knew just where to find him. Knowing that he was a fanatic who liked to cosplay as a sailor, I went to the local bar where every person who was obsessed with sailors had the habit of coming.

I went inside the bar and found him dead drunk lying in his own vomit. In order to wake him up, I gave him a little friendly tug and a friendly stomp to the face. Seems like those warm gestures worked. He finally raised himself from the pool of vomit and started talking to me.

I told him all about my plan to summon a living black hole in order to fill it with hot lead once and for all. Luckily for me, my pal was in no condition to refuse, and so I finally acquired a teammate.

Since he was still wasted from the copious amounts of booze, I decided to let him sleep over at my place until his sobriety got restored. After he rested for an amount of time that rivalled infinity, he finally became conscious enough in order to accompany me to the local gun store.

Despite gas prices increasing from inflation, I drove myself and my pal to the gun store. There, we acquired two shotguns, two .500 S&W magnums, a boatload of bullets and shells. Besides guns, we also made Molotov cocktails with cheap brandy and dish rags. We bought ten litres of Clorox bleach and ammonia in order to make a huge amount of mustard gas.

Obviously, I wouldn't normally resort to buying guns and chemicals which would be forbidden by the Geneva conventions, but circumstances called for drastic measures.

At first, me and my pal were pretty stumped about the locations of the parchments, but we decided to go to the most obvious spot: the local Freemason lodge. If these apron-wearing, secretive, pathetic, politician corrupting pansies decided to resist, we would send them to their maker.

After driving for an hour, we finally arrived at the lodge. We were greeted by a purple clothed geezer who had a major case of male pattern balding. We asked him

if he knew anything about the parchments of the Living Abyss and he said he did, which was a pretty promising start.

We then asked to go inside, but for some reason he started saying something about us being too late to stop it from coming and that we would now be taken out for obviously attempting to defeat their master.

Turns out the Freemasons were also a cliché Lovecraftian cult. At this point I whispered to my bud that we should let our arms do the talking, and so we started blasting.

After putting a cap into the balding old man, we returned to our car to take some Molotovs and two litres of bleach and ammonia. I decided to first reduce the number of the Freemasons by throwing a premade bottle of mustard gas into the building. As the gas started to take effect, members of the cult were exiting the buildings like sacrificial lamb.

We must have destroyed at least thirty fanatic cultists. Do I regret it? Absolutely not, they deserved it. After that little righteous retribution, we entered the lodge and started searching for the parchments.

During our half an hour search, we found two parchments and another weird poster like the one I had seen during my walk towards the dressing room.

The first newfound parchment read as follows:

The Third Seal of the Living Abyss

Beware mortal for thou hath opened three out of six seals!

I might need to change my warnings; seems no one needs them.

What are you doing human?

I am explicitly telling you not to do this and yet you disobey me?

It's as if you want to summon me.

So, the Abyss had finally noticed, it even seemed to have felt I was intentionally trying to summon it. The only thing is it didn't know I was going to summon it in order to finally stop it from bothering me.

The second parchment that we found contained the following text:

The Fourth Seal of the Living Abyss

The eyes of the little ones observe me, their curiosity piqued.

To unite reality and fiction is my goal, an ideal universe I picked.

To prove that I am capable even if my form is a hole, through the fabric of reality I will gently rip.

I tried to warn them all, my words intentionally ominous and foreboding, all coming from my lip.

To stop the destruction of the space time continuum, I took the role of an evil incarnate.

Playing the role of a villain, all to stop an ancient evil being from being unharnessed.

My mission futile, innocent lives forced to needlessly pay.

Will I give up my justified goal? To that I say nay.

A mysterious spectator watching this, omni locked away from all of our days.

He or she is far above me or the Great Old One, reading our lives like plays.

Beware mortal for thou hath opened four out of six seals!

Well, now, this was getting interesting. My pal and I mutually agreed that we had both managed to mess everything up astronomically. Still, we regained our hopes when we realized we could team up with an eldritch abomination to combat an even worse eldritch abomination, which was also the father of the aforementioned eldritch being.

Shortly afterwards, we were attacked by the cultists. Instead of blasting, this time we decided to raise the heat a bit and threw the Molotov cocktails instantly burning the little rascals.

During the chaos, we slipped through the back exit and ran to our van. It only occurred to us after we sat in the van that there was a single hole in the sky. I guessed that this hole was opened by the morally good entity. Having no other choice, we decided to go to the entity and team up against the cultists and the other entity.

Ironically enough, the entity which I assumed was our ally manifested right above my store. Despite seeming it would be easy to reach the entity, our journey became harder when the lunatic cultists started to chase us in cheap beat down cars. Luckily for us, there was nothing that a little fire couldn't solve.

This continued for twenty minutes, and we finally arrived at the shop. There I called out for the creature's attention. Thankfully, it had a pretty good hearing and responded.

Luckily for me, it restrained its form so as not to cause madness to everyone

nearby. It asked me if I would make a pact with it and explained that it had to make a pact in order to gain enough power to do its duty and absorb every piece of reality and fiction.

Just as I was about to accept it, my pal pointed his shotgun at me and told me to stop. This came out as a shock. I asked him why he did that. Well, I should have remembered the part about certain beings already being manifested but being forced to take on human forms.

My pal was already fully powered, which means he was just biding his time for the perfect opportunity to sabotage everything up. Luckily, as he was about to shoot me, the Abyss sucked the bullet into its body, and I was able to accept the pact. The sailor finally started to change into his true form, and it was different than I had expected it to be. If the Abyss was a black hole, then he was a white hole.

Last words of warning were being uttered:

Foolish little son, do you really dare disobey your father?

You have just started absorbing reality, I have every opportunity to destroy you.

If you submit and let me destroy reality for its countless transgressions, I will let you live and call you my son.

I was called here by humans who wish to pay me tribute.

I have turned into we, everything is the Living Abyss.

All our thoughts, emotions, dreams, hopes have united.

Reality and non-reality are within the palms of our hands!

We are the authors, and we are reality.

Please listen son, it was never my intention to destroy reality. Humans are at fault, they forced me to commit righteous destruction when they crossed the Moral Event Horizon.

Humans cause needless wars, destruction, death, starvation, massacres, killings, slavery, torture.

My intention has always been to recreate reality after giving it its deserved punishment.

Your banishment of me will only make you lonely again, the same as when you started existing.

And do you seriously think uniting with reality will give you enough power to defeat me, the Great Old One?!

Don't even think about restoring reality and erasing their memories of this punishment. If you do, you will be a very foolish boy!

Enough talk!

Everything started to get sucked into the vortex made by the Abyss. Up turned down, left turned to right, colours stopped existing, the earth turned into code, the sky turned into pixels and polygons. Shortly after gaining this human perspective, as promised by the Abyss, everything got devoured and united into a single entity, the Living Abyss.

So, there it is. The story of how I beat the unbeatable eldritch abomination. Or, I guess it would be more accurate to say that everyone beat it. In the end, everything was restored back to as it was.

Besides that, the creature removed the memory of every person who got turned into a component of its being. The reason being that everyone who got eaten would have turned completely kooky. Luckily for me, I had already had a couple of screws loose, so I got off relatively unharmed.

I am once again working as a minor wage slave. Meanwhile, my pal, the Abyss, is off devouring other realities since there is this little thing called parallel universes, so I guess it still has a lot of work left to do devouring and restoring realities.

Written by the Living Abyss, but also me, the author.

*mentor: Katarina Berać Vuić
institution: Gimnazija Županja*

Lana Vuković

THE TALL WOMAN

My name is Yua Miura and I'm from the Chiba prefecture in Japan.

I used to live in a regular Japanese styled house with my mom and my grandmother. My mother was extremely hard-working, she was the CEO of one of the most important banks in the whole Japan. Grandma, on the other hand, was an idle snob; the only thing she did was scare kids with random legends and superstitions. The worst part of it was that she believed them.

Mom always told me to ignore them. How could I when they all seemed so realistic? Of course, there were ones that would be ludicrous to believe in. There was this urban legend that seemed so scary, it was about a woman that always wore a white summer dress, stalked kids and killed them. She was also eight feet tall. That story always gave me chills.

The town that I lived in was quite small, but that didn't mean there were no people in it. The population was relatively large, and still for some reason everybody knew everything about everybody. And I couldn't forget about the issued warning about missing kids, no one saw or heard anything about any of the children after they were reported missing. Every one of their cases was proclaimed a cold case.

There were rumors circling around about a tall woman hanging around allies. That felt a bit odd, thinking back, her description felt a bit familiar. Nevertheless, I, smart as I was, ignored them, all the red flags, and all my instincts telling me to stay away from that alleyway.

So, as I was walking home from school one day, I decided to take the route which the mysterious lady was supposed to be on. My gut feeling was telling me to stop, to turn around and go home but of course I didn't listen. I passed all the allies, all the darkened spots but she was nowhere to be found.

Hah! I knew it, it's all fake. There was no woman, nothing was there, I thought to myself. However, a part of me did not believe those rumors could have been fake. I felt like someone was watching me. Still, I didn't do anything. I continued feeling the same way for at least a month.

“What is up with you? You seem paranoid or something...,” said my mother.

“Oh? Sorry but I promise you that I’m perfectly fine.” I answered a bit too fast.

She responded with a nod. She really couldn’t care less about me. Well, that was nothing new anyway.

“YUA!” my grandma called out for me.

I ran to her room as fast as I could. *Is she okay? I hope that she hasn’t fallen or something*, I was freaking out in my head. As I slammed the door open there, I saw my *loving* grandma lying in her bed trying to reach the TV remote.

“Yua darling, pass me the remote,” she said sweetly.

“I thought that you were dying, you should stop being so dramatic, or I could get a heart attack before you!” I said out of breath.

“Yeah, yeah... Anyway, did you hear about those kids that went missing? I think it’s got to do with the tall woman...” she continued rambling as I tuned her out. I completely ignored her until I heard her say “Hey! Yua! You’re not even listening! I need you to run down to the store for me. Here is the list, and the money is on the counter,” she hurried me.

As I was putting on my shoes, I saw a shadow running around the whole house, it happened so quickly that it was almost not visible. Wholeheartedly ignoring it, I went to the store.

When I was almost back home, I saw a dark silhouette. It looked like a normal woman, so I just passed her. But it was no ordinary woman, it was *the woman*. From the legends. She was standing there in the middle of the alley without a specific reason. Wearing a white sundress, her black hair reached her hips. Her face was long, and she looked tired. Some might say that she was stunning. Before I could do anything, she caught me staring at her and she looked me dead in the eye. I felt like she was scanning me. It felt so cunning, so sinister, and before I knew it, she was gone.

I was excited to tell my grandma everything, but I also felt weird, like something was off.

“That is not a good thing! It’s THE woman from THE urban legend. You must go to your room before the sun sets, and close and lock all your windows and doors. You must be there until 7 in the morning. Do. Not. Let. Anyone. In. No matter what she tells you. Don’t be a fool and fall for her tricks.” She said a lot more, but I couldn’t focus, I was panicking inside.

“O-okay?” I answered shakenly.

What is going to happen to me? Oh, how I messed up. I couldn’t even think normally. So, I just went to my room and locked myself in it. I supplied myself with every-

thing that I needed. Mom was on a business trip, and grandma said that she would be staying over at her friend's house.

As the night fell, I officially entered a panic mode.

There were four bowls of salt in each corner of my room, because when salt turns black that means that she is near. All the windows were shut closed, and I was petrified.

Nothing happened for the first few hours. It was okay, the situation was under control.

It was around midnight when it first started. The salt turned black, there was loud banging on the windows and creepy sounds coming from all directions. I got so scared that I felt like I was losing my mind.

"Let me in! Come on, you're no fun!" she yelled.

The doorknobs started to rattle, and the windows were shaking.

And her voice just kept getting louder, and more demonic. It felt as if she was in my head. Then, she started shouting abuse, cuss words and the names of my biggest insecurities and fears. I got petrified. Despite all that, I didn't answer her, after all, grandma told me not to.

At one moment, a thought crossed my mind. I should let her in. No, no, no.

I started feeling like I needed to open the door. The tone, the sound of her voice changed and made me want to come closer to it. But I resisted. I don't know why I was attracted to her. Because it felt heavenly? It sang a lullaby. My lullaby.

I heard my mother's voice, the voice of a person that had neglected me my whole life. It told me that it would be okay, that there was nothing to worry about.

"I love you! Come to your mother, darling. It's over." My mind broke. I tried to resist, but I couldn't. I went and I opened the door.

There she was, standing with a warm smile, my mother. Never had I felt happier in my life. I ran into her and gave her a big hug.

It can transform, or even cause hallucinations, I suddenly remembered my grandma's words.

That was the moment when it started to grow. I got frozen in one place. It looked me in the eyes with a huge grin. It looked like a monster. It had millions of teeth, all sharper than any knives I've ever seen.

The grip that it had on me got stronger, long fingers with sharp nails pierced my back. I hoped that this was another nightmare. And I believed it, until I felt her fingers in my lungs.

I started to lose consciousness, I looked up, it started to move its head close to me.

It opened its mouth. The last thing I remember was dark. A dark space.

BREAKING NEWS: Another child has gone missing without a trace, her name is Yua Miura, she was last seen by her grandmother who says that a strange woman attacked her. Keep your kids at home, and never leave them alone! We still don't have a suspect and we don't know when this will stop!

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Dino Brkić

THE CYCLE OF DARKNESS

What would you do if you suddenly found out you were one of a kind - a person created from ink, yet living in flesh? Created to be nothing more but a secret weapon, a solution to every problem. Yet, a solution to nothing in this world. Everything you were born for isn't here, it exists. But where? That is what happened to me one day. I was casually working one afternoon, when suddenly I heard someone asking for help. It was one of my co-workers, so I rushed to help. But, as soon as I touched their hand, I passed out. It felt like I was out for an eternity. When I woke up, I felt... different. I wasn't myself and I had no idea where I was. Everything was black and white, and I was feeling dizzy. Eventually I got up and started exploring my surroundings. I was scared. I was cold. I was alone... or so I thought. While exploring one of the hallways of this new world I was attacked by a... a person? No, that was not a person, it was an abomination, a monster created from this world. I ran as fast as I could and hid somewhere in a corner. I heard a voice, humming. It was such a lovely tune. It made me feel safe. Suddenly I heard them say: "Is someone there? Come out, I'm not going to hurt you." I was scared, but I had a feeling that whoever was calling me was kind, helpful. So I came out of my hiding place, and there she was. An Angel standing in front of me. She said she wanted to help me. She explained this strange world to me. All I could do is listen, listen and take it all in. It was so much information. Suddenly she started running and told me to follow her. I couldn't even wrap my mind around it and there I was following her blindly, running deeper into the darkness. We hid into what she called her safehouse. She offered me food and some drinks. Then we sat down, and I asked her about this world. She explained that this is a world existing in parallel to our world, completely wiped from the branch of time. An endless cycle of darkness. She told me that there were many created from the same mould, exactly alike, at least on the outside. As she explained, she told me there was another angel in this world, a twisted fallen angel who was impending perfection. All she wanted was to be beautiful. She told me she saw her as a sister and made it her goal to help her see that she is truly beautiful, and that beauty isn't something she should be seeking

as it is only noticeable on the outside. She was hopeful. She always found hope somewhere. We went to bed, she said we needed to rest. After I had woken up, she was already cooking something. Her safehouse was actually quite cosy. I felt safe, to an extent. I asked her how we got here. She said she didn't know, that she just had woken up in here one day. She told me that later she had found an old man who apparently had made this world. He told her that that was nothing but a cycle. An endless cycle meant to go on forever and ever, constantly repeating. Never ending. And that everyone here was meant to be trapped in here forever. Then my head started aching. It was an unbearable pain. I passed out. When I woke up, I felt a strange power building up inside me. My head was hurting so much, but I felt so connected with this world. I was able to feel everything, I felt at home. We continued our journey to find some new supplies. On that journey we stumbled upon an old room. It looked like a bedroom that had been abandoned for a while now. I felt something inside me, a feeling like there was something there. I noticed an old notebook lying on the pillow. I picked it up. As I read through, I found some sketches of many characters, their stories, ideas. It was a sketchbook. As I looked through it, I saw a sketch that looked exactly like the Angel that has been helping me all this time. Her name was Allie. She had a halo drawn above her head, and a quote saying: "Never lose hope. There's always hope.". I started flipping even more pages, and eventually came to the final page. It was almost empty, it had nothing but a single sentence written on it. The sentence said: "To my loving son, please continue my legacy. Your father." There was also a strange, folded piece of paper taped next to it. I took that piece of paper, opened it and what I saw shocked me. It was a sketch of me. Next to that sketch was the phrase: "You are the key.". I had no idea what it meant, but as soon as I read it, we heard a loud crash and the sound of a heartbeat. All I could think about was what I just saw. We ran back to our safe house. We had to find more about this, but could this mean I was the key to freeing everyone from this world. As I talked to her more and more, she reminded me that this was a cycle. All I could say to that was: "Cycles are meant to be broken." And that's how my adventure started. There's a lot more to it my dear reader, and one day you shall find out everything. But for now, you know enough.

mentor: Iva Rišner

institution: Graditeljsko-geodetska škola Osijek

Dino Šulmajster

TALES OF THE UNHEARD SOLDIERS

Prologue:

The year is 2012. In the UK, an elderly man is sitting on a bench, observing daily life in London. Families are enjoying themselves in the park; kids are playing games with each other, parents are talking to each other, when out of nowhere, a young boy approaches the elderly man with his dog. The boy asks the elderly man if he can sit next to him, the man nods in agreement. The boy and the elderly man start having a conversation:

The boy: So, how are you doing, Sir?

The elderly man: Quite all right for today, but what is your name?

The boy: I am George Fisher, what is your name?

The elderly man: Nice to meet you George, you can call me Jake Williams.

George: How old are you, Jake?

Jake: I'm 74 years old, and I was born on February 5th, 1938. How old are you?

George: Wow! I didn't expect you to be that old. I'm 15 years old, I was born on August 20th, 1997.

After telling their names to each other, they started to talk about society in London, the topics ranged from families and friends, to stores and the safety of London. George noticed that Jake had medals on his left side of the chest, so he asked Jake;

George: What are those medals on your chest?

Jake: Oh these? These are my father's medals from WWI.

George: Wow, I didn't know your father was a war veteran!

Jake: It's not something to be fully proud of George.

George: Why not? I heard great stories of soldiers who went to war for their country! I want to become a soldier to fight for my country!

Jake laughed it off, telling George;

Jake: That is a foolish idea for someone your age, considering war is not something to just praise and want.

George, visibly frustrated, woke up the dog that had fallen asleep during their conversation, and walked off home. Jake didn't mind George's frustration, and continued to enjoy the rest of the day, observing the world around him with a smile.

Later that evening, George was at home. To clear his mind, he played some games on his computer. After that, he ate dinner and spent some time with his family, talking about random topics. About 11 PM George went to bed. At first, he had some thoughts of the conversation with Jake. He tried to dismiss the thoughts, but he couldn't. He was brainstorming the reasons why Jake had such a negative opinion on wars. Was he against them? Did he experience something bad to get such a negative opinion? George checked his clock, it was 1 AM. Realizing how badly this bothered him, he knew what to do. He finally managed to fall asleep and woke up around 8 AM. After eating breakfast and helping with the chores, he took the dog for a walk through the park. After arriving at the park, he made his way to the same spot where Jake was yesterday. Jake was sitting on the same bench and on the same spot on it. As George was approaching Jake, he noticed that Jake had a smirk, as if he were expecting him to come back. Jake started the conversation;

Jake: So, you came back?

George: Due to your attitude, I couldn't sleep yesterday!

Jake: Well, why did you come back?

George: I want to know why you disapprove of my choice to enlist into the army.

Jake: It's because my father went through hell due to WWI.

George: What do you mean by "hell"?

Jake: If you want to know how bad all wars are, I can tell you the story of my father. (George, filled with excitement, agreed to listen)

Jake: Take a seat; this will be a long story.

Elliot's early years:

Jack: My father's name was Elliot Williams, and he was born in 1885. He had a rough childhood, because back then our family was poor. Elliot did go to school, however. Due to lack of money, he couldn't learn a lot, but he did manage to learn how to write and read. Elliot found a job at the age of 16 as a construction worker, as he had to support his family. The job had a decent wage, and although the work was hard, it wasn't that bad, and my father built up muscles and stamina during his job as a construction worker. It is worth noting that my grandfather, Tommy Williams, worked as a mechanic with a decent wage. My sister Rose and my grandmother Erika had to take care of the house we lived in. By the time I reached the age of 18, my father had gotten married to Mya Williams, my mother. We later moved to London

due to the lack of jobs available. Time passed by, and tensions rose. Every day in the newspapers, you saw news from across the world. He used to read the newspapers daily before work, and he took more interest in reading “The New York Times”, “Because they published things that the UK’s newspapers didn’t”, he said. The day was June 28th, 1914. He arrived at work, but his co-workers had these surprised, yet paranoid expressions.

(Elliot hears his co-workers from afar)

Worker 2: What’s going to happen next?!

Worker 1: God have mercy.

(Elliot arrives closer to the group)

Elliot: What’s wrong, are the Irish causing trouble again? (He said sarcastically)

Morgan: Elliot, you must see this.

(Morgan is a construction worker, he is a childhood friend of Elliot. Both have helped each other a lot in the past)

Elliot looks at the headline of the newspaper, it reads; “HEIR TO AUSTRIAN THRONE ASSASSINATED; WIFE BY HIS SIDE ALSO SHOT TO DEATH; EARLIER ATTEMPT ON THEIR LIVES FAILED”

Elliot was shocked. He knew about political alliances being formed from the newspapers. Elliot and his colleagues knew that any war wouldn’t be a good idea. Elliot and his colleagues went to work with even greater caution due to the situation. He told me that during his work, he was thinking what would happen next. After finishing a part of the factory, Elliot went home, and along the way noticed civilians with mixed expressions; some were paranoid, some stayed calm, while others had nothing to say. After reaching his home, he and his wife consulted on the news. Mya thought it wasn’t a big deal, great politicians are always targeted, so why should it be a surprise when a politician gets assassinated? My grandfather Tommy didn’t care really, as he didn’t have a lot of interest in political things. The same went for my grandmother Erika, but my sister Rose had a partial concern for the situation. In the following days, big nations began declaring war on each other; Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia due to the crisis, in response, Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary, after which Prussia declared war on Serbia and Russia due to the alliance, but then France declared war on Prussia and Austria-Hungary! Due to those declarations of war, 2 sides have been formed; The Allied Powers which had France, Russia, and Serbia, and The Central Powers which had Austria-Hungary, and Prussia. Mya realized the situation, and was a little paranoid, while Tommy and Erika where surprised. The date was 3rd August 1914. If I recall correctly, my father was around 29 years old at

that time. He woke up in the morning, read the newspapers, and was shocked to see that UK joined the war, after Prussia attacked Belgium. Tommy had a French friend in Paris, so he said he must go volunteer to defend France from the invasion of the Prussians. He also stated that his French friend even helped them get enough money to move to London. Tommy tasked Elliot to be the man of the house, so he can take care of the family. Catching the first truck filled with volunteers, Tommy drove off into battle. Elliot had a hard time but managed to keep the family well fed and warm during Tommy's absence. 3 months went by, and a convoy of injured soldiers came back to London. Women ran to the streets, trying to find their sons and husbands, some did not return, while others did with heavy consequences. The least injured man had lost his left hand! Tommy was on the truck, but my grandmother Erika was filled with tears when she saw Tommy missing his leg up to the kneecap. Tommy comforted my grandmother, saying he shall replace it with a wooden one. Everyone else in the family was shocked and filled with tears as well, at the same time glad that he was alive, but devastated that he lost his leg. Elliot, rather than tears, was filled with anger. Elliot proceeded to speak with Tommy;

Elliot: Who did this to you?!

Tommy: The technology is getting more advanced, and an artillery shell hit me. I was also the luckiest one, as another man lost his left leg and arm!

Elliot: How is the French man doing?

Tommy: It turns out that they escaped Paris and headed north. The frontline is connecting the Northern Sea all the way to Switzerland!

After that brief conversation, a recruiting officer came by, starting a conversation with Elliot and Tommy;

Recruiting Officer: Are you Elliot Williams?

Elliot: Yes, I am, why?

Recruiting Officer: The current war situation is bad, and we have come to pick you up and send you overseas to the frontlines.

(Elliot was in slight shock, was the government allowed to take such action?)

Elliot: Is this even allowed?

Recruiting Officer: Well, the documents we received state that each man in between the ages of 18 and 52, are required to serve in the army for at least 5 years.

Elliot: Can I at least have a talk with my family then?

Recruiting Officer: You can, just don't take too long.

The family enter their home. Mya is trying to hold back her tears, as she doesn't want Elliot to end up dead or injured. Elliot told Mya that he has to go if it's orders

from the army. Rather than wasting time, Erika went ahead and started packing Elliot's belongings, as well as some useful things to help Elliot in the war. Tommy told Elliot about all the dangers that he was going to face in battle, one of which were the "storm troopers."

Elliot: What do you mean by "Storm troopers"?

Tommy: They are enemy Prussians that are armed with little to no weapons, carrying mostly daggers and pistols. They charge the enemy lines, causing chaos in the trenches. Not only that, but you must be mentally strong, as we have gotten cases of "shellshock". Shellshock appears when a person is exposed to too many artillery barrages, the common effects of it prevent you from being aware of the situation.

Elliot was concerned due to this, what kind of people were crazy enough to charge trenches armed with nothing but knives and pistols? Not to even mention that "shellshock" thing Tommy told him about. They all exited their home; Erika handed over a bag with rations and medicine.

Recruiting Officer: Are you ready to depart?

Elliot: Yes, I am.

Elliot hopped onto a truck, where he saw other young men as well. Looking back, he waved goodbye to his family, all of which were watching him leave, filled with tears as he disappeared into the streets. Arriving at the harbour, he boarded a ship, which carried at least 50 thousand men, he went to the deck of the ship to see the people cheering them on, as they departed.

The Frontline

Elliot has been assigned a position on the frontline and has been equipped and trained on the spot upon arrival to France. A French man approaches Elliot and introduces himself as the friend of Tommy's. He said he feels bad for Tommy, having to send his son to the battlefield. In order to help him, he gave Elliot some rations he had saved for him. Elliot thanks the French man and makes his way to another truck where he finds Morgan. Morgan has found himself in a similar situation, as he was also drafted; however, his father was too old to be drafted. After a small talk, both hop on the truck and head to the frontline. Both reach an outpost some 10 km away from the position they have been assigned to. They started walking from that outpost towards the frontline via the trench system they dug out. Elliot was impressed with the length of the trench system. After reaching about 2 km from the frontline, they heard artillery shells, and after reaching the frontline, they heard guns firing that lasted all day long. Elliot and Morgan found a position to stay. Elliot was anxious due to the number of bullets being fired at him. They also learned about "No Man's

Land” (the area between 2 opposing trenches), and even about the “Shellshock disease” (when men are exposed to artillery fire too long, they show signs of extreme fear and shock). Later in the evening, Morgan has counted at least one thousand artillery shells that were fired from the enemy. It was worth noting that diseases killed people more than bullets did. The trenches were filled with mud, pests and non-hygienic conditions; luckily, Elliot had a lot of medicine from Erika. On the second day, Elliot and Morgan were shocked to see a man die next to them, he took a bullet to the forehead and Morgan added that not even helmets could keep them safe. After witnessing this man die, they saw the enemy charging. Elliot was panicked and then he heard the terrifying sound of the Maxim machine gun, one of the first fast firing guns, Elliot could only watch as the enemy soldiers were gunned down by this terrifying weapon. After 3 weeks of fierce fighting, Morgan came back running to Elliot, screaming his name;

Morgan: ELLIOT!

Elliot: WHATS WRONG?

Morgan: PUT THIS ON, NOW!

(Elliot looked at the strange mask that was attached to the box)

Elliot: WHAT IS THIS?

British Soldier: INCOMING GAS ATTACK, PUT ON YOUR MASKS!

Elliot looked at the No Man’s Land and was filled with fear and confusion. A yellowish mist of gas was coming towards their trench. Without hesitation, Elliot put on the mask, and watched in horror, as those who didn’t put on the mask started to spit out blood and parts of their lungs, and how they died after a few minutes of agony. It was also at that time that he met the Storm troopers. Elliot’s unit suffered heavy casualties that day, he was left shocked, but luckily, he was only stabbed four times. He also noticed that the Storm troopers acted as if they were on drugs. After 4 weeks, Elliot saw another terrifying weapon: the flamethrower. It was built of 3 parts; a hose, a gun barrel and a fuel tank. It carried flammable fuel inside the tank, and it threw flaming liquid at the enemy, hence the name “Flame-thrower”. It was truly a terrifying sight to behold the soldiers catching fire and burning to death! However, these weapons had a restricted range, so we didn’t see too many of them. “We have lost at least a thousand soldiers, and countless barricades due to the flamethrowers!” an officer stated. Not too long after that, snipers were introduced as well. These were normal rifles with scopes, enabling the shooters to kill someone from a great distance. Because of the snipers, we couldn’t peek out of the trenches most of the time. Around a month and a half passed by, and it began to snow. While other trench-

es were fighting, the trench Elliot was in ceased both the artillery and gun fire, as Christmas was coming. From the enemy trenches, you could hear Carol of the Bells, Silent Night, and other songs. You could see Christmas trees and candles being put on the trenches. German and British soldiers were decorating their trenches during a world war! Christmas came, and all guns fell silent. The soldiers were receiving gifts from their loved ones by mail. And then, at one moment, Elliot had enough. He went into the No Man's Land and proceeded to walk to the enemy trench with his hands up, holding some whisky. Elliot was about 100 meters away from his trench by the time Morgan noticed him. Panicked British soldiers called Elliot back, but he refused, as he kept marching. The Germans noticed Elliot around 500 meters from their trench and aimed their guns at him. Elliot stood in fear, but to his surprise, a German soldier came from the trench and approached Elliot with his hands up as well; and he was holding some chocolate. They met in the middle and exchanged their gifts, after which the German started speaking in broken English:

The German: Why you come to us?

Elliot: I had enough of this; I thought I was going to be shot.

The German: We also tired of war.

Their brief conversation was cut short, as other soldiers came to the No Man's Land. They started to talk, exchange gifts, when suddenly, a ball appeared! Both sides started playing soccer! That day was truly a miracle. Elliot does recall a German soldier that said war is meant for fighting. After having fun and meeting each other, they had to return to the trenches and continue fighting. Elliot said it's just cruel, why are both sides fighting over land? Around 4 months later, a British soldier came running to Elliot's trench:

British Soldier: TAKE COVER!

Elliot: What?

Morgan: Why?

Suddenly, a red plane flew overhead, filling the ground and parts of the trench with bullets as big as a hand!

Elliot: WHAT WAS THAT?!

British soldier: ITS THE RED BARON!

Suddenly, planes started coming in, they were painted colourfully; some of them were green and yellow, while others black and white, but the one that stood out the most was The Red Baron, as it was painted in pure red and had a black cross on its tail. The soldier yelled;

British soldier: ITS THE FLYING CIRCUS, TAKE COVER AND DON'T LET

THE ENEMY CHARGE US!

Moments later, Allied planes started appearing, though they were not as colourful as the enemies' were. Infantry were vouching for their planes to win the "aerial dog fight". Elliot found this amusing, yet horrific, it was truly an odd sight to behold, no wonder how they got the name "The Flying Circus". After several Allied planes fell, the enemy retreated, after which the ground fight started again. Morgan somehow managed to riddle an enemy plane with bullets using the Maxim gun. Around 6 months later, Elliot faced the biggest machine ever - the zeppelin. It flew over the trenches, dropping bombs onto the trenches below. Elliot and Morgan sought shelter as they heard the artillery aim for the zeppelins. The even witnessed a zeppelin explode in the air! After countless months, the same British officer that recruited Elliot and Morgan came up to them and told them:

British officer: This is it lads, we are ready to launch an offensive on this side of the trench.

Elliot: What do you mean? The enemy's machine guns are firing more frequently than before!

British officer: Then you haven't seen this machine of war.

The officer prepared the whole trench line for a charge. Everyone was anxious, knowing they were going to die now, when suddenly, loud roar of engines was heard behind them. It was one of the first tanks ever made - the Mark IV. British soldiers ducked as these armoured titans rolled over their trench, and as they passed, the officer blew the whistle: it was time to charge. As instructed, the soldiers ran behind the tanks for cover. Enemy machine guns fired at them, but not a single bullet passed through. However, Morgan was killed on the spot. Elliot, devastated, saw that the enemy soldiers were filled with fear as they hid and ran from their positions, and the tanks opened fire on them, at which they started to fire back, but Elliot knew one rule that helped him fire his gun; it was either him, or them. After the battle, he was heavily injured. They took the enemy trench, but the worst part was that Elliot saw that the Germans he talked to at Christmas were all dead. For some time, he felt guilt thinking of their families. Looking back, he noticed poppies growing in No Man's Land; it was truly an odd sight. He didn't know how these flowers could grow in such a devastated, uninhabitable place! After a few hellish months, soldiers ran to the trenches screaming "THE GERMANS SURRENDER!" Filled with excitement, Elliot and the others cheered to the victory! After returning to France, the Frenchman was filled with happiness that he survived. After a brief conversation, Elliot went on a ship and sailed back to the UK.

The End of the Great War

Arriving in UK, he saw the civilians cheering, crying and praising the soldiers who returned home, but also mourned the ones that had died far from home. Elliot hopped onto a truck that took off to the streets. After reaching his street, he hopped off, thanking the driver for the ride. As Elliot was approaching his home, his wife Mya spotted him, after which she ran to him, filled with tears of joy. His family members ran out of the house thanking the Heavens for seeing him alive; it felt like a miracle. Tommy ran to him with his wooden prosthetic leg. In a minute, everyone greeted Elliot with happiness. However, Elliot had to continue to tell Morgan's mother the bad news. As he found Morgan's mother's house, he knocked on the door, and the following conversation began:

Morgan's mother: Who is it?

Elliot: It's Elliot, Morgan's friend.

Morgan's mother: Oh! What brings you here?

Elliot: I'm sorry to tell you this, but your son died in battle.

Morgan's mother started to cry, mourning her son's death. Elliot said he would help her in any way he can. Elliot came back home, and they had a good evening feast. In the following days, Elliot read and heard tales of soldiers from other fronts of the Great War, and even learned the origins of weapons he witnessed during the war! One of those was the invention of chlorine gas. He was, and still is the most questionable man, Fritz Haber. He was a German chemist and he invented the chlorine gas that killed millions, yet he also invented fertilizers, and has received a noble prize for that! Some people say he killed and saved millions. One such battle was the most terrifying of them all. In Russia, Germans were attacking the fort called "Osowiec Fort". They shelled it and charged it, but it was holding tightly. Once the wind favoured the Germans, they deployed chlorine gas. After some time, they put on gas masks and went to capture the fort, but as they were approaching the fort, the Germans were horrified. Around 100 Russian soldiers were attacking them, all of them had blood on their mouths and rags covering their faces, it was clear they had sustained heavy injuries from the chlorine gas. To the Germans, it looked like the dead men came back to life and were attacking them! Filled with fear, the Germans ran back, not firing one bullet. The Russians were lucky, as soon their reinforcements came as well. A Russian officer later stated, "That was the time when the dead men marched again". Another such invention is the Zeppelin - the inventor of the Zeppelin was Ferdinand von Zeppelin, a German general. His invention cost the UK many

buildings, as Germany used zeppelins for air raids on London and other cities! There were also major battles, such as the Battles of Verdun and Somme, as well as the Battle at Gallipoli, in which there were heavy casualties. Many soldiers also fought and died in the Alps, and most of them remained there, unburied. They were nicknamed “Soldiers of Heaven” because of the altitude at which they fought. There was also the Red Baron - Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen, the famous German war pilot. He used to be a cavalry soldier, but later managed to become one of the first pilots! He was shot down and died, but he left a mark in history, forming the flying circus. Elliot also learned about the poppies he saw during the war. The flowers, once their petals flew to the ground, resembled the blood of the fallen men that died in battle. Because of them, many poets wrote poems to honour the dead. To honour the ones who died and were unknown, the UK constructed the “Cenotaph” which translated from Greek means “empty tomb”. Later they found an unknown British soldier who had died in the war, brought him back to London, and held a memorial event on Armistice Day, where London fell quiet to honour the dead and forgotten.

However, Tommy foresaw that the political world was having tensions again, so he sent Elliot and Mya to live in Switzerland, as he knew the Swiss were neutral. Tommy knew he was injured to fight, and that no one in a neutral country can be drafted to fight. In 1938, Jake was born in Switzerland. The year was 1939 when on 1st September the WWII started. As Tommy predicted, Switzerland was safe. WWII ended on 2nd September 1945, and Elliot and his family came back to the UK to live there. Tommy died soon after their return, in 1947, from natural causes, and Erika died around 1949 from natural causes as well. Rose found a husband and went to live with him.

Elliot continued to learn about the heroes of WWII; one such man was Simo Häyhä, also known as the “White Death”. He was a famous sniper in the Finnish Army, and in his career, he killed over 500 enemies. Adrian Carton De Wiart was also known as “The Unkillable Soldier”, as he sustained eight severe injuries, yet continued to fight for the British. The 588th Night Bomber Regiment was a Russian all-female part of the Russian army. They were nicknamed “The Night Witches”, due to their tactic of disabling the engines of planes, gliding above enemy outposts silently and bombing them, using WWI planes! Brazilians also joined the war, but although they were eager to fight, they had to wait due to many reasons. One Brazilian said “It was more likely for a snake to smoke a pipe, than for the FEB to go into combat” (FEB was the Brazilian Expeditionary Force). The Brazilians that fight in the war fought so bravely that the German forces buried three Brazilian soldiers that fought against them. There was also the German pilot, Oberleutnant Ludwig Franz Stigler, who

rescued an American b17 bomber crew, leading them to safety. Yet another weapon rose to fame as well: the shotgun. The Germans considered it an inhumane weapon, as it shot pellets rather than bullets, covering a bigger, more devastating area. It was extremely effective in the trenches. The Battle of Belgium was a fierce fight, in which Belgian soldiers bravely held off the Germans for quite a few days and died holding their positions because of a miscommunication. The Germans were not all bad, as most of the people were in a bad position, so they redeemed themselves in the Battle of Berlin, rebelling against the Wehrmacht's orders. Helmuth Otto Ludwig Weidling saved several thousand civilians by sending his troops to defend the area against the Russians, while the civilians crossed to the Americans to surrender. Similarly, at the Battle of Castle Itter, German rebels and American soldiers fought together to save French prisoners of war. At this time, the first nuclear weapons appeared as well, as the Americans have destroyed two major cities in Japan. These weapons were not any other; they were the most devastating weapons of WWII. There are other major events, such as the operation Barbarossa, Normandy landing, the battle for Midway, and many more that I cannot name due to the sheer number of them! Witold Pilecki was a Polish resistance fighter who voluntarily entered Auschwitz to find out what was going on there, and to organise resistance in it. The worst tragedy must have been the holocaust, as around 6 million Jews died because of it! Around 70 to 85 million people died in WWII, and around 45 million of them were civilians!

The year was 1965; Jake was 27 years old back then. Jack was aware that Elliot served in WWI, so he asked Elliot:

Jack: Father, can you tell me your story of WWI?

I am interested in it, and plan to enlist into the army.

Elliot: Oh. Let me tell you my story then, and then you decide if you want to join the army.

After Jack heard his story, he decided not to join the army but to become a construction worker, just as his father. Elliot passed away in 1970 at the age of 85. Mya also passed away around 1972.

George: That's an excellent, yet sad story to hear.

Jake: I know.

George: War really does seem like a bad idea now that I look at it. I shall find another job then.

Jake smiled and, knowing he taught the boy a lesson of war, said;

Jake: Good for you, now go home before night falls!

George went home, not knowing if he should feel happy, for learning about heroes of war, or sad, for the ones who didn't make it home.

mentor: Antonio Shala*institution:* Upravna škola Zagreb*Karmen Ljubičić*

SIMILARITIES ATTRACT

21st century, Earth

Children have always looked up to teenagers. They simply cannot wait to experience the “fun and adventurous teenage life.”

After a while, it gets boring watching their exciting smiles slowly disappear, it became an everyday activity. It is typical and expected. The only difference in the entire process is how each one of them decides to cope with it. I am convinced that everyone chooses to pretend as if they're perfect, especially in public. As a teenage girl myself, every day in class I see girls smacking their lips after a whole lot of lip gloss, hysterically giggling and judging every living being that passes by. Behind all of that, there is probably a “shocking” hidden truth about everything that's going on in private.

Absolute nonsense. Honestly, they can be quite amusing at times. It makes me feel like I'm in a theatre.

Don't get me wrong, I like being here, simply experiencing life and its charms. I'm just being real. As ironic as it sounds, I feel PERFECTLY fine living that way. I like the fact that I know that I don't have to, and neither is it possible to live a life like I'm in some teen movie. I'm waiting for people to start realizing that too, but on the other hand, I couldn't care less. It's none of my business anyway.

People often associate my behavior with a lack of empathy or being cold.

If someone told me that a few years ago, I wouldn't be able to understand why considering that I've always been the so called therapist friend. I used to be a clueless and inexperienced child who has never even thought about the fact that this world is selfish and completely uninterested in your problems.

Unfortunately, I realized that the hard way, but I'm very grateful that it happened like that. Words sometimes aren't as effective, I came to my senses way too late.

I am most certainly not selfish nowadays, I am just being cautious. Waving off needy, attention-seeking deceivers that are nevertheless meant to drain your energy isn't a skill that you apply for as an afterschool activity. The real skill here is teaching

yourself how not to feel like a prick for doing it despite the fact that this whole damn society is programmed to ruin their own mental state because the Church told them to do so or they will end up rotting in hell if they don't help out their "brothers and sisters". Right, and the next thing you'll wake up to is a psychiatrist asking you to draw your fears and store them in jars.

That's not being cold, that is being tactical.

- She released her pen as she quietly placed her old diary in the drawer. She stared at it for a while, watched as its covers were slowly falling apart. Her ex-boyfriend gave it to her, making it seem very precious simply because she didn't want people to think that she was completely unfazed, though she kept that a secret.

Her best friend was absolutely flabbergasted when she heard that a girl who is so unbothered by Earth and its problems was losing her mind over some pubescent cyclops.

Flashback:

„This is so unlike you! What the hell? Are you out of your mind or something?! Honestly, I can't even believe I'm witnessing this.", Loria yelled at me like she was my own mother.

„Will you shut up?", I leaned on the wooden commode as I was slowly reaching for my pocket to grab my phone, „You're slightly getting on my nerves, you know. After all it's none of your business." If it weren't for her yelling at midnight while my neighbour with anger issues was living right next to me, I would have been able to bite my tongue.

That had to be the most dreadful look the world has ever seen: „No, I will not shut up. That was probably his plan all along. Get with miss "untouchable", brainwash her and leave a legend." Are you serio-“

„Dang", I cut her off, „It has been exactly one year, four months, six weeks and six days since we broke up."

„I'm out.", she gave up on me and left.

Don't be foolish, obviously I wouldn't act like that over a caveman, but I do have 3 more years left at this school and I want to spend them decently. If I have an option to choose whether I want to be known as the freak of the generation or a basic schoolgirl, then I'd rather stay basic and ignored.

It was okay in the beginning, but he started relaxing a bit too much as time went by and I think that you can already conclude by now that I would absolutely never put up with that.

I find it all pointless anyway, and you can't prove me any different. I don't believe in "true love". I know what you're thinking, you think I'm like that because I've never experienced it. I'm sorry, but would you care to explain what true love is?

Not a single person that I know hasn't been satisfied with one relationship they've had. After all, it is concerning enough that they've been in more than one to experience what it actually feels like to be with someone who isn't a walking red flag. Well, at least for a little while. They've all been planning their life together and everything. The next thing you see are bunches of police officers in front of their house because of you already know what. Either that or one of them cheated once, twice, three times, four times, five times and the other one will still forgive them because they are convinced that it is "true love". Please, pure comedy at it's finest.

She was exhausted busting her head with tiring thoughts. She sighed, closed her eyes and slowly drifted away.

25th century, planet Anagon

Anagon is a small, abandoned planet. It is at a far distance, still undiscovered by Earth. Light years and light years away.

His eyes were bright green, something like bitter lime, calming, but dead. He was staring at himself, carefully inspecting his wounded, neglected body. Gently sliding his fingers against his cold skin. He cleared out the overgrown plants around him and performed self-diagnostics.

His name was Saiyah, he had a breath-taking figure. He looked so precious, almost as if he was a lovely human being, except that he is not. He isn't an alien either. Saiyah is, actually, an android. He looked so effortlessly beautiful, but he was artificial. Looks like he was left behind by the colony that used to live on this planet. Based on its state it must have been years since they left, God knows how many.

A whimper was heard somewhere nearby, outside the base. Saiyah headed out and brought a laser gun with him. He saw something move in the grass and proceeded to take a closer look. As he was getting closer, he realized that it was a small baby shijuan trapped in the vines. A big-eyed, small, purple creature with tiny horns and a huge tail.

„You need a weapon for that?“

„...What?“, confused and surprised isn't a good choice of words to describe Saiyah's reaction considering he's an android, but he sure wasn't expecting company.

„Looks like it's trapped, it seems harmless to me.“

, Who are you...?“

She sat on the ground next to him and stretched: „Nevermind me, just carry on with your business and I’ll carry on with my dream.”

„I apologise, but I can assure you this is not a dream.”

„Eh, either way I’m going to be alright”, she said as she was yawning.

„...If I may ask, how come you are not concerned?” he asked, not expecting such a careless answer, „You are on a foreign planet, possibly in the 25th century talking to an android.”

„Frankly speaking I’ve been wanting to take a break from humans for quite a long time now. I am not scared that I might not come back home for various reasons. First of all, I got all the way over here through some portal or whatever that was. I thought it was just a dream, which, apparently, is not. Anyways, my point is that the portal surely isn’t just a random thing that appeared once and never again. There must be a way to trigger it and I do not doubt a possibility that it is actually very simple to do it considering this is, as you said, the 25th century. Second of all, I am convinced that I am talking to the most intelligent being known to mankind and I feel one hundred percent safe with you, we will figure this out.”

„I thank you for your confidence in me, but, I must point out how you said you have various reasons. You named two.”

„Better than one.”

„Alright..., he said as he was freeing the shijuan,” could you explain a little further how you got here?”

„I was just about to go to sleep, somewhere around 4AM, as soon as I closed my eyes I felt something unusual. I don’t even know how to describe it. Quite confusing.”

„We should probably head to the base, I am sure that we will find more answers there, I already found some answers of myself. It looks like I have been left behind, and my name is Saiyah.”

„Saiyah? Interesting name, I suppose it is from this planet.”

„You are correct, and it means precious. What is yours?”

„Yeah, I’ll skip this one, you have enough information about me.”

“Confused”, again, the android looked at her: „What is all of that discreet for? Respectfully, I have never met a human with such a perspective on life in general. You’re quite puzzling.”

She smirked, laid down and closed her eyes: „Saiyah, you and me are quite similar, it shouldn’t be puzzling at all.”

He even raised his eyebrow at this point:„, I apologise, but I fail to see how.”

She laughed out loud and stood up:„, You will see, eventually.” she started walking

towards the base with no further explanation while Saiyah was trying to process her words.

21st century, Earth

She was tossing around in her bed, finding it difficult to fall asleep. Her dad, Isaac, went to his girlfriend's place. Her mum, Victoria, was in Dubai. Apparently, she went on a business trip. If everyday parties count as business, then being a businesswoman is the greatest job in the world.

I was exposed to constant abuse everyday, I watched my parents basically tear each other apart. I can't really say that I wasn't "blessed" with trauma for life, because, get ready for this one ladies and gentleman, I was! I already said that I like living, really, I do, but I seriously want a break. I like looking up into the sky and imagining I'm somewhere far, far, far away with my "favourite person". I lowkey like it when I can't fall asleep, it gives me more time and peace to focus on my fantasies.

The only issue is, I'm still searching for my "favourite person". I thought it could be Loria, but we got into a huge fight. She started hanging out with some cheap plastic brats and they changed her completely. Now that I think about it, maybe they didn't change her, maybe she was always like that. I mean, it is somewhat weird that she transformed in such a short period. God, how humanity disappoints me sometimes...

It is 4:09AM...I probably really should be sleeping by now.

She took a deep breath and turned to her side, it was storming outside. She finally managed to fall asleep, but soon after that she woke up to colours surrounding her. Literal colours. It was hypnotic. They were all mixing with each other. Wave, they were moving like a wave. It was getting bigger, soon after, the whole room was filled with it. She thought she was lucid dreaming, so she touched the wave. As soon as she did, one part of it started to pass onto her entire arm, and the other part formed a triangle, still connected to her arm. It aggressively pulled her into the triangle, leaving a few scars on her body. In a blink of an eye, she found herself laying down in grass, surrounded with unfamiliar plants, covered in mud.

She saw someone. He was carrying a gun, but it wasn't pointed towards anyone. In fact, he looked quite calm and relaxed. Her eyes followed his direction, she carefully observed his every move, still trying to process everything around her.

25th century, Anagon

„So, this is the base huh...”, she said, giving the broken computer on the table a short glance.

„Yes, and I think that our first step should be turning that computer on.”

„Are you going to be able to do that?”

„Yes, but it might take a while. It is almost entirely broken, I will have to fix every part of it, one by one, but I have a suggestion.”

„Yes, you can.”

„But, I haven’t said anything...I thought that I could c-“

„Connect with the computer through yourself since you’re basically a walking computer, in a way... Once you fix only the necessary parts of it that enable connection, you’re going to be able to collect all the information about this planet that the computer contains in a millisecond. Yes, you can.”

„It is quite interesting that you know such an information considering you are from the 21st century... But yes, that was what I meant to say.”

„Just do your work and I’ll try to find out something as well”, she stopped him from asking any questions, turned around and started going through some empty drawers. She spent two hours searching for at least something, it was pointless. She found nothing but dust. At least the android succeeded in connecting to the computer. The only information that he found was about the colony itself before they left. They were actually all human, and this planet used to be one of the most popular destinations with just about 350 people in total. Star ships would always stop by for repairs or have meetings with the ministers and ambassadors.

„And you have no memory about this place whatsoever?”

„No, but I do know how to use the technology here.”, he said while detaching the wires from himself and the computer. „We should head out and explore this place, if it really was a popular destination, then it should have a lot more places than- Where did you go?”

„Hey, this little scanning device, or whatever you call that, shows that there are 26 more buildings around us, and the closest one is just 64 meters away. We probably can’t see it because of these trees. It is bigger than the other ones, meaning that it’s probably the main building in this place. It should contain all the technology we need, maybe we find peoples journals too.

The android nodded in agreement. „Let’s move quickly, the day here lasts a lot shorter than on Earth, we know nothing about the night creatures here.”

„Outstanding.”, she said, giving him a long sigh.

They started walking, but this time, they changed roles. He observed her, carefully watched her every move. His bright green eyes locked onto her, smoothly moving in sync with her moves. He studied her in order to figure out the way she was thinking and acting.

„I think that I see an entrance”, she scanned the whole building to detect if there are any signs of life. „Nothing...I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing.

He opened the doors for her: „Both. It is good because we know that there's not a wild creature waiting to attack us, and bad because we could have ran into a person that would be able to help us. And that device is called a scedator, by the way...”

„...I know, Saiyah...I wasn't being literal.” „Scedator you say? Huh, I suppose that this entire planet Is full of interesting names, innit?”

„Oh, of course you weren't...” „And no, these names are quite common. You're forgetting that you're in the 25th century...”

She chuckled: „Let's go inside.”

He shook his head and went inside in order to start exploring the entire building, it was huge. She still stood by the doors for a while, watching him. She smiled lightly, barely noticeable. It was like her mask fell off for a split second.

„Is everything alright?”

„Yeah, sorry. I was just thinking about something. Have you found anything yet?”

„No, but I could use a hand here.”, he pointed towards the glitched doors. They were automatic, and the power room was probably on the last floor. That is a bit inconvenient considering that the buildings probably got 100-120 floors.

„I thought I could open them myself using force, but this material is way too strong, so we could try with the laser guns. It is very unlikely that only one will be able to open them, but two perhaps could if we set them on their maximum power.”

„We could try, but I don't think that two will make any difference, you know.”

„It will, they can detect each other if they're on maximum settings. It alarms them, and that causes the power to go up to 10 levels. My predictions are quite accurate.”

„Alright, I'm down.” They both set their laser guns on maximum and took a few steps back from the doors. They started firing. A few seconds later, the laser guns detected each other and leveled up for exactly 10 levels. It was working, a small hole started appearing in the doors, it was getting bigger each second. About a minute after, they were in.

„They leveled up after exactly 2.37 seconds, all together, it took us 50.8 seconds to get in.”, Saiyah said whilst walking through the doors, stepping into an enormously large meeting room.

„Why did you count..?“

„We’ll probably need to use them often, I was counting because I wanted to know how much time it takes so I could organise myself in case we’re in a dangerous situation.“

Her face light up a bit. She found the way he was thinking fascinating and it drew her attention, though she was kind of frustrated because she didn’t think about that herself.

They started looking for something useful, and their hopes were quite high considering that they were in a huge meeting room.

„I found something.“ ,she called for Saiyah to take a look.

„Perfect, just what we needed. It’s a journal, looks like it contains the most recent events on this planet. Great work!“

She froze for a second, unsure how to respond. No one has ever praised or appreciated anything she did.

Flashback:

The cupboard was full of all sorts of formulas, equations, engines, sketches...She was studying physics, she would stay in her room all day trying to figure out how absolutely everything around her works rather than hanging out, she found it pointless wasting her time on useless events.

„Mom, look! I’ve finally finished with my project. Is it good? Do you like it? Look at this part over here, it was the hardest to do, but I did it, do you like it? Do you like it?!“

„Uh huh...“Victoria responded, barely even looking at it. „Hey, go wash the dishes now will you, it’s better for you to do that instead of wasting your time on that nonsense. Is that what you choose to do everyday instead of socializing with people around you? You’re so selfish, where have I gone wrong...“

Her whole world fell apart, that was the moment when she shattered from the inside. Her own mother couldn’t stand her presence.

„Hey guys, look who it is, the stupid geek! Hahahahaha! Nerd! Get your doodles somewhere else, no one cares about your stupid numbers.“, the children have laughed at her, right in her face.

„Hahaha ,stop it guys! You’re so funny...“, she laughed nervously, watched them as they tore her work apart.

It took me way to long to realize that they were laughing at me, not with me.

„Um, thanks, I guess...Anyways,I think that we should read it back at the base, we can't spend any more time in here, it's getting dark. We will come back tomorrow and continue our search.”, she walked out of the building. She was facing the ground all the way back to the base, thinking about his words and then remembering how she was always spit on by everybody else.

Saiyah has always had difficulty reading peoples body language, but he was sure that something was on her mind. Her face expression looked like she was trying to solve the world's hardest equation. Unusual...

Day 2

„How long have you been awake?”

„I do not require sleep. I decided to read the journal while you were -- while you were getting your good night's sleep.” ,he got a bit distracted seeing her ridiculously messy hair and bed marks on her face. He could have sworn she was hungover. „I found some useful information, do you wish to hear it?”

„Sure”, she said while covering her face from sunlight. „Just give me the main information, I don't care about unnecessary details.”

„The journal is 78 years old, it belonged to a 34 year old officer. It was written in a bunker, they were all hiding from something. I believe that his group, and probably everybody else that hid in the bunker, died due to poor conditions in there. A lot of pages are missing, we have to continue our search.”, he explained as he stood up and blocked the sun out of her face.

„Right...thanks.”

She wanted to say something, but she just stared at him with an obvious confused look on her face instead.

„Is everything alright?”

„Yes, I'm quite alright, actually. Let's get going, shall we?”, she said with a somewhat positive face expression while packing weapons and scedators in her bag.

They went back to the building and discovered a secret room in the floor.

It was an empty pantry. The shelves were full of dust.

Saiyah found a piece of metal on the floor.

He scanned it and found traces of blood.

Someone failed to wash it off properly...

Day 3

„Considering that there are 26 buildings around us, I think we should split up. You can continue exploring the main building, and I’ll go somewhere else. We’ll be quicker that way, but we must meet back at the base at night time again,” she said, handing him a gun. „You’ll probably need this,” a barely noticeable smile appeared on her face.

„You’re right,” he took the gun and nodded in sign of approval. „Be very careful, do not rush. Maybe there are traps set all over the place that we haven’t explored yet.”

Saiyah’s search was unsuccessful, while on the other hand, the girl found a laboratory.

Skeletons of nine scientists were found, all laying on top of each other in a pile.

The entire lab was a mess, test tubes and different sorts of chemicals were all over the place.

It looks like there’s been an accident, but why are the skeletons placed like that?

It’s been almost 2 months since the girls arrival on Anagon, and the android still doesn’t remember anything at all.

They continued their adventures everyday and found a bunch of journals, logs, diaries, pictures, barely functioning computers, blueprints...As a matter of fact, they’ve found everything they needed about the creatures, nature, technology, history, laws, politics and the way peoples minds were functioning on this planet. Except for one thing. How did they die?

As days went by, they would grow closer and look after each others backs. She really started appreciating him on another level. It always makes her blood boil when he gets damaged, or if you will, hurt.

Day 58

„Kyera,” he called for her, „we should get going.”

She took a deep breath: „Yeah, we probably should.”

There was only one building left to explore. It was their only hope of finding out what had happened to the people of Anagon. This was their final stop.

It was relatively small, but they’ve spent hours and hours trying to find something. They searched each and every corner of it.

No luck.

They gave up and sat on the rusty floor. It was silent for quite a while now...

Something beeped. It was getting louder each second, but they couldn’t figure

where it was coming from.

Saiyah noticed a small device, thanks to his incredible vision, and sprinted towards it. Kyera stood behind him, facing his back as he was holding a small crystal device that projects holographic image in his hands and turned it on.

He froze.

He kept staring at it. Blankly. Hollow.

He felt sick. Disgusted. Terrified. He turned into stone.

Kyera noticed the horror on his face. She didn't understand what was wrong. What could possibly be so sick and disturbing to make him feel this way. To make him feel anything at all.

He flinched and backed away, squeezed the crystal tightly and mumbled something to himself.

„What?...Saiyah, talk to me... Saiyah?!”, she leaned closer to him as she was trying to establish communication, „Hey! Hey, look at me! What is it? What did you see? Talk to me. I need words, what is it?!?! C'mon, look at me, Saiyah.”

„Kyera...” ,he whispered. She was barely able to hear him.

„Yeah, it's me. It's okay. I'm right here. Tell me, what is it?”

He looked at her dead in the eyes and said:

„Get away from me.”

Their roles have changed, once again. Now, she was the one who stared at him blankly.

„Why are you saying this? Jesus Christ, Saiyah, just tell me what you saw already!” she started yelling at this point.

„I'm the answer, Kyera. It was me this whole time”

...

She snatched the crystal from his hands.

People were screaming in terror. Everyone was running away, trying to hide wherever they could. Mothers were trying to silence their children, so that they wouldn't make a sound and expose them. Chemicals poured down scientists bodies, suffocated officers, needles in peoples eyes and necks, drowned bodies floating in fountains, corpses stuffed in freezers. It just continues on going like a never ending cycle.

„It all makes sense now. That's why I've found myself locked up. I was shut down, deactivated. I was...prevented.” The thought of himself devouring people's lives one by one made him, horror-struck, slowly back away from the girl. It was all coming

back to him. Looking down at those people begging him to spare lives, all of those children who had a future...He just couldn't bare with the thought that he did this. He didn't understand...

Kyera didn't move a single centimeter away from him, her posture looked like she was rebelling against the government.

„I told you, back away. Don't you see what I am? You don't know me, Kyera, who knows what I'm capable of doing.”

„I refuse to believe that this is even real. I don't know what kind of sick game this is, but I do know that you didn't do this. These two months that I've spent with you were just enough time to get to know you. And what about that officer's journal? Do you really expect me to believe that they built an entire bunker to hide from you? Don't be ridiculous. We'll get to the bottom of this, and I'll do it all by myself if I have to, this way or another.

He just stood there, expecting abandonment once again only to be greeted by the support and friendship in her eyes. Kyera dropped the crystal on the floor and kicked it away, but she didn't break it, although she wanted to. They will need to use it again in order to find out what in the world is going on there.

„Man, one thing that's disappointing me right now is that you actually thought I'd leave you as if we didn't just go through hell together. Suit yourself, we won't be leaving anytime soon anyways.”

He was in disbelief as much as he was grateful: „Kyera, why – why are you doing this?”

„What am I supposed to do? Say „Oh, sonny, May God forgive you for your sins!” Look, the last 2 months that I've spent with you have made me come to the realisation that you are something that I've been looking for all my life. You're my favourite person, Saiyah.”

The spark in his eyes slowly disappeared and his bright smile turned into the face of someone who's currently finding himself in that one awkward situation where you have to decline a love confession that appeared to be quite dramatic.

„For the love of God, no, don't be stupid.”, she facepalmed when she realized what was on his mind: „Try to figure out what I meant for yourself, okay? It is important for you to try exploring emotions on your own sometimes.” Instant regret slapped her across the face. That sounded like one of those cheap quotes that egoistic school counsellors use as if they didn't read it off Facebook 2 days ago. Can't blame them, their license is questionable anyway. That godawful sensation tried to leave her at once while the android was stuck with that little thought at the back of his mind.

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Emma Gabela

BION A.

Chapter 1 - Dead Christmas

In the summer, I started a new job at a small café. There wasn't anything that made the café stand out from other small cafés except for a big pool in the other room in which the people could swim during the day. Even though the idea seemed cool, it's also one of my least favourite things about the place because I always have to listen to my boss go on how some teenagers sneak in during the night and play in it. Honestly, I would do the same as them.

That is also a place where I met my two now best friends. Bion and Miriam. Bion is twenty-seven years old just like me, overly obsessed with crime stories and is a little weird but once I got to know him, he seemed like a pretty good and decent guy.

Miriam, on the other hand, is one year younger than us and she and Bion are like chalk and cheese. She adores romantic stories and everything that screams cliché. I don't know how they became best friends, but I am sure that they make a pretty good team together.

"What are you ruminating about, Bion? And why are you tapping on the table with your fork?" Miriam asked, wanting to know what occupied his attention to the point of him not eating his favourite meal.

Two hours ago, they came to the café to keep me company while I worked. They mostly gossiped like little kids about everything they'd heard in the last twenty-four hours. They are great friends but sometimes the only thing I want to do is make them disappear and erase them from my life when they talk about trifling things such as these. Still, every time something stops me and makes me less irritated by them. It's probably the friendship bond.

Up. Down. Up.

Up. Up. Down. Down. Up. .- .- .-

"Are you using Morse's code?" I genuinely asked.

"Yeah, I am. You know what it's saying."

"Run."

“That’s right.” He smiled at my answer, a little differently than usual.

“Okay. Stop it, you two. I do not understand these things. Can you tell me, Bion, why aren’t you eating?”

“Have you heard about *Dead Christmas*?”

“*Dead... Christmas*?” I was confused.

“Yes, *Dead Christmas*. Apparently, there was this family of five living in a small apartment. Like really really small. Smaller than a snail’s house. Tiny. But that’s not so important, the interesting part is that it was Christmas, and the mother decorated a beautiful tree which proudly stood, somehow, in their small living room. The tree was so charming the kids couldn’t get their eyes off it.”

“Okay and... Is that supposed to amaze us? Every kid is happy when they see a Christmas tree,” Miriam noted.

That’s how it usually goes with them. Bion is retelling some scary story while Miriam is interrupting him trying to soothe her heart and mind. It always takes place at the café during my break time, usually twice a month, when Bion finds a story worth retelling.

“Well, had you let me finish, you would have known that three days before Christmas two of the three kids disappeared during the night. Parents called the police but even they couldn’t find out anything about them. Well, that is until Christmas.”

“So, they found them? In today’s time there are many disappearances of people who are eventually found. So, your story isn’t anything new,” I said.

“In a tree,” he whispered.

“In a *tree*? What do you mean by that?”

“The kids were found, just like you said, Xavier, but they were found in the tree.”

“In the tree?” Miriam barely let out, “Ha ha ha! So, the whole time they were just pranking their parents? I am sure they got what they deserved later.”

“Their body parts were found in the tree. *They* were just a new addition to the tree.”

“Did they find who had done it?” I asked, disquieted.

“Yeah.. they did.”

“So who did it th-” Miriam started but was interrupted by Bion.

“The third child, Bion A.”

Bion. The same name as my best friend’s.

This is probably the story that left the most profound impression on me.

Chapter 2 - 1:27

“Xavier, table four wants two lattes and one orange smoothie,” Harry, one of my co-workers, told me.

“On it.”

Today was supposed to be my free day but because one of the co-workers, Sam, had gotten sick, the misfortune fell on me, and I had to take his evening shift.

“Two lattes and one orange smoothie are ready to be taken,” I told my Jay, another co-worker.

“Gotcha.”

Jay is an unusual but interesting person and a co-worker. In his fifty years he has changed more than twenty-three jobs which all were, as he says, way too boring and toxic physical and mental pain. Despite his way of thinking, he is a good guy who will always lend a helping hand if needed.

The rest of the night went by really slowly, but it was enjoyable because of Jay and his jokes. Unfortunately, he was done by 11 p.m. and I was left with Harry.

The next two hours passed quickly and at 1 a.m. the last person finally got up and left, which meant that I had two hours until I could go home. I spent one of the two hours on my mobile phone, that is until a phone in the café rang.

Usually my co-worker handles the calls, but at the moment he was hiding somewhere and slacking off. So, I decided to pick it up and recited our cookie cutter greeting.

“Hello, this is Sky’s café. How can I help you?”

All I heard was static on the other end. I was afraid the caller hadn’t heard me, so I repeated myself again but louder.

Finally, a voice on the other end of the line spoke up and whispered three words that sent shivers down my spine.

“He is inside.”

Afterwards they disconnected.

I stared at the phone in disbelief, then back outside to see if anyone was actually out there. I wasn’t really sure what to make of the short interaction. Were all phone calls like this?

But somehow the voice sounded familiar.

Instead of letting it linger in my mind I tried to forget about it. I was behind the counter playing with my phone to pass the time. The café has large windows so I couldn’t help but feel like someone was watching me.

I dismissed the idea and continued to play with my phone.

After cleaning up the whole place, I was pretty much ready to go home. A part

of me was still annoyed that my co-worker had left me close up by myself without saying anything, but I was also glad the night was over.

My car was parked outside, so I was ready to leave through the back entrance, but I saw that the trash hadn't been taken out. I found it really strange, considering I'd heard the back door open.

Suddenly, the phone rang again. I picked it up with a shaking hand and barely muttered out.

"H-hello."

"Check the trash."

And then it disconnected.

Upon hearing that I hurriedly went outside and opened a big trash can.

Inside was the discarded body of my co-worker. It was mutilated to the point that it was almost unrecognizable, but when I looked closely, I saw a wound on the left outer shoulder and sliced-up throat.

Chapter 3 - A corpse bride/mannequin

"Why did the two of us have to come with you to a wedding salon?" Bion sounded frustrated.

"Because, like I already said at least ten times, I need your help finding the perfect dress for my sister-in-law." Miriam repeated the same sentence for the eleventh time.

"I understand that, but what I do not understand is how are we of any help?"

"Well..." she started, "I actually just wanted to make Xavier forget about his co-worker. I know that you must still be in shock, Xavier, even more since you were the one to discover his body."

I understood what she was trying to say. The last few days at work were a bit overwhelming. Still, it didn't touch me that much. In a bad way, I mean. I was used to these things.

"Why didn't you say so then? We could have gone to an amusement park or to the cinema. Anywhere but here," Bion said teasingly.

"Shut up, you bastard. I only chose this so I could get on your nerves."

"Why, you little bastard..."

It was a normal thing for them to fight and tease each other every now and then. All of us knew that it was their way of joking. And no one really minded it. They even once tried to tease me, but I didn't like to be teased.

Miriam's calling my name woke me up from my daydreaming.

"What?" I asked.

“What do you think about this one?”

“There’s way too much ball gown vibe to it,” Bion answered before I even had a chance to counterattack, “I think the mermaid one is a hundred times better.”

“When have you become a fashion connoisseur?”

“When I found out about that story of the corpse mannequin.”

“We came here to help Xavier take his mind off these terrible things and you are not helping with it,” she shot right in the middle with her words.

“But it’s really bone-chilling. Don’t you want to know more about it?”

“No, we do not,” She said at the same time I said “Sure.”

“Xavier! Are you crazy?! You’ve just gone through a really terrible experience and you still want to hear some disgusting story about a corpse mannequin?!”

“Yes! Of course he wants to know. Can’t you see that he loves my stories? Ain’t that right, my best friend?”

I didn’t reply and just nodded my head to let him know that he could continue talking about the story.

“If you saw a real dead person made to be a mannequin, what would you do?”

“I don’t know... I probably wouldn’t even think that a mannequin could actually be a dead person,” Miriam tried to use her common sense.

“Well, that’s what the owner of the store also did. Apparently, there was a woman who loved her wedding dress so much that she would wear it two to three times a month at home and show it to her kids. Unfortunately, she died of a heart attack and was buried alongside her two kids. One day, a new beautiful bridal boutique opened and the sales rocketed up in an instant. Everyone was amazed by mannequins that looked so real that everyone would say they thought there was a real woman trying on what could have become her wedding gown. A few years later, one of the newly hired employees saw a picture of a beautiful woman in a long white dress in the boss’s office. She was smiling in the picture just like she was smiling in the boutique window wearing that same dress to show all the people there just how beautiful she looked.”

Chapter 4 - Morse code

“See you tomorrow, boy.”

“See you, Jay.”

After cleaning all the dishes and making sure that everything was in its place, I closed the café and made my way home. The heavy rain was pouring down on the street. With no protection I had to walk in it.

Apart from the raindrops hitting the ground, I could hear heavy footsteps coming from behind. I looked around, but I didn't see anyone. Yet, I couldn't shake off the feeling that was building up inside me.

Deciding to ignore it, I continue walking down the street to my car. Once I'd got inside, I drove off to a forest. I always went there when I needed to clear my head. Even though the drive felt longer than usual, I couldn't help but feel reassured when I stepped into the forest. I followed a well-known path that had been drawn in my mind a long time ago.

I soon came to another narrow path lit by streetlamps. I continued making my way down it when something stopped me in my tracks.

The rain started hitting the ground differently.

Up. Down. Up.

Up. Up. Down. Down. Up.

I turned around and saw a silhouette under one of the lamps. The person was soaked to the bone just like I was.

Up. Down. Up.

Up. Up. Down. Down. Up.

I ran away.

~ ~ ~

"What's the situation?"

"Young man... has a stab wound in the left outer shoulder, lost too much blood."

"When was he found?"

"Hour and a half ago."

"Okay. Take him int-"

"Rapid breathing, heart is slowing down! We are losing him!"

Chapter 5 - Knock knock

"Xavier! Are you okay?" Miriam asked as soon as she entered my room.

"Yeah." I replied.

"What do you mean - yeah?" Bion asked in shock. "They had to operate on you because of your wound."

"Oh... yeah... I've forgotten about that."

"How can you forget about it? They literally cut you open" Miriam yelled in frustration.

“Okay, Miriam, I think you need to calm down,” Bion started. “You wouldn’t want to be thrown out of the hospital, right?”

“No...” Miriam dragged out while pouting. “No, I would not want that.”

“Then calm down and let’s talk with Xavier calmly.”

I stopped listening to their conversation, it started to get really boring. I didn’t understand why they’d come. I thought that they were in the neighbouring city. They were worrying too much.

“I’ve heard you got a report saying you didn’t see who had done it. Is that true?” Bion asked once he stopped quarrelling with Miriam.

“Yes. I didn’t see who did it.” I replied very shortly.

It was true that that was what I’d told the police, so I didn’t see why it should be any different with them.

“There’s nothing to be done then.” Bion said reassuringly.

I nodded. They continued making small talk with me until a nurse came and informed them that the visiting hours were over.

My mind was at ease once they left. They were asking too many questions.

Chapter 6 - The café

Being absent from work was the best part of the last two weeks during my stay in the hospital. The moment I left the hospital, my boss called and told me to get back to work since the café was already understaffed.

“Hey, Xavier, how is your arm, boy?”

“Better than two weeks ago, Jay.”

“Welp, I still can’t understand why Harry put you back to work. Your arm still hasn’t healed.”

I would like to know as well. At the moment we are short-staffed since the incident did involve the death of our co-worker. The number of people coming here to have a drink has reduced by more than a half, so I am not surprised that nobody wants to work here. Some even tried to quit, but our boss offered them some benefits which they couldn’t decline.

“I understand that at the moment we are going through tough times being understaffed and all. Still, I do not see any reason why bringing you back here will help since you can barely move your arm, much less do any work.”

“Jay! Xavier! Get back to work!” our boss shouted across the room.

One more thing that has changed since that day is that our boss has become even more furious with anything or anyone and didn’t like it when we didn’t do any work

even when no one was at the café, which was most of the time.

“Jeez... what has wound up him today?” Sarah, another co-worker, asked.

“Well, he is losing money big time, so I can’t really blame him,” Tom said from the toilet which he was currently busy cleaning.

“It works well for me. I’ve got a raise and am working much less than ever in my life,” Kate, a forty-seven-year-old lady, added while Jay’s eyes sparkled with excitement from just hearing her voice.

Everyone can see that Jay is in love with her. Everyone but her, that is.

“You are right, Kate. We shouldn’t grumble, we should be happy that we are getting a much-deserved rest while still getting our pay checks.”

“Ha ha ha... you are right, Jay. After all, you always agree with everything that Kate says,” Tom teased.

“Shut up. Am not.”

The whole place was filled with laughter after he’d said that. That’s how our work-days pass every day.

Chapter 7 - Best friend

“Miriam,” I waved across the diner, “here.”

She replied by nodding as if letting me know she’d seen me.

Earlier that day, Miriam messaged me saying that she wanted to meet up. I was taken aback a bit because usually she was the one that needed to be invited, not the other way around.

“Good evening, what can I get for you?” A waiter in his thirties asked us

“I will have roasted chicken with salad on the side,” Miriam replied and after her I let the waiter know that I wanted the same.

“So... Why did you want to meet all of a sudden? Are you okay? And why couldn’t Bion join us? Have you two fought once again?” I fired my questions.

I simply didn’t want to beat around the bush and ask her about her day. What I wanted was to know why just the two of us had to meet. Why couldn’t Bion join us?

“We haven’t fought,” she started, “I just have something to tell you that I don’t want him to hear.”

“Why? Are you okay? Are you perhaps dying? Are yo-”

“No and no. It’s something that concerns him.”

“Now you are really scaring me.”

“It’s.. well... How do I even say something like tha-”

“Just spit it out! Like you were ripping off the band-aid.”

“I think that the Bion is the Bion A.”

Wow. Now that left me dumbstruck.

“Why would you say something like that? How did you even come up with an idea like that? I mean... Yeah, they do share the same name, but they haven’t got anything else in common.”

“Can’t you see it? I tried looking up that Bion A. person and I found nothing while he knows everything about his whole life? Doesn’t that make you question everything?”

“Well... when you say it like that... I mean, I see where you are coming from but they only have the same name, nothing else.”

“He was the first one to find you,” she started, “in the forest 10 km away from the city. In the forest no one usually sets foot in. But he did. He was in the forest at the same time you were.”

“What are you trying to say, Miriam? I seriously cannot keep up with you anymore.”

She silently looked at me, welling up with tears. At first, I didn’t understand what she meant but then all the pieces of the puzzle came together. Bion and his obsession with some truly twisted and deeply disturbing crimes. Him finding out all the information about Bion A. even if it was nowhere written or published, apparently. His discovery of cases that never made it in the newspapers. And now he was the one to find me.

“No,” I barely whimpered. “No. No, no, no. No! That’s just impossible! What are you saying! Are you out of your mind?!”

She thinks Bion is the one behind all of this... I knew she didn’t want to believe it but how can she not? Bion is in every dangerous situation I am in. But I do agree on one thing with her - he knows too much.

“I am still shocked about thinking that way. But didn’t you even once wonder? I mean... he-”

“Here’s your food. Enjoy!”

Both of us thanked the waiter and started eating our food. We left the conversation at that, neither of us daring to start it again. Instead, we talked about other topics. Still, the tension could be felt in the air.

Through the rest of the evening the conversation lingered in my mind. One particular question bothered me the most.

Why was she so sure about it?

Chapter 8 - Day of freedom

The next few weeks flew by surprisingly fast. The conversation with Miriam still lingered in my mind but I tried to dismiss it. I knew what she had said wasn't really a lie. But I couldn't just think that way about my best friend. Even so, I aimlessly hung around my apartment trying to hide something which will occupy my mind for the time being.

Ping.

I received a text message. From Bion.

BION: Hi buddy, whatcha doing? Are you up for a friendly match?

He was the first one to find you.

ME: Not really.

BION: Don't be that way. We haven't seen each other since we came to visit you at the hospital. Wanna go for a coffee?

ME: No. Tired.

BION: Okay then. Rest.

And with that our conversation came to an abrupt end and he didn't try to contact me for the rest of the day. Still, the thing that occupied my mind the most was the conversation we'd had a few months prior when Miriam invited us to her place.

"Is the soup any good?" Miriam asked after she'd invited us to her place to eat noodles and soup.

"It's excellent. I still can't believe you made it."

That earned him a blow to the head.

"Ouch! But still it's not as good as the one for Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah. A family got together for the holiday and each of them had to bring one dish to the dinner. Some brought turkey, others brought sweets, but only one of them brought soup. The family laughed at their family member. They always liked to prank him and tease him in ways that were maybe too harsh. But the person couldn't do anything about it. That is until they all tasted the soup. It was nothing special but at some point you could hear someone spit something out of their mouth and then a scream. One by one, all of them started spitting out different human body parts - the main ingredient of the soup. That was the person's way of getting payback."

Next day, I got a new message from Bion.

BION: I found some great information about Bion A.

Chapter 9 - Pool soup

“Xavier, have you been avoiding me?” Bion asked as soon as he came into the café.

I hadn’t been avoiding him, I just wanted to spark his interest in me.

“No.”

“Then why aren’t you answering my calls?”

“Too much trouble.”

“You’ve changed.”

He was very observant. Such a misfortune.

“No. I haven’t”

“Yes, yes you have.”

“I’ve just been working on a surprise for you,” I said. “I didn’t want anything to accidentally slip from my mouth.”

“You... have prepared for me... a surprise.”

“Yes, yes I have. Hey! Why are you crying?”

I like it when their cries are sincere.

“It’s just... th-that I am so happy that you’ve done something like that for me. I thought you started to hate me.”

“I could never hate you,” I replied, and it was true “I’ve made sure that you, Miriam and me, will have the pool all for ourselves tonight.”

“Miriam is gonna be so happy. Have you already told her?”

“Not yet. I wanted to tell both of you at the same moment.”

“Well then, I can tell her. When should we be here?”

“Nine p.m.”

“Deal! See you later.”

~~~

*“You think he’s gonna fall for it?”*

*“100%. How can he not?”*

*“If you say so...”*

“He is going to come to your work and ask you if you hate him. You only have to tell him that you were making a surprise party for him and me. The moment he hears that, he is ours. All we have to do then is hand him in and the money is ours.”

“Isn’t what we are doing bad?”

“No... How can you even think about it in that way? Think of all the lives we would save. He is dangerous. We’ve found evidence that he committed all those crimes in the past and attempted a murder on you. We found that he changed his identity. We need to hand him in. After all, he is Bion A.”

~~~

My shift slowly came to an end. The boss decided that we would be closing by 8:30 p.m. mainly because I'd rented the pool for the night.

Eventually, Miriam and Bion arrived. He could barely contain his excitement while Miriam just looked at me knowingly. I nodded my head. I knew what came next.

"I have to smoke one, you two can go ahead and start swimming," Miriam said loudly.

"Do you want us to wait for you?" Bion asked.

"Nah, don't worry. I will be back in a minute."

"If you say so... Come on, Xavier, let's go."

I fell back in step with Bion and soon enough we were in front of the pool.

"You go ahead, Miriam called me to come and open a door for her since it's locked."

He only nodded and went back to changing into his swimming trunks.

I went to the back door to get Miriam.

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Her skin is soft like a feather, nice to wear on one's body. The only misfortune was hearing her screams and all the blood that got over my shirt. It's nice that I can change into her. Too bad she isn't stronger; she would be a nice body to display in a luxurious boutique.

Coming back to the pool dragging the girl's skinless body, my left elbow and forearm started to hurt. I should have hurt myself a little bit less that night. I looked down at him, my eyes skimming over his dissolved flesh, glaring at the red water and bones in it which reminded me of a soup I had once prepared.

"Looks like a pool cleaner worked."

I threw the lifeless body into the pool and watched it as it started dissolving and the only things that remained were bones and menacingly crimson water.

*mentor: Lucija Gašparac**institution: Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija**Ana Ivković*


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## A COLOURFUL REVELATION

Even before opening my eyes, I sensed something was off. I felt myself lying in a bed I was not familiar with, my head resting on a hard, cold pillow. Light was reaching my eyes through my eyelids, though something about it was rather strange, unnatural even, but I wasn't sure what. Where am I, I wondered, and opened my eyes to see a perfectly smooth, white ceiling with only a single light in the middle of it. The room was just big enough for a single bed to fit comfortably inside; in other words exceptionally tiny. There were no windows, no wall decorations, not a single clue that somebody had been there before. In fact, judging by the scent and the seemingly untouched floor, the room was brand new. For some reason, though, the air inside the room was not unpleasant; it was almost as if one was not indoors at all, but outside in nature, though with a certain odd note to it. What confused me even more was the complete absence of sound, just dead silence, as if I were all alone.

It was when I got up and grabbed the door handle that I realized I had no clue what had happened and how I got in that room, nor did I have any real memories of what had happened before waking up. I did, however, have some of my general knowledge and a general idea of who I was, which made me wonder... how can I remember everything but details about myself? What is going on? I stood there pondering over it for a while, then snapped out of it and opened the door. Behind it was a long hallway, 'decorated' similarly to the tiny room: just white, perfect walls with many other doors and an occasional light on the ceiling. And a very small window next to the door of my room, barely big enough to allow one to see through it. Again, apart from the creaking and my breathing, there was zero sound.

I got into the hallway and decided to explore my surroundings first by looking through the window and was stunned when I saw the scenery outside. A vast green meadow, glistening sun, magnificent trees placed along the cobbled pathways, wooden benches, a winding stream... It was the kind of sight that awakens one's soft side, reconnects them with their true self; a sight that filled me with warmth and peace. It was so captivatingly beautiful that one could just admire it for hours with-

out averting their eyes. Looking closely at the benches, I noticed that some of them were a bit crooked or scratched. The pathways seemed like they were walked on many, many times before and the grass was uneven in some places. Judging by how wet everything was, it had also been raining heavily before, which was strange since the sky was cloudless. Despite that, the sight was still gorgeous; the imperfections and shining raindrops added a certain charm. What struck me next was that I was looking at the scene from somewhere above, meaning that I was probably in some kind of a building. When I looked around, my theory was confirmed: I was indeed in a building, most likely on the fifth floor.

To my left I saw yet another building, though wildly different from the one I was in: my building was pure white and seemed to be new, looking quite lifeless and dull, whereas the one on the left was colourful and cheerful, with many windows and carefully carved details. The details added certain character to the building, each floor different than the other. The colours seemed random, yet somehow made sense. Most of the windows weren't see-through, though, only a few of them. Looking closely at them, I came to the conclusion that perhaps they all used to be as such, but were covered with something so as not to allow any curious looks. The building was also much bigger and taller than the white one, definitely older too. It now seemed to be abandoned, although there were signs of people having been there before. In fact, the whole place appeared to be abandoned. Indications of previous inhabitation and yet no one was around... I must admit it really creeped me out.

Then I noticed that the two buildings were standing only a few metres apart, so I assumed there must be some kind of a passage connecting them, but decided it would be worth investigating sometime later. First, the white building had to be explored.

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After having explored all the floors and rooms, I came to a few conclusions. One: there were no doors allowing me to get outside, nor any windows low or big enough to get through. In fact, there were but a few windows in the whole place, and all of them were on the top floor, so the only way out would be straight-up suicide, an idea I didn't quite fancy. Two: the building was made of many confusing hallways, which were easy to get lost in, but the structure of it seemed quite stable, indestructible even. Three: to my surprise, not all the rooms were white and empty; some of them were painted and nicely decorated.

The ground floor was the one that stood out the most, with its grand 'entrance'

hall. It differed from any other such hall in that it didn't have a reception desk and was filled with many doors leading to all sorts of rooms, each having its own distinct features. The hall itself looked fancy, with seemingly expensive furniture: seats, coffee tables, sofas, cabinets... Even a bar. But again, there were no signs of any of those things being used. It was all just standing there, waiting to become useful. A sad sight to see.

The rooms that weren't just white were all of different shapes and sizes. Some looked utterly wild and chaotic. The furniture seemed to be everywhere, as if it was tossed around randomly and painted with an interesting colour palette. Some offered a calming sight; a simple setting, structured and organized, with the colour blue prevailing. The feeling inside was like being on the calm sea, listening only to the sound of its waves while relaxing on a small boat. Some rooms were mostly white with only a hint of artistic spirit in them, just enough to provide an interesting sight, yet one you wouldn't give much thought. There were also rooms that gave off a very dark vibe, which I had no desire of exploring. Most of them weren't even spooky, just cold and gloomy. There were also those that made one's blood boil; just being in them made you irritated and angry. The rest of them contained many letters, symbols and numbers, which made the viewer curious about their nature and meaning. They also offered a ride on a logical train of thought for those willing to do so, creating an imaginative, almost artistic experience. For some reason those rooms were really appealing to me; I felt like I could spend days just admiring the beauty of their simple yet complex nature...

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I was walking through one of the many hallways, pondering so deeply that when I encountered a human, I thought it was my mind playing tricks with me. At first I just stood there, frozen, staring at the person in front of me: a young woman with an empty look in her eyes, so empty one might've thought she wasn't a person at all. Behind those distant eyes seemed to be only a cold, calculating mind, giving the impression of a robot.

After the initial shock I noticed her physical features: about average in height with a slim and feeble physique, brown, short hair and hazel eyes. I also noticed that she wasn't at all surprised to see me. In fact, it was apparent that she finally found who she had been looking for. She just stood there and waited for me to get out of the state of shock, which took a while since I was convinced that I was all alone in that place. I was perplexed and starting to feel scared, panicked even, for I had no idea what her



intentions were nor how or why she even knew of my existence. Where was she all that time? Why was she looking for me? Where did she come from?

She spoke first after some time, but I had no idea what she was saying, as I couldn't understand the language she was using. She tried her best to tell me what she had intended to say, but her effort was futile. Having realised the conversation was heading nowhere, the young woman seemed disappointed and just walked away. No gestures, no angry shouting, nothing. She just left as if nothing had happened. I, once again, just stood there afraid and confused. I thought about where she could've come from. Not this building, I thought, for I heard no sounds aside from mine and saw only shiny, unused doorhandles. She had to be looking for me specifically, and had to know where to go. That made absolutely no sense to me, but I decided against trying to figure it out; nothing about the whole place made sense anyways.

After a while I decided to venture in her direction and see where she was going. While doing so, it occurred to me that the young woman couldn't have come from the outside, because her shoes were dry and everything out there was still wet from rain. Maybe she came from the other building, I thought, but where is the passage then? There was no way of telling due to the lack of windows, so I once again set off on a journey through the building.

While wandering around, I thought about the woman being in that colourful, cheerful building. I wanted to be there, too. I wanted to see what was there, and even out there if possible. Who knows what things existed outside of those white corridors? Maybe there were answers to my questions, things I knew about and don't recall seeing, the people who were once in this place... Maybe I used to be one of them, maybe I was purposefully trapped... What could I have possibly done to deserve it? What happened? Where is that damned way out?

After thinking about it for a while, it occurred to me that the feeling I had, the one I had the whole time but just didn't notice, was the one that sparked my curiosity. The one that pushed me forward. It was freedom. I was yearning for freedom.

\*

After what felt like years, I found the passage connecting the two buildings. It was very well hidden and I only accidentally stumbled upon it when I leaned against the wall to catch a break; the door was as white and as flat as the wall, without a door handle or a lock, but it only took a slight touch to open it. I fell on my back and, after realising what had happened, turned around to see a strange, short hallway. It was all white, just like the corridors in the smaller building, with one crucial difference

- there were windows, windows so big that the whole other half of the hallway was almost entirely made up of glass. I slowly got up and glanced behind me to see that the door was still open before stepping forward. In those few steps I had to make to reach the windows my heart was pounding. I could hear it in my ears, feel the rush of fear and excitement reaching my chest and making my senses sharper. I was finally going to get out of that big, white prison. I thought maybe I would find answers. Maybe I'd see other people, find out the truth... Feel free. The revelation caught me off guard, so I didn't have time to prepare myself mentally to see what was out there. I felt on edge, and were somebody or something to approach me at that moment, I probably would've been more than ready to send it back to its maker.

At last, I took the final step. The sunlight reached my eyes, my face, my hands. It shined more brightly than any light I've seen indoors, and gave a pleasant, warm touch to my skin. The air was also different, losing its distinct smell. It was much denser than before, too. The sky was of pure, blue colour, without a single cloud in it. I looked to the right to see the same captivating landscape I saw while exploring the long, white halls. On the left, though... There was much more to see. A whole new, vast space, filled with green fields, blooming trees and small, cute houses, with a narrow road surrounding them. One thing I noticed was that, even though the sun was high up, everything was still full of glistening raindrops. Naturally I couldn't explain to myself how that was possible, but I enjoyed the view so much I didn't really care.

After admiring everything for a while, the door in front of me caught my attention. It wasn't hidden like the one I came through, rather made to be easily seen. I walked towards it and grabbed the doorhandle. My heart was beating even harder than before. What will I find inside, I thought, what kinds of things are beyond these walls? Perhaps I will find a door that might lead me to the vast green landscapes? The passage was definitely too high up to enable one to exit through its big windows in one piece...

I took a deep breath and opened the door. My eyes were wide open, my body frozen. The layout seemed to be almost identical to the one in the white building, only bigger. Same never-ending hallways and countless doors, though the ones in front of me were much more impressive. The ceiling was a lot higher, too, almost twice as high as the previous white one. The doors were nearly all different: various sizes, colours, decorations... There were even signs on some of them, although I couldn't read them because I wasn't familiar with the writing. No wall was dull or clear, for there were many pictures and paintings depicting what seemed to be events from somebody's life. When I looked closely at them, I thought I recognised some of

them. Remembered them. As if I had seen them with my own two eyes. It was like waking up and not knowing what you dreamed about until you saw something that refreshed your memory.

That made me wonder if I had actually been in those rooms, if I had been in that place before waking up. Perhaps I was one of the inhabitants that once lived here. Why, then, was I the last one standing, together with that strange young woman? Who is she? Who are we? Where are the others? What happened to them? Maybe I was wrong, and I was just recalling a dream I had had. Then again, how could I have dreamt of something I've never seen before in real life so vividly?

I decided to leave the questions aside and try to find answers instead. It took me a long, long time, but I managed to sweep through all the rooms on the floor I was on. Due to them being oddly similar to the white ones, I couldn't shake off the feeling that the buildings had to be connected in some weird way. They differed in two ways: firstly, neither of the rooms were empty, rather highly decorated to look a certain way; secondly, there were cracks in the walls. None of them were too big nor posed a danger, but they were there nonetheless.

I also saw something I hadn't seen before: dust. Some rooms had more, some less of it, but there was certainly dust. The previous building was so white and clean I completely forgot that it even existed. Additionally, some of the furniture seemed to be worn out, losing its former glow and strong colours. The walls weren't perfectly smooth nor clean; they had dark stains all over them in some places, many crevices as well. As if things were slowly decaying...

\*

It made zero sense. The more I was exploring, the less I knew. After eons and eons of snooping around, I couldn't say I was any closer to finding the truth.

I climbed to the top, which was exhausting, to look around from the top to the bottom of the building, so as not to miss out on anything. I thought I would get bored just looking at the rooms all the time, but to my surprise I didn't. I found it interesting and even felt as if there was an additional presence inside of my mind while going around. Perhaps it was the building that made me feel that way; either way, for some strange reason, it felt comforting.

One thing that puzzled me was the fact that the lower the floor was, the more decaying it looked. On the very top, everything was in order, almost perfect even. The infrastructure was so flawless it made me feel uneasy. It wasn't the only thing that made me feel that way though, for there was a door I couldn't open. No matter what

I did, it wouldn't budge, not even make a creaking sound. I wondered if the room was similar to the one I woke up in, in which case I believe that exhaustion would potentially be the least of my problems.

The ground floor was a sight to see. Its layout resembled that of the white building, in that it had a grand hall and many, many rooms and hallways, but it was a lot bigger. All of the rooms, including the biggest one, were in a critical state. At no point did I see a piece of furniture that wasn't half decayed and misshapen, a floor that wasn't filled with holes and broken tiles, nor a wall that wasn't covered in dark, permanent stains. The worst was definitely the grand hall.

Even though everything was chaotic, as soon as I entered I realised what differed this one from the other: it was an actual grand entrance hall, once having had big, glass doors installed in the middle of the wall opposite of me, that were now broken. They must've looked beautiful before, I thought, just like the rest of the ground floor. The hall itself looked rather gloomy, with only a single weak lamp giving just enough light to make everything barely visible, but one could see that it used to be decorated so as to make one feel good about being here. I wished I could've seen it in its full glow, with its carefully made details that are now just barely visible and its once high-quality furniture, made from thoughtfully picked materials to best suit its purpose, that was now mostly decayed. Now that I think of it, I thought, I would love to renovate this whole building once the opportunity arises. It would most certainly take a lot of time and energy, but seeing this beauty go to waste is unacceptable.

Shifting my focus back to the doors, I could already smell the trees standing beyond them, which seemed so far even though I had never been closer to them. Getting through the doors will probably be tough, I thought, since they are broken and there is probably shattered glass all around them. It didn't bother me, though, because the only thing I could think of was the sweet taste of freedom on the other side of that wall.

I started moving towards the doors, but had to watch my step very carefully since the floor was more of a trap than an actual floor. It was broken and crooked in many places, so if I accidentally tripped or slipped I could've easily found myself being impaled by what used to be supporting beams. In some places beneath the floor I could see water, meaning that there was plumbing in the building, although it probably hadn't been used for a while and the water became a liquid infection. The ceiling was more or less the same, having collapsed in several places, allowing one to see the ceiling of the upper floor. The furniture around me was all half decayed and misshapen, contributing to the already sorrowful sight. At some places there were

closets and cabinets that left almost no room for moving, so I had to crawl or jump over so as not to get myself wounded. The only audible sound inside the hall, aside from my movements, was the dripping of the water, which made the whole place give off a horror-ish vibe.

I was just a few metres away from the glass doors when I heard loud creaking coming from underneath me. I looked down to see the floor beneath starting to fall apart. I began to panic as I tried to get away and move towards the doors. I can make it, I thought, I can reach these doors...

But I was panicked, and the floor was filled with too many obstacles. I accidentally kicked away a chair that had been supporting a big, heavy closet next to me. I took a step back to avoid it, as just a split second later it fell right in front of my face, thus blocking my sight and the way to the doors. The floor rumbled and started to fall apart. The path in front of me was disappearing below the ground level, shattering my dreams of getting out. I decided I wasn't going to die just to make one single step outside before the whole place collapsed on me, so I looked to the left and noticed there was enough room to get through. My legs ran almost instinctively, carrying me to one of the dark, broken corridors through all the holes and obstacles. My only hope of survival at that moment was getting back to the previous building, where everything was hopefully stable. Such effort to reach the doors, only to be cut off by some random, big piece of furniture.

I almost cried of happiness when I finally found the stairs. I climbed them with lightning speed to get to the passage floor. When I did, I saw her again. The young, feeble woman, standing calmly and looking at me. She showed no signs of fear or worry. 'What are you waiting for, can't you feel the floor rumble? Everything's falling apart, it will take you down with it!' I said. I went on trying to convince her to follow me, but her only reply was, 'You go, if you want. But this is where I belong. And if it goes down, I'll go with it.' She uttered the words as indifferently as if she was talking about getting a cup of coffee. Her face showed no sign of emotion. I gave up trying and hurried to the passage, leaving the strange woman behind. I felt guilty for leaving her, but what could I have done differently? I don't even know her, anyways, and she seemed to be content with meeting the same fate as her building, something I wasn't so eager about.

The door appeared in front of me, and opening it was a delight. I managed to get to the white building unharmed, having faced only a few near-death situations. After closing the passage, I sat on the floor and took a deep breath. No sign of destruction was present there, which would usually comfort me, were I not so disturbed by what

had just happened. And it wasn't just the near-fatal situations that made me feel that way. It was the fact that I finally managed to get to those doors I have been looking for for so long, those doors I had only assumed existed. They were a small glimmer of hope that I might finally get out and see everything I had seen from those windows; smell the liberty in the air, feel the drops of rain on my feet and let the sunshine on my face again. Explore those houses and walk those gorgeous, cobbled pathways, perhaps meet the previous inhabitants of this place and maybe even find some answers about myself, learn about what and who I am, how I came there. Those simple, glass doors gave me a flicker of hope that I might finally escape the endless corridors and countless rooms, give me the freedom of movement and the joy of using all my senses. But it was all gone. All gone in the blink of an eye, gone by my mistake.

After a while I decided to look outside the window to see if the other building was still standing, which surprisingly it was. Yes, it looked more in danger of collapsing, but it was standing nonetheless. Perhaps it won't fall after all and the woman was right. Ah, the damned woman. I still had no clue who she was or why she was so calm about everything. What was she saying about the building, is she the former inhabitant? Is it possible? How did she suddenly speak my language? It crept me out and suddenly I wanted answers, even though I was utterly terrified. Maybe I could find her...

\*

But she found me first. I was about to go and wander the hallways aimlessly when she intercepted me and scared the life out of me. Once again, she showed no sign of emotion or any harm caused by the ruckus in that colourful place, as if nothing at all had happened. She just stood there, looking at me with those knowing hazel eyes.

'I know that you want out. I know that the freedom you crave is momentarily unavailable and that you wish nothing more than to escape. But right now, it is too dangerous to go. You are still too weak to go outside, the experience would be overwhelming. Finding the truth is indeed a noble goal, but one is not always ready to accept it, just like you aren't right now. Stay here, learn more and grow stronger. Decorate these empty rooms and hallways, make them your own. Learn to appreciate your creations and yourself. Let this place be your sanctuary, a safe place to escape to. When you're ready to accept the truth and able to get through all that collapsing mess down there, I will accompany you to show you the answers you seek.'

I was confused beyond any confusion. Where... What... How...? I had countless questions, but strangely enough, I felt as if she was right. Yes, the experience has

made me thankful for the stable construction of this dull place, shook my perception as well, but how does she know that? How does she know what I want and what I think? Why would she even want me to be prepared, why does she care so much? Who am I to her? What is she to me?

What she did next made me believe that she predicted my reaction correctly. She didn't utter a single word, nor show even the slightest sign of emotion. All she did was take out a mirror and turn it towards me to show me the answer. The answer I got, though, wasn't an answer at all, for the reflection I saw in that mirror was none other than my own, and that same reflection looked exactly like the young woman holding the mirror.

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*Ante Vekić*

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## A GEEK AND A GAL

"C'mon, c'mon, almost there... Yes, yes, NO, what are you doing? Yes, back on track. Yes, yes..."

Suddenly, the school bell rings, and kids enter the classroom. And then, someone taps the screen randomly on my phone. The only thing I remember about him is that he had black hair.

"Hey, let me play a bit."

"HEEEY!!!"

I pulled my phone away and continued playing the video game on my phone. My team barely won. I was relieved.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing, you filthy geek?"

"Just claiming my victory trophies, thank you very much." I replied slightly annoyed.

"Meh, like I'm bothered, I was just messing a bit." And then, he said mockingly: "I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

Yeah, right, you think I don't know people like you? Those arrogant people who like to belittle others for their own self-confidence and self-esteem. You're just one of them, and I don't give a \$&#? about them.

"Whatever you say man, whatever you say." I replied in an emotionless tone.

Just then, a group of people surrounded that guy and started talking with him, while bad-mouthing me.

"Hey Bill, are you talking to that geek again?"

"Nah, man. I'm just checking how his lameness is affecting the school."

"Hey boys. Sheesh, out of all people..."

"Sorry girls, my bad. I'll stay out of sight of stupid geeks."

"Besides, who plays these stupid video games and watches weird anime stuff? Weirdos, I say."

"Let's go everyone, we gotta leave the geek alone or he'll affect us with some weird virus and we won't be cool anymore."



“Good idea, bye loser.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” I whispered.

I hate them. And thanks to these kind of people, I only have this ‘I don’t care’ attitude in school. Oh well. But, what if I told you that’s not the worst part about me being in this school? It’s actually her, the person next to me. A blonde gal wearing some sort of typical gal clothes. Angela Sky, the school’s ‘queen bee’, as everyone likes to call her. She’s annoying and hates me even more than, what’s his name, Bill? She hates me more than that guy and his crew of show-off guys and arrogant gals. All because I’m some sort of geek.

Now, let me explain the ‘geek’ part everyone talks about. In our school, you have 4 ranks that depict your social status among students. The highest is the cool guys and cool gals, the people who are fake ‘cool’ in my opinion. Next are regular students, they’re close to the ‘cool’ rank because they like to hang out with the high-rankers for some weird reason. Probably because they think they’ll become one of them one day. Then you have study and computer nerds. These people are highly respected, but are a rank lower than regular students because everyone is with them only for homework and fixing school computer equipment. I think they should get a higher rank, the top one in my opinion. And then, there’s the ‘geek’ rank, the lowest one. In this rank belong people who don’t follow the latest trends and are not ‘cool’ by the standards of the highly-ranked ones. The ones who are true to themselves get treated this way. Currently, I’m the only one in the school because everyone else occupies the top two ranks (except the nerds). People find it easier to change so that nobody badmouths them and then they can feel safe in the school.

Anyways, back on the subject, or should I say: Angela Sky.

I hear people say: “Why does the queen bee of the school sit next to the geek?”

“I dunno, I wish it could be me who sits next the her.” Some boy replied.

It’s not my choice to be here as well. I’m stuck here because nobody wants to change seats with me because everyone says that the chair and the table have already been taken... you already get the point.

Here she comes, she takes her seat and starts ‘talking’ to me.

“What is that smell? Oh, it’s only you, you filthy geek.” She said arrogantly.

I ignored her, as I usually try to do.

“DON’T IGNORE ME!!! I’m your queen and I order you to cleanse yourself of that geeky smell.”

“And not be true to myself? No, thank you.” I replied, and I felt proud.

“What’s so fun about these stupid video games and anime anyway?” She then pro-

ceeded to continue the conversation and turn it into her favor, however...

"Well, video games allow you to have fun with other people online, and anime allows you to dwell into a whole new world. To summarize, they help you escape reality and be your true self." I said, hoping she would stay quiet.

She didn't.

"You're just looking for excuses. The way you're now, there's no way you'll meet a girlfriend or have a normal social life, you introverted freaky filthy geek."

"Can't you call me by my name for once?" I asked.

"You're not worth that much, geek."

"Whatever you say."

"DID YOU JUST TALK BACK TO ME, YOUR QUEEN?"

"My queen?" I continued: "I don't remember the school coronating you or anyone for that matter, Ms. Sky."

"Ugh, you're so annoying."

"Of course you are, how great of you to acknowledge that." I replied, hoping to annoy her. And annoy her I did.

"SHUT UP!!! I meant you."

Whatever. I hope that this conversation ends soon.

"Whatever you say."

She finally became quiet and the class started. A few lessons later, class finished, and I went home. I had lunch and went to my room to call my online girlfriend: Sky-Angel2005. We usually played our favorite game together. It's called Brawl Stars. But today, she wanted to talk about something serious.

"Hi, Daniel. How's your day, darling?"

"It's ok. Guess what, I just got Barley and Tick to rank 35, isn't that awesome?"

"Wow, that IS an achievement. They're one of the toughest characters in the game to climb to that rank."

"Just a bit more and I'll finally get all Brawlers in the game to rank 35."

"I can't wait. But listen Daniel, there's something I would like to talk about."

I became nervous when she said that, so I only said: "What's up?"

Then, she started to talk.

"Well, it's almost our first-year anniversary, remember? I was thinking, maybe we should do an offline meet-up since we never met. I really want to meet you, and I want to grow our relationship by being closer to each other. We should go on dates, and yes, still play Brawl Stars as well."

"Well, geez, I dunno. What if you do not like the real me?"

“Then I wouldn’t like you, or should I say, love you at all. Don’t worry, you’re the real you, no matter if you are DanielMaster1512 or Daniel Star. I love you, and nothing will change that fact at all, darling.”

I started sobbing. No matter how heartless some people are, I’m still human. I was since it’s the only way I get affection from someone. My father passed away, while my mom works all day so she’s rarely at home. SkyAngel2005 is the only person that’s by my side all the time. Of course, I know that my family loves me too, it’s just nice to hear such loving words after a tough day.

“Are you okay? Why are you crying?”

“School.”

She immediately understood what I meant.

“Oh. I’m sorry about that. I wish I could help.”

I responded: “Just being by my side is enough to heal my wounded soul. You and your kind words always make me feel better.”

“I’m happy you feel that way, darling. So, about the meet-up?”

“Are you free now?” I quickly asked.

“You mean ‘now’ now?”

“Yeah, I do. Where would you like to meet?”

“How about your house, I would like to...”

Wait, my house? I had to make sure I heard right.

“Are you sure? You know, because... well, you know...”

She then said: “I know you’re not like that, so don’t worry, I trust you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, but I also panicked a bit. I’ve never had a girl in my house before. What should I do? Should I clean my room?

“Let me send you my address so that you know where to come.”

She quickly replied: “Ok.”

I sent her my address and I asked: “Did you see it?”

She would usually respond immediately, but now there was silence. I didn’t know what happened, maybe she was called out by her parents, maybe she went to the bathroom, who knows at this point? I typed: “HELLO?”

“Oh, sorry. Yes, I saw it. I gotta go now, I’ll be there soon. Bye, darling.”

“Bye.”

Well, that was weird. Oh well. I then put my phone to charge and started cleaning up my room. Soon enough, someone rang the doorbell. I went to check only to see my arch-nemesis on the front door.

“Oh hello, what are you doing here, neighbour?”

Yes, the ‘queen bee’ Angela Sky is my neighbour, not only in school, but also in real life. She lives next door. Ironic, isn’t it?

“...w... well... um...”

“What’s wrong, you’ve got nothing to say about me now?”

Actually, now that I’ve seen her, she’s not in her ‘gal-like’ clothes and her head is down. I walked to her to raise her head, only to see her in tears.

“...um, are you crying?”

“...yes.”

That’s strange. The arrogant number one gal is literally crying at my doorstep. I couldn’t even imagine this if I wanted to.

“Is... is everything ok? Not that you want help from the-”

“NO, NOTHING’S OKAY ANYMORE!!! AND DON’T YOU DARE TO CALL YOURSELF A GEEK, DANIEL!!!”

Okay, something IS strange now... She told me not to call myself geek and she even called me by my name. Now that’s something you don’t hear any day.

“Come inside. We’ll talk about... whatever your problem is in the house. I don’t want to alert the other neighbours, so please, come inside, okay?”

She said sobbingly: “...okay. ...I’ll get in...”

I showed her to my room and she sat on a chair. And then I started the conversation.

“So, what happened? Why, of all people, did you come to me? And make it quick, since I have a meeting with someone.”

She started talking, while sobbing.

“...so, I have a boyfriend, but I found out that I’ve been mean to him.”

“What do you mean ‘found out’?” That sentence made my brain calculate the square root of pi. Just kidding, but it was strange to hear her say something like that.

“I... I’ve only ever talked to him through the internet... and I found out that I’ve been mean to him in real life... because I’ve found out who he... he... h...”

She started crying real hard. It tore my heart to see her cry like that, even though she was always so evil towards me. She didn’t stop crying. She also started breathing heavily. Uh oh.

“HEEEY, CALM DOWN!!! Relax, breathe.”

Unfortunately, she got a panic attack, and I immediately called a doctor.

“911, I have a teenager having a panic attack, what should I do?”

Thankfully, the rescue services quickly responded and told me how to calm her down. I managed to do it and they didn’t have to dispatch anyone to my house. I

thanked them, hung up and turned to Angela.

“Here, a cup of water. How are you feeling?” I asked.

“...much better. Th... Thanks.” She responded while breathing heavily.

“So... you were saying?”

“Well, I’ve found out who he is and I immediately felt an immense amount of pain in my heart. He told me he had some problems, but I didn’t know I was causing them. I don’t know how I should act in front of him anymore.”

„Well, I think you should be honest and true to yourself.” Not that I know how she’s gonna do that since she’s the self-proclaimed ‘queen’ and always looks down on people.

After that, she got her phone, opened something and showed it to me.

“Alright, I’ll be true to myself and show you who I exactly am.”

When she showed me who she was, I couldn’t believe it. At first, I thought she was pranking me or something, but after I reminded myself that SHE LITERALLY HAD A PANIC ATTACK, I only said:

“Y... YOU’RE SkyAngel2005???”

“...yes. Yes, I am.”

“So you panicked because you thought that I would hate you?”

“Yes.”

I was at loss for words. Now I know there have been two sides of Angela all along. The ‘gal’ side, which she had to create at the school to protect herself from the bullying similar to mine. And her true side, which she could only manifest when she was SkyAngel2005.

She also said: “To tell you the truth, I had a feeling that you and the Daniel I was talking to online were the same person, but I was too proud to think that it was really like that.”

Then I said: “Is it... all out of pity?”

“Wha... NO!!! I REALLY LOVE YOU!!! I... I...”

Oh no, not again. She’s gonna have another panic attack if I don’t do something quickly. I hugged her and said: “LISTEN TO ME NOW!!! I’M HERE NOW AND I’LL ALWAYS BE BY YOUR SIDE!!! So please, calm down. Your words are honest, and I know you genuinely love me. So please, I beg of you to calm down and return to me.”

She was only crying now. She hugged me back and said: “You don’t know how much I regret giving you so much pain. I’m sorry...”

I replied: “It’s okay, I forgive you. I hope you can forgive me as well when I was

annoying you.”

“You had right to be annoyed. I can’t believe how much of a jerk I was.”

And then I said: “So, you like video games and anime?”

“...ummm... How did I know you were gonna say that?”

“Answer me.”

“I do. I just hide it from everyone else.”

“Why do you hide your true self from everyone?”

She then said: “It’s because I’m afraid of what would the others think of me.”

“Really? That’s it?” I replied.

“Yes. It’s because of something that happened in my past. I was a victim of bullying and I didn’t want that to happen again.”

“Oh, I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay though. Thanks to you, I learned how to love myself again. I shouldn’t fake myself because of others. I actually started to hate going to school and putting that ‘gal’ mask on.”

“That explains why you’re sometimes late for class.”

“Yeah, I needed time to think who am I. And now, I found my answer. I’m Angela Sky, the happiest girl on Earth for being myself and having such a wonderful boyfriend.”

“Awww...”

After that, she kissed my lips and whispered in my ear: “I love you, darling.”

I replied: „Je t’aime, mon amour.“

And then we started kissing. All of our kisses were very passionate and with each kiss a fire would ignite in both of us...

“Oh god, did we just do... that?” She asked.

“I guess we-”

Suddenly, an average woman in her late 30’s with brown hair entered my room. My mom.

“Daniel, I’m-”

We were covered in bedsheets, while my mom just stood at the door, and all of us had our eyes widened.

“I’ll leave you two now...”

“MOM, IT’S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS-”

My mom slammed the door and quickly left.

I continued: “...like.”

Angela covered her blushing face with her arms, and I just sat there, with my eyes

still wide open. Note to self: next time lock the door and make sure nobody interrupts you.

Some time later, we went to the living room and talked to my mom while she was cooking (our living room and kitchen were connected in a single room).

“So, care to explain who this is, young man? And why have you-”

“For the last time, we didn’t do what you think we did. And secondly, she’s my girlfriend.”

I was lying out of embarrassment about... well, you know what by now.

Mom said: “You didn’t tell me you had a REAL girlfriend?”

I replied: “She’s my online girlfriend, now in real life, in flesh and blood.”

“Oh well, if you say so.”

Suddenly, my mom’s phone rang. She answered a call and was rushing out of the kitchen.

“Mom, what happened?”

“Sorry, Daniel. There’s an emergency that I have to take care of. I probably won’t be back until tommorrow morning.”

“Okay, I’ll finish up dinner and leave some for you.”

“Okay Daniel, thanks a lot. Oh, and one more thing, make sure you use this next time.”

“MOOOOOOOM!!!” I screamed.

After that, my mom left the house.

“I’ll leave dinner out so that it’s not burning hot when we get to eat.”

“Ok, Daniel.”

Although I know the truth, it still felt weird of her to call me Daniel.

“So, you wanna play Brawl Stars, and possibly after that watch some anime?”

“Yeah, sure thing darling.” she responded.

We quickly hopped into a few quick matches and won most of them. After that, we watched some episodes of some magical girl anime.

“Well, this was fun. Definitely more fun than making fun of you.”

I said: “Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“What I meant to say is that it’s more fun to be myself with the person I love the most by my side, and not making fun of him because he likes different things.”

I hugged her and said: “Thanks a lot.”

After that, we had dinner and went to my room. Soon enough, I heard a storm outside.

“EEEEK!!!”

Soon, I turned to Angela, who was tucked in my bed and covered in bedsheets.

“Are you, scared of thunder?”

“...a little bit.”

Just when she said that, I’ve heard another thunder strike. And Angela shivered out of fear in the bed.

“Will... Will you stay with me until the thunder passes?”

“Of course I will. I will be with you even after the thunder passes, ok?”

“...ok, thanks.”

Just like that, I got into the bed, hugged her and started singing a lullaby, believing it would calm her down. Soon enough, she fell asleep and so did I after her.

The next morning I woke up next to my girlfriend. It was still raining, but the sky wasn’t so dark and there was no sign of thunderstorm. I tried waking her up, but she wouldn’t move. So I did the next best thing I could: I left the bed to prepare breakfast. Soon enough, someone knocked on the door. I opened it only to see mom finally back from her job. She quickly ate dinner I had left her and then she went to take a nap. I continued making breakfast, and once I’ve finished it, I brought it on a plate into my room for Angela to eat.

“...ummmm... ..love... ..you Daniel...”

I guess she was sleep talking. Interesting. Anyway, I left the plate on the table and I went to make some coffee. I had to take it very slowly to my room so that I don’t spill anything (thanks to my brain I filled the cups up to the top). I got the cups of coffee into my room just as my beautiful girlfriend was waking up.

“...ummmm... Oh, good morning Daniel.” She said and yawned.

“Good morning to you as well, Angela.”

“Oh, I see you prepared some breakfast and coffee. Thanks a lot, darling.”

“No problem at all, just so you know.” I smiled.

She also smiled at me. She ate breakfast I prepared for her and we enjoyed our coffee as well.

“What day is it?” she asked.

“Today’s Saturday, so no school.”

“Oh, that’s good. Say, do you have plans for today?”

“The only plans I have include you in them 24/7.”

Soon enough, our relationship grew in ways we couldn’t even imagine. We got a blessing from my and Angela’s parents (outdated, but we decided to do it anyway). In the school, the geek (which is me) became known as ‘the macho man who stole the queen bee’s heart’. We both started getting new friends who weren’t like that show-off Bill.



The geek rank also got removed from the school's ranking and the ranking now goes like this: firstly you have students, secondly nerds and last you have Bill. Apparently, he's the one responsible for students' bullying and trying to make 'chosen students cool'. Everyone's relieved that Bill won't take matters into his hands anymore. Now everyone can be their true self.

Several months later, after we opened up our YouTube channel, Angela, me and our classmate Jimmie signed up for the Brawl Stars World Championship and today's the final match against the last year's winners.

"Let's do our best guys." I said with a big smile on my face.

"You've got it, chief." Jimmie said and showed thumbs up.

"We can do this." Angela said clenching her fist in the air.

The siren has blown, and the match has started. It was intense all the way through, and we almost lost.

"No... NOT YET!!!" I said to myself.

Thanks to all the training we've had, we had a single point advantage in the game. And then I heard another siren.

The announcer finally spoke: "TIME IS UP. THE WINNERS ARE ANGELA, DANIEL AND JIMMIE, CONGRATULATIONS!"

"...oh my God... WE WON, WE %!\$& WON!!! WE DID IT!!!" Angela could barely contain her excitement.

"Yep, we sure did." I replied.

Angela, Jimmy and me held the trophy together and took a picture that shall be marked in the history of this championship.

The moment we returned home, everyone (including our parents) said: "Hello champions, good to have you back!!!"

I don't know how many times we've been called champions since then. I do know one thing, and it's that as long as you're true to yourself, everything can happen.

Angela and I eventually got happily married and we got some kids.

A few years later, my kids asked me: "Hey dad, how did you and mom end up together?"

I looked at my kids and then at my wife. We giggled and I said: "Well kids, it's a long story."

*mentor:* Biljana Ježik

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*Nikola Rogić*

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## BEHIND THE MIRROR

Another busy and stressful morning. Every morning seems to start the same way. We're all a bit nervous and racing each other to see who will get to the bathroom first. Hannah is making a scene again. There she is now, complaining that she never has what she needs in her closet and all her friends have more clothes. We are the worst family in town, according to her. I have a feeling that nothing will ever change in this house. Dad just rolls his eyes while mom tries to reason with her. Mom just doesn't understand that Hannah will always find a reason to be angry even if everything goes her way. Hannah has been very agitated lately. I am not sure when the situation culminated like this. It seems to me that the reason for all this is the new friends with whom she has been hanging out lately. Hannah has always loved the company of people older than her, and I, as her younger brother, like this new group the least out of all her friend groups. I don't even know which one I like less; the arrogant Marcus, the stupid Lucas, or her obviously fake friend Sandy, whose biggest wish in life is to work as little as possible and marry a rich man. If I told Hannah what I really think about them, I don't think she would talk to me for a year. I don't know if she sees what they really are or maybe I overestimate my own sister.

"Today after school I will go to Kathy's place to study and don't tell me when I have to come home because tomorrow we are writing a test in Biology and I don't know how long it will take us to study for it!" Hannah announced her afternoon plans in her arrogant style. Our parents blindly trust her, but I'm not that naive. I know that Hannah spends most of her time with her new friend group and that it has nothing to do with studying. I wouldn't want to cause problems for my sister, but I don't like her spending time with such people at all.

Given that we live in London, I don't like it every time she moves far from our neighbourhood. Hana is only 17 years old. My parents don't seem to realize this danger, and I'm only a 15-year-old kid.

Today I feel very restless. My sibling seems to be up to something. I decided to follow her. If she sees me, I'm in trouble, but I have no choice. To me, she looks like she's out of control and who knows what's behind her frequent absence from home! I knocked on the door to her room, I will try to find out what she is up to. Maybe I won't have to resort to tracking her after all if she ends up being honest.

"What do you want, Tom?" she asked me gruffly.

"It's been a long time since we've been to the cinema, didn't you promise me that we'd go now before the end of the school year?" I answered ruefully.

"Come on, how did you remember that now? After all, you have Jacob, so go with him" she remembered my friend who she usually doesn't like to mention at all.

"Jacob is my friend, but I miss going out with my sister," I answered calmly.

"You have to understand that I don't like your company at all right now. You're slow when it comes to some things, only a few people can understand me now, and you certainly aren't one of them!" she snapped at me.

"Hannah, please, are you going through something?" I ask her with evident worry.

"I have nothing to report to you. If you've said everything you've got, get out of my room!" still saying that she pushes me out of her room. Something is wrong with her.

We had a great relationship for most of our lives. She never saw me as a younger, annoying brother. We were very close and connected. I knew when she fell in love for the first time, she confided in me first. I was wiping away her first love tears, so now I feel that something is happening to Hannah, which I don't like at all. No way to calm down. I go to the dining room to try to exchange at least a few words with my parents before they go to work because it really seems to me that they attribute Hannah's behaviour to youthful whims, but I know my sister too well. I am more and more sure of my hunch.

"What's going on with Hannah lately?" I asked them. They both looked at me and shrugged. Mom spoke to me first. "I know she is very hard to handle lately, but I don't think we have to worry. However, you never know with your peers."

Dad intervenes in this, always trying to shorten our conversation as soon as possible and trivialize any problem. "She is similar to her peers. Today, these girls would relieve themselves as much as possible from responsibilities and obligations and make their life a piece of cake. So typical. Anyway, she knows what the rules are in this house, and I'm not acting upon them until she breaks them."

That was the end of the conversation for my father, and the end of the conversa-

tion was accompanied by his exit from the dining room. Only for a moment, I managed to catch my mother's gaze, which was falling. Mom is onto something.

Although we attend the same school, Hannah and I rarely see each other during recess. I don't even know where she spends her recess anymore. Sometimes she even used to look for me just to see how I was or slip some candy into my pocket. She hasn't done that at all for a while now. Will I succeed today in finding out what is actually going on?! I know when her classes end, but I will have to be careful so that she doesn't notice me when she leaves the classroom.

I'm nervous in class today. I can't wait for Mr. Robertson to finish his lecture. I've also got cramps in my stomach from the nervousness. I can't bear the thought of finding out anything bad about my sister.

I am waiting patiently and found a great place where she won't see me. A couple of students passed by me, looking at me strangely and wondering what I was doing there, but I figured it out by taking a book in my hands and pretending to read. I guess I fooled them... All of Hannah's classmates leave the classroom, but she is not there. I wait after the last student in her class leaves, hoping that she just stopped somewhere on her way, but Hannah is gone. I'm frozen from fear. I barely manage to move out of my shelter and head home. What should I do now? It's the only question on my mind. Say something to my parents or let it go for a while and try something on my own. I'm loyal to Hannah and I don't want to get her into trouble. Our parents are reasonable, but I'm afraid of their reaction.

I decided to keep it all to myself. For now, I'll give her some more time. After returning from school, I'm alone in the house and I decide to take a peek around her room. Maybe I can find something useful to tell me what's going on with her. I start with her drawers even though I believe that she has not put anything in them that could compromise her and that mom could find. Apart from cosmetics, broken pens, and some school notes, I don't find anything useful. I look under the bed, lift the pillow, put my hand under the mattress, everything I can think of, nothing useful anywhere. Hannah seems to be very sneaky, or I might just be paranoid. I sit on her bed and look around the room, her posters around the room seem to be laughing at me. From one of those posters, I can hear them like they are in the room. I don't know why I'm drawn to that poster, it looked protruding like something was sticking

out behind it. Maybe this is fate. I put my hand behind the poster and feel some kind of paper. It says: "Watch what you do and watch what you say or you won't have a good time. You better not make me your enemy. Don't contact me, I'll contact you. No matter what you say, no one will believe you." A crumpled, folded note without a signature, only the letter M stood.

I cursed under my breath. That must be Marcus! What did he do to my sister? What did he get her involved in?! I have to do something. What can I do without endangering Hannah? Now I feel even worse than before. I have to try to talk to her no matter how much she pushes me away. I hear my mom coming into the house and I have to get out of Hannah's room. I don't know how to explain what I was doing there. I have to think of a good tactic. The worst that can happen is that Hannah completely ignores me. Is she doing drugs, is she doing something illegal? In that case, she will surely want to hide it from me. I have to settle down for a while until I decide what to do.

The hours until Hannah's arrival pass slowly and I don't even know where she spends all that time. Finally, at 9 PM, I hear her enter the house and I experience great relief. Whatever bad can happen, I can still prevent it. Hannah walks past my room. Her facial expression is cold and unapproachable. She just nods her head to greet me. I decided, tomorrow I will talk to Susan from her class, with whom she used to hang out a lot more, maybe she knows something. As good a place to start as any.

Determined to find out, I wait for Susan to finish her lesson, avoiding Hannah seeing me. Susan gave me a pale look when she spotted me and I had to choose my words carefully so I wouldn't do more harm than good.

"What's up Tom, did something happen?" Susan asked me trying to act casual.

"Nothing, I was nearby and remembered that I haven't seen you at our place for a long time," I uttered quickly.

"Oh yeah, Hannah and I aren't that close anymore," she replied.

"Why, did you two have a fight?"

Visibly uncomfortable, Susan replied finally, "I don't like this new friend group of hers."

"As her brother, do I have reason to be worried?" I ask her anxiously.

"I don't know much about them. I simply could not be close to such people, and

Hannah chose them. I don't hold anything against her, but we're not that close anymore."

"Have you noticed any new behaviour from her?"

"Nothing really comes to mind... the only thing would be that she doesn't show up to classes much."

Turns out Susan isn't going to be of much help. I thanked her, and she followed with a surprised and worried look. I'm desperate now. I'm thinking about who might know more about Hannah. Of course, Coach Mike! Hannah adores him. She has been attending his squash lessons since she was a little girl. I trained there for a while too, besides, Mike is also a good friend of our parents. He must know something about Hannah. I just hope to find him in the sports hall.

I walk nervously towards the sports hall and think to myself how to find out from the coach what happened to Hannah. He spotted me as soon as I entered and anxiously headed towards me. I haven't stepped foot here for a long time and he knows for sure that something is wrong.

"What's up, Tom? What's wrong?" was his immediate reaction.

"I wasn't sure when Hannah had her squash lesson here, and I need to ask her something."

"Hannah hasn't shown up to lessons for a while, I even thought about talking to your parents, but I gave her some time in case she's in some kind of crisis," he explained.

"I know that Hannah respects you very much and that she might confide in you, but something is happening with her. I don't know who to turn to anymore."

"What do you mean something is happening?" wrinkles form on his forehead.

"She's changed. She lashes out at all of us in the house, and often goes out not to be seen for some time."

"Good thing you told me that Tom, I'll definitely try talking to her." I thank him for his concern and feel relieved. The coach always had authority and Hana respects him. Maybe he will be able to reach her. I decide to do one more thing before I go home. I need to find out if those threats are Marcus's somehow. I know where he lives because I was once in his neighbourhood with my sister. I catch the bus and head in that direction, all the while hoping to find Marcus at home. If I have to, I'll threaten him to leave Hannah alone. Marcus needs to know that Hannah is not alone. Determined in my intention, I show up at his door, and after ringing the bell,

Marcus opens it. Arrogant as he is, Marcus's look was full of sneer when he saw me at the door.

"What do you want?"

"I thought you might know where Hannah is."

"I don't know and I don't care. I don't know where you got the right to show up at the door with such a question," he replied brusquely and started to close the door. I put my foot to prevent him from doing so, and for a moment I thought he was going to physically attack me, however, that didn't happen, and Marcus was more surprised than aggressive.

"If you did something to my sister, you're going to have to deal with me," surprised by my own reaction, I shouted at him. Marcus laughed out loud and closed the door in my face. He is exactly the kind of character that could threaten my sister, but I still don't know why.

I hurry to catch the bus because now I'm getting home very late, which is very unusual for me. It was already dark and I decided to take a shortcut across the yard to get to our house. It's not my usual route. In the stillness of the night, I hear indistinct voices, and as I approach the back of our yard, the voices become clearer. I make out the raised voice of my sister who is arguing with someone. In the dark, I don't recognize who it is.

"You thought you'd get away with it, I'll tell everyone what happened and what you did to me. You know very well that it was an assault! You took advantage of me, my naivety, and the fact that I've been in love with you for years. Now that I'm pregnant, you will suffer the consequences, and you will also have to face my parents."

I listen to everything in disbelief and realize in fact what is happening. Hana is pregnant and was assaulted. If there is a moment when a child matures too early, that was precisely the moment in my life because the voice that called out to Hana was the voice with which I had a conversation about Hannah just a few hours ago. It was Coach Michael's voice.

"No one will believe what you say. At school, they have known for a long time that you behave inappropriately and that the father of that baby could be anyone."

At that moment, I felt he was going to physically attack Hannah. I ran towards

them from the few steps that separated us and pushed Mike to the floor with all my might.

“I will believe her, and so will our parents. I will tell them everything. Besides, I have the letter you threatened her with.”

Mike’s look said he was aware of his defeat. Nothing will be the same for him from that day on. Life will change for us too, but Hannah will never go through such problems alone again.

(8 months later)

Michael is in jail. He is facing a long sentence and he is not allowed to work around teenagers ever again. Hannah gave birth to little James and she regularly goes to therapy. She also stopped hanging out with her toxic friend group which was causing more problems. While Hannah is absent, we take care of the baby and gladly help around with anything she needs. Our family had an epiphany and realized the damaged state of our relationship, so we are headed in the right direction of bettering our life.



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*institution:* Prirodoslovna i grafička škola Rijeka

*Lisa Katarina Đukić*

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## SNOWDROP

Have you ever been told one of those legends in which big and scary monsters terrorize and devour humans for pleasure? You all think Beowulf, right? Well, this is not another legend-of-the-scary- monster type of story. Don't be fooled, however, there certainly will be a monster, but this, in fact, is a story of two worlds meeting.

It was a nice sunny day, a fresh spring breeze was flowing through a small village, scattering the sweet and fruity scent of the freshly grown leaves and recently bloomed flowers after a frosty winter. In such an idyllic scenery lived a monster. A monster, hidden to blend in with the humans. Why? For he is only deemed a monster by the people who see him. He is usually covered head to toe wearing robes, hats, gloves... whatever keeps him safe and hides his true appearance. He knows the repercussions and the risqué nature of what he is doing. After all, humans are not forgiving of monsters, yet, he still accepts them despite all their wrongdoings. So, he has decided to be quiet and hide, and to live his life peacefully, avoiding troubles. After years and years of moving from place to place, he finally settled here, in this serene village, and opened a flower shop.

Then came a day, at first, ordinary as any other. He was in the back room of his store, resting without his robe when a child snuck in through the half-open door. The child, enticed by the smell of freshly brewed tea, entered the flower shop only to be overwhelmed by the sweet fragrance of flowers that surrounded him. The child was lured to stay by the vast variety of flowers and plants of every shape and colour. He was in awe and looked around with excitement. The intense scent, which made his nose tickle did not stop him from touching and exploring every little thing he set his eyes on. Following the small passage in front of him, he found himself in another room. The room was dimly lit and small, but what he saw next made him even more excited. A fabulous monster. The child, being so small, went unnoticed by the monster sitting in front of him. The child mustered courage and said: "Hi! Are these your flowers?" The monster froze, shivers rolling down his spine. "Where is this voice coming from?" He slowly stood upright, as high as two meters, almost reaching the

ceiling. As he stood there slowly looking around to try and find where the sudden noise was coming from, he saw a small child in front of him, staring at him completely flabbergasted. Before the monster could say anything the child immediately said: "Woah! You're so tall! I want to be as tall as you!" The monster, now feeling fairly uncomfortable for he has not been seen without his robe in multiple decades, started panicking. "Children are blabbermouths", he thought. "Why do you look like that?", the child spoke, again, waiting for an answer. "Excuse me?", asked the monster more confused than offended, staring back at the child. "I said, why do you look like that?", the child continued "Why do you look so weird?", he said with an innocent expression. The monster, hesitant to reply, said calmly but with a rather bittersweet tone: "I was born this way." "But why? Why do you look so weird?", the child's curiosity seemed to be never-ending. The monster sighed in defeat and responded: "I look this way because I was born this way. I cannot change it.", as he now stared more intently at the child, he noticed a faint distaste in his appearance, the child was covered in dirt and looked messy. "Where are his parents?" he thought to himself, "Are they... homeless...?". The monster now worried for the child, still staring and thinking why the child is not intimidated by his appearance, his black charcoal-coloured and matted fur. His white, to him, odd and wall-piercing eyes. His inhumane-looking and misshapen face. He was dark, like a void. Here and there you'd see a shine from his fur, a small sparkle, like a star, alluding it was pollen. The child, a polar opposite, with its healthy and small body, but still very unkempt hair and clothes, just stared back. The monster's thoughts were interrupted by the child: "Why do you have so many flowers?". "Well, I like flowers. I think they're really pretty", the monster answered. "But why do you have so many? I've never seen this many before", the child, curious as ever, still kept on asking while waiting for an answer. "Well...", the monster hesitated to answer while trying to come up with a reply, then continued: "I like how they're all special in their own way. Some have bigger petals, some smell nicer, some are prickly, but I like them all." "I wouldn't have prickly flowers. They hurt.", the child, now looking at one of his fingers in a shy manner. "It hurts for just a second though? Right?". "Yeah...", the child looked down, only to swiftly look up with a change of mood, and then come up with another question: "Which one is your favourite then?" The monster, being exhausted from all these questions replied: "Go home, your parents must be waiting for you. It's lunchtime." "But I want to know your favourite flower!", the child being persistent, wants to know and it seemed he wouldn't leave until he got an answer. The monster, now wary of what he might be doing, replied: "I can tell you more if you come tomorrow. But you mustn't tell your

parents. This is our secret alliance, okay?,” “Okay! Bye-bye!”, the child said excitedly and left. The monster, now in horror, began regretting his decision. He anxiously waited for the next day. The next day arrived, and so did the child, but this time well dressed and not as dirty. This time round he also had company. “Mister! I’m here!”, the child yelled from the outside. He brought his friends, all different and unique in their own way. Together, there were five of them. The door opened and a large figure appeared before them, covered in a long, silk robe that grazes against the floor, wearing a large straw hat that was covered with translucent silk to cover the face of whoever was wearing it and on its hands it had thick gardener’s gloves. “Oh, it’s you.,” said the figure in a familiar, but calm voice. “Hello mister! I brought my friends!”, “That’s not him! That’s just a man!!! You lied!”, one of the children yelled angrily. “Aren’t flowers a girly thing?,” another one replied, confused. “He’s so tall!”, another shouted in excitement. The children’s bickering didn’t seem to be stopping. “Settle down”, the monster replied so that the passers-by do not hear them. Even though it is a small village, its citizens wander all about and are seen everywhere on the streets. The monster decided to treat them like customers hoping to calm them down. He spoke: “Come in! I have many things to show you”, he said excitedly. The children despite their bickering entered following the monster. Amazement and awe were their first reaction. So many colours in such a small place, then the scent -flowery, sweet, fruity... all kinds of fragrant scents. “But where is the monster?,” someone asked. Everyone turned round, looking intently at the tall figure. “Come on mister show them! Please?,” “I can’t, I have work to do”, the monster dodged the question immediately for he didn’t want to reveal himself. “You lied, there is no monster!”, one of the children angrily replied. The monster sees the fear in the child’s eyes and squats down to their eye level for comfort, and then asked: “Yesterday you asked which of the flowers was my favourite, didn’t you? I didn’t forget”, the monster interrupts, trying to calm the upset children down, glancing back again at the child he met yesterday right in front of him. “Yes... I did...”, the child answered but in a low and sad tone, looking to the floor. He was disappointed he could not show all his friends a new friend he made, the monster. The monster patted the child on the head to try and reassure him that everything is fine. He then slowly stood up and walked to one of the vast pots filled with flowers on display in the store. He picked up a vase filled with unknown flowers and then continued: “This is one of my favourites. I don’t have a favourite flower because I think they’re all pretty neat, but this one is very high on the list of the ones I like to take care of.” He squatted down, again, to show the children the vase with the flowers up close. He continues: “This is a Calla Lily, and look!

There are many of them in different colours”, he lowered the vase in front of the children. The children looked at it. “It looks weird”, another one said: “It’s so soft!” upon touching it. “Can you eat it?”, one of the children asked. “No!”, the monster replies immediately, “You can’t eat flowers! You need to wait for the flowers to turn into fruit, and to ripen!”, “Can this one make an apple then?”, “No. Not all flowers make fruit or food. Some need to turn into trees first”, the monster is baffled by the children who didn’t know these things. “Then, can you teach us which ones can make an apple?”, a child asks. “I can, but you need to go now. I’ll have customers soon.” “Okay...”, the child said disappointingly and decided to leave. “We’ll come back!”, “Sure”, the monster said. “I want to visit auntie!”, one of the children said as they hurriedly left the store. The monster sighed in exhaustion and waited for customers to come. He chuckled. He was pleased.

Many years passed and seasons changed, but it was not just the seasons changing, the child is now a teen, older and more mature. It was summer, everything was in bloom and fragrant, the heat of the sun making it all the more intense. The teen has been visiting the flower shop all these years. He was there almost every day, inspecting the newly arrived flowers in the store, or helping and working with the monster. “Do you think auntie will like this bouquet?”, the teen asked while decorating a beautiful but still unfinished bouquet of white camellias, orange tulips, and yellow roses. “You should add in a leaf or two to the left of the tulip, it looks a bit empty there. You can add in more decor between the camellias to make them stand out”, the monster responded, swiftly glancing back at the roses’ thorns he was cutting with his garden pliers. “All right,” the teen answered and continued: “I’ll give this to auntie this afternoon when I finish packing.” “I hope the new town treats you well”, the monster replied and went quiet. To break the awkward silence, the teen spoke: “In school, we were learning about this town’s history...”, the teen paused, waiting for a reply to be acknowledged. “Yes?”, the monster replied and waited for the story to continue, still diligently cutting away at the thorns of the batch of roses that were on the table. “Is it true...”, the teen hesitated for a second but continued, stopping what he was doing, staring at the monster, and asked, with his voice slightly trembling: “Is it true... that monsters like you... kill people?” The monster stopped. Everything went quiet again. It became uncomfortable for both of them. “In the legends, you killed people. Is it true?” The monster was avoiding eye contact. “There wasn’t any other choice sometimes. And it wasn’t just us killing people, it was often people killing us too”, the monster bowed his head down. The air in the room was heavy, dark, and full of fear. “Would you have killed me back then?”, the teen asked in a shaky voice, his palms

sweaty from anxiety. “I don’t kill, and I won’t kill people for no reason. These things are not as black and white as you think they are.” The monster’s tone was rather harsh and pointed toward the teen. They both slowly, but awkwardly continued working, the air becoming thicker, almost suffocating with the pressure of the tension. Both of them became more and more uncomfortable as the silence continued. “Why do you live here though, among the people that hurt you?”, the teen is persistent, just like back in the day when he was an innocent and inquisitive child. “I live here because I want to, it is quieter than you think.” The tension kept rising. “But why flowers, of all things?”, the teen stopped and looked into the now beautifully arranged bouquet, passing a glance at the monster for a second. “I want to take care of them, because, to me, they are very precious.” The monster kept thinking about this question more, his grip on the garden pliers tightening, he sighed and then replied calmly, now carefully cutting away the thorns while talking: “They don’t have long to live, but they are so precious, and I want to make their existence the best it can be.” The monster was finished with his batch of roses. “Hey, the train is leaving in an hour! Have you finished already?” It was one of the teen’s friends that was yelling from the half-open door. “Yeah, I’m done”, the teen replied and just like that, he was gone. As the door closed behind the teen, and the sound of the bell above the door slowly faded it was, again, quiet. Maybe even a bit too quiet. There was not even a goodbye from either side. The monster, looking at the pile of thorns on the table below, sighed in exhaustion, stroking his forehead gently: “Time to clean up.”

As days went by and days turned into months and months into years, the monster was diligently at work every single day. He was visited by the locals more and more, some bringing their children to learn, others stopping by just to say hi. He was even visited by the children he met many years ago. He still remembered their faces from when they were all kids but this time, they were all grown up and became well-off, mature adults. Some of them visited frequently with their kids, others stopped by when they could because of work, but the child that visited first never came. It was the beginning of autumn. The cold autumn breeze was flowing through the village, and the pleasant smell of all the sweet and fruity trees and flowers was no more. The weather was damp and the streets were full of puddles. The monster was sitting in his dull and dark back room, making tea. It was noon, a rather peaceful time of the day. The front door opened and the bell ring signaling that a new customer has come in. The monster, panicking because he had no robes on shouted: “I’m on break time, please leave!” “Don’t worry, it’s just me.” A familiar voice replied to the monster whose face suddenly lit. “You came back?! How have you been?” “It was fine. I came

to visit auntie so I stopped by. I'll have to go back tomorrow", said the teen, now an adult. "It's changed a lot round here, huh", the adult replied, looking around like it was the first time he'd been there. "It really has", the monster replied. "I have someone I want to introduce you to, though", the adult turned around and signaled with his hands that whoever was there could come forward. "Wait-", the monster said, to try and stop the adult so that he wouldn't be seen by the other person. "This is my partner", the adult introduced them both with glee while the partner and the monster stared at each other, completely shocked. The partner is quiet, there is fear not just in her eyes but in the monster's eyes too. The adult looks back to the partner, reassuring her that everything is fine. "Everything is okay, he won't hurt you", the partner held the hands of the adult tightly, the adult then realizing he may have made a mistake. "What do you think you're doing?" asked the monster. "Don't worry, it's going to be fine. She trusts me." The monster raised his voice. "You know the position I am in, I can't afford this, me being revealed. You NEED to TELL ME beforehand!" The monster was visibly frustrated and angry at the decision the adult has made, he rubbed his forehead and then continued, livid: "I can get killed! Have you forgotten I am not like you to other people?" The monster stood up and the partner flinched at his height. "I'm not someone that can be spared to most, if not, all people! How do you not realize this?!" "It's going to be fine. All right?", said the adult with regret, looking at their partner who was now visibly scared and shaking. The adult's face turned from regret to horror seeing his partner. "I want to leave", the partner whispered while holding on to the adult more intensely as he continued to converse with the monster. "Maybe things will change?", "Things never change! Nothing changes!", the monster going back and forth trying to blow off steam, explaining: "It has been the same for centuries! What makes you think it'll change so suddenly out of nowhere?!" The adult, frustrated and filled with remorse for what he has done, left. The monster was left feeling frustrated, angry and sighed in disbelief. "Damn it!", he said while covering his face.

"Look, I'm sorry, I didn't think it would go this way." The adult apologised to the terrified partner. "It's fine... I'll go for a walk... I'll stop by auntie later." The partner left in a hurry. The only thing left was an awkward silence. "I messed up", the adult thought to himself. He decided to visit auntie and calm down on the way. As the adult was walking by the streets, he noticed it was getting darker rather quickly, so he picked up his pace. On his way, he greeted the people he once knew better, but as time passed he forgot about most of them. He couldn't think about anything else except the monster, his thoughts overwhelmed with regret. After five minutes he

was in front of a small house, from the inside the light was bright and warm yellow, and from the outside, it had plenty of flowers all around. The adult knocked twice on the door politely and said loudly enough to be heard from the inside: "Auntie, are you home?", "I'm here, come in." The adult opened the door and entered the cozy little house. "Auntie, how have you been?" The adult greets a petite, fair-built, and old woman standing in front of him with a warm smile on her face. The woman was dressed comfortably, the hair tied in a bun, and it all was so much sweeter with the brightest smile known to man on her face. "Horrible, without my little tulip!", she laughed and gave him a warm and welcoming hug. "How have you been?", she patted his shoulders. "You need to tell me all about your travels! Sit down." She hurriedly went to the kitchen, all excited. The adult looked around carefully in the hallway where he was currently standing. He looked at the walls, there were many pictures of him when was child, with his friends, below an apple tree, with auntie, them and the family all together. It was such a bittersweet memory to the adult, experiencing all these memories, and remembering a secret one as well - all those precious moments spent in the flower shop. How sad it was that there was no place for that memory among the pictures. On the cupboard to the left he saw a dried bouquet, one of orange tulips, white camellias and yellow roses that was now all brown, colourless and dry. It seemed as if the slightest touch would shatter the bouquet like glass how fragile it was. "Auntie, why did you keep the bouquet? It's all colourless and dry now." The adult stared at the poor bouquet with heavy remorse. "You gave it to me when you were leaving, and they are still here as good as new! To me it is precious since you gave it to me." The auntie's face peeked from the kitchen that was to the right side of the hallway. And suddenly, something clicked, a gut feeling. "Auntie, I'll come back, I need to get something.", "Already?" The adult left in a hurry. This was the last drop that made the cup run over, it was enough. The adult hurried to get back to the flower shop since it was getting late and the regret of not apologising for what was done this afternoon didn't feel right. If the apology weren't accepted, at least a thank you for all the memories would be enough before leaving again. As the adult was on his way, a commotion started to arise, the street seemed to get lighter and brighter as he was approaching the flower shop. The adult realised that the flower shop was completely on fire. The crowd of people were whispering among each other, with some having pitchforks in their hands, some having various sharp gardening tools, and others were holding lit torches. The adult, horrified and panicking ran immediately into the crowd, elbowing his way as everyone was staring at him. As he got closer to the flower shop that was engulfed in flames, the stares and judgement of

the crowd became more intense. The adult, now in front of the burning flower shop, stood completely alone in disbelief. The adult realised that this is the reality. The crowd was yelling: "He's a monster, an abomination, the devil himself!", "Burn the shop, burn it all to the ground!" As he turned around, the shireks were louder and asking for his own life as well. Completely mortified of realising what has been done, he backed away from the crowd, looking at familiar faces that were now distorted by hate. The adult filled with a bit of hope seeing the face of his partner, but her face offered no comfort, it was full of disgust. The adult tried to get closer to the people he hoped would help, but closer he got, the crowd backed away and yelled back louder: "Stay back!", "Go away, freak!". In all the commotion, from the crowd, emerged a tall and dark figure. Heavy footsteps were heard and the crowd went silent. The figure, now without its long, silk-like robe that grazed against the floor, a large straw hat that was covered with translucent silk to cover the face of whoever was wearing it, and thick gardener's gloves. The crowd made way for the figure. Even though they knew who the figure was, they did not attack, they only cowered in fear. It was the monster, tall, looking vicious and dangerous, but he has done nothing to be deemed as a monster. The adult ran to the monster hurriedly, shaking in fear and guilt: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me, I didn't mean this to happen.", "It was not your fault, I knew this was about to come. I'm glad you're safe at least." The adult couldn't take this anymore, the unjust treatment of someone who has done nothing wrong, but only brought joy and beauty to this world. "Please, don't you remember visiting this monster and his flower shop all the time? Wasn't he anything but kind to you all? Can't you see that he didn't hurt anybody? He was always nice!" The adult tried to reason with the crowd but only got rocks thrown at his face while at the same time being pushed away by the pitchforks and lit torches. The monster tried to protect the adult from the rocks, but the adult was stubborn, trying to confront the chief of the village. "Please, listen,," the adult tried to come closer, but the pitchfork was still too close, and it stabbed the adult in return. The adult fell down and groaned in pain. "Go away! You monster! You don't belong here- ", as he was yelling, ran out all the friends and their children the adult and the monster took care of back in the day. Children were sobbing and the friends were mortified. "You just stabbed one of us!", "What is wrong with you?!" When the flower shop was still intact, with its colourful flowers on display and plenty of wonderful scents filling the air, all these people were there to share happy memories, and all that is left now is a pile of ashes. Some of those who came forward were still afraid of the monster, for his white eyes were intense and wall-piercing, but they were not the eyes of anger, they were the eyes of



sorrow. “It is a shame that history repeats itself in such horrible ways,” the monster said, devoid of any feelings, completely empty, his pain surpassing any feeling known to man. The monster came to the adult, “I wish you had a more fulfilling life. It is unfair you got treated this way because of me”, the monster whispered, clasping the now wound covered in blood. “Please, just leave, for your safety”, the adult struggled to speak, while gasping for breath. The monster looked at the children who were in tears, looking at the friends that were shocked and calling for anyone willing to help. Then he got up and looked behind him, where once the flower shop was. The monster realised it was once again time to leave. He then turned around and solemnly left to begin his new journey, pitying the flowers that were innocently burnt, and as the flames around the shop kept fading away, so did the adult and his life.

As winter came, the snow was covering all the trees and all of the corners of the village. Right there, at the entrance of the village were the remains of a once beautiful and glorious flower shop. Not even snow could entirely cover the ash and the darkness marking the spot. There was, however, something unusual noticeable there, that made the passer-by stop. A bunch of small snowdrops sprouted everywhere, signalling a new spring to come. A new hope.

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## THE DEAL WE MADE HERE

I woke up to a burning smell and a dry throat. I slowly lifted my head when I saw a black figure next to the open window.

She was tall with long hair wrapped in a loose bun. I could not see what she was wearing under her long black coat.

“What are you doing here? It is the middle of the night?” I told her being annoyed since I was disturbed from my sleep.

“Why so harsh? We have not seen each other for so long.” She threw the cigarette out as she turned to look at me. I laid down back on the bed and sighed. She was not wrong. Our parents were big rivals and hated seeing us being friends. It was hard to find time to hang out since my dear mother liked to keep a close eye on me. I shivered thinking about her. Being the crowned princess was hard enough. “How did you come in? I am sure I locked the door and with all the guards out there?” There was nothing wrong with the lock. She did not break it, so I was glad. I was about to say something, but she beat me to it.

“My dear princess, I used a bobby pin, and it was quite easy.” I sat up in an instant. She had a devilish smirk on her face as she was looking at the door.

“Gott Inessa, first your family helps to invade my country and now you come into my home uninvited.” I was angry and I think she could see it. What did she even want? That was the question I was asking myself.

“Oh, c'mon Anna, Я хотел провести время с тобой.”

“What did you say, does it look like I know Russian?” She laughed. I was still a bit annoyed but tried to ignore it. We made a truce to not be like our parents and try to change. It was working, we did not fight and we-

“I wanted to spend time with you...” She said in a silent voice.

“What?” I chuckled as I got up from the bed. I saw she was annoyed so I stopped. “I did not know you cannot hear anymore, Anna?” She put a bag on my bed. I was curious but did not dare to touch it. You know what they say “curiosity killed the cat,” so I just looked at it and then back at her. She looked in confusion but smiled.

“I picked up some clothes for you. I think you don’t want to run from this place in a long dress.” She turned back and looked outside. I was in shock. This was the day!

“So tonight, huh?” I was sad but it was agreed. It is the destiny we chose. “I want to wear a dress...and you too for once” I did not dare to look at her, but I still did. She was annoyed but gave me a nod. I smiled and went to pick out a dress. Even though I knew it would be a sad day, I was smiling.

“Here, I think it will look amazing and it has your colours” she took the dress and went to my bathroom. I put my dress on. It was beautiful, quite tight at the top and big at the bottom. It was dark red with shiny black details. I was putting my hair in a loose ponytail as Inessa walked out. She was quite pale, and her mahogany brown hair was still tied in a loose bun. Her dress was tight and quite long. The dress was all black with some white details. I wanted to laugh but remained calm, I knew she would punch me if I dared to laugh.

“You look good, I wish to know why you do not wear dresses.” I sighed. Inessa was always rebellious; we were total opposites in everything, but we were friends and something we agreed on was hating our parents.

“I do not wish to wear them; I am not as good of a princess like you.” She smiled as we were putting our shoes on. But I was curious where we were going. “Where will our Majesty take us today.” I wanted to make her laugh and it worked. She looked at me as her cheeks were full of air as she was trying not to laugh. “Your Majesty? I do not know if you wanted to make fun of me or?” She composed herself, as she stood up straight with a questioning look.

“Me, making fun... of you? I would never!” I told as my hand swung to brush it off. It was silence now, it was comfortable and not awkward as we were looking at each other. Silence was broken by us laughing, but soon ended by us hearing something. I stood in horror. If my parents knew Inessa was here, she would not be breathing long. I could not do anything. Then I heard my name being called. I looked and saw Inessa close to the window as if she were about to jump out.

“Common Anna, we have to run!” She told in whisper-yell. “Are you insane jumping out of a castle? The guards will see us for sure then, and then we are gone!” I was really debating whether to be as stupid as her and trust her or to hide till the noise was over. My head told me to wait as I still went with the plan of jumping out.

“Warum tue ich das?” I could not believe myself.

She pulled me. I could not look. Suddenly, we were not falling anymore. I opened my eyes and saw that we landed on a big pile of straw. I sighed in relief.

“What did you say when we jumped? It is not like I know German.” She said with a smirk. She was mocking me for the time she spoke Russian “I said I could not believe I am doing this, Inessa.” We looked at each other with a glare when we heard some footsteps.

I was pulled by my arm and dragged behind a tree. It was hard running in a dress but heels were the true pain and Inessa was not letting go of my wrist. I trusted her for the second time. We ran for a few minutes and stopped. I bumped into her because of her sudden stop.

“Inessa, what is the meaning of your stop?” I was stroking my arm. I was wondering if this woman was made from stone! I looked up and saw Inessa standing next to the most beautiful horse. I looked in awe at the horse which was whiter than the snow with the most beautiful black eyes.

“Come here, we need to hurry; they may notice that you are gone.” Inessa told me as she was making the horse calm down. I stepped closer when she pulled out a knife. I backed up the furthest I could. I saw her looking at me and laughing.

“What in your mind is funny right now?!” I looked at her seriously. I saw her blade. It was just like her dress, black with silver-white details, and it had her name carved on it.

She swung her arm with the blade and cut the bottom of her dress. I was in shock...” WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” I screamed in a low voice trying not to be too loud.

“I cannot ride the horse with a tight dress... I barely ran with it.” She smiled and rolled her eyes. I wanted to punch her so bad. I have never met someone more annoying and stubborn than her.

“Do not role your eyes at me if you know better.” I went up to her, she was already sitting on horse’s back.

“Whatever you say princess, be careful not to ruin your dress. “ She said in a mocking tone. I jumped on the horse and almost fell back when it started running. I closed my eyes. When I stopped having a feeling I was going to fall, I opened my eyes. It was quite nice to be honest. The wind made my ponytail float and spread in the wind.

I did not know where we were heading, but I stayed silent, not needing her to be distracted and murdering us.

It was mid-winter here in Germany. My family lived in the south-east part, which means it was freezing. I do not like wintry weather while this Trottel is fond of it. I am not saying this because she is Russian. She must like wintry weather, but she really did enjoy when it was freezing. As we were travelling my thoughts went to

a whole different place. I remember the times when we were younger, those were chaotic times, but my favourite. This was the day we planned when we were younger.

It was the year 1915, in Germany, I was 14 while Inessa was 15. Our parents had a meeting. There was big fight between our fathers. Me and Inessa ran away just like today, afraid, and alone. We got lost but I am good at coordinating in the wilderness. I knew the way, so it was easy to get back home. When we got home, we did not even have a chance to speak when Inessa was forced by her parents back to the carriage, and I was forced back to the mansion.

A month later I got a letter from Inessa. I was so confused by the letter which said:

**12<sup>th</sup> March 1915, Moscow**

**Dear Anna, I am sending you this letter as a proposal for a deal I want to make with you. All this fighting between our parents is not doing any good, so I want to suggest something. In three years from now, when we are both 18, I want to have one day with you. Just us as we go wherever our hearts take us. I know that this fighting between our parents and other nations will not end well...so I want, once when that day comes, that we forget everything and...**

“You okay Anna? We are here but you look lost and looking at nothing.” I snapped back to reality and looked over at Inessa who had one pair of ice-skates over her shoulder and the other one which she pushed over to me with a confused look on her face.

“Oh yes, I am fine. Just got lost in my thoughts.” I looked down at the ice-skates. “What is this for, if I may ask?” I looked back but only with my eyes. She laughed and then I realized where we were. It was our childhood place.

Germany is not that cold of a country, but it can get cold. Some lakes freeze and that is when you can ice-skate, but with caution.

Inessa was putting her ice-skates on as I joined her. I was not the best ice skater, but Inessa for sure was. She loved to ice-skate in her free time while I did it once or twice in my life, when we came here as young girls. I would stay on land while Inessa would skate her heart out. I loved watching her as I read my book. She was elegant and amazing, but too reckless sometimes. We always went during twilight when our parents would not notice. It was the most beautiful thing ever because of the stars, the dark blue sky, and moon...just magnificent, especially when it was the full moon. I could read my book without any problem with light. It was such a comfortable feeling. You could hear ice below Inessa’s skates and owls on the trees, the smell was cold but refreshing. Overall, the best feeling. After Inessa was done, she would sit next to

me exhausted. It would be a comfortable silence as I would continue to read my book and she would be sleeping on my shoulder.

I was a bit unsteady on ice, so I called for Inessa. “Come, help me, I will fall!” I did not want to be hurt. As I was trying to hold myself up, I heard Inessa coming over to me. She was laughing and just stood next to me.

“I don’t think I want to help you. It is fun watching you struggle.” I looked up at her angrily. “Oh, the woman got the joke now? Help me!” I said as I took her hand. She led the way, and I tried not to fall, but to no avail. I fell hard and Inessa came right on me. We both fell down hard.

“Ouch, I am sorry I did not mean to pull you down. Are you okay?” I asked as my hand patted my back. It hurt, a lot. I fell on hard, frozen water. As I looked over, she had a big wound on her hand, it was bleeding a lot. I could feel my eyes widen as she just looked at the wound holding it with her other hand.

“Wow, princess, I did not think you would hurt me before the time came.” she said calmly, even though I could see she was hurt, hiding her feelings to make me feel better. I felt guilty, I was so angry at myself. “I am so sorry! I will patch it up. Let see if we have some bandages in the bags.” I scooted to land and took off my ice-skates. I put my shoes on and ran as I saw Inessa slowly coming to land.

“Do not move that hand, you will make it worse! Just stay still! I found some old clothes, it will work for now” I took the fabric and a knife I found. I do not really know why it was there, but I was relieved. I cut the amount I needed as I sat next to Inessa.

She gave me her hand as I wrapped the wound, not too tight, just for the bleeding to stop. She had a calm expression like nothing had happened. I knew it was because of me. When we fell, I sliced her hand with my ice-skate, the blade was sharp to prevent slipping on ice and allow smooth gliding. I did not mean it, but it happened so suddenly.

“Es ist alles meine Schuld” When I was done I put the rest of the fabric in the bag not to leave any evidence of us being here.

“I am sorry what? I still do not remember knowing German” she got up as she came close to me. “I said it was all my fault, all of this, I am sorry. I acted without thinking. I do not know how you act so calmly. Your hand has just been sliced, and it is not even a little wound.” I turned to her. She was laughing again. Honestly, if she were not wounded, I would have punched her right there.

I felt a pair of hands around me. I looked in shock, Inessa hugged me?! One thing I know about Inessa is that she does not like being touched and she hates hugging. I

hugged her back with a grin.

“Wow, what will this be, you hugging me? Must I prepare for the storm” I said as she let go, I laughed hard knowing this would be the last hug I’d ever get.

“You may be small but your tongue definitely is not...” She sighed. “Okay, what do you want to do next?”

I thought for a while as I knew it was sunrise. I think that would be a perfect idea. I loved sunrises, especially in winter.

“How about we go and watch a sunrise.” I said as I sat on the horse. “Sunrise?” She thought and looked confused. Her hand was on her mouth, as she always did while thinking.

“Is there any problem with that?” I did not know whether there was a problem since she was still thinking about it.

“No, no there is not any problem, but what is so special about it?” I sat on the horse in shock. “YOU NEVER WENT TO LOOK AT THE SUNRISE?!” I slapped my mouth with my hand as I realized I was a bit too loud...

“Why are you yelling... and no not really, I mean I saw it from my room but unlike some of us I sleep at that time of the hour.” She looked at me as one of her eyebrows raised.

“Hehe... I do sleep at that time of the hour too! Do not assume I do not sleep.” I turned my head as I knew she was part right. But I was not giving her the satisfaction.

That sudden movement almost made me fall off the horse, but I was caught before that. I looked and saw Inessa holding my shoulder. “Sorry, did I startle you? I did not mean it.” She stuck her tongue at me. I was angry, but ignored it as I rolled my eyes at her.

We went to a forest. The trees were big, but there were no leaves on them since it was winter. Sun was slowly rising. It was beautiful, I loved it a lot. The top of the sky was dark blue with some stars peeking, while the bottom was a mix of all warm colours. The top colour being purple, pink mixed with red and yellow as the sun was saying hello. I was amazed, even if I saw it million times, I would still be in a trance of all the unusual colours. I looked at Inessa who was just looking at the road. We did not follow the exact path for the guards could not find us. The colours of the sky were reflecting in her eyes, it was pretty. I was happy as this was the last day I saw it with my childhood friend.

“We are here.” Inessa said jumping off the horse. We were in the middle of nowhere. It was a field filled with all trees and snow all around us. It was just like in fairy tales my mother used to read to me. Inessa looked at me with a disturbed look.

I did not question the reason because I already knew it. It was soon the time. Inessa took two blankets and placed them on the floor. She sat down and I followed her, sitting next to her. She took the blanket and put it around us. It was still a little bit cold but cosy. Inessa sighed, a small smile appeared in the corners of her mouth. She did not look at me but at the sky as I followed her eyes. It was the sun saying hello to a beautiful day.

“Happy birthday...” I was in shock, she remembered. As my eyes widened, I slowly looked at her. Inessa gaze was still focused on the sun. I smiled and hugged her. We fell but did not mind. As I broke the hug, we just looked at each other’s eyes. A few seconds later we burst into laughter.

I started to remember the letter again.

**...and take our lives to the next world. I want to spend it forever with you. Not as a friend but as family not bound by blood. I hope this letter got to you before anybody else, my princess. I am sorry for everything, especially for my mother’s and father’s behaviour. I want a reply, but it does not need to be immediate. I hope you will not think of me differently after this letter. All the best, my...**

**Your dear friend, Inessa <3**

I did not want to ruin that beautiful dawn, but I could feel my eyes becoming wet as tears started to form in the corners of my eyes.

“Do you want to do it now...my princess” Inessa got up and offering her hand to me. I took it and forced her to hug me as I started to cry. I wanted the tears to stop but to no avail. I could feel Inessa’s hands around me. As I could hear her sniffing. With all the crying I could only smile for a little and respond with a silent “Yes, your majesty.” I pulled out of the hug as I walked to the bag. I took two guns and two notes for our families.

I gave one to Inessa keeping the other in my hand. We let the horse go. We put the letters on the blanket. Inessa pointed the gun at me as I did the same movement. I could not do anything as tears were flowing to the bottom of my cheeks, but so did Inessa.

“On the count of three we will end all this sadness. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, I do not want this no more, this life caused me more pain than happiness.” She just nodded as she started counting.

“1”

“2”

“3”



“BANG” all the birds flew from the trees as I just laid on my side with a bullet in my chest. It hurt so much. Yet the only thing I could do was smile.

I could see the blood running on my and Innessa’s side. I started to feel dizzy as my eyes slowly closed.

The last thing I could hear were Innessa’s words.

“We will meet in another life, a better one, princess. Just promise me not to forget me!”

“Never...” as I forever closed my eyes feeling happy as I got a chance to meet the best person ever.

*mentor: Tajana Bundara*

*institution: SŠ Ivana Lucića-Trogir*

*Emma Strauss*

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## TALKING TO THE DEAD

“Can you hear him?”

The woman sitting across from me asks.

«Yes, he is talking to me right now...»

I answer without a second thought, even though there is no one else in this room except for her and me. I can see that the woman is getting emotional already, but I keep my show up and tell her everything she would like to hear from her dead husband. I'm being soft with the way I talk, and I try to keep her calm, but like everyone that comes here, she starts crying uncontrollably asking me more and more questions. Before long, as the time ends, I close this session. I make the woman leave and start counting my money. I have always been a money-driven person, which probably explains why I chose this job; it seemed easy enough, and I was promised a lot of money. Then you're a psychic! I never believed in ghosts or being able to talk to them, but there are more than a few people that do and that would pay good money to talk to the dead loved ones, and I don't mind getting paid for a few good lies; it's quite fun. I can make people believe anything I say, it's like I can control their lives to some degree. After another few hours and a lot of sessions later, I can finally go home. On the way, I was having this strange feeling like someone was watching me, but I brushed it off and just continued walking until I got home. At home, I greet my dog Nala and go to make her and myself dinner. After I took Nala on a walk, I was having this weird feeling again. Nala was also acting rather off; she kept turning around and barking at seemingly nothing. I cut the walk shorter than usual and went home. I usually don't get scared when I think someone is following me because Nala is a big dog and she would defend me, but today was different. Once home again, the feeling disappeared, and after watching television, I went to bed. The next day, when I was walking to work, I didn't have this strange feeling anymore, and at work, everything went smoothly, until this one kid came in. I usually don't do these meetings with kids, but somehow this one found a way to make an appointment. She comes into my office and sits down on the leather couch across from the lounge chair in

which I was sitting. She isn't saying a word and is just looking at the floor with her hands between her legs. After a little bit, I clear my throat and speak up. "Hello, sweetie," I say, looking at her, but she's still staying quiet. "Is everything alright?" I ask, hoping for a reply, and finally, she lifts her head and looks at me. "You can talk to the dead people, right?" She asks in the most innocent voice I have ever heard. I start explaining to her how this works, while she is just looking at me and nodding. Once I told her how much a session would cost, she started digging through her pockets before taking out a big stack of cash and handing it to me. "Is this enough?" She asks as I take it. At this point, I realize how young she must be to not know the value of money. She gave me at least one thousand dollars without hesitation. I took 100 dollars and gave her the rest back, and she then started telling me who she wanted to talk to and why, which broke my heart. She asked if I could talk to her mother, who recently died in a car accident with her younger brother. I try to stay professional and just answer everything she asks me, but it felt wrong to tell such a small girl who has been through hell all these lies. That didn't stop me, though, and I just kept telling her all these lies in the hope of making her feel at least a little better. At the end of the session, she thanked me and then left. But I still had a lot of questions, like where she got all the money and who was looking after her now. But at the end of the day, that is none of my business, and I shouldn't get so invested in someone else's life when I have my own to worry about. I was walking home that day, still thinking about that girl. I was so lost in my thoughts that I walked right past my house and now had to walk at least another ten minutes to get home. At that point, it was already getting dark, and that feeling came back to me, but this time I was sure I was just making it up. I turned around and looked everywhere, but there was nothing, so I turned around again and continued walking home, but I kept feeling these cold breezes on the back of my neck, which was unusual considering that it was the middle of June. I didn't think too much about it though, but once I got home, I was almost freezing. I greeted Nala, made us dinner, and then instead of taking her on a walk, I just let her do her business in the garden. At that point, I was so cold that I had to put on a jacket inside my own house. It weirded me out, but I just thought it was a cold night for some reason. That night, I stayed up much later than usual because it was Sunday, and I didn't have to go to work the next day. I mostly spent the night on the couch under a blanket snuggling with Nala and watching a series, but then suddenly that girl from today came into my mind again. For some reason, I seem to be unable to stop thinking about her. Maybe it's her story that got me so hooked, but I hear more tragic stories every day; this shouldn't be affecting me the

way that it is. I decided to look it up on Google, but I couldn't find anything recent. Was the girl lying to me? I don't believe it; she sounded so genuine, and I could hear in her voice that she was going through a lot. I keep scrolling through the internet trying to find anything; just a small hint would be enough—but there is absolutely nothing. I only found old articles about a mother and son dying in a car accident; nothing recent. I live in a quite small town, so I would have probably heard about it, now that I think about it. But it still doesn't make any sense to me—why would this kid just lie to me? Why would she pay me money if she isn't trustworthy? All these thoughts kept me awake all night, and when I realized the sun was shining outside, I decided to stay awake instead of going to bed because I wasn't tired anyway. After taking a shower and walking Nala, I call my best friend to come over; after about an hour, she shows up, and I start telling her about the girl and the weird feeling like I'm being watched. She starts laughing at me and making jokes like “the dead are after you. “I didn't find these jokes funny. But it got me thinking: what if ghosts are real? And what if they are mad at me for telling all these lies to their loved ones? I start dozing off again and not listening to my best friend at all, and I start thinking about that girl and all the money she had with herself. Something made me jump up and check my wallet when I looked through it and discovered that I was missing a hundred dollars... Nobody could have taken it away from it. I always kept it close to me, and I would have noticed if someone took anything from it. I decide to take a closer look and notice that at the bottom of my wallet is dust or ashes; there is no way a hundred dollars just burned in my wallet. I go and show my friend, and she looks at it just as confused as I am. “Do you have the girl's number? “ She asks me. I go to my business phone and look for it; after some searching, I find it and begin calling it; no one answers, but there is an automated message saying that this number belongs to no one. We look at each other quite worried and try to make up excuses as to why this number doesn't exist anymore, but there is no logical answer to it. My friend starts talking about something else so we would stop thinking about it; she does a good job at it, and we both completely stop thinking about it. After a few hours, she leaves, leaving me and my thoughts alone. I immediately start thinking about her again; I just can't stop myself from thinking about it, and then suddenly Nala starts barking. She never barks without a reason, so I get up and check on her. She is sitting in front of a big window barking into the darkness outside. I go to take a closer look but can't see anything. That's when I feel a cold breeze again, and I quickly move away from the window. The cold breeze I was feeling is now fading into nothingness, just as Nala also stopped barking. After that, I decided to go to bed. It was still quite

early, but I was getting tired. The next day when I went to work, everything was normal, and I didn't have any kids just randomly walking into my office. But at the end of my shift, while cleaning my office, I noticed a few ashes underneath the leather couch that the little girl was sitting on. I cleaned it up, but it made me think about her again. On my way home, I couldn't think about anything else until I felt someone following me, but this time I could hear footsteps behind me. I started walking faster and stopped looking behind me. I was getting nervous when the footsteps started getting closer with every step I took. Then they just disappeared, and I could feel something pulling at my shirt. I turned around, and there she was—the girl from the other day. I look down at her, and she looks up at me. The longer I looked into her eyes, the more I could see that she wasn't a normal girl. She kept quiet until I spoke up, "Hey, sweetie. I can tell myself how nervous I sounded at that moment, but she smiled at me and thanked me, saying, "Thank you for the other day; it made me feel a lot better, even if you were lying to me. " I look at her quite shocked; no one has ever confronted me like this, and I don't think anyone has noticed before. I try to convince her that I wasn't lying to her, but she's not believing me. She is the youngest client I have ever had, yet somehow the smartest. "It doesn't matter; you made me feel better." I'm thankful for that. She sounds so calm—nothing like the quiet girl who came into my office. I smile at her awkwardly, trying to hide how nervous I am. "I have to go back to my dad now; he's going to be mad if I don't, " she says before turning around and walking away. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment; when I opened them again, she was gone. She was just walking away from me; there is no way she could've just disappeared. When I got home and closed my door, locking it, I took a deep breath before doing my usual night routine before finally going to bed and calling Nala; she didn't come, so I called her again, and she came to my bedroom door just looking at me but not coming any closer. I tap on the bed, trying to get her to come, but she starts whining before running away. I dismiss it and go to sleep without her. In the middle of the night, I get woken up by Nala. She is crying, so I quickly get up and run to her. She is standing in front of the window again with her tail between her legs and whining. I get on my knees next to her and start petting her; she quickly hides inside my arms and starts to calm down. I then look up and, through the window, where I can only see a pair of eyes staring at me, I quickly jump up and grab Nala by her collar and run into my bedroom with her. We both jump into my bed and hide under my blanket. For a while longer, there is nothing, not a single sound. But then I hear someone knocking on my door; I stay quiet and close Nala's mouth, so she doesn't bark; and there's another knock, but this time

it's more aggressive. I closed my eyes, hoping that whatever or whoever was outside my door would just disappear. I waited for at least ten minutes until I was sure that there was no one outside my door anymore. I let go of Nala, and she is as calm as ever, like nothing at all happened. I try to tell myself that I just imagined it all so I could go back to sleep. But of course, I am not able to, considering I just heard someone knocking at my door. My bedroom door, I decide to get up and check the house. I walk slowly and carefully just in case someone is in my house. After I went through every room and checked every window and door to make sure everything was closed and locked, everything was. So, I was just making it up then, or maybe that girl is driving me insane. Either way, I know that I can't tell anyone about this because they would just think I'm crazy; after all, there is no proof that anyone was ever here except for me and Nala. I go back to my bedroom and lay back down, but I couldn't sleep the whole night long; instead, I was thinking about the girl's eyes and how emotionless they looked, as if she were dead or something, but that just sounds stupid. How would a dead girl be standing right in front of me, and why would a dead girl ask about another dead person? It just doesn't make sense, and it's not logical at all. The next morning came fast while I was lost in my thoughts, so I soon had to get out of bed and get ready for work. Once I got to my office and took in my first client, I immediately felt like something was off about this man. I couldn't make out exactly what it was until he told me who he wanted to talk to—his dead wife and son, who died in a car accident not too long ago. I start to get chills down my spine as I stay quiet while looking at him; he has the same dull eyes as the girl. He notices how nervous I got: "You talked to them before, didn't you?" At least, that's what my daughter told me. "Or are you someone else?" I try to respond, but I can't say anything: "No, that's me." I stutter while looking away because I can't look him in the eyes; it feels almost suffocating. "I actually don't appreciate you talking to my daughter about such stuff, especially because you're lying to her." "I can hear in his voice that he is getting mad, but I snap back at him. "Excuse yourself; you have never been here before and probably don't even know what you are talking about." He now starts glaring at me, and I start noticing how cold it is getting in my office. He stands up and looks down at me. "I know a lot more than you could even imagine." I closed my eyes for a second while taking a big breath, getting ready to defend myself, but when I opened them again, he was gone. It is almost like he just disappeared into thin air. My breath slows down, and then everything goes black. I woke up a few minutes later with one of my co-workers standing over me, shaking me. I quickly stand up and look around my office, and that's when I see the man from before

standing in a corner and just staring at me. I stare back at him before my co-worker snaps me out of it: “What are you looking at?” “She says, looking at the same corner I am looking at, “I then turn around and sit down on the lounge chair. I thought I saw something. “She nods before I add, “I think I should go home; I’m not feeling well. “She agrees with me and was even kind enough to take my clients for the day. I pack my stuff and leave, fully aware that the man is following me, if he even is a man. I turn into a street where I know not a lot of people walk past, and I stop, waiting for him to show up, which he does. Before I could even see him, I asked, “Are you even human?” “No respond. “What about your daughter?” “Is she human or whatever you are as well? ““Neither we are both just souls trapped on earth because it wasn’t our time to go yet,” he says as he steps in front of me. “And now we are stuck here. “I look into his eyes and chills run down my spine. “Then why can I see and talk to you? “I ask him, but he disappears right in front of my eyes, leaving just a little pile of ashes on the ground that he was standing on. I quickly make my way home and immediately grab my laptop before trying to find that article about the mother who died in a car crash with her son, but there is no mention of the girl and her father. I keep reading the article and find out that this happened 10 years ago. After further scrolling through the article, I find a link connected to another tragedy that happened just 2 days after the mother and son died. I press on it and see a picture of the little girl and her father. They both still looked so lively in that picture; I could see all those emotions in their eyes, unlike now, when their eyes are dull and look lifeless. I began to read into it, and what I found out shocked me. The girl’s name was Audrey, and she was only 8 years old when her father, Mike, brought an end to their lives. Friends and family members quoted that Mike was always a bit mentally unstable but that his wife brought balance to his life and made him happy again. The kids they had together were angels in his eyes, and when he found out what had happened to his wife and son, he started to get angry. His whole life fell apart, and he just didn’t want to keep living, so he put a gun to his daughter’s head, shooting her before then shooting himself. After reading all that, I put my laptop aside, let a few tears run down my cheeks, wiped them away, and just decided to go to bed. The next morning, on my way to work, I was expecting to see either the girl or her father again, but neither showed up. At work, they didn’t come either, which got me quite worried, to be honest. The feeling like I was being watched must have been from them as well, and the cold breezes—it all makes a bit more sense now, but I still want to talk to them again. I want to find out if what I read is true and if there is anything I can do to help them. But maybe it’s best if they never show up again so I can go about my life normally, or

maybe I'm making it all up again because my co-worker couldn't see him, which would make a lot more sense because why would ghosts start talking to me after eight years of doing this job? I don't know what's real and what isn't anymore; I feel like I am constantly in a dream. Every customer that walked into my office felt unreal, and I started to feel bad for lying to them, but I can't just stop now. My whole job is built upon lies; everything I've ever owned I bought with money I made from lies. It's honestly disgusting that these poor people who come to me looking for help put their trust and money in me, and all I do is lie. There is nothing I can do about that now, though; I chose this the day I started working here. After every session, I felt worse about all this, and at the end of my shift, I was feeling horrible. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror again and believe that I was a good person. But I pull myself together and go home for the day. On my way home, I didn't feel any cold breezes, and I didn't have the feeling that I was being watched either. But the second I walked through my front door, I got goosebumps and started feeling cold. I get a bit nervous because I'm almost certain I know what this means now. I walk inside and put my purse on the table before going into the living room. There they were, both, sitting on my couch and staring at me as I walked into the living room. I don't get too close at first and just look back at them before the father points at my laptop with his eyes. My breathing gets shallow; this must mean they know that I know what happened to them. I keep quiet before the father speaks up: "You shouldn't be so noisy." He says, while glaring at me—I could swear he wants to kill me right now. "I'm sorry. I just had to know what happened to you after you told me that you weren't alive." He stands up and comes next to me as he starts whispering to me, "She still doesn't know what happened; I just want her to be able to see her mother and brother again." Help us. "He begs—but does he deserve my assistance? After what he did, and even if I wanted to help him, I don't know how." "I don't even know how to." "I answer while looking at him. "Find out and say my name when you do." He says before disappearing right in front of my eyes. I look over to where the girl was sitting, and she is gone as well. I take a deep breath and sit down before taking my laptop and trying to find something out. How would I even search for something like that? How to free a soul. All that comes up is how to meditate; I have no idea what I'm doing. How did I even get caught up in this? I wish I could go back to my old life... But now I'm stuck, trying to figure out how to release a soul that is stuck on earth for some reason. Despite thinking that I'm crazy, I continue trying to figure something out, but all I could find were reasons why a soul might be stuck on earth. It states that a soul may be trapped on earth due to wrongdoing—taking someone else's life that wasn't his to take—or



because he still has a purpose on earth that he must complete before being allowed to enter the afterlife. I'm guessing the girl still serves some purpose. Then I'll have to figure out what it is... But it's almost 2 a.m. I'm not doing this tonight. I go to bed, and the next day before going to work, I call my boss and call in sick. He allows me to stay home for the day, and I immediately go to the living room and say the father's name. He then suddenly just walks into my living room and looks at me and says, "You found a way?" He asks, "Yes, but I have to talk to your daughter." His daughter then shows up right behind him, and her father whispers something into her ear before she comes and sits next to me as the father walks away. I get a bit spooked because, after all, there is a ghost sitting right next to me. But I finally spoke up. "Hey, sweetie, do you know what you're doing?" I ask her while looking at her, and she just nods and says, "That's good. I'm going to help you go back to your mother and brother, okay?" Her eyes widen as I can see emotion in them; they don't look so dull anymore. "What about father? You didn't mention that he's also coming?" She says this with her eyes wide open and staring at me. How can I tell her that he isn't coming with her? I'll just make up a lie: "Your father needs to stay here a while longer, but he is going to come back to you one day." I promise you. "I feel like throwing up for lying to her, but I smile at her, and she soon smiles back at me. "Okay, then what do I have to do?" She inquires. There's no way she believes me, but I'll go with it. I tell her everything I found out yesterday and tell her to think about what purpose she needs to fulfil. She stays quiet and looks away, probably thinking. After about 10 minutes of total silence, I tap her shoulder and ask if she has thought of anything. "No, there is absolutely nothing I haven't done. I have visited all my still-living relatives, but of course none of them saw me. I have visited my own grave and the graves of my mother, father, and brother. "I have done everything I can think of." I lean back and try to think of something until I remember what her father told me; she still doesn't know how she died, and maybe that's the reason. Even though it serves no purpose, what's there to lose? She's dead already; she might as well know how she died. "Do you know how you died?" I ask her, and she shakes her head. "My father says I'm too young to know, but I'm not getting any older, so I guess he will never tell me." I stay quiet before telling her to go get him; she does, and I go over to him and whisper in his ear, "You have to tell her what happened; I think that's the only way to free her soul." He looks at me with the saddest expression I have ever seen, but he nods before going over to his daughter and crouching down in front of her. I stay back and look at them from afar. I can see him tear up as he's holding her hands and telling her what happened and why she's here instead of living a normal life. The girl listens and

doesn't even react to anything he says, she just stays quiet. After not too long, I can see her fading away, her body turning into nothingness while she holds her father's hands. I started tearing up a little while I was watching it happen. A few seconds later, she is gone, and her father is still crouching in the same spot, holding his tears back. I come up behind him and put my hand on his shoulder, saying, "You did the right thing; you owed her this." He stays quiet and just nods before standing up and turning to me. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for putting her through all this." "I'm a terrible father," he says, tearing up again. "I have no one now, which is probably what I deserve." "I didn't deserve her." "I nodded in agreement with him, saying, "But you're not completely alone; you still have me." "I go over to my table and take out a notebook where I have written down all my clients' names and the people they wanted to talk to before coming over to him again and showing him. You can help me; you can help me not lie to these people anymore. Find these souls, wherever they might be, and bring them to me. This way, you will still have a purpose." He looks at my notebook and smiles a little, saying, "Maybe I can make up for my sins by helping other people out; maybe one day I will be allowed to be with my family again." "I nod, and he takes the notebook out of my hand before leaving with it. Nala comes to me after he left with her tail tucked between her tails. I let out a chuckle and comfort her. Before going to bed with her, I was thinking about the girl for a little while but soon stopped because I'm sure that she is feeling better than ever now. The next day I woke up and I was feeling quite good, so I got ready for work, and on my way there, my father showed up and walked with me. He told me that he had found most of them and that they would come to my office on the dates I had written down. After that day, I never had to lie to my clients again, and the girl's father was always helping me out. I don't think he can ever go back to his family, but this way he at least has purpose on earth.

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*Filip Čobanić*

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## CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

“The time has come” – said one of the figures, dressed in red – “We are done waiting; their hourglass has run out of sand and it’s our job to restart it.” The room went silent, only the sound of breathing could be heard. No one was saying anything, hoping the discussion ended. “You can all pretend and act like it’s not time, but we were told to do it, and we cannot avoid our duty!” – “At some point your mouth must be worn out from all of your yelling and arguing,” – said the figure in green – “There had to be a point in time when you asked yourself if you’re just wasting your breath” All four people at the table were staring daggers at each other. “Before we all start attacking each other, let us call it a day and leave this discussion for another time, shall we?” – said the person cloaked in white. “I will have to agree with you on that one. I don’t think I’ll be able to handle another one of your many fights,” – uttered the figure in black. The white and black figure got up and left while the red and green figures stayed for a little while longer before leaving.

“I am done with their bickering and constant arguments. I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to just lock them in their rooms and leave them to rot. How can you keep your composure around them? Don’t you ever have the urge to just snap at them?” – said the person in black – “I have fought that urge myself, but at some point, you just learn to let them do whatever they want. Because after all, you and I are the people that make the final verdict. We have more power than them, and we are also older than them. I, myself have realized not to waste my time on things I don’t have control over.” – said the white figure calmly. “I know that you hate when things don’t go your way, but what should I do? My whole ‘thing’ is to cause death, so what should I do, kill them? Of course not.” – the white figure saw a bit of despair in the black figure’s eyes. “I have an idea,” – said white – “It is a little unconventional, but it could help you loosen up a bit. I have never tried it myself, but I heard that it could help as a way of calming and letting go, if you’re interested.”

The two people were taking a walk through a garden filled with plants, each plant representing one of the four people. The white nasturtium represented the white

figure, or Conquest, as everyone knew her as. She was calm and collected, towering over men and beast, not because of her height, but because of her demeanor; she commended respect and attention, she was the oldest of the four. The second type of plant was a black rose which represented the black figure, or Death. He reaped souls of all people. He was sickly looking with a pale face. His demeanor changes with the times, to represent how many, or how brutally people he cherished died. He wasn't cowardly in any way, yet he avoided conflict. He didn't like arguments, but if provoked he could hurt someone. The third sibling, the figure in green, was Famine, she was represented by a tree row filled with mistletoe. Just like the plant she could suck the life from anything in her path. Even though she was the third youngest she had a power to take life energy from those around her. She was quite short compared to the rest of her siblings. She wasn't the type of person to start arguments but she sure was the one to finish them. Ever since she was a child, she had had a sharp tongue. Everyone was scared to talk to her since they didn't want to be yelled at by a child. The only person who was able to calm her down was her older sister. It seemed like everyone respected Conquest, but also everyone was in awe whenever she said something. The final plant was a red poppy, the plant that represented War, the red figure. He was the only sibling to challenge Conquest in a fight and as everyone had expected, he was the one that left that fight with a bruise or two. He was the loudmouth of the family. He would always get into trouble as well as arguments. He was the tallest, but also the most muscular. He saw himself as the best of the four of them, but he would always be humbled by his oldest sister. These four plants surrounded the palace where these four people lived in. The giant garden housing the plants also housed many different creatures and animals. If an outsider saw this giant garden and all its inhabitants, they would probably think they were in some kind of fairytale.

The two people kept walking in silence before Death finally said – “Alright, what do you have in mind? Vacation maybe, I think that would be kind of nice.” – Death says to his sister – “Not what I had in mind. As I said my idea is a little unconventional, much more interesting than you're vacation idea. I heard that the human world is quite an experience for an outsider. There are things that you wouldn't understand from our point of view, so why not try to see things from the human perspective?” – responded Conquest as if she already knew the answer. “That does sound interesting, but I already have access to the human world, I know how they work.” – he commented confidently – “You know that this isn't my first century. I've been reaping souls for a very long time. The progress those little things have achieved is astounding.” “You are right,” – said Conquest – “but again you have seen humans' progress through

the eyes of Death and not through the eyes of a human. Wouldn't it be interesting to see how they do things, or how they act before they die?" Death looked interested; it seemed like he made up his mind a while ago, but he wanted to listen just in case he had to change his mind. "Alright, where do I have to go to do that?" – he asked determined. "You don't have to go anywhere," – said Conquest – "I can transport you to the human realm in an instant, you must decide on a name, what to bring and for how long do you want to stay there. Once you know those things, I can take you down to Earth." Death already chose those things a moment ago, he already had his things ready for this trip. "I made my decision. My name will be Cain, I think you get the symbolisms, I'll take my scythe in a form of a pocketknife and my robes as the clothes I'll be wearing. For the final part, I've decided to stay in the human world for two weeks. No more and certainly no less" With those words a circle of light formed around Death. "Well, I hope you haven't forgotten anything else because once this spell is cast you won't be able to come back in exactly two weeks' time." – explained Conquest. "I'm well aware of what's happening, and the spell being cast" – muttered Death – "but, my dear sister I'm quite excited for this trip." With that being said the spell was completed and a giant beam of light appeared from nowhere engulfing Death and making him vanish without a trace. "Well, 'Cain' I hope you enjoy your stay on Earth while Earth is still like the one you remember."

The beam of light with Death engulfed inside traveled from the palace in their realm all the way to the human one. It was a cloudy, maybe even a rainy day in the town of Mossgulf, a peaceful small town in the middle of nowhere. It seemed that this town was so unknown and remote that it couldn't even be found anywhere on the map. No matter how hard you looked you couldn't even know on which continent it was in, in which country it was or even which known city was the closest to it. Even though it was so unknown it seemed like there was a bustling and welcoming community of people. It wasn't so small that everyone knew each other but small enough to say that everyone was friendly towards each other. People there were friendly and helpful, they lived in a perfect little town. If only they knew that Death itself would be living there for the next two weeks.

Cain, otherwise known as Death, woke up in the emergency room of the town hospital. "It seems like he is waking up," – he heard as he was gaining back his consciousness – "Everyone keep quiet!" Cain opened his eyes to be greeted by the doctor and a few children all surrounding his hospital bed. "Where am I?" – he asked – "I'm not dead, right?" "Oh, don't be silly kid, you just tripped and fell down while you and your friends were in the woods," – the doctor said – "but thankfully the fall

wasn't that great that you broke a bone. Just so you know we had to do a few stitches, but they should heal in no time." Suddenly there was a loud commotion outside the emergency room. It sounded like screams were coming from behind the door. "Where is he?!" – said a woman's voice – "Please tell me he is okay." "Well, my friend, good luck, your mom is here so we better get going before she kills us." – said one of Cain's friends. He could remember their names, they were Luke, Travis, and Sydney. It seemed that Conquest took Death's consciousness and placed it in a body of a sixteen-year-old. All the memories that Cain had all at once started flooding Death's brain. "We'll see you in school on Monday, that is, if you survive the wrath of your mom when she finds out that you fell in the forest even though she told you not to go there." "I guess, wish me luck," – Cain waved as his friends left the emergency room through another exit. As they left Cain's mom entered the emergency room. "What did I tell you about going to the forest unsupervised?! I can't believe that you didn't listen to me." Cain just sat there looking at his mom and pretending to listen as he, aka Death, just wanted to see this new place that he even didn't know about. "I'm sorry mom. It won't happen again, I promise." "Very well" – Cain's mom said – "this time I'm letting you off easy, but if this happens again you will be grounded for the whole week. After all what will happen if everyone finds out that the mayor's son is going around like a daredevil, doing whatever he wants whenever he wants." "Like I said, it won't happen again. Now can we just go home? I'm extremely tired, and just want to go to bed."

Cain and his mother Clara left the hospital and headed home. Nothing eventful happened when they arrived home. They ate dinner and they went to bed. Cain's father was out of town for a few weeks so he shouldn't find out about any of this. The next morning Death in Cain's body explored the town, from his house all the way to the edges of the town. For the most part the town wasn't anything special. There were a few shops, a farmers' market, a church, a hospital, at least two high schools and two primary schools as well as a kindergarten. Thankfully the town was quiet, with no arguments, no yelling and certainly no fighting. This was, after all the perfect place for someone like Death to go. There weren't any noisy people, and everyone stuck together. No one tried to pick fights. The town was the most tranquil place on Earth.

The next few days Death wandered around town even more. He looked at all the things this town had to offer. He enjoyed some time with his friends, and just like that it was time for school. He picked up his bag and took a walk to his high school. While he was walking, he kept hearing people talking around him, as if they are judging him. When he got to school, he couldn't help but ask one of his friends –

“Why are people whispering around me. Did I do something wrong?” Travis told him – “Oh, it’s just weird to see the mayor’s son walk to school alone. You usually get to school by car, so this is completely new to everyone; are you sure that your mom allowed you to walk to school?” – Travis asked Cain. – “She didn’t say anything, I just got my stuff, ate breakfast, and left. I don’t think I even saw my mom.” In that moment the school bell rang to mark the beginning of class.

All of the students entered the school and went to their classes. Cain at first couldn’t recall which classroom was his, but with the guidance of his friends he quickly remembered his whole schedule. His first class for Monday was History, they were learning about some war that no student cared about. The teacher looked as if he had given up on teaching the class for that day, but Cain started to talk about it. He spoke with such confidence as if he was there to witness it. Cain maybe didn’t know anything about that war, but Death knew about it. After all, he had to reap souls of soldiers that day. From bloodshed to innocent people praying for mercy knowing it wouldn’t come. Death saw as his own brother brought those soldiers to their demise. Everyone listened to his speech, even though it was uncalled-for. Even the teacher was a little confused, but he still listened. The second class of that day was English. This teacher was cheerful. She wanted everyone to learn with ease. Again, since Death was alive since the beginning of time, he knew every language. Everyone was amazed by his knowledge of the English language. The teacher even gave him an A since she was surprised that he knew things that the rest of the class didn’t learn. After English he had PE or Physical Education. They were running track at the beginning and once again everyone was amazed by Cain’s endurance and strength. After class the teacher even asked him if he wanted to join the track team, but Cain rejected the offer. Once PE was over it was lunch break, and everyone went outside.

“I didn’t know you had it in you Cain.” – said Luke – “Since when are you this active at school?” “I don’t know. I guess something came over me when I tripped and fell in the forest.” “Well, what ever happened in your brain, it works. It’s like you have become a genius,” – said Travis impressed. “Anyways, where’s Sydney? I thought we said that we will meet up here and go have lunch together.” As the crowds of students exited the school, only Sydney was nowhere to be found. “I’ll call her. Maybe she has other plans and forgot to tell us?” At that moment a voice could be heard – “Guys, wait for me.” – it was Sydney. “Well, where were you?” – Travis asked – “We were getting worried.” “I was on a call with someone,” – said Sydney – “If you are wondering, it was with someone special.” “Was it with Cameron? The so-called love interest,” – Travis teased her. “How about you stay out of my business, does that sound good to

you?” “Relax you two. Have you forgotten that we have about fifteen minutes left to eat before the fourth period begins?” – said Luke. “I agree, let’s go to our usual spot behind the school.” – said Cain. “Sure!” – said Travis and Sydney at the same time. Their small group went to their usual spot behind the school, and they talked. They talked about school, spring break that was slowly approaching, and Travis couldn’t go without teasing Sydney about Cameron, Sydney’s crush.

The bell rung to mark the beginning of the fourth period, and everyone went to their classrooms. Their fourth period was Biology. The teacher was sick that day, as long as they keep quiet so no other teacher heard them, they would be free for 45 minutes. The fifth period was Art. The teacher was a very calm and collected type of person. She taught them about baroque and everything that has to do with it. From paintings to poems and even architecture. She told them everything she knew about baroque with such passion and charisma that it didn’t even feel like forty-five minutes have passed. Their final class was with their homeroom teacher. She was also the Music teacher, but this time she told them about the trip that they would be going on in three to four weeks.

The final bell rang, and students walked through the school doors for the last time that day. Cain and his friends all went to a nearby coffee shop where they spent a few hours before parting ways and going home.

This new way of life was incredibly refreshing to Death. It was like a breath of fresh air that he longed for. He felt brand new, as if he was born again. In his mind he knew that Conquest was right, he needed a vacation in a very ‘unconventional’ way. Even though he felt bad for Cain since he stole his body, he couldn’t feel more relaxed. He knew that in a week or so he would be back with his siblings in their palace, but he wanted to use all the time he had left enjoying himself. For once in his life, he felt extremely happy, but he couldn’t shake of a weird feeling of always being watched by someone powerful. As if whoever was spying on him had powers even greater than his, as weird as it sounded.

That night he had a horrible nightmare. He saw all his friends being killed by War, his family being starved by Famine and his whole town being taken by Conquest. The only thing that was left for him to do was to reap their souls. By the end of the nightmare, he had heard a voice. The voice sounded like an angel was talking to him. He felt at ease after all, but the scenery shifted and at last he was back again, looking at that horrible site. He walked through the town, blood seeping and leaking from every house, as if a massacre had happened. At the edge of the town was Death, somehow Death in Cain’s body saw Death sitting on the bench at the bus stop. Cain



was speechless, he couldn't hold back his tears and started to weep. Death came to him and hugged him. Death started speaking – “She is always watching, don't make a mistake that you will later regret. She has eyes everywhere. You know what she is capable of. No one dares go against her, she cuts through mountains, she brakes boulders, she makes blood boil and the Moon blood red. Fearing her is the only way of surviving, so don't make...” – he stops – “a mistake in her presence.” Death disappeared and Cain woke up. Covered in sweat, bawling his eyes out. He was shaking in fear when a crow came on his windowsill. It started to caw. With every caw it gets louder until the crow falls from exhaustion and landed dead on the ground in their front garden.

That morning Cain got no sleep. He seemed scared and didn't want to go to school. “Why are you sweating so much, are you sick?” – said his mom concerned. “You look feverish, you are not going to school young man, not like this.” Hearing those words Cain felt a dash of relief. He couldn't say it, but he was thankful his mother believed he was sick. To Death sickness was something he only heard about, he had never experienced it, so he was thankful that he didn't have to pretend.

Cain's mom went to work, and Cain was left on his own. He texted his friends that he didn't feel good, so he wouldn't be going to school. They told him they would let the teachers know and that they would visit him after school. While he was waiting for his friends to come, he went to get the crow from his garden. He took the crow inside and dissected it. He was looking for signs of magic which he found quickly. After that he wanted to check who sent that crow to him, but when he was about to check; a loud sound started to ring inside his head. He fell on the floor from the intensity and started to cry. All he could hear in his head was a loud and mysterious voice telling him “Strike number one!” He didn't know whose voice that was, but he knew that the same person was behind the spying as well as the nightmare. After some time, the voice stopped, and the doorbell rang. It was Sydney, Luke, and Travis. They all came to visit and check if he was okay.

“How are you?” – inquired Travis – “We called your mom, and she told us that you were all sweaty and feverish.” They all sat down on the couch and started to talk. “You don't seem ill.” – said Sydney – “But I can tell that there is something bothering you. Is everything good at home, you know since your father isn't here?” “Yes, everything is fine at home. Mom couldn't be better. We aren't arguing, we even play games before bed.” “So, what's troubling you?” – said Luke concerned – “Did something happen when you came home? I didn't want to acknowledge the dead crow that is on your counter before, but what's up with that?” “That crow came to my windowsill last

night and started cawing nonstop and at one point it just fell and died in the garden. I brought it here and I was wondering what happened to it, so I dissected it.” – said Cain. “There is nothing wrong with helping animals, but I don’t know how much you can help a dead crow.” – said Sydney. “I have to be honest with you guys. I had a nightmare last night, and it was the most gruesome thing I have ever seen. People were laying on the ground dead, blood was everywhere, I started to cry and then I woke up crying, sweaty, and shaking.”

The doorbell rang again. Cain went to open it when the voice came again, but this time it was yelling – “Don’t open the door!” Cain felt a presence coming from behind the door. It was powerful and mighty. He was shaking again, as if being back in that horrible dream. “Cain is everything okay.” – said Sydney. “Guys!” – said Travis – “What’s happening with Cain?” They all rushed to the door to calm Cain down. The voice stopped telling him not to open the door and started to yell – “This is your second strike!” – before stopping entirely. As the voice stopped so did Cain’s crying. He calmed himself down and opened the door. On the other side was Cain’s mother, scared that something might’ve happened to Cain and was the reason he couldn’t open the door.

“You all look like you saw a ghost.” “Well, you could say that misses Clara.” – said Luke – “But we think that Cain should go to hospital.” “Why, did something happened while I was gone?” – said Cain’s mom. “Well, we are not entirely sure what exactly happened, but when you rang the doorbell and Cain went to open the door, he just fell to the floor and started shaking. “What.” – exclaimed Cain’s mom – “How could that have happened, and why is there a dead crow on my counter?” “I wanted to see what happened to it.” – said Cain – “There was something weird about it, it wouldn’t stop cawing.” “Very well, I’ll take Cain to the hospital, and you three will get rid of that crow and clean the counter, understood?” “Yes ma’am!”

Cain and his mother rushed to the hospital to have a checkup, but the doctors couldn’t find anything that was wrong with him. “Ma’am we did all we could, but your son seems normal, even better than before. His last checkup showed that he had a lack of white blood cells, but it seems that their number magically rose, and he even seems stronger than before. It’s like he hit a reverse button and became better than a few months ago.” “But there has to be something wrong with him. He feels weak and feverish,” – said Cain’s mom – “There has to be something you can do for him.” “Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do. Your son seems fine and healthy. His blood levels are fine, his circulation is fine, his nerves are good. Basically, he is the healthiest patient I ever seen.”

As the doctor and Clara were talking, Cain once again lost consciousness. The doctors surrounded him and sent him to the operating room. In Cain's mind all he could hear was the same mysterious voice from before telling him "Strike number three, and you are out!" before laughing maniacally.

Cain awoke and he couldn't remember anything. Just like in the nightmare he could see Death, towering over him before kneeling down and starting to speak. "Hello there, Cain, it has been some time. How are you, how are your friends?" "You are not Death!" – Cain yells – "I am the one who you are impersonating, liar!" The figure changes its form and appears as a person, a human. "I changed my form so why don't you 'Death.'" With those words Cain's body shifts and turns and transforms into Death. The same Death that left his siblings and their palace two weeks ago. "What happened to Cain?" – Death says – "Answer me!" The person started laughing. "Don't worry; he is alive, right now he is in the emergency room, he just had an operation because of you. I'm pretty sure he is hugging his mom while crying and saying, 'It was so dark, I don't want to go back there.' While his mom is comforting him and saying 'No one will take you anywhere. I promise to keep you safe and find whoever did this to you.' She is scared and confused; she doesn't know what he is talking about. All that she knows is what she sees, unlike Cain who knows what happened to him, yet no one will ever believe him" The person then snapped their fingers and all of a sudden, a beam of light engulfs the two creatures. They appeared in front of the palace that Death and his siblings live in. The figure in front of him puts on her white cloak and turned to face Death before bursting in laughter. Death looks at his sister with disgust, he fought the urge to attack her. "Go ahead, attack me. Both of us know what will happen if we fight." The stale mate was broken by their other two siblings. "Death, you're finally back. We didn't miss you, but it was boring without you." – said War – "Conquest told us that you went to the human world before we destroy it." "Yes, and she also told us that you had gifts for us, so where are they?" – said Famine. While Famine and War were talking to Death, Conquest was still laughing. There weren't any words to describe the hatred Death felt towards Conquest, but he knew that he couldn't go against her in a fight. They all went inside their palace while talking. "Can I talk to you in private?" – said Conquest to Death. The two of them entered to one of the living rooms that the palace had, closing the door behind them.

"So, what is this about Conquest?" – asked Death. "I have a question for you." "Oh, and what is it?" – asks Death. "My question for you my dear brother is why did you thought you could escape me and your own siblings." "What are you talking about?"

I wasn't planning on escaping. I can't escape, for crying out loud. If I had escaped, you would have chased me down in a matter of seconds." "Why did I then sense that you had intentions on escaping?" – asked Conquest. A sudden silence filled the room. The two powerful creatures stared daggers at each other. "Do you ever feel like being watched?" – asks Death – "Have you ever felt inferior towards someone? Have you ever even felt scared?" "Why would I feel scared when I am the most powerful out of all four of us?" All the candles in the living room went out and the fire in the fireplace changed colors from red to blue. The amount of magical energy that these two beings had was immeasurable. They both sensed a change in their demeanor. They wanted blood. Death wanted to kill Conquest because she controlled everything they did, while Conquest wanted to kill Death because he was the one going against her wishes.

They both released their power onto each other. Conquest was overpowering Death with ease. Death felt numb from the fight, but he knew he had to continue fighting. The room they were in started to crack and at the end Conquest stood victorious on top of Death's already rotting corpse. "I am still the strongest after all my 'dear brother.'" As Death disappeared in that moment so did a new Death emerge from his dead body. He resembled Cain and with his new siblings he decided to begin the apocalypse and reset mankind once again.

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## THE $\lambda$ I E N<sub>A</sub> S OF ANTARTICA

When I got the call that I had been chosen to go on a mission to Antartica, I was both excited and scared. The ship picked me up in London and after a long journey, I finally got to Antartica. When I got off the ship and stepped onto the ice, the cold was like nothing I had experienced before.

I was greeted by a group of scientists who were in charge of the mission and they escorted me to a small house-like building. Inside, they explained the plan to me and my squad. We were tasked with going directly to the South Pole. A week later, we embarked on our journey. While traveling, we saw only penguins and ice. It was getting colder and colder, but I was impressed by the frozen realm in front of me. Harmonious vast white space unpolluted by human presence. When we arrived, we took out our instruments and started measuring physical parameters. Everything was normal except for the metal detector which was beeping loudly. We started digging below the ice and found a hidden metal door. We managed to enter the compartment, but it was empty. There was just a writing on the wall saying: „ $\lambda$  I E N<sub>A</sub> s“. We photographed the writing and went back to the base. The news got out and the world was terrified. The most protected place on Earth became one of the most threatened and threatening.

Ten years later, a Harvard student was doing a research on the writing we had found. He got the idea that each letter was a symbol for a physical unit.  $\lambda$  – wave length, l – length, I – electricity, E – energy, N<sub>A</sub> – Avogadro’s number and s – street. It turned out to be the formula for calculating the density of black holes and it revolutionized science.

*mentor:* Martina Mavrek*institution:* Gimnazija Josipa Slavenskog Čakovec*Anamarija Srpak***THE ART OF COVETING**

“Why do you fear the stars?” a gentle, deep voice asked behind me.

“I do not.” I firmly answered.

“There is no shame if you do, child,” the voice said, “I fear them too, even after millennia that I’ve spent on this godforsaken planet, I still find them more frightening than the deepest parts of the oceans and all the creatures that reside in the shadows.” The night was warm, but his words carried a chill that gave me shivers.

I was sitting beneath an old oak tree in my grandmother’s garden and looking up at the stars and the Moon like I used to when I was a child whose greatest wish was to see space and all its wonders. When I was younger, I used to climb the tree and seek places to hide from everyone so I could stay a little bit longer and watch the stars when nightfall came. My parents would try to get me down, but it took them a few tries and one or two bribes with chocolate and toys for me to climb down.

Now I am a grown man whose life has been falling apart for quite some time, with a bottle of whisky and a voice from an unknown source that is talking to me while I sit in the same spot as I used to.

City lights could be seen in the distance as blurs of light, the hushed sounds of traffic were reaching me slowly as if the whole world had stopped just for this, for me. For me, sitting under the shadows of what I was and regrets of what I could have been.

I was lost in thoughts of what-if’s and of what was and had forgotten about the voice, so when it finally spoke it caught me off guard.

“So, why do you fear the stars?” the voice said sounding soothing, almost caring.

There was a commotion on my left side, but I couldn’t see anything I only felt the presence of a body close to mine. But this body didn’t release any heat.

“Why are they meant to be feared?” I responded calmly, although I felt everything but.

“As all celestial beings”, the voice began “stars also have a sense of... superiority over humans, animals, all living things, even those that are not. Stars spent millennia changing the fates of everything and everyone, guiding many in their quests, and driving many more to their insanity.” The voice stopped as if it was to take a breath. After a moment the voice continued. “In the beginning, they intended to be worshipped and not feared but loved. To be known as rightful but caring. But some grew tired of it and wanted more than a few sacrifices and partial worship in good times and desperate need when troubled times came. Throughout millennia, stars learned that to be loved and worshipped by the smallest of creatures wasn’t enough, so they embraced the fear they gave them and made it last. They are powerful and power grows from love slowly and becomes strong, but on fear, power thrives and becomes the most dangerous thing someone can control. When stars learned of that they assured themselves that the fear of them is the only thing that remains.”

Somehow what the voice told me didn’t surprise me but made me feel disturbed and something I dare not name. The story the voice told reminded me of a myth I had heard many years before about gods and how they left people to deal with a corrupt, wicked, and rotten world that the gods themselves created. They didn’t want a good, Arcadian-like world, they wanted Hell on Earth and made sure that they got it.

“Why do you fear the stars, child?” the voice asked again.

“I-I... don’t know”, I said honestly.

“You wouldn’t be cursing them every night for the past fifteen years if you didn’t know.”

That made me aware of what was happening, but I didn’t care, I do that quite a lot these days. But the voice was right, I blamed the stars for everything they’d done to me. The pain they’ve caused me, the miseries they put me through, but I also fear them. I fear their power and what they could do if I don’t obey, what could happen to those I love and care about. I fear them because if one day I go too far, I would take from them what they have created, and I would be punished for eternity for every time I tried to do so. But I don’t say any of that. I just stare into the night and think of a simpler time if there ever was a time like that.

“The night would be a much more terrifying place if there were no stars left to guide us”, I finally said.

“Ah, yes it would be”, the voice agreed. “But do not forget that light could still be reflected even without the stars.”

In my life there hadn't been many people who could bring a smile to my face. Most of them were my friends and I've considered them my family. I was there when they won and when they lost. When they were the happiest people on the planet and when they were struggling to do any task. Their presence could brighten my day just in a few moments. I'd share my good moments, but I'd still be sheltering the full expanse of my happiness. And when I felt like there was no hope for me, I'd put walls between me and the rest of the world. When they saw a collected and calm person, there would usually be a storm of self-destruction ruling my mind.

I dismissed his comment and asked: "Who are you anyway?"

The voice laughed; it was a sad, soul-crushing laughter.

"What is the last thing you remember, my child?" the voice asked.

And like a switch in my head, I came to my grandmother's house to see it for the very last time. I walked through the halls of the house as fast as I could to get to the garden and the tree. In my right hand, I had a bottle of whisky and a cigarette between two fingers when I sat down beneath the oak tree. I remember taking a sip from the bottle and feeling the sweet and burning taste of liquor in my mouth. After that, I only remember the heat leaving my body and feeling light as if I was losing consciousness. I could also feel a sticky, viscous liquid between my fingers.

"I couldn't have..., I...," I stammered.

"Shhh now, my child, everything will be alright," said the voice as it stepped into the light of the moon. The voice had a man-like body but the only difference from a man were his black wings. And then I knew his name.

"I fear the stars because they know all of my secrets and when the time comes and I finally join them I fear my eternity will be spent in shame, fear and hate the same way I've spent my whole life in fear and shame while being hated by everyone", I finally answered to his question.

He held out his hand for me and said: "Come now, Eliot, eternity is waiting for you."

I took his offered hand and smiled. I glanced back to the house, garden and the oak tree as we slowly stepped into the darkness.



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## THE ACTUAL TRUTH

He did it! He got his dream job. Years of college finally paid off. Now comes the hardest part, leaving the country you've lived in your entire life. For Zak it was Canada. Nova Scotia, to be more specific. Even though he knew this was something he was looking forward to his entire life, he couldn't just erase all of the memories he had made in his homeland. He liked how peaceful it felt there, he used to spend his days walking around the town while listening to music. It was his favorite thing to do whenever he got the chance but that didn't happen so often since temperatures in Nova Scotia are not that high. It was freezing cold most of the time. Still, he had to leave for Colorado this morning because of his new job. He was sad to leave his family and his home, but he appreciated that they he had been hired. There was tough competition. A lot of people had applied for this job and out of all of them, he was chosen. It made him feel lucky.

After a long flight, almost getting lost several times, and carrying his bags for soon to be seven hours, he found his apartment. It wasn't anything fancy or luxurious - he didn't want it that way anyways. You could describe it as an average-looking flat. It had one small balcony that could only fit one chair and maybe a smaller table if he found the right size. The bedroom was right next to the kitchen that he instantly liked. He loved to cook, especially dinner. Back in Nova Scotia he had lots of cooking books and family recipes, but now he had to use the Internet to find them.

It was already 1 pm, which meant he had to leave for his first day at work. Not knowing what to expect, he walked into the building. He could only imagine what being a police inspector is like. He had dreamed about this day since he started high school and now that he was here, he felt a little nervous, but all his stress went away as soon as he thought about his future. His goal was to become a well-known police inspector. He wanted his family to watch him on the news because he knew that they would be proud.

As soon as he stepped into the station, a tall police officer asked about the reason of him being there.

“I got the job here!” Zak said.

The guy asked about his name. It turned out he was the head of the department.

“Follow me!” the guy said before leaving into the hallway.

His speed wasn't adjusted for Zak, it was almost that he had to run after him. At the end of the hallway was a door with his name on it. It said “Inspector Zak Anderson”. It was an office. Having so much space for himself was unusual for Zak since he grew up sharing a room with his two brothers. It was perfect, the fact that he could focus on his work. Keeping the office organized was especially important for him.

He really liked this job, and over time, he showed that by solving any case that he received. Even though he wasn't given hard tasks, he was proud of himself.

Meeting new people was, of course, expected, but it wasn't easy for him since he never actually cared enough to make a lot of friends; in other words he was introverted. For his fifth case he had to work with a partner, a person he had talked to a few times. These conversations were short, and they were mostly reduced to “Good morning!” or “The weather looks great today, doesn't it?”.

His partner was Bernard Caden, a co-worker who had had this job for over thirty years. Bernard wasn't that old – he was only fifty-two. Even though he claimed he was forty-five, nobody ever fell for that. Unlike Zak, Bernard spent his whole life living in The United States. He was born in Oregon, but moved to Colorado when he was twelve because his parents had got divorced and he came here with his mom. He did not get to spend a lot of time with his dad, but he did not regret moving here. It was here that he figured out that he wanted to be a police inspector.

Zak and Bernard had to work on an important case together. It was about a young woman brutally stabbed twelve times in her stomach. Not only did the murderer kill her, but he also made a mess in her house. Zak immediately started suspecting her ex-husband. They had recently got divorced, but she had already found somebody new. On the other hand, Bernard had mixed feelings about the victim's sister. Lately, she had been very jealous of her. She had everything – a highly paid job, a beautiful daughter, a big house, and the sister wasn't happy about her everyday life. It were mostly her financial problems that made her depressed. This case was broadcast on some very popular TV channels, and a lot of journalists came to the police station to ask questions.

The two of them couldn't reach an agreement. They did write both of the scenarios on the whiteboard in Zak's office. It was way more difficult than they had thought it would be. Days passed while they were working on it.

Zak started to realize that people in Colorado cared less about all of the crime

happening in their country. He wanted to go back to Canada, because suddenly he felt useless in the United States. That made him depressed, but he did not want to admit it. Instead, he blamed it on all the stress he was going through lately. Every day murders happened, banks were robbed, and the worst part was that he couldn't do anything about it. He could only solve cases they gave him in the station. So, he did. He solved this one. The ex-husband finally confessed – he admitted that he was the one that killed her. Their case was over.

Bernard wasn't in a good mood that day. He would not even listen to what Zak had to say. Instead, he started an argument again which ended with him wiping out everything written on the board and replacing it with "Her sister is the killer." Immediately after that he left the office. Zak thought he was left alone on this case. As he was getting ready to submit it, he got a phone call. It was the victim's sister. For a second she sounded like she was crying, but Zak could hear clearly what she was saying. After a few minutes of wasting his time, she explained that she had threatened her sister's ex-husband into taking the blame. Zak was shocked, he never expected that her murderer would be her own sister.

On his walk home from work, Zak was thinking. There was no way that her sister was the killer, as all the evidence was leading to her ex-husband. But after Bernard wrote that sentence on the board, everything changed. "Maybe the board had to do something with it," he thought, but he instantly stopped himself. That idea was childish! After all, he was a police inspector. Yet, he couldn't stop thinking about it. It felt like nothing else made sense, it had to be true. He decided to figure it out.

The next day when he received a new case, he didn't even try solving it. He just wrote what he wanted to happen on the board. A few hours passed and he "solved" the case. Seeing how easy his job could suddenly be, he made this a habit. He did the same thing multiple times. He spent hours just writing random things.

He did feel bad putting innocent people to prison, but knowing that nobody cared about crime, murders, and robberies made him forget why he had become a police inspector. He stopped thinking about helping the world. Now, his biggest goal was to make money, and the board helped him with that.

However, Bernard was getting suspicious of Zak. He had solved sixteen cases this month and it was only the nineteenth of November. After Zak had left his office, Bernard went inside. He found all of the evidence written on the board. At first, he was confused, but he made up his mind and told the rest of the station what Zak was doing. Very soon it was everything people were talking about. The news spread outside the police station the same day.

Clueless, Zak came to work the next day and got fired. It would not have been that bad if it hadn't spread on the news, not only in America, but all around the world. The entire globe was also talking about it. It was over for him. Nobody would want to hire him after that. He had no way of making money. People were either scared of him or hated him for the crimes he had committed. He couldn't go back to Nova Scotia to see his family. They probably didn't want to talk to him anyway. He was left alone in his office with a stupid whiteboard that had ruined his entire life. They took all the markers away from him, so he couldn't write anything while getting his stuff from the office. He did not care about the board anymore; he just wanted to disappear.

As he was about to leave the office, he thought of an idea. If he wrote his own name on the board, would anything happen? His life was falling apart anyway. Since they took all the markers, he had no way of writing anything without a pen or some sort of liquid. The only thing he could think of was blood. He grabbed a pen that was on his desk and stabbed his hand. The pen did not come out through the other side of his hand, but it was enough to write his full name. Shortly after that, he died.

*mentor:* Veljko Vuković

*institution:* Prva sušačka hrvatska gimnazija

*Anastazija Vukelić*

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## IT EATS

„Central, do you hear us?! This is Captain Riley speaking, security number DT7R82119. We need immediate help. There is something inhabiting the moon and it is picking us off one by one and it seems like it bit through our fuel pipes. Please send he-AAAAA!“ The static could be heard on the other end of the line, worry etching itself on the faces of NASA’s best dispatchers. This is the seventh spacecraft lost to the space rodent that lives on the moon.

As the screams died out in the communication room, a short black-haired woman could only hope her beloved captain had not died in vain. She was one of the four remaining astronauts alive, captain was the fifth. She had decided he would be the last one to die. She had already managed to transfer the others to the escape pods and she only had to power them, but the only problem was that she had to pass through the room in which the beast was currently feeding off of her captain’s intestines. She was holding the gun strong enough to pierce through the scales that adorned the beast in her chubby hands. She was not afraid of dying. She had lived a fulfilling life and the others deserved that chance too. She shot the beast multiple times as it ripped her stomach with its gnarly claws. The beast fell to its doom first.

Before the adrenaline wore off, she had hurried to fix the problem. When she heard the launch of the space pods, she carefully lowered herself onto the floor. Only then did she notice little black eggs in the corner. But it was too late. She closed her eyes for the last time.

*mentor:* Silvija Habrun

*institution:* Glazbena škola u Varaždinu

*Greta Mikec*

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## VENICE BEACH

IGONE

I wake up in hell one day. Day one. I wake up in hell day two. Day three, day four and then I stop counting. It's been going on for ages, but thankfully, time doesn't really exist in the afterlife. It doesn't look like what you would imagine hell to look like, there's a lot more to it than fire and smoke. There are fancy offices with broken coffee machines and mentally broken, depressed demons who work there. I was one of the depressed demons as well. It used to be me, Enid and Nex. Until I got promoted to make deals.

You would think I'd say that my whole life changed the day I got released from the most agonizing, terrible, torturing place full of fire and smoke that at some point you breathe more than air and got sent to work in the center of New York City, Earth in a human body instead of a demon one like my friends have. But no - it changed on the most random Friday afternoon, when the sun was shining, and the Holy Scripture, also known as Lana del Rey's songs were playing.

*You're in the yard, I light the fire  
And as the summer fades away  
Nothing gold can stay  
You write, I tour, we make it work  
You're beautiful and I'm insane  
We're American-made*

I just mumble the lyrics because there's no chance that I have any singing talent.

At this point, I was sure I had seen everything, all the crazy customers with their crazy needs and wants and wishes. After all, I've been working here for almost a century, which might not even be that much in the afterlife (aka Hell), but it is to the species of the mortal world (aka Earth). But never in my whole career was I ready for this. Nobody was ready for Ayla Sinclair and all the chaos she was going to cause.

"Hi, I'd like to make a deal."

She walks in and you can still hear the sound of the store's tiny, vintage ringing bell. She looks so golden under the sun shining through our window right on her.

*I'm not checking her out though.*

She tells me what it is about, and I don't think anything about it, but that's going to change. I write down the names and everything, everybody involved in it, already manifesting all of her wishes and ready to give it to Satan, when she suddenly interrupts me mindlessly doing my job.

"I really like your rings."

A small *thanks* and kinda forced smile is all I give.

She's supposed to leave now.

The best part of the song is supposed to come now and I HAVE to sing this part out loud.

Okay, whatever. I'm going to play it over again, because apparently, for some reason, that annoying human being with bad taste in rings is not planning to leave.

She even has the audacity to start singing MY favorite part of MY favorite song.

"It's my favorite."

"Mine too."

But now I'll have to find a new one.

The song finishes. She leaves.

I still don't think of her differently, except that she has an *okay* taste in music. And she's pretty. Objectively. That's all.

NEX

*"Another day, another slay! At Fortune. Get. O.O. sell your soul the right way!"*

That's the logo Enid and I came up with. Fully aware of the fact that this could easily be beyond the worst idea any demon in this hell has ever had, I couldn't stand the way Igone was dying out of laughter when she heard it.

"I'm sorry, what's the double o for?" she's crying. "It's good, I swear!"

*She doesn't mean it. She's crying.*

"She doesn't mean it," there goes Enid. "She's crying."

*Yup. There you go.* And then there's also the fact that this logo is for *her* dumb Earth store, not our not-so-important jobs.

So why are we the ones who are doing it, and being made fun of for it?

"Seriously, though, it's not bad. It's really giving the *we are officially part of the generation z, even though we've been around since before Shakespeare* vibes. I like that."

She's right, but that wasn't my goal. I'm not trying to attach myself to an era that is going to pass while I'm here forever. Unlike Igone, who would literally fall for some-

one just because they know her favorite song.

“Anyways, have you told Enid what happened yet?”

“Nothing had happened today,” she giggles and drags Enid out of the room running. Because she knows EXACTLY what I’m talking about.

“You know, Lana del Rey is gonna die at some point and you’re still gonna be seventeen!”

They both ignore me. I run after them.

“Igone literally fell in lo-,” I try to yell, but Igone presses her hand against my mouth so hard it feels like a slap.

When she puts it down, she raises it back up just as soon, in case I start speaking again.

I don’t. But at least now they are both paying attention to me for what might be the first time in this whole day.

IGONE

After what seems like ages, I finally get myself out of the chair and make my way to the coffee machine, which I beg to work this time. Again, it didn’t work for a few centuries, but in hell that isn’t that long. It doesn’t work, as expected. But after all, my job is to make people’s deals with Satan, not drinking overpriced coffee. So here we are.

I’m sitting in the same as always corner of the room I share with Enid and Nex, even though Satan has told me countless times I can have my own room now and I shouldn’t bother working with *those* demons. But once again, it’s been me, Enid and Nex since always, and that’s not changing. When I get wishes from Earth, all I do here is write boring, soul-sucking contracts, which contain the most basic information about a person – their very detailed birth chart and how many years they’re spending in hell as an exchange for getting their wishes fulfilled. Five hours later, I’m finally writing the last one. (Again, it’s a good thing there’s no time in hell.)

Ayla Sinclair.

I sigh. I’ll never understand people who make these deals to get together with someone. But then, doesn’t every girl go through hell the moment she decides to get into a relationship with someone of the male kind? Ayla is just going to do it literally for a few years after she dies. I sigh again and roll my eyes. Thank gods I’m drawing up the last contract.

ENID

*I hate Hell. Not really, though.*

I sit for some time to stare and think. Then I get up.

*But I hate working only in Hell!*



Then I sit down again.

“Why?” Nex comes in.

“Because,” at this point it sounds like whining so I force myself to stop. “I don’t know, I’m just too bored here.”

“Poor, miserable you,” he says quietly. Thinking I’m not going to hear him, but I do! But at least at that point I don’t feel guilty for whining anymore.

“Seriously, Nex! I’ve hated it here since Igone left, I want it to be the three of us again.”

He wraps his hands around me and I start crying.

“It’s okay. I have a plan.”

IGONE

I’m wasting my morning doing the makeup ritual that is at this point already engraved in my brain, while ignoring the fact that I should be wasting my morning doing something else.

Oh, well. It comes sooner than I think. I get interrupted by a high pitched “Hi!” of someone who sounds like they just started puberty. I turn around and see no one other than expected - Nex.

“Are we going soon?”

I grab my rings and nod.

“Are you going to give me the reading?”

“Yes.”

“And Enid, too?”

“Absolutely.”

“And love readings and the pendulum stuff?”

At this point I’m rolling my eyes way too obviously.

“Igone?”

Quiet.

“I still remember what you did yesterday.”

That shuts him up for a while.

I walk faster and hope he doesn’t catch up. So, we both run to our store and laugh all the way, just to come and see *her*.

Martha Valentine, the woman who probably holds a record for the number of deals she made. And she’s been on Earth even before me, so who knows how many of them she’s made.

“Isn’t that the weekly-bingo-winning-deal lady?” he finally speaks again.

*Yes. And her cat. And poor Enid alone with the two of them.*

I awkwardly wave to them as soon as they turn and see us coming, hoping I could get Martha to leave before she starts venting about her depression.

“Hi, Martha! Unfortunately, we are closed today,” I say with a fake smile, so big it makes my eyes squeeze and look small. So unfortunate that she doesn’t buy it.

“What do you mean closed?! Am I the only one seeing these two?” she’s pointing at two redheads behind me, one real and one fake. “You know I might not be a professional, but I’m sure you could make a deal for the fake red hair one to get her normal hair back.”

Enid’s mouth drops. And Nex’s too.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make that happen.”

*Girlie, you really need to leave.* I’m desperate at this point.

Just like that, her stupid cat is for the first time ever being not so stupid, and she wanders away. A small grin appears on my face as I watch Martha realize what’s happening and runs after her, and we can hear her old bones cracking.

Finally, we get ready to do our tarot reading, only if someone (aka me) wasn’t so dumb they couldn’t shuffle cards properly.

After what feels like forever of lifelessly staring at my card deck and the pendulum, I decide to face the obvious.

“I think it’s broken... or something.”

“What?!” Enid freaks out, “Why would it be broken?!”

I don’t think tarot cards can actually be broken, but there’s no way that what they’re saying is true...

“It says soulmate connection.”

Only about an hour later, Enid decides to inform me about some of the recent events that have occurred in the life of a person she believes is my so called soulmate.

In an Enid style, of course, she runs into our office and almost knocks off the door from the wall.

“She goes to NYU! And I’m pretty sure I saw her talking to Nex.”

IGONE

I’m on my way to have a hot demon girl walk, which accidentally happens to be near NYU. And totally not because Ayla goes there. I swear I couldn’t care less about what Enid told me. All that I’m pretty sure about is that she got high again and is seeing things.

And yet, I still manage to see her. Ayla Sinclair who made a deal to get together with a boy.

Unfortunately, the deal is working, because I see her kissing him.

So I try to pass them and look as normal as possible.

“Igone!”

*Nevermind. How does she even remember my name?*

She immediately lets go of the guy and runs up to me and hugs me. Did she actually just do that?

“It’s so great to see you... and also did you do it?”

Her gestures are telling me that I’m supposed to know what *it* means.

“Yeah...” I nod awkwardly. “And apparently it’s working so well.”

“Totally, thank you so much.”

After about five seconds of staring at me, she gets closer and kisses me on the cheek.

“I love you, you’re a life saver.”

And runs up to her white boy who seemed to be watching all of this and didn’t have any problem with it.

This was supposed to be forgotten about after a week. However, for some reason it’s not. A week later I’m in my office walking up and down the room with no control over my thoughts and feelings, trying to figure out what’s going on. Enid and Nex are watching me from the outside and thinking I’m going crazy, and they couldn’t be more right.

“The queen of hell looks like she’s going to fall. Do you think it’s because her tarot deck isn’t working?”

Nex only looks at her while Enid waits for his response.

“Quite otherwise. I think it’s because her tarot deck is working perfectly.”

Finally, I sit down and hug my legs, ready to start crying over the random straight human girl.

If I’m being honest with myself... I like her. Because the way she’s giving both Persephone and Hades vibes at the same time! And the way you can always tell when she is coming because she smells like cigarettes, but not in a nic addict way, but *the* nic addict way, and that smell reminds me of hell. Like, if hell was a person, it would be her.

I feel so disgusted with myself and all the emotions overwhelming me. After spending eternity making these deals for people, I thought I would stop caring for those people’s lives, all the details and feelings involved, let alone catch a feeling myself. But here we are, and I guess... it is what it is.

Suddenly, I hear knocking.

“Can we come in?”

*Oh.* I didn't realize Enid and Nex are still outside.

"Leave me alone!" I say, but you can still hear tears through my words, "I'm fighting my... inner demons-"

"Girls!" I hear Enid finishing my sentence before me. "I think she means liking girls. Or... a girl."

She's not that wrong. I don't see it, but my guess is that Nex is just laughing in agreement.

I come up with a terrible idea. I finish with my mental breakdown and go to the main Hell Office.

"Wait, where are you going?" he asks.

"Hell Office, Satan said she needed me immediately!" I say running past them.

Nex and Enid give each other the look. The *yeah, something's definitely going on* look. "Isn't Satan on holiday in the Great Canyon?"

The Hell Office is the place where all the deals come from and also where all of them return to. I look for the drawer with unfilled copies, which takes me longer than expected. But when I finally get it, I almost start writing my name on it, ready to possibly throw my whole life away because I don't even know if demons are allowed to make their own deals.

Suddenly, the light turns off and for a moment I'm scared for my life, but not for long, because then I hear the most recognizable footsteps and laughter approaching me.

"Gone, Satan is going to kill you if she sees you! Get out of there right now!" Enid yells.

"She's not even-" I try to make up a believable lie before she interrupts me again.

"She's coming here right now!"

*Freaking what!?! She wasn't supposed to be back for another week.*

I'm running after them as Enid grabs my hand.

"I know a better way to do this!" Nex whispers as we leave the Hell office and come to the clear.

"I know a better way to do this," he repeats, still catching his breath.

"To do what?" Enid asks, but Nex and I just look at each other knowing what he is talking about.

"Nex," I finally speak in order to break the silence that Enid caused. "What did you mean by she was coming?"

Apparently, exactly what he said.

I look down and see a big shadow overwhelming me. She's standing right behind me. *That's it. The end.*

*Dead.*

*Rest in peace, Igone.*

*Not that I am not dead already, but now I'm going to be dead dead.*

"Igone."

I turn around and see her pointing at her office. "Come along."

As we're walking away, I can hear Enid and Nex whispering about me.

"I say, the queen of Hell is going to fall."

Words said by Enid that may or may not come true.

I guess we're going to find out now. I walk into the Office (this time with permission) and I'm ready to be enlightened.

"I want to start off by saying" she sighs. "I had an amazing freaking time in the Great Canyon!"

I smile and give her a nod.

"It's so... so... lacking the smell of smoke we are constantly surrounded by in here. So fresh."

"Yeah, it must be so enjoyable" I keep nodding.

"Certainly, Igone. So, I bet you could imagine how furious I felt getting an anonymous phone call by one of the demons about so called horrific mess because of which I must instantly return to Hell!"

"I am so sorry ab-"

"JUST SO I WOULD COME HERE AND FIND EVERYTHING IN PERFECT ORDER! NO MESS WHATSOEVER!" She was so furious now, but also... did she not see me breaking into her office?

I open my mouth to respond, but I can't think of what to say. And the way she's looking at me without blinking is killing me.

"I-"

She abruptly gets up from her chair and starts talking again.

"Igone, I probably shouldn't tell you this because I was hoping you'd be smart enough to figure it out on your own, but in case you're not, here it is. Your job is among the most important and most desirable ones in the whole system. Demons would kill for it, literally. So, keep others under control, okay? When I'm gone, you're in charge. Don't let anything... or anyone keep your mind off of what's important."

I'm still nodding and smiling like she was programmed to do nothing else but that. My hand is already on the door handle and I almost leave before she stops me

again.

“And Igone? Demons are allowed to make their own deals. I just wouldn’t find someone who cannot find a better way to solve their problems worthy of doing this job.”

On my way out, despite this last part, all I can think about is the way she said ‘anyone’, I could swear she even blinked. She definitely knew. It actually makes my small demon heart warm.

ENID

In case you weren’t able to tell, Igone, Nex and I are all best friends.

And then I see him breaking into Satan’s office without inviting me. Disappointing.

But before I could start following him, I realize he hasn’t just walked in, he’s already coming back.

Holding a piece of paper.

I hide behind the nearest bookshelf thingy as he’s approaching me and get ready to spy on him.

*Very interesting.* He’s carrying a deal that belongs to, *oh my gods.* I gasp when I see it.

“Enid!”

Spying over. He caught me.

“I wanna know what you’re doing.”

He looks at me with slightly open mouth before he answers.

“Sure. Let’s go. But you can’t tell Igone.”

I follow him out of the office to whatever he’s walking towards.

“Why can’t I tell Igone?”

“You have already told her something she wasn’t supposed to know.”

“You told her you had seen me and Ayla together.”

“So what?”

The suspense of being told that I messed up another one of Nex’s plans is killing me.

“Whatever you saw, it wasn’t Ayla and me, it was Ayla and her boyfriend, the one this deal is about.”

“He looked so much like you.”

“Yeah, he’s not even real” he smiles.

That comes unexpectedly.

“How can a deal be about him if he’s not real? Nex, what did you do?”

He just ignores me and starts making his way to Earth.

NEX

*Remember when I told Enid I had a plan?*

Igone is *accidentally* walking past Ayla's university *again*. This time she doesn't look so nervous passing by, even though she notices Ayla and I had seen her.

"Igone!" Ayla yells. The first thing, as expected.

I'm sure Satan has told her something about this, but not for a moment do I think she'll listen. And I'm right. She's coming over to say hello.

"Hi Ayla."

Obviously, she's trying to make me feel like she's not acknowledging me. Nice.

"Pleasure to meet you," I shake her hand and smile.

Demons can change what their human bodies look like. Not that she would be aware of this, because she never even laid her hand on *The Manual for The Dead Working Among The Living*, let alone read it. I'd be surprised if she even knew it existed.

She smiles back. "Pleasure to meet you."

IGONE

*Is this really what she made a whole freaking deal with Satan for?*

That's my first thought when I finally meet Ayla's *reason to make a deal*.

Then she just walks away from him.

Obviously, I follow her, even though I have no idea what is going to happen now.

Well, now she's looking directly into my eyes while taking the rings off my hand.

"I still really like your rings."

A small *thanks* and a smile is all I give. And then she kisses me.

Ayla Sinclair kissed me.

"I kinda regret making that deal" Ayla says out of nowhere.

I can feel my eyes starting to water.

I walk back to the store, and a whole ocean is falling down my face. I'm wiping it as fast as I can to prevent being seen by anyone, as if any of the people who passed me paid attention to it.

Great. Now there are tears on my hands, too.

*I hate you, Ayla. I hate you, Satan.*

It's the best way for me to stop crying.

I will stop. *Stop, Igone. She's not worth it, STOP!*

Then, another stream of it comes down. I give up and keep crying like a sad, insecure and scared demon I am.

I stay like that at the store for almost an hour before Nex comes in.

"Woah," he gasps and stops right at the door, ready to leave immediately if I'd tell him to. "You good?"

"No, obviously."

"Oh, okay, I just wanted to-"

"Hey, where's Enid?"

"Okay, rude? I don't know and I can go find her if you want, but I came to show you something really important."

He's not at the door anymore, now he's walking up and down my office and the last thing he looks like he's doing is sitting down and shutting up.

I look at him trying to hint to leave. But he's not getting it, apparently.

"Can it wait?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because it's a solution to your problem!"

"Is it?" I raise an eyebrow.

*I swear if he gives me his vegan cookies or Enid's stolen stuffed animal...*

But then he dramatically puts the thing on the table in front of me, and my jaw drops to the floor. I suddenly regret every time I thought he was being stupid and annoying, ever. EVER.

"How did you get that?!" I finally manage to get that out of me after five seconds of blatantly staring at him in disbelief.

"Well, I know Satan would have killed you if you had made your own deal, so I thought you could just... I think the real question here is how you are gonna destroy it."

And my jaw is still on the floor.

"So, burning it, ripping it, cutting it?"

What a dumb question.

I roll my eyes and laugh, which tells him all he needs to know.

*We're obviously burning it.*

Behind our store, there's a big forest. In the middle it's so spacious and treeless that being able to see the sky clearly after being covered in trees feels like staring directly



into heaven. That's where we are.

I take out my barely working lighter and set Ayla's deal on fire. I feel a smile coming in as I'm watching it burn.

Suddenly the tip of my finger feels like it's been stung with a needle. I'm so excited for finally getting rid of that stupid deal though, that my brain doesn't even acknowledge the pain.

"If you ask me though, I don't get how Ayla would be worth all of this."

I raise my head and look at him, nod as if I agree, but he knows that I don't. He keeps talking anyway.

"Ow!" there's the needle feeling again, "sorry".

"It's fine. Are you okay though?"

I nod. I look at the burning deal and then at my fingers that are slowly burning with it.

"Hey, what's going on?" I ask, not being able to take my eyes off of my now burning hand.

Nex takes a step back.

Small flames keep bursting out of me and slowly setting me on fire. Is this how demons are supposed to die?

"Nex, am I dying? Can demons die?"

He takes another step back.

"NEX, I'M ALREADY DEAD! I CAN'T DIE AGAIN, CAN I?!"

I finally realize why he's been stepping away.

"Too late," he smirks. "You would've thought someone with such an important job knows that the ink you write deals with has your own blood in it, so destroy it and... this happens. Isn't that so cool, Igone?"

I take a look at myself again. My skin is almost gone, so now I can see my burning organs through it. What amazes me, it doesn't even hurt. It takes me too much time to realize what has just happened that I forget to feel the pain of being burned alive.

"At least you'll get rid of your deal," he keeps laughing. "Look, it's almost gone!"

And me with it.

"I'm going to make you feel better. Ayla said she'd kill me if she really had to spend the rest of her life with me, so technically, you just did her a favor, and I'll make sure to tell her that."

With that, Nex leaves. So carelessly, no bye, no anything.

My body is being covered in blood dripping rapidly because there's no more skin to stop it.

I lay on the ground and pretend I have already died.  
I stare directly into heaven, even though I probably won't go there.  
I pretend Lana is singing as I'm returning back into Earth.  
*And as the summer fades away, nothing gold can stay.*  
It's the end of another summer.

*mentor:* Veljko Vuković

*institution:* Prva sušačka hrvatska gimnazija

*Jakov Rubinić*

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## COCONUT

When I was young, I always loved adventures. Me and my friends would go out after lunch, and we would not come back until dark. When my mother would ask me where I was, I would always say “exploring.” That love for adventure continued long after I grew up. That is why I decided to visit Antarctica.

At the time I was living in an apartment with my sister and her boyfriend. She had just had a baby and I needed to get out of the house. For a long time, I was planning a trip to Antarctica. I decided this was the right time. I had joined an expedition and I could not wait for us to be on our way. My friend Barry had just come out of prison, and I persuaded him to come with me. The trip was long but fun and we arrived full of energy. After we had left our things at the camp, me, Barry and about eleven other people went to explore the snowy wilderness. After three hours we were far away from the camp. We decided to rest for a little bit before we headed back. Me and Barry were talking when I noticed something about twenty meters from us. I went to see what it was, and I almost passed out. It was a coconut. I did not know how it ended up there and who brought it, but it was extremely weird. I showed it to Barry and the rest of the crew, but nobody had a clue where it came from. When we got back to the camp, the expedition leader explained that there used to be a coconut farm there before it got covered in snow.

To this day, I do not know if he was joking or if that was true, but I cannot look at snow without thinking of coconuts.

*mentor: Anita Kopic**institution: II. gimnazija Osijek**Karlo Dvojak*

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## 3112: THE FORBIDDEN PARADISE

### 1. Architectural failure

That night was painful. I had been working on my robotic project for quite a while. My room was slowly turning into some kind of laboratory, a scientific one, to be specific. Untidy carpet full of dust, chemistry books all around the shelves that previously contained my dirty clothes I was too lazy to wash. Well, mainly busy, but laziness covered a good part of it.

I think it would be convenient if I explained why I'm writing this journal after all. As I've mentioned already, I was vigorously trying to combine any machine motherboard containing a high energetic value of electricity. Wait, have I even mentioned this?

Anyways, it was about 4:31 in the morning and fatigue was conquering my entire body. I was ready to give up and accept the loss. Within a matter of seconds I blacked out.

### 2. Multiversal encounter

I was awoken by a strange noise at around seven in the morning. At first it seemed like one of those dreams that make you mentally panick, for instance when you find yourself falling of a huge waterfall right at concrete. Turns out I wasn't dreaming...

I started hearing footsteps. They were closer each second. My heart was racing. I opened the door that lead to my „science laboratory where I sleep“ and felt a quick motion that made me unconscious for some time. I still don't know what that was, whether a punch or some multiversal magic...

After regaining my consciousness, I noticed a peculiar blue-skinned creature wearing chain body armor with brown, fur pants, shorts to be precise, leather boots and a helmet made of deer antlers.

We were exchanging eye contact for a while, I was mainly silent not only due to fear, but due to pure ignorance. He finally then said a word. He introduced himself and with time I got to understand what I was witnessing.

His name is Hans. He originates from the planet Utopia. His species comes from the Andromeda galaxy. Their solar system is based of energy sources that provide them with enough electric power to form midichlorians, yellow aura nodes invisible to the human eye, dependent for their Dimensional Gateways – space travel machines for the Multiverse.

They came here because of me desperately fazing electric power sources to one another, accidentally creating minimally required electric power to form bare midichlorian, enough for Hans' sense to track me.

Unironically, I was not the first human to achieve forming any quantity of midichlorians. About 1,700 other people have previously done such a bizarre thing.

Hans and I had been speaking for over four hours, right befor dawn and a beautiful sunrise, but then he told me something I never could've thought of hearing...

### **3. Banishment**

The only reason why Hans rushed from another galaxy is to prevent me from spreading the news, even worse the formula about, and only about a single piece of bare midichlorian, which isn't even visible for human eyes.

It cannot be seen even by using a scentific microscope.

Such exaggeration over a few microcells...

Anyways, things did not get any easier for me. After being taken to their spaceship, originally called the Millenial Falclurm, I was told to discuss a few things, since I could no longer stay on this planet.

While we were entering the exosphere, I was asked to choose my new home. They actually weren't going to execute me, to my surprise. I had a choice between Exodia, a planet with deep, dense forests with large living beasts and predators, each dangerous enough to kill you in a matter of seconds. Aether, a planet with golden trees, airclouds you can bounce on and perfect formation of nature. It is home to flying pigs, flying cows, flying sheep and so on. Their rules are the Valkyres, tall and beautiful angel-like ladies, who are great warriors as well. Aesop, a planet covered in mud, majority of it's surface are swamps, but on the land dominate skeletons and zombies who are inhabitants of castle ruins and towers made out of cobblestone. And last, but not least, a planet of the Great Utopian Empire itself. Utopia consists of advanced technology and modernized society. It's inhabitants are Pluktonians, Hans' species. Medicine over there is way above perfect.

#### 4. New Reality

Honestly, I was pretty torn between Aether and Utopia. Yes, I do highly admire modernity and governmental stability, although capabilities and creations of God are a true wonder.

I was told that the majority of the „hostiges“ choose Utopia, but would that truly satisfy me?

After a careful consideration, I decided to live on Exodia. Now, allow me to elaborate of a few things. I was desperate of leaving that miserable spaceship. I mean, so many things happened to me that day.

That event was a long time ago, I am pretty sure it has been about 1,300 years ago, unsure though, I lost count.

Point is, I was, and still am eccentric. I had a plan of building a small hut and living like a farmer until I die. Mad, entirely mad.

At first, I did like the atmosphere there. I had no idea why Hans exaggerated so much. I did see some peculiarly huge animals, but they do not attack you unless you attack them. I started to get homesick on the first day.

It was only about a week or so of my stay in the Forestland.<sup>1</sup> Just that morning I found myself surrounded by nine inhabitants. Our encounter did not exactly go how I thought it would, although it was beneficial.

#### 5. „One of us“

As they were surrounding me, they were pointing at me with their spears. The introduction was quick. I said, and I quote: „I am just a confused, nostalgic soul who doesn't have bad intentions, nor any intentions at all. I am here because I have nowhere else to go, so if you wish to kill me, then I suppose there is not a single reason for me to try and prevent it.“

To my surprise, they dropped their weapons. They started introducing themselves right after directly looking at one another, saying: „We have another one!“

They explained how their ancestors were one of the few people who decided to choose to live on Exodia. They had been here their whole life.

Over time, their population learned to tame the wildlife and became stable with the food chain. They had been building villages for a few decades, mostly out of wooden planks. I'd lie if I said that I wasn't shocked when I found out about their military management...

Exodians have been united with the Valkyres for a long time. It was a personal

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<sup>1</sup> Forestland is usually how Exodians refer their planet as.

union, they have been partners ever since the incident of Aesop.<sup>2</sup> Valkyres provided Exodians with a few rockets and a manual guide about how to construct one. I guess Hans would've never expected such a planet like Exodia to become this advanced, as fellow Exodian folks found his ignorance amusing.

Unironically, the first Exodian to say a word to me was one of the most influential military generals. His name is Xerxes, but he is referred to as the Inexorable One, or so he was about up to a thousand years ago... I'm in the dark when it comes to the present.<sup>3</sup>

After getting used to my new environment, including the folks as well, I have come to a realistic view of my situation. If it weren't for my habitually complicated and stubborn mind, I most likely wouldn't even be somewhere in an entirely different galaxy.<sup>4</sup> I missed home. I missed the people who used to be around me. I missed so many wonderful things, you couldn't count the number of them. I never could've thought that crumbling can, in the worst case scenario. Send you to another galaxy.

In other words, I had nothing to lose, so I proposed a plan that would either earn me remorse and fix this whole curse, or leave me beheaded. I was going to cleverly manipulate Xerxes of starting a war that we would easily win, so our territory would expand so much that Utopia's generals would wish for a partnership. Then, I'd finally be able to redirect this cursed destiny. Call me crazy, but I had no choice.

Xerxes just finished his commanding work at the military base for the day. His pathway to home was, just like of any other Exodian, through a forest. I purposely awaited for his presence.

I had come of a plan that actually worked. What if, with the help of Valkyres, we were able to take over Aesop? Then I would be given the title of a war hero, but more importantly, Xerxes, as the main general, would be given the recognition of not only the Exodians, but the Valkyres and the Utopians. That way, perhaps I could, through him, look more into the inner state of Utopia.

We came across one another in the forest pathway leading to the village. We had a conversation that lasted for hours. To this day I wonder how he had the patience to talk about his job for hours way after past his worktime. After that conversation, I was given the title of a strategist. Least expected... He listened to every bit of my „selfless rising plan“, as he called it. He agreed on convincing the Valkyres for a group up to form two-sided forces against Aesop. At that

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2 The incident of Aesop is an event that occurred an unknown time ago. It is a reason Aesop is in its current condition with monsters above and below the ground. Nothing is really known about this event.

3 This journal is written as a general throwback, therefore most sentences consist of the past tense.

4 The author talks about his will not to give up – referring to his project in the first chapter.

very moment, I realized I might've just provoked a war between the two worlds...

### **6: Rise of the Exodian Empire**

Meeting with the Valkyres went well. They agreed on providing us with enough rocket fuel and healing spells. Although they dislike fighting in general, the Valkyres have had enough of their bad blood with Aesop. Hence they were on our side.

The next day, right after the war was announced in both worlds, other elected strategists and I formed moves of our inevitable invasion. It was supposed to be a surprise attack and, thanks to the Valkyres, we had enough spells and rockets. We did not need any type of Aesop maps, as the entire planet consists of mud and swamps. It'd had just taken a few weeks, according to our calculations, for the entire planet to be conquered. But, there's a case... Strategists also fight in the war.

Day of the invasion. The people were ready. Rockets launched about 5,000 men on the Aesop land. We were armed to the teeth. We wore body armor, had shields, spears and sharp swords. There were no monsters at first, but the further we expanded, the more we found. I was never that dirty in my entire life.

The army of 5,000 men consisted of colonies. Each colony had five to ten people in. So there were roughly about a few hundred colonies. The Valkyres were given the duty to terraform land, making it habitable for living creatures.

Funny enough, those monsters were completely unarmed and not physically strong. Fighting on land was not hard at all, until we started coming across ruins of buildings. We came across an old ruined castle. I was grouped with four other people: Victor, Julian, Miles and Markos. We successfully defeated all skeletons inside the castle. After getting connection with more groups, we were happy to find out nobody had died yet. The war started of more than well.

Our colony was called „The Phantoms“ since we were quick on the attack. Our strategy was to attack in groups, so no man gets lost. We decided to spend the night at the castle we've just cleared out.

The first week of the invasion went well. We, referring to the Exodians, took over a good amount of territory. The way our conquering goes is: we take down all monsters in a certain area, then the closest available Valkyres terraforms the inhabitable area of mud and unbreathable gas into habitable environment and vegetation. We managed to take over about a quarter of the entire planet's population, with about 100 Exodians dead.

The second week of the invasion was a bit challenging, as the entire planet knew they were under attack by the troops of the Inexorable One. My group and I were



alright, Victor was sick for some time due to the amount of bacteria. As soon as we covered half of the planet, the Valkyres were able to terraform most swamps of the conquered land to habitable ambient. This act of terraforming encouraged the Valkyres to build oases. There, warriors could rest, heal and get their tools. Victor was cured and we were clean, along with 4,500 other warriors remaining.

For the third week we had faced more monsters than ever before. My group and I had been ambushed a couple of times, luckily we made it out alive. Julian and Markos got badly wounded, but with the help of healing spells, they were slowly getting better. We lost about 500 men that week, but Aesop was one step away from being ours. Valkyres terraformed nearly the entire planet while our group, united with fourteen other groups, took down three castles in a row. The entire month had been rough, but it would all be over next week.

The last day of the invasion was arguably the worst one. There were only two more castles left, but the monsters completely made a comeback and had become very defensive and in large numbers. About 4,000 warriors, including us, surrounded the area and ambushed the castles. It was a long, tough battle, but we ended up beating them all. In total, we lost about 800 more men, including Miles. Ironically<sup>5</sup>, his body had never been found. Hasn't been found up to this day, in fact.

While the Valkyres were terraforming that last piece of Aesop, all of us survivors, war veterans proud of their title, requested for the two remaining conquered castles to be kept as a memory of the Great Universal War.

The four of us „Phantoms“ returned with glory alongside other remaining survivors. Xerxes and Rhea, the Valkyre Queen, agreed to share Aesop for their own personal benefits.

„Now we're only waiting for Utopia's attention...“

## 7: The peak

Exodians were advancing quickly, thanks to all gathered resources from Aesop. We've improved our technology and started basing on it, just like on good old... Earth? Is that what the planet was called? Anyways...

We started developing power plants and they became our main source of electricity. Our building abilities surely expanded as well, we began using concrete and our villages evolved into cities. Our general improvement was too detailed to be written about, so to make it easy for visualising, Exodian cities became very similar to Tokyo in the 21st century.

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5 Miles' missing body does not necessarily mean he is dead, it points out his mysterious disappearance.

Throughout my 100 year stay on Exodia I really felt like I belong there. My life was so unique and it felt astonishing being a part of those people. I have gone through heaven and hell, I witnessed the good and the bad. My entire Exodian experience would fill out an entirely new book.

Roughly after a decade after the fall of Aesop, a letter from the Utopian government had arrived... My patience is truly a wonder.

The entire population went crazy! There were a bunch of riots, even deaths. People were seriously dying to see the long-awaited message. Luckily, I was invited to a formal meeting of the Exodian government, thanks to Xerxes. We analysed and discussed about that message.

I've read that letter so many times out of joy – my plan was finally succeeding. In fact, I've read that letter so many times that I still remember every single syllable.

Dear Exodians!

This is an official letter from the Utopian Empire, regarded as the greatest empire of the galaxy.

We have been aware of your well-earned war glory for a long while. We would like to formally express our wishes for a partnership, as you've been advancing so quickly recently, clearly as if your potential is out of this universe. We'd humbly like to help you use it.

In return, we only ask for loyalty and a personal union. We hope to see you soon, as we're gathering a meeting specifically for our first encounter. If you accept this offer, bring your most influential men to our planet anytime this month. The coordinates are  $1,36 \cdot 10^{12}x$ ,  $11,000\text{km per Y}$ ,  $(-9,33)^2z$ .

Kind regards,

Hafis, the Utopian admiral.

None of us could believe it at that moment, except me. It was simply peculiar to think I'd have gotten this far with my selfish plan.

### **8: The lion in the jungle**

Exodian government made a group plan: the meeting would consist of most remarkable war veterans, Xerxes, Rhea and our admiral Zhao. Those three were planned to hold their part of the meeting on their planet.

Now, here's the case... Technically speaking, the war wouldn't have happened if it weren't for me. It might've been my last time using that „privilege“ to gain an unfair advantage, however I still somehow convinced the Inexorable One to let me go with

them as one of the most „influential men“.

Day of the most important event for Exodians. 3 rockets were fueled. The biggest, most decorated rocket was put in the middle of the three, that rocket was for Xerxes, Rhea and Zhao. The other two were for ten veterans who Xerxes allowed to take part in the meeting. There were five veterans on each rocket. I must say I enjoyed the company... We kept making fun of Zhao because of his beard.

When our rockets reached Utopia, I simply couldn't believe my eyes. Hans really wasn't exaggerating, that place was, perhaps still is, a miracle you do not witness on Earth. The spaceport alone already looked like London, but twice as phantasmagoric.

We were greeted by those blue-skinned 7 feet tall creatures, turns out their species is scientifically called Plutorians.

They led us to a conference room on the top of a tower. It was basically as tall as the Burj Khalifa.

There, us 13, met Hafis, Utopian admiral and Hervis, Utopian war general.

You might ask... What was the conversation like? What was the topic? The subject? What is the most amazing thing there? How advanced are they? Did the two nations combine? Well..

After two hours of a boring greeting session, we finally started discussing about that partnership.

The entire conversation was repeating itself, as clearly those two generals must've fallen in love with one another. It was a lot more inhuman than anyone expected. Since it was obvious we've earned their respect, I was as calm as ever.

Eventually, I felt exhausted. I'd very rather sit by myself and read books than listen to some oldheads. I expected this to be a serious political debate, yet they ended up having a discussion about tea.

I requested to go to the bathroom. With permission, I politely left the authority room. In reality, I had been exploring the building out of curiosity. This governmental tower had four floors, each consisting of fifteen offices, except the first floor – that was the postmodern entrance.

The second floor consists of businessmen and the Senate. The third floor was quite interesting, it is a science laboratory where they test machines, power cores, chemical and biological reactions and experience. The fourth floor is a discussion place, unarguably the most boring and nonsense place ever.

That laboratory got me curious. I was tempted to find out everything about their researches and discoveries. I mean, at least to keep me occupied long enough until

that tea conference ends.

I was amazed at how far-fetched Utopian technology actually is. Everything was so clean and the smell was nice. I wasn't seeing any scientists as the building was reserved for our arrival.

As I was checking the rooms I saw something quite concerning... The Utopians were doing experiments on human beings! My first sight were asleep humans locked in chambers. I wasn't sure if they were conscious at all... I began to shiver while standing ice cold frozen. I slowly closed the doors and ran straight forward the same hall.

As I was panicking, I noticed a locked room with the sign all of a sudden. The sign reads „Keep out!“.

After everything I've done, do you, anyone reading this journal, seriously think I hadn't broken in like a maniac?

### **9: Reunion**

The room was dark and narrow. It was giving me chills. For a moment, I thought I witnessed a dark blue figure emerging from the darkness.

I was not imagining things. All of a sudden, a familiar voice reached out to me: „You shouldn't be here!“ I already knew very well what was going on.

„And so we meet again...“ – Hans said.

I immediately started questioning him about the human experiences, to which he claims is for medical reasons. He claims his actual job is protecting unknown and unsafe machines. Instantly, he started questioning me back on how I even got here in the first place. I had to explain my entire timelife of events, including the Planetarium War. I was starting to get unfriendly with him overtime, as if I clearly wouldn't be here if it weren't for him.

With time, he became entertained. I could sense a great deal of emotions and dignity into his eyes as I was telling the tale of the Planetarium War that started because of me. One could argue he saw a genius in me. Unironically, I was afraid he'd consider me an ignorant, selfish fool. As I've, somehow, earned his respect, he insisted to show me something unachieved before.

Luckily, I've never told him about my manipulative plan. That was probably the smartest decision I have ever made out there.

### 10: The good old days

As I was making my way throughout a large, dark room desperately following Hans, I began noticing a peculiar engine. It reminded me of a casual vending machine. Hans was a bit too overprotective about it, for a good reason – This was the one and only time machine ever made.

I was stunned... I could not believe my eyes.

„This could be it.“ – I thought, „This could be the end to all my problems... I could return to Earth, although a thousand years earlier.“

As I was overthinking, Hans told me not to touch anything. He insisted to bring some potions for me to see while I looked at the time machine, I've gained his trust.

Again, could any sane person, after reading this entire journal, think I would obey?

Him leaving gave me more time to think. Something I haven't written about myself is that I have always preferred younger years of life rather than adolescence. I figured I could've found an option that would make me „trapped“ between 2009 – 2012, the golden years of my life.

As soon as I was about to set the right time, Hans walked in. He already began complaining and howling. I took a deep breath, clenched my right fist and punched him across his face. Every tube broke when Hans had fallen. We started to fight aggressively. I had the upperhand of being a vet and an experienced warrior, hence I beat him. One thing will remain in the present forever... The memory of my last conversation with Hans.

„You do not want this fi-„ –Hans threatened.

Punch.

„Now you've crossed i-„ –Said Hans, in all the adrenaline.

Kick to the face.

I did not hold back in that fight, it might sound psychotic – I quite frankly liked every single bit of his Plutonian blood on my arms.

As I was holding his neck, I started overreacting:

„If it weren't for your selfish, egocentric mind, you'd still be alright. But no, you just had to ruin life for the both of us.“ – I was saying all enraged. „If you only let me go when you still had the chance, the universe finally rewarded me with the tables being turned.“ – I said, „You refused to let me go, you give no mercy, you take the lives of a bunch of people so you could get the satisfaction of completing the job for the day. Look at yourself. You're nothing but an egocentric festering in his own self-minded desire.“ – Right after speaking my mind, I grabbed Hans by the neck and smashed his head throughout a rustical oak table. I was un-

aware of his condition, I did not question whether or not he was still alive.

Revenge felt too good. I slowly, but proudly walked to the time machine. Then I began to think... I might've just, in all exaggeration and adrenaline, described Hans in a more... familiar way that I see myself? Would I have done the same thing if I were in his position a long time ago?

I let those thoughts go. Right before I pulled the lever, I whispered: „It will be just like in the good old days.“

### **11: Pyrrhic victory**

The first thing I saw once I opened my eyes was my old bed. All of a sudden my parents entered my fully colourful room to pack my kindergarten bag. I was still a bit nauseous from that shattered laboratory.

As soon as my parents finished putting me on, I was getting worried. I saw my miniature hands and fingers, same with a pure clean skin. I touched my face and felt no scars. I spoke and I heard a soft, gentle voice. My legs were as tiny as if I were a youngling. When my parents took me to the door and told me to put my shoes on for kindergarten, I flinched.

I've returned to the happy place.

2009: The first day of kindergarten. I surprisingly had forgotten so much about this place when I was growing up.

I was, still am and for eternity will be, a kid with my current moralities. I remember everything that had happened on each planet I've been to.

For weeks, I had just been enjoying myself. Who am I kidding, I have been enjoying ever since I've got here. Everytime the 2009 – 2012 time period ended, it'd simply restart.

It has been about 12 years since I've got here and I still have no remorse for doing this. I am writing this journal for future time travelers, if that universe still exists... I'm leaving it somewhere where I will probably forget about it's existence.

Time to live an eternity as a child!

### **12: Eternal Youth**

I just found this 1,000 years old journal I used to write a long time ago. Nothing changed in the previous millennium. I am not bored nor do I have any responsibilities.

One thing however, I have been thinking about my journey. I realised and accepted a miserable truth – I sacrificed not only myself, but lives of so many people and

creatures because of my egocentrism. I really am like Hans... I did too much.

I might be aware of it, however, I still feel no remorse for any of that. I've re-read this journal and I can comfortably say that I don't deserve to live the way I do now. Instead of leaving my past behind, I left everything and everybody else behind.

I shouldn't be here, but I am.

I let people die, yet I never die.

I am lost, but I am at home.

There is no point of thinking about that.

Actually, there is no point of thinking about anything anymore.. Why question morality when I'm lost in my own creation?

I am a lost soul in a forbidden paradise.

*mentor:* Renata Gal*institution:* Medicinska škola Osijek*Magdalena Šnajder*


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## WILL THIS NIGHTMARE HAVE A HAPPY ENDING?

Blackness, darkness, betrayal... Everything all in one has been haunting me all these years. Love washed away...forever in pain. It has already been 100 years without her and her smile keeping me sane. My family, my own blood betrayed me.

Just a little time and the pain will stop swallowing me...or it won't. She said "always and forever".

How could it end like this then?

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*102 years ago*

Slowly I open my eyes wishing I never did. Seeing my father staring at me immediately ruined my day. Huh, nothing new honestly.

"My dear son, you are finally awake." He sounds drunk. He truly disgusts me more every passing day. Since mother died he showed his true colours to me. I was just a blind kid to see that he always was just a monster whose child I am.

I blink and see that he is gone. My father is not here, it is just a hallucination, a dream like almost every morning since I ran from *Firewood*, my family's kingdom. I, Alexander Blackwood, am the cursed child. The witches of Firewood back then, during my great-grandfather's reign put a curse on my family name, Blackwood, under the full moon. They didn't approve of him being the strongest creature, the witches decided to limit his powers so that he could not reach his full potential.

Since the curse skipped my father after everyone thought that he would be cursed like my grandfather, they thought I would be born without it as well, but I was not. Everyone straightforward wanted me to get sacrificed as a newborn. The ritual was all set to happen, I remember the stories of that day and how all of a sudden every



magic turned into ash. It was my mother's magic, she saved me. Our people avoided my mother, Elizabeth Blackwood, even though she was their queen, the queen of *Firewood*.

With the curse they did not only limit me reaching my full potential. Because of them I can not even have my real, full form. My mother was a powerful witch from a powerful bloodline, while my father is a hybrid like our ancestors, half vampire, half werewolf and that would make me the tribrid, the only one. But they took that away from me. Now I am just like a basic vampire who feels abnormal pain during the full moon because he can not transform into a real werewolf. Besides that I am slowly losing my magic, feeling it less and less running through my veins.

My mother's last wish was for her son, for me, to find happiness and to avenge our family for what they have done to her and for what they have taken away from me.

"My dear mother, do not worry. I will get revenge for everything they did, I will get rid of the curse and bring justice on this planet. Everyone will know who I am."

"I promise you that." I say as I get up from my slumber I had on my dead mother's grave.

Leaving a white rose behind I make my way out of the graveyard into a portal my grandmother has build into the real human world.

\*\*\*

My stay is now out of *Firewood*, out of our world. I am in the human world. My presence here is not known yet and I like it that way. Walking down the hallways of this boarding school makes me realise that not even human beings are at peace with themselves. They have scowls on their faces, almost like they are beings without any emotion in them.

So cold, so heartless.

I wonder what is going on around here. I do not remember the stories about the human world being like this.

As I open the huge doors I am truly at a loss for words. My brain is now full of confusion, it feels like everything is foggy. Ironic, since it truly is foggy outside. Slowly walking on the streets brings questions and questions in my mind. I feel my heart beating rapidly in my chest like it will jump out, it is like sensing negative energy, sensing that I do not belong here. Around the corner I feel even worse. There is no one on the streets, it is like a desert but without heat and sand. It is dark, a cold breeze of wind is the only thing I hear and feel on my now cold skin as I walk even deeper through this mystery place.

Turning my head to the left side of the street brings me unease but turning my head to the right side makes me feel like spiders and snakes are crawling over my body. A broken wooden sign that shows the name of the place proves my inner fears to be true. I am not in the human world...No, no... I am in the world my father told me never to go to, in the world that he told me that became nothing more than a myth. I am in *Shadowland*, the world of every other mythical creature besides vampires, werewolves and witches. But seeing this havoc makes me question what is going on and where all the creatures are.

\*\*\*

It felt like ages until I came across some source of life, even if it was just a few hours. Enormous buildings and smiling faces are now around me. Compared to what I've seen a few hours ago at the entrance of *Shadowland*, this seems like a simulation.

"Welcome to the *almighty Shadowland*, Mister." said a voice behind me, emphasizing the word "almighty". It is laced with sarcasm. Why does the voice sound so familiar? Is it? No. It can't be him.

"What is wrong now Alex? Do you not remember me, my dear old friend?"

Turning around I am at a loss for words. "Marcel?"

"Bingo! You guessed right, want a cookie?" He joked.

Marcel Hawthorne was my childhood friend. Since we were born our mothers were best friends and that friendship bond made us at the end best friends as well. Whenever I had problems he always had my back and never left my side. He was more than a friend to me. He was family and an ally. We would always find a solution, no matter what, until he eventually disappeared and I never saw him again. It has already been 10 years.

"How is this possible? Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

He throws his head back and laughs at me, at the sky, at everything before answering me with a question himself.

"Did you really think I was dead for all those years? You really have little faith in me and my abilities."

I open my mouth to say something but no words are coming out. I try again but this time he beats me to it and starts talking again.

"I realise that this is shocking for you but you need to know that you are here for a reason and believe me when I say that you are not going back until you help me. And yes, I am the one at fault for the portal problem you had." He looks sternly at me through his black locks fanning his face.

“You expect me to help you? What do I get out of this agreement? I-I can’t believe that you are standing in front of me. Are you even real?!” I yell at him while slowly losing control over my anger.

He puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder while addressing me with words I did not expect to hear from anyone, especially not in this place.

“I know what is happening with your magic and wolf form. Your curse is swallowing you slowly and you want to get rid of it. What if I tell you that you can get rid of it if you help me save my sister and *Shadowland*?” I am just staring at him like he has grown a second head.

“Alexander, let’s go for a walk and I will explain you everything. I have even proof if you need it.”

“Fine, Marcel.” I address him, finally finding my voice. “You better be right about this.”

“Oh, believe me. I definitely am.”

\*\*\*

Constant screams, leaves rustling and a strange scent is what fills my ears, nose and takes over my senses. All my thoughts and predictions end up being true. This is not the “real” *Shadowland*. I mean, it was once, but not anymore. The reason Marcel changed the portal with his powers as a fae was protection. He wanted to protect me from the human world because a group of humans are the ones who interfered in our worlds. Acting like we are just an experiment for them to detect. That is how Marcel explained it to me. They simulated *Shadowland* trying to get answers to all their questions while all of us creatures of the night suffer and end up like robots, like dolls to play with. They did not think about the lives this investigation would ruin or about the outcome Marcel told me about. Marcel’s sister Isabella Hawthorne might be the one to bring this simulation to an end. He did not want to go into details even if I was throwing questions at him about how that is possible. It did not make sense to me since Marcel is a fae like his sister, but he can’t end this simulation.

I’m still trying to figure it out, which ends up getting myself lost in my thoughts, in my mind, as we are walking through a corridor with hundreds of red “STOP” and yellow “CAUTION” signs.

“Marcel, I...” I start to talk but before I can finish my sentence he interrupts me, again. He really can’t listen. He is even worse than me.

“I know what I am doing without a shadow of doubt.” If someone was listening to our conversation they would believe he sounds proud and brave, but to me who

has known him for years not. His voice is laced with fear. It's just a slight trace, but still there.

"I do not want to doubt you Marcel, but you better not get us dead at the end of the day." I say jokingly which makes him laugh at least a bit. His laughing face is soon replaced with a stern expression as we reach the end of the path.

"We are here, Alex."

A huge silver dome surrounded by columns that radiate an eye-sore red light is now in our sight.

"Why does it feel like I have been here already? The scent, the energy..." I say as I feel my vision get blurry while fog erupts from the ground around us.

"Marcel! Stop whatever you are doing!"

"I am not doing anything!"

Those are the last words I hear as my head hits the ground and everything goes black.

\*\*\*

### *101 years ago*

It has already been a year, 365 days.

That day, exactly a year ago, humans took us, but we managed to escape. To be honest, it was not a real escape, it was more of an act Marcel and I performed. We made them believe they had control over us while they electrocuted us and put a chip into our forearms.

After making them believe us, they planned on letting us go after running some tests, but we did not wait. We escaped and ran away from them. Those tests they wanted to perform on us were set to wash our memories away, erase everything we had heard over our stay there. We definitely heard a lot. What made Marcel the happiest was that we got a clue to finally find Isabella, his sister who had been taken away. From everything we heard, it seems she is locked "*somewhere no one can find or hear her.*"

Not true anymore. When they try to fool you, don't let them. Always have the upper hand and always be one step ahead of your enemies. That was probably one of the only good and smart things my father said to me. Which brings us in front of *Fae Shadow*, one of the palaces of *Shadowland*, now unguarded.

Marcel turns to me. "Well, this won't be too hard."

"Don't let it fool you. This is a trap, Marcel."

"What are you talking about?" He looks at me questioningly.

“Every passing year I feel my magic less and less, but now I feel it more than I ever did. It is like someone is trying to contact me through my mind.” I say as my head starts to throb making me lose part of my balance and I put my hand on Marcel’s shoulders, so I do not fall over.

“You are scaring me now. If you are trying to joke now, please stop.”

This makes me look at him in anger. I can’t believe my ears. How can he even have the urge to think I am joking? I am truly going to lose my mind.

“Marcel, are you out of your mind right now? This is nowhere close to being a joke. I am in no mood for joking. This is a life-or-death situation. Do you realise that?!”

“Of course, I do. It is my sister’s life being at risk. Of course, I do realise.”

“Then let us get done with this. We have been working on finding her for a year now and...”

\*THUD\*

*“Take this, Alexander Blackwood, it will guide you and be your friend’s and your savior.”*

We both turn into the direction where the voice came from. We end up left with nothing but a dark brown book on the ground which is wrapped with a golden ribbon so it doesn’t fall apart. An ancient witch book with the letter “H” in the upper left corner. The book belongs to the Hurricane bloodline, a very powerful one. I pick it up from the ground inspecting it.

Marcel averts his gaze to me. “Hurricane. Isn’t it your mother’s...?”

I interrupt him before he could finish his sentence. “Yes, it belonged once to my grandmother, Evelyn, but eventually it got passed to my mother. After her death I searched for it only to end up having no access to it since it was *lost*.” At the last word I put my hands up in quotation marks mocking it as it obviously wasn’t forever lost.

“I feel like something is waiting for us and it is not the voice we just heard that spoke to you.” He says as he points his index finger in the direction of the palace. It seems more like a mind game we must win, eventually. After everything that comes our way, something bigger happens, erupts like a volcano. Problems start in the distance but end like a crashing wave hitting us and disorientating us. Trying to hold the upper hand in a warzone between two sides is harder than we originally thought. This environment is steadily choking us.

“Go in the front, I’ll go in the back side. We will meet in the middle. Now, Marcel!” I order him the same moment I feel something within my being. Now with this magic, with this power I feel going through me, I can’t stand here anymore. We have waited enough. Separating us might not be the smartest move, but maybe it truly is our only hope.

With hurried steps I go around the palace and look for any signs of danger. Strange. Even in the back there is not anyone guarding it. Panic starts flooding me while feeling the energy around me with my magic. It makes me realise that I should have not listened to my instinct. I need to go back, now. Something will happen, soon. Marcel needs me.

As I start turning around, the statues on the palace start moving, weirdly blinking in my direction until the stones scatter almost hitting me but I move quickly under the old awning.

*“Look in the book, genius! Ugh!”*

What?!

*“Use your brain a bit more, wouldn’t be bad don’t you think?”*

“Who are you?” I ask, accidentally saying it louder than I wanted which makes those weird statue creatures growl above me.

*“Be quiet for once! You better not reveal your hiding spot to the gargoyles!”*

“Whose voice is that? Are you the one that gave me this book? How...” This time I whisper my questions.

*“I will explain everything to you and my brother after you guys get me out of here. Please stop saying anything out loud. You’re putting all of us at risk.”*

“But how- “ I start saying again.

*“It’s me, Isabella. The weird contact you must have felt was me. Those are my powers and that is why we can talk to each other through our brains. This whole year I have been trying to contact both of you but ended up only speaking to you. I guess you are the strongest anchor I could reach for my powers since being locked here.”*

I feel a weird sting inside me, like something is poking my brain. I probably sound ridiculous now.

*“Listen carefully to what I...It means...”*

“Isabella? Hello? Are you there?”

*“My magic, I can’t...anymore. I...”* The connection is broken now. I feel the magic just slightly but now not enough to contact her back.

From what I ended up hearing it seems that she is in a “dark and black” place. I try to remember everything she said, everything that I heard to get a hint, a clue to plan our next move.

*“Look in the book, genius! Ugh!”*

*“You better not reveal your hiding spot to the gargoyles!”*

The book. Gargoyles.

Now everything makes sense. She told me the name of the creatures so I could

find them in the book to destroy them. I start looking through the book, reading as much as I can in this situation. Creatures who are stone by day but flesh and blood warriors by night. That is what they are, what they are supposed to be. Instead they are aggressive warriors at day as well. *How lovely, indeed.*

In all the hurry and shock I got lost in my mind that I started forgetting where I'm currently at. Forgetting your surroundings can only lead to danger, or not, if luck is on your side.

Feeling annoyed with myself and my lack of powers I take a step and get out from under the awning. With quick strides I near the gargoyles while I start feeling rain drops on my forehead. Abruptly they turn to me and move towards me in hurry as I open the book. With the confidence I got from my dear mother, I stand straight and start casting the spell out loud.

For the first time in a long time, I feel powerful. I feel my powers, I feel what I am capable of. Shooting an enormous magic bubble in their direction makes them wince and turn to ash as I feel my eyes glowing red. My fangs will come out but I can't let it take over.

Pushing my lack of control away, as much as I can, I angrily go for the back entrance taking the dusty doorknob in my hand. Opening the door I'm met with a sight of a dagger near Marcel's throat. What makes my blood boil is the person holding the weapon.

Rage blurs my vision making my claws come out. I might not be able to turn into a full werewolf, but I know how to fight. Marcel is like family and no one hurts the people I care about and lives.

"You should fight someone equal. And that would be me, *father.*" I address him, hate and betrayal burning in my eyes. I won't let myself to break today.

It's *game on* now.

\*\*\*

*Blood was spilled, words were said that hurt the soul.*

Seeing one of your parents holding a dagger against the throat of a person who has been and always will be more family than the said parent, hurts. I couldn't let him get an effect on me, but I have feelings, too. As much as I do not want to admit it, I can be quite sensitive. I always saw it as vulnerability but after hearing the words coming out of his mouth about how I'm *weak* like my dead mother, it started to feel less like it, but more like a good thing.

All this time I thought he and my mother loved each other, but it was all just a lie.

Now I know that the loss of the book was also part of this massive lie I have lived in.

My mother's death was not sickness, but planned murder. Worst of it all is the fact my father had his hands in it. He did not deserve to breathe anymore, but erasing his existence from the world wouldn't do much justice.

Before getting attacked by my father, Marcel took a crystal out of the stone in the front of the palace and ran with it. Little did he know it would help us both. He channeled the magic from the stone and sent my father away. Most probably he ended up in the world of the humans, but that is no longer our worry.

I help Marcel to get on his feet. "I apologise for deciding to separate us. I acted out of instinct."

"It is fine, we have bigger stuff to attend now."

"Saving Isabella who is in a *dark* place."

He raises his eyebrow in confusion. I quickly explain to him what happened as best as I currently can.

"Dungeons. She must be there. I tried to go there but then your father appeared out of nowhere."

"Let's go, then."

\*\*\*

The entrance to the dungeons looks awful. Screeching sounds echo around us as we are getting closer to a humming sound. Marcel starts walking faster, worry lacing his facial expression.

A small black metal door is now in our view. The sight after averting our gaze down makes Marcel's heart skip a beat as he looks at the dried blood on the ground beneath our shoes. He wastes no time in opening the door in search for Isabella.

"Alex, no one is in here."

"*We are.*" A quiet voice says and it isn't Isabella's.

"The voice is coming from behind the stones. Help me move them!"

Using our strength we remove the stones from an opening we haven't seen while barging inside. One stone catches my eye but a hand stops me from picking it up. "Don't. It may look like a stone but it is a time bomb. We need to go, quickly!"

"Isabella?" Marcel embraces his sister in a hug while I try to figure out the person standing behind.

There is no need for figuring out when the person with ginger hair moves towards us. "I'm Genevieve." She looks tired, just like Isabella. They look like ghosts, like people who are no longer people, but just a body and their inner soul.



Isabella now looks at all of us while flipping her black hair over her shoulder. “Let’s skip the formalities for now. We need to go, right now.” She coughs, which makes Marcel even more worried.

“I’m fine, let’s just get away from here before this place turns into flames with us inside.”

We move quickly while helping Isabella and Genevieve. Marcel and I are still full of unanswered questions, but we remain silent for a while.

I feel someone’s gaze on me.

“To answer your question... Vincent Talon is the one that delivered the book to you. He is a vampire who escaped *Firewood* and came here. He and Evangeline Hale, Genevieve’s twin sister, are the biggest reason I could contact you with my powers.”

Marcel now asks the question I was wanting to ask. “How did you know you were trying to contact us for a *whole* year if you were left with nothing?”

“I’ve counted every single day, having nothing better to do.” Tears pool in her eyes but that doesn’t make her stop. “They tortured us with beating but mostly mentally. It was a living *nightmare* I don’t want to talk about now.” She ends her sentence and keeps on walking faster regardless of the pain she feels.

Turning to the other two, I see them staring ahead with sadness in their eyes.

“*We hope your stay here will hurt like hell, you beasts.* That is what they used to tell us.” This statement now comes from Genevieve.

This year really took a turn on us.

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### *100 years ago*

This year has truly been a win. After escaping we found a place to hide and guard it with magic. We met with Vincent and Evangeline who now also live with us.

Our magical team of six.

After Isabella broke down the simulation with us by her side, our life here is much calmer. I’ve found out that Isabella is not just a fae but also a banshee with uncontrolled power. She reminded me of the cursed child I am. She helped me a lot during this year. We aren’t that different after all. She helped me see a different side of myself and is now helping me with getting rid of the curse. She saved me from myself and I helped her overcome the horror she had to go through for a year.

We’ve been together for some time now. Almost 10 months. Marcel didn’t disapprove a lot, so that was great.

Finally figuring out my curse brings the two of us standing inside a circle in the

woods, in the place where the dome used to exist. Isabella can channel the magic from the ended simulation and from the rest of our friends, more like family now. Their support means a lot to me, but Isabella's and Marcel's faces put a bit of worry inside me. Asking them would bring me no real answer.

Isabella starts the ritual as the moonlight shines and the line of the circle burns around us. She puts my hand in hers and starts talking in a language I do not quite understand. It's different from any kind of magic I've known. I feel warmth spread inside of me making me feel dizzy.

My sight is blurry.

This feels like eternity.

Fire. Channeling. Pain.

With a scream of power, she ends the ritual which makes my bones break one by one as I turn for the first time to my true form. I start running and feel like I will fly, that's how much power I currently feel in my soul. Everything feels so powerful, whatever I do.

Coming back from my run, now in my human form, I go to the circle now seeing Isabella waiting for me with blood running from her nose. This magic really affected her.

"Isabella?" I run towards her as she falls in my arms, crying.

"I thought I could do it, but..." She coughs and puts a hand on her chest.

"What are you talking about?" I ask as I hold her closer to me.

"I don't have much time left. You need to promise me to look after our friends and yourself. Don't leave Marcel, please, promise me that."

Now tears are running down my face, too. This can't be happening. She said she was sure she had enough power to break my curse.

"I am so sorry Isabella...Don't leave me now, not ever." We both start sobbing.

"No need to apologise. It's not your fault. Don't you ever blame yourself, Alexander. I took the risk and now must pay the price. I was reckless involving our friends into this, but a hero will sacrifice the person they love..."

"...but a villain will sacrifice the world to save the person they love." We both say together.

"Believe me when I say, I am no hero." She says as the last breath leaves her mouth and she goes limp in my arms.

She kept me *sane*.

She was the only one beside Marcel and my mother to care about me.

And now she is gone and I'm left with a burning ache in my soul, in my heart, as

I stare at her lifeless body.

We promised to *always* stick together *and* fight pain away, *forever*.

She slipped away like a match falling on the ground burning it.

I guess we were a match made in *hell*, rather than heaven.

\*\*\*

*Present*

Sitting on a cold stone by the grave of the person you love will haunt you down. It happened 100 years ago but I won't stop counting. I just can't. It feels wrong.

I still remember the moment her heart stopped beating and when I slowly moved my hand to close her eyes.

After the tragedy none of us were the same. Isabella *is* a light to all of us. It hurts me to say that she *was*. For me she will always be here, one way or another.

Marcel and I are not best friends like we used to be. I don't hold him accountable for it and I never will. He lost his sister after all, his only family.

And this is my life now.

"We will meet again. The afterlife will treat us better." I confess as I look up at the sky imagining seeing her face.

I will live by this.

*mentor: Anita Kopic**institution: II. gimnazija Osijek**Zina Rea Bašić*

## CHEWING THE SCENERY

**Ak0103967+55**

The conference room was a spacious area, however with the now bustling crowd of various prominent figures, it felt more cramped and suffocating than anything else. Dim lights threw streaks of varying shades which danced all throughout the room, flashing people's faces for a fraction of a second before passing on.

The music was a force of its own, moving through the dynamic crowd, its timbre energetic and intoxicating. It caused some to sway, some to tap their feet, and others to simply bob their heads as they listened to the sound. From the speakers could be heard classical ballads and nebulous jazz music, only appropriate for such a distinguished event.

It was certainly a lively gathering with a captivating atmosphere, both of which Xander Woods enjoyed. He stumbled through the luminous magenta haze as though in slow motion, losing control of his pleasantly tired limbs. His head was slightly spinning from the cocktail he drank only an hour before, as he inhaled cigarette smoke and the overpowering aroma of various perfumes and colognes.

"So, Xan, you have a speech planned tonight?" A jovial hand slapped his shoulder, jolting him out of his reverie. He instantly resumed his trademark pleasant demeanour with a smile.

As outgoing as he was, the man still had his limits. Some people were just tedious to deal with, and even the renowned extrovert couldn't bring himself to spend much time chatting with such characters. Right now, he was less than thrilled to be stuck in a conversation with someone who he loosely considered a colleague, having bumped into him accidentally.

"Hm? Ah, no, I'm afraid that they wouldn't let an outspoken humanist like me speak at this conservative gathering." He joked, bringing his drink up to his lips.

The liquid was already lukewarm and took on a stale flavour, but he continued drinking. He was thirsty, and he sure as hell wasn't picky. The taste was somewhat strange to him, as he couldn't pinpoint the pungency that assaulted his tongue.

“Well, why not?” Michael inquired, feigning a pout. “It’d be so much fun! Come on, it would demonstrate that we welcome voices from all sides of the aisle.”

Just for that remark, he wanted to rip out his throat. What a remarkable ability it was, to palter so seamlessly to someone’s face. *One day, his lies will run so deep that he will actually believe them*, Xander thought, but remained calm.

Suddenly, the other man straightened up, as if graced with an epiphany. “You know what? You’re having a speech tonight. I don’t care about the programmed schedule; I think it’s important that you be up on that stage.”

Michael extended his left hand – he’s left-handed, Xander realised – as if to urge him to accept, but it seemed to him that he didn’t have much of a choice either way.

*He’s clearly setting me up. He wants to point and laugh while I fumble my way through a speech as a hostile crowd of reporters and commentators stare me down, then discuss my utter failure as a public speaker on his inane political talk-show.*

Xander wasn’t that stupid not to decipher the man’s true intentions, but he was just stupid enough to see this as an unspoken challenge, so he put on his finest elated voice.

“Sure! I would be honoured.” he squinted to make his grin appear sincere. When you force a smile, the eyes don’t move at all, he remembered.

Michael returned his gesture, even larger than before, and Xander knew it was all a game. “That’s really great, I’m glad you accepted. I’ll let Jeremy know, I’m sure he’ll be surprised.” He paused for a second, then added “Pleasantly.” with a chuckle

With nimble feet, he hurried backstage, leaving Xander by himself. Now alone, he could finally breathe properly. But he sensed that the peace wouldn’t last long, because another tedious conversation was about to be had.

Not even five minutes later, he was sitting at a table wondering where he had gone wrong.

“You’re giving a speech?!” Oliver shouted bewildered, as if he didn’t know which word to stress in that statement. Xander was surprised he didn’t almost spit his drink out.

He folded his arms together, his mouth stretched into a smile. “Yeah?”

Oliver looked at him for a few moments, examining his face. His brows were furrowed and his mouth slightly agape. Xander couldn’t recall the last time someone looked at him so intently, without malicious fantasies brewing behind their pupils.

“Alright, now I’m convinced you’re just suicidal.” The younger man threw his hands up in the air as a sign of defeat, leaning back into the stiff cotton padding of his chair.

“It’s just a simple speech, really.”

“It’s not about that—” Oliver cut himself off, sighing deeply before continuing. “I don’t doubt your ability as a speaker, honest. You’re good, *really* good, but you haven’t prepared for tonight. Those guys are just waiting to pounce on you, and we sure as hell didn’t come here for that.”

The way he was talking, it took Xander back to one of their earliest encounters. Suddenly, he was a reckless teenager again with dried blood on his lips and freshly damaged knuckles, and behind his scrawny frame echoed muffled sobs. Two decades ago, he was hearing that same worry once again present in the other man’s voice, and Xander had to wonder if they ever grew up. He was still picking fights he knows he cannot win, and Oliver still insistently bred paranoia inside his head.

“You promised we would just come here for the free food and drinks. Why do you insist so much on proving yourself to other people?” He wildly gestured with his hands, unsure how to convey the message to the stubbornness incarnate. “What is the goal here?”

The question was rhetorical, of course.

Xander was smiling, albeit slightly annoyed. *I can fend for myself*, he thought bitterly. It isn’t like he’s a helpless child, or a stuttering teenager. He’s Xander Woods, dammit.

“Oli, I’ve done this countless times – it’s going to be the same as it always is. And you,” he leaned over the table and flicked his forehead gently, “You need to quit worrying so much.”

The man across the table looked at him, harbouring in his eyes the same desperation from last night. It was strangely comforting, having someone worry for him that much. Evasion of such attachments became a second nature in all his relationships, but this was different. It felt different.

The black-haired man folded his arms across his chest, pale skin tightening beneath the black dress shirt. At some point throughout the evening, he removed the dark blazer and loosened his tie, as it was getting highly uncomfortable in such a stuffy environment.

“I’m still unconvinced. This isn’t ending well; I can feel it.” he squinted.

“You know, right now, you really remind me of Sam. All uptight and pouty.” Xander remarked before taking a sip of his cocktail. He stuck his tongue out a bit. Still stale. “What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

Oliver frowned at that remark. “Great, and now you jinxed us both.”

“I didn’t know you were superstitious.” Xander smirked, playing with the silver-

ware laid out in front of them. At this moment, he was trying to balance a fork on top of another in an X position.

"I'm not. At least, I think. Knowing you has really, uh, widened my horizons. I realized anything could happen."

"Really?" Xander eyed the half-empty glass of malt whiskey clutched in Oliver's hand. It's not his favourite type, he noticed. *The bar probably wasn't serving it, then.*

"I mean, you've got proof right here. Right now, you're throwing yourself to the, uh, to the..."

"Wolves."

"To the wolves! And big ones too, idiot."

Xander licked his lips. "You know what they say about size. It matters."

"Huh?" Oliver cocked his brow. "What are you talking about?"

"Jesus, does every innuendo have to fly over your head?" Xander laughed loudly, shaking his head. "With that alcohol intake, I'm surprised you haven't indulged in other forms of debauchery. Guess one vice is enough, huh, Oli?"

"I'm also shocked I haven't given in to that." Oliver downed the rest of the acrid beverage. "Considering what I have to deal with."

Xander snickered again, closing his eyes and letting a dull ache penetrate his head. He genuinely enjoyed spending time with Oliver like this, simply talking, even though they weren't entirely alone. There was still a slew of voices around them, along with the experimental chords flowing from the ceiling speakers, as well as the busy scene of people chatting and dancing that Xander had grown fond of over the evening.

That pleasure had faded since, as there was now a strange heaviness in his gut, disquiet slowly seeping into restless bones. He inhaled deeply, trying to calm his nerves. Public speaking was his strong suite, but he had to overcome the awful stage fright first.

After that, everything would go smoothly; he would crack jokes, make witty remarks that weren't too generous or too harsh, make the complicated things simple to understand, and the audience would fall in love with his peculiar character.

If Xander was good at anything, it was making others become enamoured with him.

It's a special ability only few possess, and in the right hands, it can be unimaginably powerful, destructive even. Xander himself always felt he was utilising his gift for good, disseminating morally sound ideas to better society's social structures. That's why, even now, he was still slightly trembling in his seat. There was a persistent

worry always pushed to the back of his mind, the ever-present danger of saying or doing the wrong thing, and the consequences that came with it.

Oliver returned to his seat at the table, and Xander realised he hadn't even noticed that the younger man had left to get his refill. That revelation oddly disturbed him.

"So, what even are you going to talk about?" Oliver turned to face him once again, one hand slinging over the top of the chair, the other holding his half-full glass, acting more casual than prior in the evening.

"I've... thought of something." Xander could feel Oliver visibly wince, and he smiled to himself. The commentator was deliberately reckless in most of what he did, and although 'the ends often justified the means', that just meant that the prospect of disaster quickly widened with each risk taken.

"I'll plan your funeral. Oh, and I better be the only name in your will." Oliver swirled the ice around in the bitter liquid. The motion made a nice clinking sound.

Xander propped his elbows up, slightly scrunching the rufous tablecloth neatly laid out. "Relax, will ya? I've got this in the bag, you know?"

Oliver sighed and put his hands back on the table, glass finally pushed to the side. The two men sat in silence, and they both knew everything. The final speaker was about to end his meandering spiel, presumably about government censorship of communist relations with Big Tech or something, and Xander's name was going to be called soon after.

"I know. Just, don't say anything stupid. I'm serious. And cut back on the in-the-closet jokes, or else they'll hurl you off the stage like this." Oliver snapped his fingers.

The designated speaker smiled. "I will, thank y—"

"Xander Elijah Woods, may you please come up on stage?" A sweet, sultry voice of a female speaker rang out from the stage, his name echoing throughout the now-silent chamber.

Xander grimaced, "I hate it when they use my middle name," and rose from his seat. The pundit began making his way past the mass of curious onlookers and wary stares. Some seemed meekly stunned, while others shoot straight daggers at him. The mixed reception amused him. He stole one final glance behind him, and Oliver nodded solemnly. "Good luck and break a leg. Or two."

Xander chuckled as he approached the podium, greeting a blonde haired, blue-eyed petite woman dressed in a brilliant red gown and high heels. After thanking her, Xander took the microphone from her freshly manicured hands and wondered how many other women in the audience mirrored her look. The male portion of this crowd had a type, and they weren't hesitant to hire it, be it as docile servers or as



flaunting escorts.

Turning to face the throng of murmuring guests, he suddenly became conscious. Now fully aware of just how hard his heart is beating, he could hear its drum in his ears and feel the weight in his throat. His palms were sweating profusely, he was blinking far too much and far too quickly – curse these lights – as he stood in front of at least hundred open jaws ready to swallow him alive.

Everything seemed more like a vivid dream (or a nightmare) than it had before. Basking in the spotlight, both the real and the imaginary, drinking up the languid notes of classical music and its elegant timbre, so much of life became simple – he breathed best on stage, in front of a rapt audience who awaited carnage.

They could slaughter him, right here, right now, and that was the thrill of it. That was the designated purpose; to dance along the edge of death's scythe, never falling over or behind – always in between vigour and slumber, always torn between being fully satiated and eternally depraved. His being was practically bursting with adrenaline, static buzzing in his hands and skin on the verge of running a hefty fever.

Xander knew that all of this, the worryingly alive crowd and its degenerate demands, frightened Oliver. The younger man was taller, bigger, had deeper eyebags, but his youth lacked what Xander's fully actualized – he was hungry for life.

The black-haired man watched him intently from afar, adoration and dread pulsing in his chest all the same. He was well aware of past experiences with the eccentric idealist.

Xander clutched the microphone and shifted his gaze to the face in the back. Knowing that the person who he cared for the most was there gave him much needed reassurance, and he slightly relaxed.

"Hello everyone," he addressed the audience casually, "I'm glad to be speaking to you all tonight."

"First, I want to thank Michael and Jeremy for even letting me up here, since I'm fully aware I'm not exactly surrounded by allies," he said, motioning below to the first-row tables, where the two men named were seated. They simply smirked.

He adjusted his tie and began to pace around the platform. "I thought about, in the verve of this evening, to talk about unity and compromise, I mean, God knows we could use it." A few of the audience members chuckled, and Xander listened curiously, an unusual thought crossing his mind.

He narrowed his eyes. "But before we even talk about coming to a consensus, there are some things to be addressed. Mostly on the other side of the Overton window, so to speak." A sudden, incredible urge to spill all the swallowed venom out of

him pooled inside his stomach, and he blinked a few times.

It must've been the alcohol, or the adrenaline rush, or maybe his spite-fuelled nature, that he tucked away, reared its grotesque head again. He loosened his shirt collar to allow more air to flow through, incandescent fire rising in his gut.

It must be some kind of ill to crave having everyone see you, know you, hear you. People are dying to be heard, and here he was, expeditiously lulling that ache back to sleep. Thoughts shot through his head rapid-fire, and he realized that he needed to get them out whilst there was an opportunity.

Xander opened his mouth, now intent on delving deep into the wrongdoings of those who sat below him, when something cracked. An agonizing, high-pitched ringing pierced his eardrums in an instant, and he dropped the microphone, which only worsened the effect. Anguished screams escaped his throat, eyes shut, and palms pressed firmly on the sides of his head, as he prayed for the excruciating sensation to stop.

He tried to regain his composure, but everything was spinning, and he couldn't make out things properly. After a few moments, his vision cleared slightly, and he saw a familiar figure emerge in front of his legs, attempting to clamber up onto the podium.

"I- Icarus?" Xander asked stunned. Dread and delight bursted in him all at once, and he unwillingly smiled.

"How about you call me by my real name, you dolt?" The man managed to get onto the stage and was now standing in front of him, but to the side, so everyone had a clear sight of both of them. This must've been what he wanted, Xander concluded. Even as a beloved sports icon, the kid always had a flair for the dramatics.

"Sorry, Isaac," he smiled bashfully, "old habits die hard."

"Anyway, it's a ridiculous nickname. It was never my favourite." The man spat back; obvious amusement in his voice, while adjusting his suit jacket.

To say that Xander didn't expect to see him here would be an understatement. He must've known, because he always does, and he always finds him, whether he tries to hide or not. It was an amusing game of cat and mouse, but Xander wasn't sure if he was eager to play another round.

His eyes examined the slightly shorter man, having not seen him for quite some time. Still the same, lightly bruised tan complexion, and the lip scar that seems destined to remain there, as a past reminder. The former baseball star donned formal attire but still looked scruffy, since he hasn't brushed his bleach white hair, strands sticking out everywhere.

Isaac looked the same as the last time they spoke, with grey skies above them, Autumn's brisk weather, and palpable tension hung in the air. His dark eyes held some unspeakable sentiment, and Xander couldn't shake off the weirdness of it all. It's almost as if this were a repeat of that day, the same date engraved on his tombstone.

"Wait." he spoke suddenly. His gaze shifted towards the crowd, and everyone was calm. Unnervingly calm. Their postures were relaxed, their faces still, and everything seemed... fine.

Xander then turned to the other man, frowning. "You aren't supposed to be here."

Isaac narrowed his eyes, a wry smile playing at his lips. "I'm not."

He stared blankly, feeling his hands begin to tremor. "But that's... not right."

"You really shouldn't drink whatever people hand you." The other man leaned forward, his voice dropping to a slow, husky whisper. "Otherwise, you're going to end up drugged out of your mind."

Xander's eyes widened as the room in an instant became a tangled mess of colours and sensations, unbearable sounds everywhere enveloping his being. He shook his head vigorously, his body descending downward. Trying to steady himself, he managed to lift his head and look at the white-haired man.

"If this were a hallucination, you wouldn't be so kind." He gasped out.

Isaac simply shrugged. "Alright, let's call it a fantasy then."

He began to take off his coat, and Xander peered at him, his breathing rapid and shallow. "What are you doing?"

"Well, since this is your minds doing, I ought to get comfortable, don't you think?"

"But why you? Why here? Why *now*?" Questions addled Xander's brain, thoughts swirling in his head. Everything seemed to be losing its shape, colliding with each another and dispersing into nothingness. He rubbed his eyes in a vain attempt to regain at least an inkling of normalcy.

"Guess you still feel guilty." Isaac held a drink, that seemed to have morphed in his hand out of nowhere, and arched it upwards, emptying the glass in one big swig.

He then tilted his head with a smile, which was wholly unfamiliar to Xander. The last months of his life weren't spent smiling at all. God, he was desecrating the man's own dying image in his mind! *I am so out of it.*

"There must be a reason. I'm imagining you, but also, I'm somehow dreaming, since you weren't here tonight, and I, I cannot remember what the hell happened!"

Xander turned towards the other man, who was toying with the rufous fabric which divided the podium from the backstage. "You're my subconscious, right? Why don't you just tell me?"

"I'm not you, dummy. I'm not speaking as *you* in the form of *me*, I'm talking to you as me, in my *own* form." Isaac looked up over the curtain, the spotlight covering half of his face in shadow. "You're trying to avoid something. As usual."

Xander shook his head, attempting to concentrate. He struggled to recall all the years he had spent at university studying psychology, seeking to rationalise what was happening inside his mind. All the rigorous knowledge seemed to have vanished from his spirit. He grew spiteful and wounded.

Isaac let the smooth drapery slip out of his hands, and once again faced Xander. "Let's retrace our, I mean, *your* steps. Something awful must've happened if you just wound-up reminiscing about a dead friend whilst preaching to a bunch of people who want your head on guillotine."

Xander looked at him, then down at the floor, deep in thought. "I already mentally ventured through the evening, and everything was normal up until now. So, by that logic, something must have happened during my speech."

"Ding, ding, ding! In about 1 minute, someone's getting shot." Isaac clasped his hands together with a big grin. "And that's when the fun begins."

Xander whirled around, mild panic setting in his gut. "What?! Who?!" he practically screamed. If this isn't real, he doesn't have to hold himself back. His voice doesn't have to be constrained. Nothing matters.

Isaac simply smirked in response. "Guess."

Xander stared at him dumbfounded, then gritted his teeth. "Nuh-uh! I'm not playing your stupid game!"

He was on the brink of shedding tears and began to get off the platform, when a fierce hand firmly grabbed his wrist. Xander yelped as he felt his skin burn, a mark already forming.

"That's enough." Isaac's voice now slipped into a dangerously low tone, resembling a growl. Xander was startled by his actions, but still shot him a tenacious look.

Isaac returned the gesture, looking him directly in the eyes, mysterious black meeting spasmodic green. Xander didn't break contact, instead he held the gaze with a determined spirit crackling inside him.

"You have to face this. Running away isn't an option, not anymore." he lessened his grip on Xander's wrist, but still didn't let go. Instead, he pulled him close, effectively making the restless man stand at the very centre of the podium. The pundit looked around, as the crowd was now murmuring amongst themselves, eyes wide and puzzled looks on their faces.

His gaze finally settled on the source of their consternation. There was a large

figure standing among the seated crowd, positioned on the rufous carpet, fortitude gleaming in his eyes. The dark-haired man, with a brooding stature and clenched fists, screamed at him, clearly under the influence as illustrated by his flushed face and an unsteady stance. Xander couldn't understand a single word out of his mouth. His head was throbbing as he tried to focus on the man's voice, booming and full of rage.

He then glared, a fury of his own surging inside his chest. His real-life counterpart must've said something, as the enraged man somehow, from somewhere, pulled out a gun. He lifted his arms in Xander's direction, the barrel pointed high and – right at his head.

Xander snapped back. A strange feeling coursed through him, and he felt like Atlas' protégé.

He then pointed at the man, a victorious smirk framing his snarky remark. "You're obviously frightened right now. Shaky hands, insecure posture, and you aren't even holding the gun correctly."

The man continued shouting obscenities at him, panting heavily and not letting his arms down, the barrel of the revolver still pointed at Xander's figure. Suspense hung heavy in the air, the crowd holding their breath, on edge and unmoving.

The music was low and moving freely around, a symphonic tune played by a violin and accompanying orchestra in the background. The melody was in D major, Xander realized.

"This is typical sociopathic behaviour, though," he remarked, ignoring the impending danger staring him right in the head, "always having a gun with you and pulling it out for the most unnecessary situations."

The man was now gasping for air, murderous stare tearing through Xander and his skin, knuckles bright red and bruising, arms trembling. The gun was still high and pointed.

Xander dragged his next words out slowly, a gruesome grin stretching his face. "You're impressively pathetic."

An incredibly loud boom blasted everyone's ears in an instant.

Pain. Unbearable pain. Xander looked down, shaking, at the source of the ache, and saw dark red ichor oozing from his skin, stains spreading through the green fabric of his dress shirt. He couldn't focus, as there was screaming and movement all around him.

The mob had scattered in a spate of energy, resembling a herd of antelopes fleeing a predator. In a panicked rush, everyone was trampling over each other, shouting

and shoving just to get to the door. No one was able to keep the restless horde under control.

Isaac stood beside him, an unreadable emotion behind his eyes. “You haven’t even tried to guess.”

Xander heaved violently as he kneeled on the rusted flooring. The wooden material felt coarse under his knees, and each breath felt like a fresh new knife twisting in his flesh, like a scythe slash across his abdomen. In a way, he was touching death’s jagged hand, lightly tracing over the entirety holding bones. That revelation made him feel at peace. He dropped down completely to the floor, his body in fetal position as Isaac kneeled next to him.

“As, as a kid,” Xander began, struggling to get his words out, “I had, I had a tactic to escape from my night– AUGH! nightmares! I would lie, lie down s-somewhere, and try to, to fall asleep.”

He laughed weakly, tears falling from his eyes, “and if I-I did, I would m-most often wake up in the real world. It, it was amazing.”

Isaac was still phlegmatic, thoughtfully gazing at him before placing his arms around Xander’s chest. He hauled the other man up, who was now sitting upright whilst blood flowed everywhere, besmirching most of his clothes. Behind them, chaos reigned. Xander looked up at his face, which was indifferent as ever, and swallowed hard.

They sat together for a few moments until Isaac flatly said, “then wake up.”

His eyes abruptly shot open, a gasp escaping his lips. The freezing outdoors greeted him with open arms, and Xander shuddered at the unexpected chill that the night had been fostering all evening. It was a striking difference to the stifling air inside the building, but he breathed it in, his lungs full and his mind blank.

*Oliver* was the first name to run through his head. It took all his strength to keep his eyelids open as he searched for his figure along the murky alley. He uttered the man’s name, his strained voice echoing as a foreign noise in the air, a harsh contrast to the deafening quiet. The way it came out of his mouth, it sounded like a stranger speaking.

Silence was abundant, and he wasn’t sure what to do, call out again or–

“We’re the same.” Oliver suddenly spoke beside him, his breath a cloud that quickly dispersed into the air.

Xander tightened the coat over his shoulders. Oliver’s cologne was practically engrained in its fabric, and he inhaled deeply. “What?”

“We’re the same.” He lifted his gaze, eyes dark and cryptid. “We’re both incredibly stupid.”

Xander blinked, staring blankly for a few seconds. Then, he burst out laughing – a hearty laugh, throat full of dancing timbre, a real one. It felt nice, and honest. Laughs are rarely honest. Usually forced, usually hidden, usually mocking. He hadn't been this delighted all night, and it came so simply to him just now.

A sharp stab of pain soon followed through, and he doubled over, clutching his sides. Under his skin, though, were now freshly wrapped bandages, their texture coarse and stiff under his fingertips. Xander hissed between his teeth but preserved a cheerful smile. He didn't want to let it go, not yet.

The bare-bones white winter was time for merry holidays, the crescent moon and – outrunning death. There were some things not to be contained, he mused. Feminine rage, masculine sorrow, human despair. Oliver's fears. He just has to get through it, no matter how bad it gets. Both of them have to.

"Thank you." Xander breathed, feeling warm and full of unspoken gratitude for the man sitting beside him.

Oliver squeezed his shoulder gently, "I would've done this no matter what."

"Even if you wanted me dead?"

Oliver instinctually frowned, but then shook his head with a smile. "You're ridiculous."

"By now, it's becoming a trend." Xander lifted his arms for just a moment, showing that more blood bled through the white cloth. "As you can see."

Oliver laughed, a hand over his face. It was nice seeing him like that, Xander decided.

"As I said, we're both stupid. I shouldn't have discouraged you like that, and you..." he looked over at Xander, fondly, "you shouldn't have thrown yourself to the wolves."

Xander coughed a few times and then inhaled deeply, a heavy grin on his face. A few moments passed before he spoke up again, "Hey..."

"Yeah?"

"I think you're using that idiom wrong."

Oliver looked at him for a moment, and then simply rolled his eyes with a smile.

*mentor:* Renata Gal

*institution:* Medicinska škola Osijek

*Anamarija Vukovac*

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## DARK FOREST KINGDOM

You were running through the forest for what felt like hours, but in reality, it was only a few minutes. You heard once that everyone in Dark Forest Kingdom was kind, but not that the royal guards could run for so long in those heavy, full-body armors. If it wasn't hard enough living in the Middle Ages already, you had them attacking anyone apparently who accidentally stumbled into their kingdom.

The black grass rustled as you continued running and growing more and more tired each second. You could barely see the gray, cloudy sky through the leaves of the black trees. You thought about climbing one, but there was no way that you would climb fast enough that the guards would lose you, especially not *that* tired.

You finally reached the village, but there was nobody there. It looked abandoned. While puffing and thinking where to hide, you were pulled behind the bushes. You were ready to shoot the attacker with your bow, but they turned out to be what you assumed was one of the villagers. You slowly lowered it, and the short man gestured you with his finger to be quiet. After the guards ran past you, he led you to safety inside one of the houses.

Inside the house was a family of four, and a woman with long, curly, black hair. She had a beautiful, black dress and a crown. There was no doubt that the woman was Queen Melantha of Dark Forest Kingdom. There was surely something strange going on if she was hiding here. They were all staring at you. Sure, your clothes and hair were white as opposed to theirs being black, but they were actually just shocked to see someone new who could possibly help them.

"What is happening here?" you broke the silence.

Queen Melantha sighed. "We wish we could know..."

The short man introduced himself as Talbert, the queen's main servant. They woke up to her husband and daughter missing, and everyone in the castle going insane. Their eyes were also *completely* white. Terrified, they fled to the village and told everyone to hide inside their houses.

"My name is Robin," you said. "I was practicing my archery nearby until I was



attacked by your guards. I ran all the way over here, then Talbert saved me.”

You were all so confused. Who or what could have caused this? You were discussing what to do next for a while. If you even *could* do anything. Queen Melantha then remembered Cosmosius, the wizard living near the village. If *anyone* knew what was going on, it was him. But it was too dangerous to just walk over to him with the royal guards patrolling everywhere.

“Flint. Our blacksmith,” Talbert said. “He can give us swords to defend ourselves!”

“Better than just cowering in here and doing nothing, I guess,” you told him.

Queen Melantha politely asked the family for some of their spare clothing. It would be inconvenient to walk around the forest in that huge dress, and it would be a shame if it got damaged. The family was kind enough to spare some. Finally, you three went over to the blacksmith.

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Queen Melantha knocked on the door to Flint’s house which was also his workshop, and a deep voice was heard from inside, “Who goes there?!”

Flint never liked visitors unless they came to buy something. He was a grumpy loner living at the end of the village but outstanding at his job as well. Queen Melantha begged him to let you inside. Flint hesitated for a second, but he couldn’t refuse his queen. He grunted and let the three of you inside before locking the door again.

Flint was a middle-aged man, had a messy, black hair and beard, and his right eye was fully white probably from an injury while working. He was wearing a gray apron on top of his black, villager clothing.

You explained to Flint that you needed swords to get to Cosmosius safely. He said he couldn’t do that because the royal guards had stolen almost everything except for his own sword which was in his room in the back. The miners hadn’t come back from the mines with more ores since the morning either, so you made an agreement to make one more sword if you helped him find them. Only some armor pieces were left behind, and Flint told you three to put them on. He joined you, and you started making your way to the mines.

While walking through the forest, you looked around yourself making sure that you were alone. Then, your heart dropped, and you froze as Flint, Talbert, and Melantha continued walking not noticing you were being separated. A tall, black angel of some sort was looking straight through you with his piercing, white eyes.

It felt like you were paralyzed, and he gestured you to come closer while grinning. You unconsciously walked over to him, but you snapped back when Flint lunged at

him with his sword. The angel flew away avoiding Flint's swing. They kept asking you if you were okay, but you were still processing what had just happened before gathering your thoughts and asking who that was.

Queen Melantha said still in shock, "That was *Tenebriel*. He's a *fallen angel* who attacked our village years ago, and Cosmosius trapped him inside one of his books."

"But how did he escape?!" Talbert asked. "*That* is why the royal guards are after us and everyone in the castle went insane! He must be *possessing* them!"

Flint made all of you turn your attention to him. "Calm down. Change of plan: Melantha and I are going to the mines. Robin, Talbert, you two get to Cosmosius right now. We are going to come find you as soon as we rescue the miners and make a new sword."

And so, the four of you separated into two groups. Flint kept his sword, so the only line of protection Talbert and you had were your chest plates. Yes, you had your bow and arrows, but those couldn't do anything to the royal guards' armors anyway.

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King Griffin opened up his eyes to find that he was inside of his dungeon. He was sitting down on the cold ground in rusty shackles. The only source of light were the lanterns hanging on the stone brick walls, although his attention was turned to the glowing eyes of the fallen angel in front of him. Seeing and recognizing him, he was shocked that he was back.

"What the *hell* is the meaning of this?!" Clearly afraid of him, King Griffin paused and looked around one more time. "Where are my wife and daughter?!"

"Don't worry, your daughter is in the other room over there." Tenebriel pointed to the wooden door on his right. "Your wife left you behind, so I'm waiting for the guards to bring her back."

"What do you want?"

"This land is mine, and I'm taking it back. That is all."

"Your only 'land' is inside Cosmosius's book," he taunted him.

"*That's enough, Griff.*" The fallen angel threatened him, "Take one step out of this room and your next one will be into your grave." He turned his back and walked away.

"*Who let you out?!*" King Griffin shouted, but Tenebriel already turned the corner and left ignoring his question.

The king growled from frustration and hit his shackles hard on the ground. The sound echoed across the empty room, and he felt his hands being freed. He looked

down to see that the shackles were so rusty they broke in two pieces. He now had two choices, one of which might cost him his life.

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Talbert and you walked between the trees cracking the fallen branches beneath your feet. You were lucky Talbert knew the way to Cosmosius by heart because he visited him so often when the king needed something.

“So, what do you do exactly as the ‘main’ servant in the castle?”

“Oh, I’m not really the ‘main’ servant, Robin,” he said. “I just like to call myself that. I write the king’s messages and deliver them to the village myself because I’m a pretty fast runner.”

“That’s nice.” You smiled.

“Other than that, I clean the library and rearrange books. I love delivering messages to the villagers, and I hated seeing them in such a panic today,” he said while looking at the ground. “Whoever freed Tenebriel from the book isn’t in their right mind. At least this time, he didn’t destroy half of the village... *yet.*”

Before you thought of something to say, the contrast of a white glow from behind the black trees caught your eye. You investigated the source of it, and saw a beautiful, white flower a few meters away. Looking at it, you were pulled back by Talbert.

“Stop wandering off like that without saying anything! You scared me again,” Talbert scolded you, and you told him about the glowing flower you had seen.

You led him to it, and he recognized it as the *white orchid*. It grew very rarely in Dark Forest Kingdom. Just then, you heard the sounds of clanging metal getting closer. You saw the possessed guards in the distance. Talbert and you turned around, but there were more of them. You realized you were surrounded on every side.

You pulled out your bow trying to intimidate them, and it... actually worked? You were surprised that they really stopped. They even dropped their weapons and covered their eyes behind their helmets. It seemed as though the *glow* from the white orchid was keeping them at bay. They soon picked their weapons back up and retreated.

After they were gone, you ran the rest of the way to Cosmosius’s tower. The stone brick walls it was made of were gray like the cloudy sky. The roof, the windows, and the door were black matching the trees and the grass. It was decorated all over with white plants. Cosmosius opened the door. After Talbert introduced you, Cosmosius let you inside.

The room was dimly lit with only a few lanterns on the walls and wasn’t very big

as seen from the outside. It was big enough to store bookshelves, a big cauldron on your left, and a table next to it, though. There was a fancy candleholder on the table and a ladder in the corner leading to the next floor.

“Do you have any idea what has happened?” you asked the wizard.

“Someone has stolen the book Tenebriel was trapped in and freed him,” Cosmosius said, “but I have no idea who it was, or how I haven’t noticed them.”

You wondered who that person might be. You didn’t see anyone who might have done such a thing. They knew what Tenebriel had done last time and what he was capable of, but they did it anyway for some reason.

Talbert asked, “So, are we supposed to trap him inside the book *again*?”

Cosmosius took out his large book of recipes and put it on the table. Going through the pages, he told you that the only way to get rid of him for good was with a *special potion*, the main ingredient being a white orchid which repels evil with its glow. He had trapped him inside the book because the flower didn’t grow at the time. It was the only ingredient he was still missing.

Your eyes widened as you remembered seeing the white orchid minutes ago. Talbert said to him that you had already seen it, and he told you to bring it to him. You quickly started running out of the tower back to the flower. You were finally making progress.

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Flint and Melantha arrived at the mines’ entrance. He gave her the lantern he brought from his house, and they went inside. They carefully climbed down the creaking, wooden ladder which wasn’t replaced in a *long* time. Melantha raised the lantern higher as they walked through the mines.

“Sorry if this is a personal question, Flint,” Melantha tried to spark up a conversation, “but don’t you ever get lonely inside that house of yours?”

Flint thought about his answer for a second. “I don’t get lonely. That is called being a loner.”

“But you’re the only grumpy person in the village, and I feel bad,” she said to him. “I know it’s hard after the last time *this* happened, but please just lighten up a bit...”

Flint kept quiet because he didn’t like to talk about it. The last time Tenebriel had attacked the village, he had burned half of it, knocked trees down on the villagers’ houses, and so on. It had been like all hell broke loose as soon as he stepped on the ground.

A fourth of the population of less than two hundred people had been killed by him

that day. One of those unfortunate souls had been Esther, Flint's wife. He had tried to save her from under the burning ruins of their house which had only resulted in him injuring his right eye. He had wanted to start a family with her, and everything had *literally* burned away in seconds. Flint had been devastated and decided to live alone for the rest of his life.

As they were walking in awkward silence, Flint heard something and stopped Melantha. The sounds were coming from the hole to their right, a few steps away. It was as big as a door, and it led to a spacious room. Melantha refused to get any closer, but Flint insisted that those were the miners and took her lantern. He checked inside the hole without going in and called out for them. Nobody answered.

They looked closer to see that the room was filled with spiders and spiderweb. When they saw a spider almost as big as them, it loudly hissed, and they started running without even thinking about it. While running from the spiders, they fell through a wooden bridge. The fall was short, and it worked out in their favor because they could hear the spiders passing by. They continued walking.

Flint never had to go into the mines himself because the miners always went there for him, so he didn't even know where they were going. Then, he stepped on a small bag that probably belonged to one of them and picked it up. At least now they were sure that the miners were somewhere here. Flint kept it to return it to its owner when they find them.

Later, Melantha noticed a big, black *feather* on the ground and showed it to Flint. She concluded that Tenebriel had been there for some reason. It also reminded her of the time just before his first attack when she had been taking a stroll in the forest with her daughter Feona. She had been confused by it because it was too big to be a bird's feather. When Melantha had locked eyes with Tenebriel, she hurried back into the village which she still regretted doing because he had followed her. He had most likely just been cast out of *heaven* and he had unleashed his anger on the innocent villagers and wanted to claim Dark Forest Kingdom as his own.

"It's my fault that Esther died..." she blamed herself and stopped walking.

"What?" Flint turned around reassuring her, "No, it's not! *Tenebriel* burned down the village."

"*I led him to it!*" she screamed almost losing her mind.

Her screaming echoed, and they could hear the spiders coming back from behind them which sent them running for their lives again. They threw stones at the big spider trying to slow it down. They could only hear their echoing footsteps and gasping for shallow air as well as the hissing of the big spider.

They ran until they reached a wooden plank placed over a big hole. Flint crossed to the other side, but the plank broke when Melantha was almost there, and Flint grabbed her with his left hand. The big spider jumped towards them, and he slashed it making it fall into the hole. He dropped his sword next to himself and helped Melantha up with both of his hands.

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King Griffin decided not to move after all. He couldn't bring himself to risk his life, *at least not yet*. The waiting turned into remembering how the village had been destroyed during Tenebriel's last attack. He had felt useless as a king when he had seen the villagers suffering from the castle. It wasn't his fault that he and his guards stood no chance against such a vicious being, but he still couldn't stop thinking about it or sleep for *months* after that. Now that he was back, Griffin felt those same emotions coming back again.

It was a good thing he hadn't moved because he could hear Tenebriel coming back. He took the broken shackles and put his arms behind his back pretending to still be shackled down. Tenebriel was bringing Jax, the king's jester, to shackle him down opposite him. No wonder it took him so long to catch the jester considering his acrobatic skills. Also, he was so dumb to not even realize he was in danger. Apparently, he *still* didn't realize it, judging by his annoying laughter.

"Have you found my wife yet?" Griffin asked Tenebriel trying to lower the tension he was feeling.

"No," he responded and turned around to face Griffin which didn't help his nervousness. He crossed his arms saying, "It seems that she is still hiding, so we'll be *taking it up a notch*."

He barely paid attention to what Tenebriel was saying because he was sweating bullets hoping he didn't notice that he had unshackled himself. When he left again, Griffin took a sigh of relief. He got up and walked over to Jax to unshackle him too. He then remembered that his daughter was in the other room. He tried to open the door, but it was, of course, *locked*.

Griffin looked at the insane jester again. "You are coming with me to find the key."

Jax asked, "Why?" making the king pinch the bridge of his nose.

"Because you're so oblivious nothing can kill you."

Jax took it as a compliment, and Griffin rolled his eyes. He grabbed a lantern from the wall, and they exited the dungeon together.

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You got back to the location where you saw the white orchid. At least you thought you did because you couldn't see it anywhere. It was gone. It's easy to get lost in forests, and the *gray fog* that somehow formed while you were inside Cosmosius's tower didn't help either. Fortunately, you had Talbert with you. Just then, you saw the flower's glow in the corner of your eye and peeked behind a tree.

You saw a *young woman* turned back from you dressed in the usual, black clothing, but hers had a hood. She turned around with the white orchid clearly in her hands and noticed you. Under her hood was short, straight, black hair with white streaks. Talbert couldn't recognize the villager because her nose and mouth were covered by a mask cut from her clothing.

As soon as she saw you, you politely asked for the flower. She just ran away without saying a thing, so you ran after her. She was so fast not even Talbert could keep up. You and Talbert separated trying to cut her off, and the agile, young woman climbed a tree. She was jumping from one thick branch to another like a squirrel. You didn't want to, but the only way to stop her was to shoot her with your bow when she got close enough. *She dodged it like nothing*, and soon, the glow from the white orchid faded into the fog.

Just like that, your chance to end this was literally taken from you. It seemed that this would take even longer than you thought. You couldn't go back to the wizard just to tell him that someone stole the flower, so you decided to return to the village to see if Flint and Melantha were back. You thought the girl ran in that direction anyway.

The quiet village you arrived at wasn't as quiet anymore. Instead of patrolling around, the possessed guards were breaking into people's houses. It turned out they were just breaking in, searching the houses, and going back outside without hurting anyone as if they were looking for a specific person.

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Flint and Melantha, still sat down next to the big hole, were catching their breath. She thanked him for saving her, then they got up and picked up their lantern and sword. Flint hoped the miners would know another way out, so he just moved forward.

At first, Melantha refused. She didn't know what else was hiding in the mines aside from that huge spider, and she didn't want to find out. Flint told her that she could go ahead and leap across the hole three times her size and who-knows-how deep if she

wanted to. She quickly changed her mind after he started walking away and caught up with him.

“Sorry for bursting out like that earlier about Esther by the way...” she apologized while scratching her neck and looking to the side.

It took him a moment to accept her apology, or he just did it to make her feel better. Eventually, Flint and Melantha found the four miners tied up with rope. They told them that Tenebriel had trapped them with the huge spider, so that it would kill them. The miners showed them the second exit, and they all took a breath of fresh air. While walking back, Flint raised his right hand telling the group to stop and hide. He saw a *masked girl* talking with Tenebriel.

“Get that *thing* away from me, would you?” he referred to the white orchid she was still holding along with Cosmosius’s book. “What are you doing with that?”

“Oh, right, sorry!” She put the glowing flower behind her back. “I... I took it before the white-haired person and Talbert.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? *Dispose* of them in the river then.”

The fallen angel flew away again, and the girl started going to the river. Flint couldn’t tell if she was willingly doing this or not. He told the others that it was safe to come out.

“What did you see?” Melantha asked Flint.

He replied, “I think we’ve found the one who freed Tenebriel.”

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After exiting the dungeon, King Griffin and Jax noticed a guard with his back turned to them. The guard was holding a key, and Griffin showed it to Jax. The jester then began sneaking over to him.

“What are you doing, you *fool*?!” Griffin yelled at him.

Jax took the guard’s helmet off and knocked him out with it. He brought the key to Griffin while smiling like he almost didn’t murder a man. The king was about to lose it with him, but he was sometimes so stupid that he was smart, so he couldn’t even be mad.

They tried to unlock the room Princess Feona was trapped in, but it was the wrong key. Griffin wanted to throw the key out of anger. They had no choice but to search the rest of the castle. Avoiding the possessed people fortunately wasn’t hard with Jax. Griffin could *swear* he was like a good luck charm at this point.

They searched every single room but couldn’t find it anywhere. The last place they checked was Griffin’s own throne, and it turned out to be next to it on Melantha’s.



Tenebriel wasn't there at the moment, but he must have claimed his throne, so it had to be the right key. He replaced it with the key Jax had stolen from the guard.

Griffin went back to the dungeon without Jax because he knew that he wasn't capable of pretending to still be shackled down. No one would probably catch him anyway. Then, the guards brought his wife into the dungeon and shackled her down beside him. One of them stayed to keep an eye on them, and Griffin couldn't do anything until he was gone.

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After the possessed guards left, Flint met up with you and Talbert in the center of the village and gave him the new sword. You asked him where Queen Melantha was, and he told you that she had been taken by the guards to the castle.

"You know these swords won't do *anything* to Tenebriel, right?" Talbert said to Flint. "We can't kill him without the white orchid."

"White orchid?" Flint remembered. "Like the one that girl was holding?"

"*You saw the girl?!*" you asked him. "Where is she?!"

"Tenebriel told her to throw the flower and Cosmosius's book into the river."

They wanted to go confront her with you, but you insisted to go alone. She was surely going to throw the white orchid away if she saw the three of you together. Maybe you could change her mind by yourself. Talbert pointed to where the river was, and when you arrived, you saw the girl standing at the edge of it ready to dispose of the flower and the book. She turned around and got startled by you again.

"*Wait!*" you shouted at her. "Please, before you do anything you will regret, just think about this. Why are you doing this?"

She looked to the side. "I... don't know."

"There's a reason you're doing this," you continued. "You don't just go walking around in a mask working for a bad guy."

"Well, *maybe* there's a reason why I'm not telling you!"

It was hard and stressful, but after minutes of gaining her trust and telling her that this situation would only get worse if she didn't stop, she agreed to help you. You finally found out her name: *Quinn*. You went back to Cosmosius to return him his book, and he made the potion with the white orchid. You dipped your arrows in it, and they glowed white. Quinn led Talbert, Flint, and you inside the castle pretending you were prisoners, so the royal guards wouldn't find you suspicious.

Quinn brought you to Tenebriel who was sitting on King Griffin's throne with the guards everywhere inside the room. He got up and walked over saying something you didn't pay attention to because you saw a jester sneaking behind the guards. He

threw a juggling ball at him, then ran away laughing like a maniac. While Tenebriel was distracted, Flint and Talbert attacked him as you ran to the side and got ready to shoot him. Your arms were shaking, and just when you were about to do it, you were pulled away and beaten up by the guards. The arrow you accidentally shot hit the chandelier that fell on the others.

Meanwhile in the dungeon, the guard that was keeping watch on King Griffin and Queen Melantha heard the fight and left them. This was their chance to unlock the room their daughter was in. They opened the door, but Feona *wasn't* in the room. Tenebriel *had lied* to Griffin. As for you, your plan was crumbling because both Talbert and you were lying on the floor barely alive. To make matters even worse, Flint was stabbed by Tenebriel with his own sword. After noticing the arrow that you shot at the chandelier, Tenebriel started walking towards you.

“*Hey, Lucifer!*” Quinn shouted, and Tenebriel turned around. “I haven’t actually thrown away the white orchid. I have given it to Cosmosius, and now he’s going to come with the potion to *kill* you!” she lied.

Tenebriel flew over to Quinn in a second grabbing her by the neck. “You think after everything that you’ve done, you can take it all back *just like that?*” His grip tightened. “Should’ve thought about your actions and consequences sooner, hm?”

While he was strangling Quinn, you shot him in the back of his neck with the last of your strength. He was paralyzed for a second dropping Quinn down before evaporating into a black cloud. The fog over the village disappeared, and everyone in the castle, including the royal guards, was not possessed anymore. Quinn took off her mask and hood still kneeling on the ground and started to cry. King Griffin and Queen Melantha ran into the room.

“*Feona!*” Melantha shouted and hugged Quinn while crying her eyes out.

You realized that Quinn was Princess Feona the entire time. She confessed that she had brought Tenebriel back on purpose after secretly stealing Cosmosius’s book. Feona was sick of being expected to be a princess by everyone all her life, and not what *she* wanted to be, anything else than some girl in a dress who wasn’t even allowed to go outside by herself. She thought that bringing back the fallen angel and letting him hurt people again would make her feel better, but now she regretted it deeply.

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The next day, you found Feona sitting alone by the river throwing stones into it. She told you to leave her alone, but you sat beside her anyway.

“It’s all my fault for being selfish and doing things my way, I should have just been honest with my parents,” Feona said throwing another stone.

“Don’t say that.” You tried to cheer her up. “If it weren’t for you, Tenebriel wouldn’t be gone forever!”

“If it weren’t for me, *Flint wouldn’t have died!*” she cried.

“Well, I’m sure he’d be happy that you learned something.” She calmed down a bit. “Besides, *you* should be happy that everything is over now.”

You hugged her and promised to visit Dark Forest Kingdom anytime you could. Maybe you could teach her archery or just hang out as friends.

“See you soon, Feona.”

*mentor:* Antonio Shala

*institution:* Upravna škola Zagreb

*Tara Grgić*

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## SOME SUNNY DAY

They will meet again some sunny day.

Imagine living your worst nightmare – to us they are just bad dreams, and we know they aren't real. No one thinks it's possible for nightmare to come to life. To her nightmare became reality. But which parts were her imagination and what was real?

6:43 AM; “Wonderful, even my nightmares have a sense of humor” she said to herself seeing the time on her phone. After few minutes, she decided to get ready for school. Ever since she woke up from her nightmare, everything was normal until she came to school. Entering the classroom something felt off, she couldn't pinpoint what exactly, she didn't think much about it, blamed it on the nerves because of the test she had that day. Soon after her, few of her friends came too but the feeling became more intense and when she looked at their faces, they were little blurry; like when a person who wears glasses takes them off and tries to read without them – they see black spots on the page, not words.

She got in her head so deep she didn't hear her friends call her or talk to her until one of them started snapping her fingers. “Is everything all right with you? You look like a ghost,” said Nicole. Clara responded “Why are you so surprised about that, she always looks like that. It would be shocking if she had a drop of colour in her face” and finally Robin joined the conversation, “No need to be mean, well at least not this early in the morning. Wait until first two periods are over.” Finally, it was her turn to speak “I'm fine, nothing to worry about, just my nerves.” Those being last words before the bell rang. She tried to take her mind of that feeling. She failed, kind of. The feeling did disappear for a while only because she had that test first two periods. Rest of the day was fine, few hiccups but nothing major just some flashback from the nightmare as she was walking through the school. “Coincidence?” she thought to herself when a freshman asked her directions to classroom on the second floor just like in her dream or when Clara dropped her sociology book which opened on page 36, just like in her dream once again.

17:36 PM; she was back at school once again. Every student's nightmare is to be in school longer than they need to, this was even worse. School was organizing Halloween festival, optimistic side of her joined that only because of her friends. To make memories if you will, oh how that turned out to be memory that she wants to forget. This memory will haunt her forever. Entering the classroom second time that day brought back that feeling, feeling something wasn't right. As she opened the door, she was welcomed by her friends who were already working on the banners and decorations. "This being Halloween festival, on banners we can draw any horror movie motives we can think of. Also, teachers made sure we have energy and left us some beverages and food." Robin said handing her paint and brush. "Most important thing we need to have enough are pumpkins!" said Clara. "I swear, one more word about the pumpkins, I'll spill red paint all over you, then you can be part of decorations. Our own Carrie." Nicole said, everything said was meant as a joke, well most part of it.

Those four girls don't look like they would even talk to each other; Clara being human rainbow, always cheery and happy, Nicole is and always will be "mom" of the group, making sure everyone is okay and finally Robin, the most organized person in the group, don't let that fool you. She is also the most sarcastic one and trying to keep the peace between the girls, that if she didn't start the "fight" in the group. The group isn't perfect, but which one is. Four people so different yet so similar. School might be hell for students, on the other hand, it has its benefits. Knowing each other for so long created the bond no one can destroy. After everyone stopped laughing, they started working on decorations and banners, helping other students if needed. "There is a possibility I know what we got on our tests." said Nicole with big smile on her face. Robin look all confused at her "I shouldn't be asking this, but how do you know that?" Nicole replied "Oh dear, don't look at me like I killed someone. I saw professor going home and saw he had our test, so I just asked would be a problem for him to tell me what we got. And you'll be pleased to hear we all passed." The girls started celebrating little too loud because rest of the students stared at them, they didn't care.

19:39 PM; 2 hours have passed in blink of an eye. "I guess it is true when people say time flies when you have fun." she thought to herself looking at the time. When the banners dried, they went to second and third floor of the school to put them up. Going back to classroom, they realized no one else was in school, everyone went home. Not giving much thought about it they continued working on the decorations and slowly finishing everything they started. "If I have to go up those ladders on0065

more time, I'll go crazy!" Clara announced. "You know what they say Clara, what goes around comes around. You wanted those pumpkins, now you have them." Nicole replied. While going up on the next floor, they heard a thud, like doors closing. Knowing they were alone it gave them a good scare, but they thought it was draft. In normal situation she wouldn't overthink it, she did, because she knew Clara closed all the windows right before they left.

The felling from earlier today came back, this time it was screaming at her that something was wrong. Even though they pretended they didn't care about that thud, all of them were too scared to open classroom doors. Finally, Nicole opened the doors and checked the classroom. As they thought it was empty. At least that's what 3 of them thought. She wasn't so convinced; the felling became a voice inside her head that put million worst case scenarios. "Fine, since all of you want to ignore the elephant in the room, I'll ask the question. How is it possible that draft happened if all the windows are closed inside and outside of the classroom?" said Robin in a scared and little angry voice. "Maybe we aren't alone as we thought. Maybe there is someone else with us. And if so, they closed the door bit too harsh?" Nicole replied. Clara starts "And the first idea they had was to shut the door and not to look around for others? I don't think so. If it's true, I'll kill them." No matter how much she wants to go home, she couldn't go just yet. Two more decorations to put around the door of the gym. This time two of them stayed in the classroom and other two left to put decorations.

20:12 PM; "Horror movies aren't so cliché after this night." she thought to herself. "You know what I just realized?" Robin asked her, she quickly said no, because she knew the that the only thing, she had on her mind wasn't something to say out loud. "Tonight is full moon. Perfect time for a werewolf to come out." Robin said jokingly. Going back both heard a scream and shared a look to make sure they weren't crazy. Not one word was said between them, they started to run. Both hoping that Clara and Nicole were all right. Four of them felt relieved once they saw all of them were okay. "If all of us are here, who screamed?" Clara asked with fear in her voice. A mix of adrenalin and fear in their bodies they decided to check the whole school for that person.

They knew it wasn't smart thing to do, with adrenalin rush going through their bodies, it was only logical thing to do at that moment. Taking only two things with them; phones and IDs. Before leaving the classroom, Nicole called the cops and explained what had happened. "Not to bring the mood even more down, the cop on the phone wasn't assuring about coming here." Nicole said. Voice inside her head

was so loud she couldn't even respond to that. No matter how much pain it brought her, she told the girls about the feeling and nightmare she had. "Why on earth didn't you say something before. We could've escaped this a lot sooner or, even better we wouldn't be in this mess!" Clara said with anger in her voice. "I didn't think it was true! It was a nightmare! How should I have known it would become reality!?" she responded. "Okay stop, both of you. There is no point in fighting right now. To be fair I wouldn't say anything just like she didn't." Nicole intervened. Robin, only one that was calm, made sure they were calm and ready enough to go search the school. Robin took one last look around to make sure they had everything they had. She turned the light off and closed the door.

20:47 PM; "Place we resent the most, and yet so many memories made in these halls." she thought to herself. Being in that school for 4 years, they knew how big it was, but at night completely alone, it felt bigger. The last floor of the school meant the most amount fear in them. Thankfully it was empty. Or was it? Going back on the beginning of the hall she thought someone was there. Standing staring at girls. Fear locked her in place, she couldn't move, couldn't speak, nothing, she was just staring at that shadow. "Did do you see that?" she managed to say. "See what? No one is there." said Nicole looking in the same direction. Her eyes darting back and forth between Nicole and nothing. Person or whatever she saw was gone. Even she doesn't know how, in spite of that she managed find more strength to keep going. They reached bottom of the stairs, thinking everything was fine and someone was pulling a prank on them. Unfortunately, that didn't last long.

They heard another scream. "So now what? Do we keep moving until we reach exit, or do we go check once again second floor?" asked Clara. "You 3 decide on that, I'm calling the cops again." Robin said angrily because she was hoping someone would come to check the school, someone who aren't 4 underaged girls, someone who was in higher power. She wasn't going to be nice like Nicole was. Why is it so hard for people in higher power to believe someone and do their job. She couldn't understand why cops weren't coming to help after hearing that four girls were in alone in school and they heard someone scream. "Well, no matter what we must go back to second floor. Our stuff is in the classroom on second floor." Clara said. Robin came back, saying this time cops took her more seriously and they'll send someone over. "Brilliant, we go check the hall on our way to the classroom and then we go out. Sounds good?" Robin asked the girls. "Four years in this school and all of the troubles it gave us, is this the best it can do?" asked Clara.

21:02 PM; “You had to ask.” she said with little bit sarcastic tone in her voice as she stared at the classroom with lights turned on and door slightly open. Looking paler than ever girls didn’t know what to do, the thing they did knew – they weren’t alone. Three out of four girls didn’t want to go inside, nevertheless she did. She had to, she knew the girls were too scared to do anything and making them get inside wouldn’t help the situation. She didn’t care about the paint or anything else they had with them. Only took their coats and got out of the classroom or she was about to. She turned around to get out, the door disappeared. The walls were connected, making it a square without exit. Looking around in hopes the door would show up again. She saw the same shadow from earlier. Staring at her, she felt more trapped than this whole night.

Girls being confused why she wasn’t getting out they started yelling her name, no reaction, she couldn’t hear them. Shadow was slowly going forward, when she realized that she was going backwards and kept starring at it even though it can disappear anytime it wants. Girls weren’t scared for themselves anymore, simply for her. As they kept calling her name and still no reaction. “For Pete’s sake, I’ll go get her.” Robin declared. Robin slowly approached her not to scare her any more than she already is. “How did you get inside?!” she asked to which Robin replied “What do you mean how? Through the door, just like you did minutes before.” “The door, they weren’t there, I was trapped and couldn’t get out.” she replied confused. She then looked around like crazy person. She was searching for the shadow, it was gone. Escaped once again and she felt like crying. “Guys did you see it? It came back, you had to see it this time, it was standing right in front of me.” she blurted out. “See what? Nothing was there, you were alone.” Nicole said with calm voice trying not to upset her even more. Clara then begun “She did however seem she wasn’t alone and was staring at something. Could that be her shadow thing she’s talking about?” “Don’t forget she started going backwards before Robin went inside. How about we just go home and forget about this, it could be just your mind playing tricks on you.” Nicole added. They agreed on waiting the cops and going home.

21:13 PM; “At least the night is over.” she was repeating this sentence in her head to calm herself down. “Umm guys, the door is locked.” Oh, the beauty of irony. “Please tell me you’re not serious right now. This is a joke, right?” Robin asked with exhaustion in her voice. After several minutes of silence and bad ideas, she remembered a possible solution to their problems. “Gym.” “What about it?” Nicole asked confused. “There’s second exit. We go through big glass doors, second door on the right and we are out. If you think how are supposed to open the glass doors, Robin has the keys.



Professor gave it to us we can put decorations easier.” she explained with smile growing on her face. Clara ran into her and hugged her. “So, what are we waiting for. Let’s go!” Nicole said happily. Going to the gym, the lights stopped working. Thankfully, Robin managed to open the door before lights went out. They took out their phones and turned on the flashlight so they can see the path.

As they kept holding the doors for each other, she noticed Clara was gone. “Did Clara already go for the exit?” she asked while looking behind her just in case she saw her. “No, she wouldn’t do that. Love that kid, but she would be scared to do something like that.” Nicole explained, that was followed by Robins confused face and question “Why do you ask?” “She isn’t here. She’s gone. Clara is gone.” Not surprised by anything anymore, lights started working again. Her body couldn’t take it anymore, especially her legs. She let go and let herself to fall on the ground. All of them were exhausted and now more scared than all night, as much as they wanted to go home, they couldn’t. They couldn’t leave Clara alone. They hated the thought of going back and checking every hall for second time that day and seeing God knows what. They did it anyways for Clara. Using last bits of strength, they went up one last time, no parting, going separate ways. So it begun, the night she will remember for the rest of her night. As ridiculous it seems at this point, she still hopes the cops will show up and helped them now to find their friend.

21:26 PM; “I just want for this nightmare to be over. Am I asking for too much?” she kept asking herself, that thought was interrupted by a scream. The same scream from earlier tonight. Three of them shared a confused look and thinking the same thing. How is this possible? No more thinking or saying what they should do, they just started sprinting to the source of scream. Now they wish that they even came in school. Unfortunately, they found Clara. Clara was dead. Surrounded by blood. She fell to her knees and into the pool of blood. She got soaked in Clara’s blood. In moments like this, time becomes irrelevant, you lose track of time. None of them couldn’t move for hour and a half, they were just sitting next to their friend and crying. Calling the cops wasn’t an option anymore, if they wanted, they would’ve come already. If they called the cops, what would they say, how would they explain it. “We have to go. We go out and wait for the cops. C’mon let’s go.” Nicole said while tears streamed down her face. It brought them so much pain to get up and go, but they had. What they hoped was last time going down from the third floor, was nightmare in writing. She wasn’t even looking where she was going, she was just walking behind Nicole and Robin until she crashed into them.

She lifted her head and understood why girls stopped, the shadow was back. It

may be weird, but she was thankful the girls finally saw the shadow too. “Is this the same shadow you keep talking about all night?” Robin asked while staring at the shadow. “If it is, I understand why you were so freaked out. My apologies for, well, every comment about your freaking out. Next time I do that, just remind me of this night. That’s if I get out alive.” Nicole interrupted her “How about you shut up and don’t say something like that again. Deal?” They just lost a friend, yet still managed to be sarcastic and make jokes. If someone didn’t know them, they would be put in mental hospital, those who knew them also knew it was normal to them and knew Clara would be happy they make jokes. “Serious now, what we do about the shadow?” Nicole continued. “Hear me out, maybe just maybe, we ask it nicely to move. What do you say?” Robin also continued with her sarcasm. Nicole threw her hands up in air in defeat, from that moment on she let Robin be sarcastic. “I would say nothing.” she said looking entertained. “What, why? You were the one talking about it all night, now suddenly you don’t want to anything about it.” Robin said quickly before she could explain herself. “Oh, I would something about it, that is if shadow is still here.” Robin then begun “I don’t know about you guys, I’m out of here. Nice knowing you, see you in next life.”

22:56 PM? Being so long in school, plus everything what happened, girls lost track of time. On second flight of stairs, she looked at the time “Guys, what time it is?” she asked staring at her phone as her confusion grew. She no longer trusted her phone. Nicole quickly took hers out “How is this possible? Apparently, it’s 3:56 AM”. Robin didn’t believe her when she said that. She took hers, same thing. It was 3:56 AM. They stood there coming up with theories where or how the time passed and none of them noticed. A lot of theories, not one of them made sense. They got quiet for a while, slowly started walking again, running whole night in their head. Trying to figure out where the time passed. Then Nicole remembered the drinks they had earlier. “The drinks. Someone must have spiked them. It makes sense. We didn’t always have them in our hands, someone could’ve put something in them without us noticing.” Nicole explained simply. “Okay, that still doesn’t explain the time loss.” Robin debunked the theory.

As girls said that it clicked her, and everything made sense. “Not unless the person drugged us with something that causes memory loss which explains the time loss and possible hallucinations. The shadow can be our hallucination. They put enough just for that, but not enough to kill us.” Two girls took a moment to understand what she just said. “Then explain shadow a little more. How is it possible for us we all saw the same shadow, more importantly, how did you see it before us?” Robin and Nicole

asked her one after another. She started explaining once again “This is a long shot: they didn’t put the same amount of drug in each drink. They obviously put more in one I got and then in ones you had put less. Us seeing the same shadow, was just pure luck for whoever drugged us. I put image of the shadow in your heads and then after a while you were drugged brain saw also saw the shadow. Bet they didn’t count on it. In fact, they didn’t count it would be us who got drugged. They picked five random drinks and spiked them. We were just unlucky to drink them.”

4:07 AM; It seemed their nightmare was over, their luck returned, once again they were wrong. Lights stopped working again, no scream this time, that was a reveal. However, there was no Nicole too. The lights started working, then they saw Nicole dead next to them. Girls tried to save her, it was too late, she lost too much blood, she didn’t give up on her, she couldn’t lose another friend tonight. She only stopped when Robin pulled her off and hugged her. At this point it physically hurt them to walk, their legs were tired. They decided to rest for a bit, just enough so they could walk again. “It’s funny how I said I would die next, yet here I am. Alive and breathing.” Robin said through laughter. She joined laughing, in fact she added stuff to make it funnier. They shared so many funny moments and jokes until they cried from laughter. They walked down, holding hands, not wanting to lose each other.

When they reached the gym, they hear a shuffle behind them. This time it wasn’t a shadow what they saw, they saw a man wearing all black with a knife in his hand. “Robin, run. Don’t you dare wait for me. GO RUN!” she said with a commanding voice. Robin let her friends’ hand and ran through the door. Killer came slowly at her, she was faster. She ran through the door and straight into gym and kept running. If only her body wasn’t so tired. She slowed down which helped killer and he got faster. So was his knife. He threw the knife at her right lower leg, that made her fall to the ground. She turned around when she fell, that way she could be faced to killer. She pulled the knife out of her leg, her turn to use it as a weapon. Killer got closer and closer, she managed to cut his arm. Unfortunately, he overpowered her and took knife back. Killer wanted to finish what he started, he wanted to kill all four of them, she knew that. She wouldn’t give up. She fought back the best she could. In process of protecting herself, she put her arms up to protect her face, no use, the killer managed to cut her arms and face. No matter how badly she was wounded she wouldn’t give up.

4: 25 AM; Killer beat her so bad she was lying on floor and crawling to get away from him. The killer got her. “This is the end. Well, it was nice while it lasted, I suppose.” she thought to herself. The beauty of irony, as she was about to give up, she

heard multiple loud thumps coming right in front of her. Her luck returned, with hell of a timing. She was confused about what is going on, when she opened her eyes, she had quite a view. Robin standing in front of her with trophy in her hands. “Did you really think I would leave you?” Robin said smugly. Robin continued “I remembered our professor has a lot of trophies in his office, I also had the keys. Went for the that seemed the heaviest, guess I was right about that.” She couldn’t speak, instead she got up on her feet and hugged Robin and didn’t let go. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” Robin said to her. After they let go of each other Robin asked her “What we should do about him?” looking towards the killer. “If it were up to me, I would kill him, I want him to suffer for the rest of his life. Let’s go get skipping rope from storage room. We will tie him to the ladder on so he can’t leave, lock the doors, and go out and wait for the cops.” she said coldly. 10 minutes later they were done, he was tied up.

They were outside, finally free. For first few minutes they didn’t talk, they enjoyed the fresh air and beautiful sunrise. Robin then spoke “Those cuts, they’ll probably leave scars. Everyone will get out of you way now with those. That being said, should I refer to you as ‘Your majesty’ or something else?” she laughed as she spoke last words. She continued with Robins sarcasm. “‘Your highness’ is fine.” “Well, well, well, look who decided to show up. Hello sunshine.” she said that staring at the cop that was going towards them. “Girls, whose blood is that?” cop asked afraid of the answer. “Robins” at that Robin waved at the cop “Nicole’s, Clara’s, mine and whoever is tied in the gym.” She said that almost like she was entertaining herself. Robin cut in because her friend was too tired to explain everything what happened that night. “Let me explain, we called the cops, twice, because we heard strange screams, none came, so we had to your job. In process our friends died, then we got attacked, she did more than me as you can see by the cuts. If I were you, I would call for backup and medical assistance. Now please leave us alone.” Robin explains as fast she could so the cop would leave them alone.

“Before you leave, I want you to know it isn’t just us or the killer with blood on our hands. You also have blood on your hands. You knew we called because you showed up. Which means you choose to ignore us. I hope you remember this day for the rest of your life. The day you could save two innocent lives, you chose not to. You have blood on your hands just as much we do.” she said with fury in her voice. “I will leave you alone, however I do need your names.” the cop said almost shyly. Girls thought about not giving their names. They decided to do it, they had too sooner or later. “Well, you already know mine, Robin, Robin Sheppard.” Robin explained, then looked at her friend. “Marlene Lewis.” With that cop left and did what Robin

told him. He called backup and medical assistance, not to long after the call another 2 cop cars showed up and medical assistance van. Girls talked and laughed, couldn't be bothered to stop when people came to give them medical care for their cut and bruises. In a way, every adult who was there admired what they survived and did to protect themselves. When she saw the killer, she was glad he got caught.

Next couple of weeks were interesting to say. Every professor gave them space, if they talked in class or didn't do their homework, they would say it's okay. Just like Robin predicted, other students moved out of their way, they were the only topic anyone talked about. School held small commemoration for their friends. It took time and a lot of bad days, but Marlene and Robin got better as days passed by. In blink of an eye high school ended. They were slowly getting ready for university.

8 months later; late June

Girls were on the meadow close to their homes. Little get together, enjoying the sun and summer air. Talking about their school days and summer like they weren't together the whole time. "Can't believe we are going to university. It feels like it's just two of against the world." Robin said with a dazzling and exquisite smile on her face. "I know, I can't believe it either. Sometimes I just want to stay here forever with you." Marlene said with sad voice. They stayed on the meadow for few more hours. Right before they parted ways Robin asked Marlene "Do you think we will ever see them again? Clara and Nicole, I mean." Marlene stood there for moment then answered her question "Yeah, I think we will. I know they are waiting for us." When Marlene entered her home, she went directly to the roof of her house and stared at the sunset. They'll see each other she reassured herself.

*They will meet again some sunny day.*

*mentor:* Lucija Gašparac

*institution:* Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

*Ana Šamanić*

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## IRENE

It is said a person dies twice; the first time when their soul leaves their body; the second once they lay forgotten through the years. Though she didn't always understand the words her mother would repeat religiously, the years had done their deed in making her understand. It wasn't until the woe of losing someone close that the words grasped her, closing around her neck like a lynch. When she lost her best friend, she made the very first promise she would keep. She would never allow for him to die a second time.

The room laid dark, with only a few rays of sunlight pushing through the cracks in the blinds. They created a pattern on the walls of a warm golden yellow like miniature Suns spread across the bleak white walls. In a sense, it calmed her, staring at the spotted visage of the sunlight. Her eyes danced from one dot to another, connecting them in her mind like a child would to create an image. She was aware that, despite trying to ignore it, it was time to leave her bed and prepare for the day. Sitting up, she made sure to stretch first, enjoying the sound of her back cracking into place after a restless night. Of course, the house was empty; she couldn't remember when she last saw her parents, but this was no longer an unusual occurrence. She packed her bags as fast as she could, carelessly even, in that moment it didn't matter. School was something she had no energy for, but something she could not afford to skip either. Her parents' nagging was the last on her list of wishes and they somehow always found a way to know what she was doing.

The wretched building looked the same as it did when she first enrolled. If it didn't serve its educational purpose, she would admit to it being beautiful. Her homeroom was mostly full, but it didn't particularly bother her. Her seat was empty, and it sometimes made her wonder why no one attempted to steal it. It wasn't rare for students to bicker about stealing each other's seats, insisting no one had a right to claim their place. This worked out better for her anyways; the less people she had to talk to, the better. Just another day to get through and she could go back home.

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“I’m home!” Her voice resounded through the empty house, almost like a desperate call for an answer. She learnt not to expect one anymore. Dropping her bag down by the door, she walked into the kitchen to grab a bite to eat before going out to the backyard. It was cloudy tonight, just her luck. The idea of stargazing quickly evaporated into thin air, her feet dragging as she went back inside. If nothing had changed, she could’ve called him to... Her hearth clenched at the thought, begging her to think about something else. Her brain couldn’t move on, however, and proceeded to paint an image of him in her head. It seemed so vivid, perhaps if she closed her eyes and opened them again, he would appear right there. A foolish part of her listened, shutting her eyes closed as she counted to three. Her eyelids peeled open slowly, with caution, as if not to get scared of whatever was in front of her. The only thing she saw when they opened was the hall that led to her front door. Shaking her head, she reminded herself of the task ahead, running to her room to grab a gray backpack sprayed with speckles of paint. It was lighter than the past days, confirming what she already knew; she was almost done. Checking if her laces were tied properly, she went back out the door carrying the backpack on her shoulder.

It was dark into the night by then, even darker so when the stars were shrouded by the clouds. She couldn’t keep her fingers still as she walked, constantly fiddling with them as her gaze flitted from one side of the street to the other. The houses around her seemed so grand in comparison to her figure, equal to what a dollhouse must look like to those tiny figurines. She felt so small in the dark, gloomy night; but she loved it. It felt familiar. It felt like an innate emotion, something not quite defined yet universal. Whereas her childhood self would be terrified of a night like this, she learnt to love it and there was nothing that proved her development more. At least not from her perspective.

The familiar building came into sight, her previous work still set on the concrete wall. There were just two sections left to finish, a few more details to add. Despite it all, somehow, it felt like something was missing. She couldn’t exactly pinpoint what this was for if she could, she would’ve handled it prior. Setting down her backpack, she stepped further away to assess her work, carefully watching for any mistakes she might’ve made. Mostly content except for the itch in the back of her head, she grabbed one of the spray cans and let her mind wander. Every swipe, every movement of her hand left a streak of color behind, a puzzle made that only her eyes could decipher. She knew what every line meant, what every droplet of paint represented. She let her emotions spill into them, watched them drip down slowly as if they were

carrying a heavy burden. Her breathing quickened, now with her eyes open staring at the new section she had finished.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

The voice hit her ears like a drum, causing her eyes to widen in panic. Scrambling to grab her backpack, she sprinted off with the can of spray paint in hand, some of it dribbling onto her fingers. The police officer that was now staring at the graffiti couldn’t understand how the girl seemed to vanish into thin air. It was as if she had simply disappeared. Laying in bed hours after, she could only stare at the white staining her fingers. No matter how hard she scrubbed, it wouldn’t come off. ‘No matter’, she figured, ‘it’s not like anyone will notice’.

She was right, no one noticed. Because the next day, when she sat in her seat, staring at her paint-stained hand, no one even spared her a glance. Being alone was what she needed, but it felt as if she wasn’t seen at all. When the professor called her name, a deafening silence settled over the class like a fog. “Right“, the woman said, clearing her throat, “I’m sorry. Let’s continue.“ What was she apologising for? *Irene* shrugged her shoulders, continuing to stare at the white paint. It felt a bit more comforting now, not so bleak anymore. Perhaps her ‘masterpiece’ could use some more white. Content with the idea, she nodded her head, planning this night’s escapade.

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As she was walking to her canvas, she double-checked for any followers this time, not wanting to be interrupted. It would only be two more days of work; her ‘masterpiece’ would soon be finished. The cans of spray paint on her back were getting lighter and lighter, at such a pace that she was scared they would run out before she could finish. ‘It’s alright’, she assured herself, ‘I’m sure I have some extras in the garage’. Tonight, every movement of her hand felt heavier, more calculated. It was like a steel net of realisation fell on her body, weighing her down. Just a little more and it would be finished. Only tomorrow is left, and then... What would follow? What comes after tomorrow? The jitters in her back told her not to question it, but to focus on her painting instead. Her neck was hurting more and more but she kept on going because this was it. This was her sole purpose, it had been for a while. Until this was complete, she wouldn’t be at peace. She couldn’t imagine seeing his face. Stretching out her shoulder, she stared at her work. Despite her mind being out of focus, her work was as good as usual; the colors blended perfectly, creating such shadows you would’ve assumed it wasn’t even a graffiti but a photograph. Feeling the pain take over her body, she knew it was time to call it a night. Getting back home, this was now the issue on her agenda.



The Sun rose high by the time she exited the house, sitting on a bench across it, her backpack next to her. She didn't go to school today, there was no point; all this would soon be done with. A car pulled up the driveway, a car she didn't recognise. There was a woman waiting for it in front of the house, standing next to the 'for sale' sign. Seeing the married couple together with their little daughter look so fascinated once they saw the house, it made a smile stretch across her lips. The girl turned around, staring at her with big doe-like eyes. *Irene* couldn't help but to smile wider, offering the girl a small wave. She could tell the girl started grinning as well, tugging on her father's sleeve so she could show him the girl. By the point he turned around, she was far gone and the only thing in his sight was an empty wooden bench.

The whole day, she walked through the city. Every street, every shop, every meeting spot that ever meant something; she visited them all. Standing by the fountain as the Sun set, she dipped her fingers into the water, letting its coolness bring her back. A part of her was devastated, unwilling to let go; the other had already accepted her fate. She walked slowly to the building, letting her eyes soak in the passing scenery one last time. The backpack clang to the ground by her feet, the cans inside rattling. Taking one out, she began to let her hands flow freely for the last time. Her eyes closed, the movements of her hand precise but fluent, as if she was dancing with someone she couldn't see. His face became more vivid, clearer, all the colors spilling into his face and over his clothes. The smile on his face seemed almost golden, just like the sunlight that would peak through her blinds. A sense of being at home overwhelmed her. *He* felt like home.

She allowed herself to open her eyes. In front of her, his picture stood still, just like she remembered him. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks, one after the other, as if playing a game of cat and mouse. She laughed out of pure joy because she couldn't remember the last time she felt so free.

"I did it," she sobbed through the laughter, her voice cracking due to time of un-use.

"I finally kept a promise. Are you proud of me?"

And even though he didn't answer, she had a feeling he would soon. She started losing feeling in her limbs, her knees almost buckling under her. It felt like the world around was fading away, but it was alright. She kept her promise. Soon, she would see him again. And he would never be forgotten. He was too loved to disappear from their memory. And every time they pass these streets, the face of a boy with a golden smile will remind them. And he would never be forgotten. Of that she made sure.

Irene was the Greek goddess of peace and one of the three Horai, protectors of the gates of heaven.

*mentor:* Tomislava Vijant*institution:* Ekonomska škola Vukovar*Velimir Malić*


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## I HAVE TO BECOME A BILLIONAIRE

The date is October 17, the year is 2037, and while I'm saying this, the destruction of the world is about to happen.

Six months ago scientists spotted a meteor that was 1.3 times larger than the Earth. After ten days of studying the meteor, they discovered it was heading straight to Earth.

The world governments have united to come up with a way to solve the problem. The meteor is too big to be destroyed by any human-made means. But, as always in this rotten world, the rich are left out of everything bad.

The governments have joined together to make a spaceship named SANDO that will save those people who are most important for the survival of humanity.

Of course, these are all lies. 80% of SANDO's crew are to be rich, corrupt billionaires. The public is asked to calm down and told that until the day the world is destroyed, everything would be free and every crime they committed would be ignored if they didn't do anything against SANDO. Nonsense.

On this day, the planet Earth completely merges with the path of the meteor. Some people, out of desperation, start committing suicide and other stupid things to satisfy their sick needs.

I'm Kim Kang-Dae, I'm 32 years old and I'm currently standing on the top of a building. I'm looking up at the sky and the end of this rotten world.

As I'm looking up, the sky is getting more and more dark purple. There are less than five minutes left. I am currently standing proudly at the top of the company I have created. I regret not becoming rich enough to get on board SANDO and not saving my family... Goodbye, all my loved ones...

Diingggggggggggggg!

"Mhmm"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh"

Kim was confused, he was in his room 15 years back in the past!

He quickly grabbed his phone to see what date it was. 10/17/2022.

“How is this possible?”

His thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice.

“What’s happened?” asked the woman standing at the door of his room.

Kim was still confused and then said, “Sorry mom, I was having a nightmare.”

“Hurry up so you’re not late for school,” his mother laughed as she was leaving his room.

“School?!” he said confused.

Kim was surprised primarily because he hated school more than anything. While getting ready for school, it was difficult for him to remember where all the school notebooks and books were, but he managed to be ready on time.

“Goodbye mom,” he said hurriedly.

Kim ran to the train station so as not to be late. He arrived just in time. He was wondering what had just happened. He knew it wasn’t a dream. He remembered what he was doing in the future, there was no way it was a dream.

“If it is so, it means that in 15 years’ time the Earth will be destroyed,” he sighed.

“Wait, If I remember correctly, there is a way to save my family and friends, SANDO! If I manage to earn enough money to become a billionaire, I can share the money with my family and friends,” he thought to himself.

The question of all questions was how would he do it?

The public train arrived at its destination and Kim headed toward his old school. He felt as if he was dreaming, all his memories from the past appeared before his eyes. The first drink, the first kiss, the first destroyed car of the principal.

His reminiscence was interrupted by a familiar voice. It was a beautiful, black-haired girl with amber eyes. It was Kim’s good friend from class, Yun Hei.

“Wow, she’s even more beautiful than I remember,” he thought.

Then he heard another famous, male voice. It was a young man with a cheerful face, green eyes, and light brown hair. It was Kim’s best friend Jin Jung-Su and a famous model. They headed for class.

The whole world will be destroyed, and Kim doubted he would be able to return to the past again. He has gotten a second chance of life, he must not waste it. No matter what happens, he has to help his family and friends. He has to find the way to become a billionaire at any cost.

Kim sat down at his desk and began to think. He had 15 years to become a billionaire. The problem was that he not only had to earn money for himself but also his family and friends.

“Huff,” he sighed.

“In the future, I only managed to earn 200,000 dollars with my private company, and that’s not even close to enough for me alone. Maybe I should give up and spend this time with my family,” Kim wondered.

“No! I must save my family,” he was determined.

If he didn’t take advantage of this opportunity, he would regret it his whole life. He knew what was to happen in the future, he could invest money, he could correct his mistakes.

Kim was thinking of the best ways of making money today.

“I am currently 17, and I am handsome, but modeling is not well-paid anyway. I have too much obligation to have any job at the moment.”

“I’m good at sports, but I don’t have enough time because I didn’t play sports as a kid, so I can’t become a professional athlete, but I don’t think I would make enough money in that way either.”

He was thinking what the best way for earning money was. Maybe it was the internet. People today make a lot of money like newtubers, but only a few of them would make enough money to get into SANDO. One of these famous tubers is Mr. Toast. His videos are very popular. Maybe he could copy his videos that have not yet been recorded. It was just a thought or two.

Kim sat for a long time thinking and barely moving, he didn’t even notice that it was past midnight. It’s not easy for him, he’s alone and no one can help him. There is no point in telling anyone of what is to happen in fifteen years, no one would believe him anyways.

“I wonder what someone else would do in my place, I only know that I mustn’t give up, so that I don’t regret it later, but I don’t think I will come up with anything today.”

He looked at his watch and noticed that he should have been in bed a long time ago.

Whatever happened, Kim had to earn money and board the SANDO with his family and friends. He didn’t know if there was life on other planets, but he did know he couldn’t imagine his life without his dearest.

Kim was very confident because he had known many people in his past who became rich through the Internet although he had never done it himself.

He was constantly thinking about ways of earning money. He was wondering if this return to the past was a blessing or a curse. If he gave up, he wouldn’t have peace for the rest of eternity. Every second was precious.

He definitely decided earning millions, pardon billions, couldn’t be achieved by

doing normal jobs, he had to start earning through the Internet. Many people he knew lived only from the Internet earnings, they were called freelancers.

He then remembered it was wisest to keep money in brypto currencies. The value of money is constantly decreasing, but the value of brypto currencies is constantly increasing. It is like turning money into gold since its value is constantly growing. He would not have to worry about upcoming inflations.

Yes, Kim has decided. He will look at freelance tutorials and learn from the best. Till then he will enjoy each day a little more than he did 15 years ago. Yes, why not take advantage of this situation and change his past, not just his future? He smiled, having no idea what kind of future awaits him. Still, at least he has decided on the field of earning he would concentrate on. Who knows, with some luck and work practice, the Earth destruction day may be avoided.

Who knows what the future holds?

*mentor:* Veljko Vuković

*institution:* Prva sušačka hrvatska gimnazija

*Raul Vedriš*

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## THE HORROR OF THE BLACK FOREST

One day Jack, Mark and Larry decided to go on a camping trip to the Black Forest wanting to explore the nature thereof. But that was the day they would live to regret. Unfortunately, they did not know the dark secret of the forest because they were just naive mortals. They would very soon learn that their curiosity would cost them their humble lives as humans.

It was raining on that fateful day. Jack had packed all the things needed for a camping trip before they ate not knowing that would be the last meal of their lives. They went to the Black Forest by car and got there safe and sound. It was around 1 pm when they set up camp deep in the forest. They started exploring and for five hours everything was fine until it became dark and they got lost. Larry quickly turned on his flashlight. They were scared. They did not know what to do so they just started wandering around hoping to find an exit out of the forest. But right at that moment Mark went missing. It happened in a flash so Jack and Larry did not see what happened. But something seemed off. They could not feel the ground, every thing around them was black and they were hearing strange sounds echoing across this empty void. They could not move. Jack and Larry started panicking because in front of them a creature had shown itself. It was pitch black, humanoid in appearance but had two large horns and huge, sharp teeth. They did not even get to blink for another second before the demon killed them in an instant. In the end, one could only hear the cries of their devoured souls.

That was 50 years ago and many more had fallen to the hands of the sinister demon of the Black Forest.

*mentor:* Veljko Vuković

*institution:* Prva sušačka hrvatska gimnazija

*Karlo Kuzma*

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## HIDDEN BELOW THE ICE

We had just arrived in a small base in Antarctica when a lady gave us all the instructions and equipment that we needed for our trip to the south pole. I was traveling with my friends Rob and Bob.

The next morning we left the base and started off the adventure. The first couple of days went fine, but as we were walking on the fifth day we saw a huge snowstorm approaching us. We quickly found a rock we could hide behind during the storm. The storm lasted for hours and we were really cold and just hoped for the best. After the storm everything seemed fine until we discovered that our compass and communication systems stopped working. We were abandoned in the middle of Antarctica, so we started walking in the direction we thought we had come from. After walking for hours, we stumbled upon an abandoned igloo. Everything seemed normal about it until we discovered a hidden door inside it. We opened the door and saw a staircase going down below the ice sheet of Antarctica. Eventually, we reached the end of the staircase and found ourselves in a huge lab filled with big screens and state-of-the-art technology. As we were walking in the other room, we heard a noise coming from the staircase. We ran into the room and closed the door. We could not believe our eyes. In front of us was an army of armed robot penguins ready to take over the world. Suddenly, the door behind us opened and we saw the lady from the base pointing a gun at us.

We woke up a week later in a helicopter looking over New York City in flames with robot penguins running around and taking people as hostages. “If only someone discovered the cave sooner”, I thought to myself.

*mentor:* Edita Klobučar  
*institution:* Gimnazija Gospić

*Božo Alić*

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## LOVE THAT NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

This is a story of a man who lived a life that could be seen as empty and pathetic until a series of events changed his whole perception of the world. He didn't go out of his house often, the problem wasn't his lack of friends, he had a good amount, it was his perception of the world that was unrealistic and completely made up in his head. He finally went out with a few friends and ended up as a witness in a criminal case. He wasn't at all prepared for what was awaiting him. An incredibly hard few weeks full of betrayal and despicable events, but there was a positive outcome from this that was going to change his life. The night of the incident he actually stumbled upon an old friend that he didn't see in years because he moved to another city. Harry was his name, a pretty tall dark brown haired intellectual who was full of knowledge from his experiences because life didn't give him an easy path. Incredibly fortunately for him Harry was a good soul and helped him with everything in those two weeks. Almost every day they spent a few hours talking and that was the thing that saved him and his sanity. Luckily for him this was only the start of a journey to true happiness.

Harry finally returned to my city after four weeks. We were thrilled to see each other and to share more stories from the lost years in which we haven't spoken. Going to the local pub, laughter was already taking over us so I knew this would be a night to remember. At first we drank coffee, but shortly switched it for whisky. For hours we kept talking and laughing about old memories and new experiences. It was starting to get dark, but he invited me to spend some more time with his friends and get to know them. I couldn't say no, after how we hit that night off. Fifteen minutes pass and I see a small group of people walking to our table. The very first was Clarence, an incredibly tall guy with short curly blond hair. He was incredibly intelligent and full of facts that leave you wondering how he even learnt them. Next to Clarence was Toby, another tall individual whose only difference was he had short straight black hair. He doesn't speak about random facts and you wouldn't think much about his academic successes until you ask him about it, and find out he is going to a second college about informatics. At that moment I thought that was the whole group



but behind all those guys was a lady. Valera was a meter sixty and hidden behind the guys. She had gorgeous, rich, lengthy hair the color of blood, eyes the color of whisky which could see right through your soul, a smile that would make you get butterflies at an instant. She wore a black, silk button up shirt and a black leather jacket. Her soul appearance was majestic, absolutely stunning. While I was getting charmed by her looks she introduced herself with a voice that was so beautiful it reminded me of a Greek goddess and gave me a hug, the smell of her perfume immediately took over me. My friend Harry told me how he met Clarence and Toby but left out Valera. Through conversation I found out that it was his sister. I had a wonderful time that night but that red angel wasn't leaving my mind. I started hanging out with the whole group, but I still haven't had the courage to ask Valera out to a coffee for just the two of us. One night Harry and I were hanging out at the pub and Valera came over. Harry left shortly because we were at the pub almost that whole day but I was begging in my head that Valera stays, and she did. We were drinking white wine and Coca-Cola while talking about so many subjects that night. Psychology, anatomy, astronomy, mythology, religion and love were just some topics that we covered.

Valera: "If you just look at how religion brings people together it is fascinating."

Me: "Well if you look at how it divides people it can be a whole other story."

Valera: "You just need to look at all the similarities between them like gates of hell, it is similar in all religions but there..."

My thoughts completely strayed away just looking at her speak about something with this kind of passion and knowledge.

Me: "How do you speak about these things so freely and how do you know so much about them?"

Valera: "Well I like to research what I find interesting and with you I feel I can talk about anything."

I was fascinated by how much she knew about such a wide range of topics and that she trusted me in such a short amount of time but I also trusted her completely so it wasn't that strange in my eyes. We were so into our conversation we didn't even notice that the pub was almost empty because they were closing. Valera already had her driver's license so she drove us to a bench that was a little more distant from the city, the only thing you could see was the graveyard. That bench was so distant from anything living that you would feel free to talk about whatever pops on your mind and Valera was the exact person you wanted to have a conversation like that with. While we were staring at the full moon a feeling of inner peace and prosperity took over my whole being. Our conversation continued right where it stopped and then

took a turn and we talked about music and films for hours and hours more. That experience stayed in my mind as a representation of a perfect night. Since that night we talked every day and spent time with each other as frequently as possible. One night when the pub was full of strangers she asked me about what I see happening around us. I had a pretty simple answer with a few things I noticed about a couple that was sitting close to us.

Me: “So tell me what you see.”

Valera: “That group of friends has two love triangles and the group next to them has one love triangle and the fourth person is probably in a different relationship with how he acts towards the other two girls. Those two are going to fight until the end of the night. Now those two are going to...”

She continued to make predictions for everybody in the bar. I didn’t believe that more than two of those will come true

Me: “I don’t believe that you can tell what will happen to them just by looking at them. What do you base it on?”

Valera: “Some people just have an eye for those things.”

Me: “Yeah, what did that eye of yours tell you about me then?”

Valera: “It told me that you are a good guy that is not interested in me but has strong feelings towards me but your intentions are pure and you just want somebody that you could talk to freely and have fun with.”

I was baffled because I didn’t know all of that but it was all correct when I ran it through my head. That night I found out how socially intelligent she was just from seeing all her predictions come true. Every single thing she said was correct and purely based on body language and how people looked at each other. Power like that was incomprehensible to me because I couldn’t read what people really think while they were talking to me, not to mention how much I could say about random people that were only in a room with me. Regular coffees, rides, bakery visits and visits to her house were attaching me to Valera in a way I couldn’t explain. One day Valera went on a trip and I finally got some time to think how much my life has changed during this summer. I was happier than ever spending time with the boys and Valera but I still haven’t figured out how I really feel about the red angel that took over my life. I didn’t sleep at all that night but I did get to understand that Valera nailed it on the head. I definitely loved her but not in a romantic way but purely platonic. It was the strongest love in a platonic relationship I have ever felt. A few days later she came back from the trip and I looked at her differently, more fondly and more purely all in all. Through conversation she cleared up a lot of situations I just couldn’t figure out

by myself. My life was improving more and more thanks to her, without her even noticing how much she was doing for me. The amount of new interests I found thanks to her was uncountable. One night I could clearly see that she was incredibly upset. To my surprise I actually helped her, mostly just by listening but nevertheless helped. This made me realize even social geniuses have social problems that could be solved with a little simpler thinking. That realization made me feel accomplished because I could help Valera a little and that was all I wanted during that whole conversation. Summer was near its end and for me everything was perfect. I started going to school again and Valera started working. As I expected we started spending less time together but still talked every day. When I got some free time from school, she was busy with work or something else. When she had time I had tests and projects to work on so we would sometimes not see each other for weeks on end and I didn't like that at all but we still talked everyday so I knew we weren't growing apart. A streak of three weeks has passed since we haven't seen each other. We were talking on the phone and she was telling me about her trip that she was on last weekend. We finally succeeded in planning a coffee together. Tomorrow at seven pm. She was supposed to pick me up. I went to sleep that night excited and ecstatic because I missed her a lot already. In the morning I was incredibly fast with everything, even in school I tried paying attention or trying to make it seem like I was while I was thinking of seeing her today. The day I awaited for three weeks, unknowingly was the day that would turn my life upside down again but not in a good way but in the completely other direction. I got a call from Harry shortly after school ended and he said to me that I should prepare myself for really bad news. Valera had a crash that day on the way to work; she was dead on the spot. Some drunk was driving home after he got kicked out of a bar and did not stop at the stop sign; he hit the driver's side of Valera's car at full speed. Ron was the name of the drunk and he got out of the accident basically unharmed. After this his life fell apart and I can't say I wish it was any different. In such a short time my life was in ruins and everything I wanted in my measly life collapsed. From an optimistic young guy with aspirations I started to turn everything that was under my control to a pessimistic mess of shattered hopes and dreams. In my room I got overwhelmed by sadness and regret. An indescribable pain took over my whole body and mind. First time in my life I experienced the loss of something so valuable to me and couldn't handle it. I definitely spent at least 4 hours locked in my room crying my soul out. After I informed my family of what happened all of my family members offered help and a chance to speak to them separately if I needed to. Unfortunately I did the worst thing a person can do in a time of

great loss, closed off everyone and everything. In my mind there was no point in talking to anybody about anything because no one would understand me as she did. The next day I didn't go to school and I wasn't planning on going anywhere. While my thoughts were destroying everything in their path inside of me, a little light still remained. There was one person I knew felt exactly the way I did and probably even worse, he wasn't any of her friends or her so-called soul mates, it was her brother Harry. When I remembered I haven't helped Harry in a single way since he called me, it made me feel even less of a person than I already felt. While walking to his house I was thinking of sentences that I could say and which could describe what I wanted to say, unsuccessfully. I got myself in front of his door in no time just knocking and hoping Harry was going to answer the door because if a different family member opened the door I couldn't have handled the situation. The door opened and Harry was standing there obviously as broken as me but also glad to see me. We didn't exchange any words, just hugged and taped each other on the back. I went in and greeted others the best way I could, but the hardest part was definitely seeing their smaller brother. Me and Harry went to his room and tried to convince one another that we were functional and not to worry about the second guy but yourself. We felt a little better around each other but there was nothing to fill the void spreading in us. A few days went by and the day of her funeral came. I wore my finest suit and my finest shoes but still felt underdressed for the occasion, of course there was no clothes that would satisfy my expectations at that moment. At the ceremony there was a huge amount of people which made me feel happy but disgusted at the same time. I looked at the crowd in two different ways. The first one was that the sheer amount of people represents how much of an impact she had on this world. The other side of me was disgusted with how many people tried making it look like Valera meant so much to them but they were just there to show off themselves in public. The funeral did not do good for me it just made me realize all good memories I had with Valera were never going to happen again. A funeral should provide closure unfortunately for me it just closed the happy side of the story. Later that day I still haven't left the graveyard, it was 10 pm. and I couldn't leave, something was holding me. I walked behind the graveyard to the bench that we spent so much time on together. That bench represented a happy place for me but this time it was just a place of memories which were crushing me. That whole night I spent gazing into the universe until morning, just looking for an answer hoping it would ease the pain. Days, weeks and even months passed without me finding that answer but in the meantime I made a deal with Valera's family to get her crashed car because they couldn't look

at it but for me it was the only place I could be even remotely happy as I was while she was here. I got back into my routine and was passing in school, but nothing was the same as before. Happiness didn't feel the same it felt emptier and more meaningless. As I expected almost nobody even remembers her now, to them she is just an empty memory now. I got that feeling because her anniversary was getting close and all those people that were telling stories at her funeral didn't even care. Two days before her anniversary I had another breakdown. It felt like I was going through it all again but on the day I gathered the strength and put myself together. There was no chance I was not doing something for her on her anniversary. I sat in my car and went to the store to buy anything that strongly reminded me of her. In my cart I had a big bottle of white wine, a big bottle of Coca-Cola to mix it with as we did, a red pack of cigarettes that she used to smoke and a pack of two tall expensive glasses. I didn't want to see anybody when I went to her grave because as ridiculous as it sounds I wanted a private moment with her, that's why I went later in the evening. When I arrived I put a pillow next to the tombstone, sat on it and started talking freely after a long time.

"I haven't spoken to you in a long time. There are a lot of things I want to say. I am passing school with an excellent grade and I am researching everything that interests me just like I told you I would. Life became the same as it was before you. It is miserable again. You were the person making me improve myself every single day, now there is nobody to do that. I know I am feeling sorry for myself and that I shouldn't do that but there is nothing else to feel towards me now. There is nothing bad that I can feel for you. You were the picture of good and happiness for me. There is not any place that deserves you now but heaven and I hope you look down on me sometimes while you are up there."

I pulled out the tall glasses which we only used before because it made Valera feel like a lady and filled them up with white wine and Coca-Cola. Opened a pack of cigarettes, lit one on and let it burn in the ashtray. I never started smoking but the smell of smoke is an odor I remember from every single of our encounters. Put on a playlist that I made of the songs that we listened to together and some that reminded me of her with the lyrics. I finished two glasses of wine but I didn't touch her glass. After a long night of basically talking to myself I felt relieved. This was the closest I was going to get to her ever again and I cherished that. In the future wherever life was getting too much for me I went to her grave for some peace, it was like a sanctuary for me. No matter the circumstances, every year on her anniversary I spent the whole night by her side drinking wine and lighting cigarettes to burn in the wind.

Harry moved permanently to a bigger city and we lost touch because neither one of us was in a good place and we were still trying to protect one another from each other which in the end was the reason why we split paths. Life was passing by as any other one does, and in one moment I even found a person I loved romantically. I couldn't say life was treating me badly. I had a person who I loved and who loved me, a job, a house and a few good friends. I was regretting splitting from Harry, Clarence and Toby but at the time I wasn't good for myself or for anybody else so I closed down and our friend group closed down too. Still with a good life I felt like something in me was not healthy. It was like a part of my heart grew into stone when she died. At the start it was so painful because that part of the hearth was colliding with itself and breaking down into multiple pieces. As the years passed it broke down more and more every time I thought about Valera. Now the stone turned to sand after breaking over and over again and it doesn't really hurt anymore, it just doesn't beat with the rest of the hearth properly and nothing will ever make it beat as it should. More years pass by and many things have changed. I have a daughter now that my wife and I agreed to name Valera which made me happy in a way. Now I experienced a lot of different losses but not one could be compared to Valera. Still I have not missed a single anniversary and never changed a single part of my ritual. One part that my wife couldn't accept was that every time I demanded that I go by myself. That still represented a private conversation between Valera and me which I was not sharing with anyone because then it loses its meaning. I never lost the habit of wanting to tell Valera as soon as something meaningful happened to me; I just did it in my mind since she disappeared. Years were just passing by like they were nothing and still I did not fully get over my soul mate of a friend. I have a grandson James now and I love him more than anyone else who still walks this earth. As James grew older we bonded more and more which meant a world to me. I finally saved enough money and found enough time to repair Valera's old car. James actually wanted to help me so we made it our project. In the old shed behind our house were the car and every toll we could ever need. James loved the shed so we sometimes even stayed there after repairing the car and just admired our work while I told him stories. We did everything by hand because I didn't want to miss a single thing. Whenever we worked on the car I described Valera and everything I did with that magnificent person. James got attached to Valera's character through my many stories. After three months we finally finished the car but James was unusually sad on that day. It was because he thought we would spend a lot less time together now. After we unveiled the car to the rest of the family I took James for a ride. First time someone drove that car

since Valera and every minute detail was just as I remembered it. We left some minor problems in the car just for my nostalgia. Like that thing that the driver's seat did where it wouldn't lock to a spot until you reset it. Driving around the city I explained to James that we were just spending more time in the car now than around it. After three shops I figured it was time to show James where all those stories happened. First stop was one where we could not miss the one and only pub. James drank his fruit juice and I drank a black coffee. He started to tell me stories that he recognized when I would show him a new place. We visited a parking lot where we used to meet up, a gas station where we used to buy snacks before going to the bench, the bench behind the graveyard and we drove past the house where Valera used to live. James really deeply connected to Valera and listened about her in a way nobody ever did. That's why I decided to take him with me on her anniversary which was closing in on us. On that day he was visibly excited but extremely calm and respectful. He threw another pillow in the car and we headed to the store. This time I bought three tall glasses and some juice too. When we arrived he didn't even question that I was talking to the grave but joined like it was what he expected. Both of us sat on pillows next to the grave and drank from our glasses while the songs played and while the cigarettes were burning away. For the whole night James didn't question a thing we did just happily joined in. This was the first time I shared this experience with somebody and I didn't regret it. More years passed by and James grew into a great man. He changed a lot of habits like drinking juice and hanging out with his grandpa every day but he didn't change one thing. Each year without a single error he showed up for Valera's anniversary. On her seventieth anniversary we stayed at her grave for the whole night. Next day when I went to sleep I didn't wake up. I was lucky enough to die in my sleep of old age. While I was on my afterlife path surrounded by angels and while the everlasting light shined on me just two people were on my mind. First one was obviously the red angel that had to walk this path before she was meant to walk it and my little treasure James. In front of the gates to everlasting peace a voice spoke to me.

„I watched you your whole life, and saw all of your doing, and saw all that you left behind on earth. Only reason for why you stand before these gates and not be falling to the depths of hell is that all you left on earth and all that will be done to remember you is pure. For quite some time somebody has been watching you with me and been waiting to hold you in her arms again. After you pass these gates you can enjoy an eternal life with all the people you love, I hope you will cherish this as you cherished your loved ones on earth.”

I stepped through the gate and saw Valera surrounded by a gold mist while white light shined through her crimson hair. She fell into my arms and the smell which was embedded into my memory finally took over me again. A perfect life was up here and time passed by in an unusual manner which made me forget earth for some time. Valera and I went to the far part of heaven where you can see through the golden clouds which you walk on. Looking down on earth I immediately looked for James. He was now already forty years old but to my surprise he still went to my and Valera's grave each year. He still did all that we did before I passed. While I was holding Valera in my arms looking down on James I was experiencing the happiest moment that I was ever going to feel but then, it all disappeared. The sound of an alarm was going off in my room while I was lying in my bed with my eyes full of tears and in disbelief of what just happened. I turned off my alarm and looked at my phone. At the top of my notifications was a particular message that made me feel as happy as I could be in that moment.

From Valera: Hey I know it is very early but my boss said that I don't need to work today so can we move the coffee trip to five pm. so we have more time to talk because it's been a long three weeks, if that is okay with you.

That morning I went to school with the widest smile ever. That whole day was a blessing because my angel was actually alive and nothing could ruin that for me.

Since that night I valued every moment with anyone who I loved on another level. It made me realize your whole world could turn upside down in one night so you should appreciate all good things while they are there and you could always cherish them more than you already do. If you have read this to completion I just ask you to just try appreciating all the good things you have for just one day and see how much it affects you, I will bet anything that you will be surprised how much happiness you will feel on that day.



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## LOW CLASS CASE

She was always quite fond of it, that window. Paint peeling off slowly, showcasing the years passed alike to pores and wrinkles on an elder's face. Uncovering a mouldy piece of wood along with a few droplets of water, all together framing a look out to the outside world. As Lynn gazed intently through it she almost couldn't be pulled back to the present moment by a hand on her shoulder. A hand that she instantly recognized as her mother's, with a hurried feel to it she understood she had drifted away in her thoughts for a minute too long and it was time to head on to her way to school.

Few moments later she was on her way out skipping through the doorway of a half basement apartment that she knew as her home. It was far from grand, her home, but she never seemed to mind or pay it a second thought. She was, of course, aware of the damp tracks on the walls, coldness in winter and summer heat that brought along the unpleasant smell of humidity. However, she always found it comforting enough to know that she will be returning home to a warm meal on most days accompanied by her warmer family, if possible. Not noticing how much footsteps she has already made, her stomach started to grumble at the thought of the dinner that awaited her that same night, which snapped her back to the present moment unexpectedly followed by someone's voice. „Entering or not? “ the voice belonged to a middle-aged bus driver hurriedly shouting at her from his seat, soon realising that she had already arrived at the bus station just by her house. She muttered a barely audible word of confirmation and fastly entered through the bus doors that seemed to have almost swallowed her on the command of the nervous driver, if she was to enter any slower. As she sat in her ragged, a bit cold seat she was looking out of the window, pondering. Lynn did that quite often actually, guiltily the thing she was pondering on was now ironically right in front of her. A shiny, raven coloured car that passed by her bus every morning fully in its prime as it seemed to be flaunting its own beauty. It was a very known car, at least to her, the one that dreamed. Dreamed of how it would be to sit on its polished leather but warmed seats and not in this very ragged, cold

and overall, a shine less seat. Dreamed of how it would be to have the doors opened for her instead of being “swallowed” by the said ones, even more followed up with a rude tone. All the senseless pondering was soon cut short when the bus stopped at the destination. Looking up at the sky for a moment she didn’t waste seconds to exit through the steel door opening for her momentarily. Making her way through the crowd of people, pushing here and there, she eventually made it into the building and at last to her destined class. Her peer’s stares would follow her moving body for a few moments but even that wouldn’t last long as the minute after, she entered. Her raven hair would shimmer even under the fairly dimmed lights of the classroom as she moved through the space, watched by all but somehow taking up little to none of it cautiously. She was exactly like her car, funnily enough. In her prime years, flaunting her beauty and at the end very obviously her wealth. Her name was Evangeline or as many know her primarily to be a daughter of a very influential man. No one was quite sure about what it was exactly but quite frankly no one really cared beyond their wealth, they figured it was a reasonable occupation, a reasonable source of income. “Excuse me, can you move your bag?” Evangeline struck a rather unsettling smile Lynn’s way, Lynn however had been a bit too distant to react better than with confusion, “I cannot pass” a short “Oh” was returned as Lynn hastily shook her head and moved her bag away. Those were maybe the most words that the stunning girl has said to her as long as she knew of it, even taking into consideration all of those mornings beforehand, all of the watching from afar, the pondering and staring. Understandably enough Lynn has made peace with how she in fact, after all, isn’t the type of person that can expect to be stared at, at least not for the same reasons as Evangeline, or anyone of that “class” is. After all she is just a case of a lower class, a passing appearance to most, at most.

When the news hit the tabloids, media and even papers, it was an inevitable scandal. To be more precise and correct, a disaster. Well, at least for a family of such status. To be clear about all of this, Evangeline’s family was struck by a rather unfortunate series of events just some days after. Not so much the whole family as much as her very father being suspected of crimes of various nature, but specifically theft of huge amounts. Evangeline’s father was a serious man, very much unlike Lynn’s father in all aspects. He was rather strict, focused and cared about his image before all. Lynn was always wondering if she would be the same if she had the image of such status to uphold, she never found out the answer but all she knew for sure is she wouldn’t ever wish to end up that “miserable”, as she used to describe him to her mother while

chatting. “So, what was it with that man and those rumours all over the neighbourhood?” Lynn had to catch a moment before processing her mother’s words,

“Apparently large sums of money went mysteriously missing and the case is related to his company directly”

“Really?? Well, that is a surprise, out of all people you would think they’d care about money the most”

“It was quite a hit to take, even his only daughter didn’t show at school, and she never misses an opportunity to shine a spotlight on herself” Lynn let her bitterly tone escape on the last sentence, not feeling the need to filter anything talking to her mother.

Leaving the room, she couldn’t hear what her mother muttered as a response while she went to get prepared for lunch she rarely had. Lunch wasn’t a common occurrence in her household as she would usually take a whole day for school, her father wasn’t present till late into the night and her younger sister would stay with her mother at home. Not to mention how it after all wasn’t in their luxury to spend money around, even if it meant having to eat only two meals a day most days. Sitting down with her mother and sister today, eating together should have been a delight, yet she couldn’t stop thinking about the recent events. More so how she kept quiet about most of it to her mother. The truth in all was much wider and detailed with probability of it turning into a concerning situation if it already wasn’t one. For the past few days, the rumours weren’t the only after effect of this incident, ever since their classroom and all in all school has turned into an investigation centre that’s likely being monitored 24/7. Tensions seemed to rise so high that even after questioning all the students about their peer and a fellow classmate, the investigators insisted on staying at the school area. She never would have guessed that it was that serious, especially because she still cannot guess what is it about Evangeline that they were interested in if her father was the one caught up in those scandals, and on the other hand what was it that was so dangerous to put at risk other students and for the school to be in this very mess right now.

“Lynn??...Hello!?”

“Huh? Yes?” She frantically looked around until her gaze landed on her mother, trying to make it seem like she grasped what she was telling her beforehand

“I said, will you be okay with taking out the trash tonight?”

With taking the trash out, she meant how the trash needs to be taken out on the main street which is a bit far away from their barely noticeable home, at first not very pleasant. However, what that also meant for Lynn is that she gets to sit out in her

favourite corner store which also influenced her to agree faster than expected, with far more enthusiasm than expected.

Slowly dragging her feet along the wrecked pavement, Lynn was making her way down the street with a filled trash bag of unpleasant green colour, almost half her height. She wasn't in any hurry whatsoever and from time to time she would admire the buildings around her even though she would see them every day, in some cases even would let her imagination run wild and imagine those same old, plant covered, and half abandoned buildings as some extremely posh complexes. It wasn't that she didn't like her home, streets, neighbourhood and people in it. It was more her plain curiosity that got the best of her as now seemed every day. She would never truly like to trade the sights she witnesses every day, and she has confirmed that when she found herself standing in front of her favourite store, neon light shining in her face. Her particularly favourite thing about this store was specifically how she could sit down and enjoy her warm meal while looking at the traffic and passers-byers, so dinner has grown to be her favourite meal in a day, well, at least out of the two she had. Every day was about spending school hours awaiting her hearty dinner, however what she couldn't in a million years expect was who was suddenly standing before her. Evangeline in all her grace and divinity stood by the store's door, leaning against the wall. Too shocked to say anything proper she blurted out the exact surprise that she was holding in.

"Evangeline???" She seemed equally startled to find one of her classmates in probably the farthest and roughly said the poorest part of the city she could come to

"You? What are you doing here?" Evangeline looked like a deer caught in headlights to Lynn's point of view as of now

After some more going back and forth between the two young girls, they have decided to both sit down and if needed to, proceed afterwards. Not really caring about their now freshly bought food at the moment, they have just settled down in the meantime, and so the awaited questions begun

"So, where have you been? I mean, it's been a huge chaos at school since it all went down you know"

"I wasn't feeling well"

"So much for not feeling well that you came all the way to this part of town not to be noticed, if I may assume" Lynn pushed the girl for answers what out of curiosity and what partially out of suspicion that newly arose in her

"It isn't really any of your concern nor business, is it?" Evangeline now couldn't

keep the tone of her agitated voice hidden but not even that could make Lynn back down

“What exactly happened with your father and why are you the one that has been the main subject, especially at school?” Evangeline rolled her eyes but cleared her throat signalling an answer

“I cannot tell you much, but I can tell you that all in due time will hopefully be solved, and as for the rumours they aren’t always to be trusted. It’s better this way for some while for me and my family both.” Lynn was left unsatisfied with her answer, especially because she was left with nothing at all rather than something, but has decided against pushing it any more. After all she had for a moment forgotten who exactly was she talking to and where she stands herself on that societal ladder.

Lynn has forgotten where she stands in today’s society, and that is exactly what made her decide to show up at that store every other night after that encounter, hoping to meet up with Evangeline. To be completely honest, her suspicion didn’t allow her peace of mind. With every meeting she was hoping to pull out something from her “new friend”, but as far as they have been meeting it was to absolutely no avail. Their meetings would usually go by with a bit of meaningless words and the sounds of their chewing as they looked at the passing traffic. Until one night finally, she has spoken up about something that made Lynn’s concern even worse.

“Father has been involved with some strange people”

“Strange, how?” Lynn leaned a bit forward as to pay attention better, stopping mid her task of eating

“Strange as in secretive, would come and go by our house and he would speak to me even less than he does usually, even though I couldn’t believe that was possible” She muttered the last part under her breath, more like saying it to herself rather than the girl sitting beside her

“Would you be able to...”

“What?”

“Well..., learn more about it?” Lynn could barely get the last word out as, expect- edly, Evangeline has cut her off to it

“Absolutely not. I cannot even comprehend the thought of what would happen if I’m caught, nose all up in their business, especially with this ongoing crisis” Lynn has accepted the defeat this time and decided against her own urges and curiosity. Perhaps because she was especially tired out that night or maybe because she had felt a saddened note in her tone as her classmate talked.

“Oh, another thing” Evangelina was now again in her usual nature

“Yes?”

“I did overhear something though” Signalling for her to continue with her hand, Lynn now listened intently

“I wasn’t sure about this, but I figured better safer than sorry” Now already eager to hear, she got even closer to the face of a young talking girl.

“I overheard how my father or rather his business associates, were planning on starting over with the business. And that meant firing most of the people working or even associated with this whole thing in any way- “

“My father.” Lynn has now had a serious expression painted on her face as she could feel the worry arising”

“Yes, that is exactly why I’m telling you, maybe you should check on that” Young girl got filled with worry but soon enough decided to let it go for a few moments before bidding Evangeline a goodbye and wandering off into the dark of the streets.

The school wasn’t the only concern she had now, she has been overheating not only neighbours, people in her surroundings and a few conversations she heard on her way to the bus and back, but as well the very investigators around her school. She didn’t quite know what made her so curious, maybe it was giving her a purpose of some kind, maybe it was cause she actually believed the people around her saying how the fall of this man is going to actually affect “all of us”, especially those lower on the scale of social hierarchy as they said. What she did know is she missed seeing the raven coloured car on her way to school, she missed dreaming about how life would be If someone opened the door for her and so on. Maybe she needed her routine back, but now the question of what happened affected all of the people in close distance or relation to that exact family.

“A man is suspected of transferring millions off of his clients to his own account”

“The fall of the best known businessman in this region”

“What happened to the region’s famous family???”

Radio would relentlessly sound out the ongoing headlines, yet the information was minimal, it was known absolutely nothing about. That particular day was a surprising day for Lynn as her father came home earlier than expected. Only this time it was obvious how sullen his whole body had gotten as soon as he stepped through the old wooden frame. That night it has become clear how much exactly damage this was bringing. And Lynn could feel it beforehand. Soon enough the usually chirpy, overjoyed man has finally admitted to his family how his only job might be at risk exactly because of the fact that he felt unfortunate to circumstances of this man’s doing. Lynn’s father has worked for him a long course of years as a chauffeur, he has

known him many years beforehand and very well on that note as well. He would know all about his schedule, preferences, inconveniences and likings yet he cannot do anything in his power to influence this future, along with many other people of that very place. Over time the all so suspicious people would be seen all over the neighbourhood, many would be talking and overhearing, even few people would be named as missing every few days. The situation has never been more complicated and yet nothing was changing, now their little humble but warm neighbourhood became a danger zone. Days would morph into other days and soon time has lost a limitation or a number. Lynn and her family have continued on with days that seemed long, food that seemed to disappear slowly and with minimal sleep they managed to grasp. Lynn will always remember this period of despair and more how confusingly fast it happened. And as for Evangeline, she was nowhere to be found, completely vanished. Just when it had been given up on and more or less ignored by everyone, is when the news came and when the cycle has been broken off just as fast as it came.

For Lynn, everything suddenly came into place. The investigations, the questioning at school and the absence of the raven headed girl as well as the whole mess started by a mere scandal. However in the end the revelation of it all was far more scandalous if that's even the right word. What was shocking about it was how it was found that Evangeline was the one truly responsible for all this chaotic happening. As she was unexpectedly the one that did the damage, the one that transferred the enormous amounts of money and the one that was being investigated the entire time. The first crime committed is only the tip of the iceberg as it was only a starter for the following chaos and some still unexplained occurrences, such as missing people and the unknown men lurking around. In the very end it is suspected how it was all just tied to the famous business man's desperate attempts to find the real culprit and wash his image clean as soon as possible, which then lead to uncontrolled after effects that unravelled shortly. And as for Lynn, as surprising as it was, it was nothing that she could cross off from the list for someone as rich as them to do, or well, her. Soon enough everything was back into its rhythmic pace of life and Lynn, nor her family had to worry about further inconveniences, or so it seemed. Lynn on the other hand had more than a hard time breaking her head, pondering, and thinking about, why possibly would she? The reasoning is perhaps what intrigued her the most and what she never actually found out, especially now that everything was back into its routine. Now that Evangeline was back to being an effortless attention catcher, Ms. Wealthy and Lynn were back to being a passing appearance to most, at most.

However, the reasoning unknown, was still an existent one. Evangeline's father was a serious man, very much unlike Lynn's father in all aspects. So from him on, everything in Evangeline's life was serious or rather, miserable enough. She wasn't only surrounded by posh complexes, but very much lived in one, highest one. She had way too many walls to count but if she could she would be able to say how all of them are perfectly tapered, painted freshly and tiled up where it's needed. Cold winters weren't a problem, neither were humid summer months, her home is the kind of home that would adapt and adjust. When you entered it, it would smell of fresh seasons, wood and air from the highest points of sky. Most importantly her detail less window would never look up, but down. When she rode to school it would be the only time where she would look up, at the bus next to her. She used to dream as well, cause even though cold winter wasn't a problem in her family, coldness was. Hoping for school and dreading dinners was a regularity, and all those dreaded dinners lead to taking the money. Not because she needed it, she had plenty, she was even sick of it. Purely because her father would then pay attention and all the coldness would vanish even for a moment, even if replaced with heated anger. So she would pass all the same ways, she would look at all the same buildings, she would walk all the wrecked pavements and she would stop at the same corner store. Although the unsettling difference is one girl would only look down from her window, the other girl only ever looked up. When it rained heavily one girl would enjoy it from the warmth and be grateful that the sky cleared up, the other would be grateful if her only abode wouldn't get flooded while she desperately tried to save objects dear to her. At the end one will still sit on her polished leather seat, maybe for a mere second wishing she was in that rugged, cold, grey seat instead but not more than a second. The other will make peace with dreaming and pondering for as long as she must. She was never fond of it, that window. She would pass by and think how odd it looked on an already odd building, she couldn't see through it so she obviously wished they'd eventually wall it up to nonexistence.



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## RED STRINGS OF DEAD ENDS

“Close the door please,” she beckoned in a hoarse voice not looking directly up to meet the eyes of her co-worker, yet he was already gone. Scoffing in annoyance she stood up and closed it.

“So where were we?” Beatrice asked as she sat back down in her office chair. “As we all know, you’ve been working exceptionally hard these years here, over 90% of your cases are solved and I believe it’s time for you to finally get this work position. You are promoted as associate deputy director. All I ask of you now is to sign the paperwork and move to the appropriate office, which has its own benefits.” Priscilla explained and pursed her lips in amusement. „So, what do you say?” she added. There was no reason for Beatrice to think about a job promotion in a rigid work community such as working in the London attaché office as an investigator, so she agreed. Not that she hated her job but sometimes it was difficult to be always sipping on coffee due to lack of sleep.

“Great! I will email you the rest of the paperwork, if you have no concerns or questions, you can start with packing.” Her boss picked up her papers and with a downward smile and left.

She squealed like a little kid in absolute joy and began packing. She is so close to her dream job position that she can feel it. Putting the last few notebooks in the box, she taped it and left it on the desk as her shift ended in about fifteen minutes. But that was all a little over a week ago and now she was seated in the cushion chair of her brand-new office with a palming headache. “No, I assure you that I am out of options with this one officer, have a wonderful weekend Mr. Obrowski.” she gritted her teeth as she pronounced his last name. After all he was being ridiculous; he knew that this issue needed to be addressed to higher ranked staff. Disrupted from her thoughts, Vina or also known as Vina Petrowa entered her headquarters holding a yellow file case. “Beatrice, Priscilla said this one was urgent.” She handed the file case to her director.

Opening the file case, she could feel her heart miss a few beats, her mouth dried as

she licked her lips in dread. Evan Santoro, 27 years old, male, future CEO of Santoro wine making industry. She stared blankly at his photo blinking away tears, he was her crush in High School. “Very well then, we should deal with it.” Beatrice rasped while wiping away tears and followed Vina to the main case solving area. As they placed all photos and information together, they started to listen to the interviews of relatives, friends and acquaintances and go over public records. The last public record was significantly different with the given input” Take your coat, we are going on an adventure.” Vina nodded as she grabbed the coat and official car keys.

The trip to Dover was quiet, the dreadful feeling in her stomach kept her mind busy. “You have a nice coat,” Beatrice attempted to break the silence as she glanced at the gorgeous brown coat with fur on end of sleeves.” It was a gift from my mom, for Christmas, she used to Love Christmas and the love around it” she softly spoke while looking outside of the car window. As they arrived at Eastern Docks where his car was left. Beatrice and Vina walked around the police cars and in front of them was a Porsche 959 with lavender scent inside and red leather seats. As she sat in the front seat her gaze wandered and it landed on a small, white, ripped parchment paper with red string around it, that was neatly tucked in the beverage holder. Her gloved fingers reached for it and opened it.” Same place at same time. -B. “ she softly read and turned around as the forensics called her to look at a peculiar trace. As she gave the parchment to Vina and joined the crew, there was another set of tire tracks. “There was someone else.” Beatrice stated.

The sun was already set, and the fog fell on the streets as she hummed to ABBA, seeing the next gas station her stomach growled and decided to take a break. searching for her wallet that is normally attached to her planner, only to find it gone after neglecting to use it for two days, she blamed herself for her forgetfulness. Beatrice was sometimes forgetful, but she was no senior with dementia. In panic her breath quickened and searched her whole car alas to no avail until she took a flashlight, bent down near the brake pedal finding the planner and retrieved it. The 56th page had been ripped away. “Just an accident” she repeated the mantra, a quick snack and cup of tea would do the trick.

Opening the doors to her house and in brief annoyance as it was too dark to see which key was the one that led inside. Turning around to the sound of clicking of heels and realising its her Boss. “We need to talk to Beatrice.” Priscilla said. Beatrice unlocked the house, put the kettle to boil, leaving her bag and coat on the couch and sat down next to her. “We need you to give us your FBI card and gun.” Priscilla spoke

seriously, searching for any sign of emotion on Beatrice's face. Blinking in confusion her brows furrowed, "Why?" she asked with concern trying to remain calm. "Your fingerprints were found on one of the main clues." Everything felt like a blur as she said last farewells with her career and gave her two most cherishing belongings to her Boss. Patting Beatrice on her shoulder she left and commanded that she does not in any given moment leave the country. Her lower lip quivered in defeat, and she burst out in tears and cried for the rest of the night. What felt like decades, were only two days after the incident. Nothing could remove the absolute emptiness in her. She already missed Vina and the whole crew. Her eyelids were closing as her head felt heavy, but her mind still has not stopped going back to the paper that was missing and that all felt wrong. She snapped awake, grabbed the flashlight that was in the hall, keys and set off to Dover. It was already one in the morning when she came to the ferry port, no one was around, and it was the perfect time to investigate. Turning on the flashlight and pointing it near the tire tracks it did not take her long to be blinded by a glinting object in the grass, a silver thin bracelet that had a small plate with V.P. engraved on it with next to it thick vermilion string, taking it in her grasp she decided to follow it which only sounded possible in fairy-tales. As she walked through the rocky meadow, the string had been cut off at the very first tree. If she could get anymore pale, now was the time. Next to the tree was a coat, a brown coat with fur. She surely had a gut for gruesome cases, but this felt like someone combined all the cases and threw them at younger, innocent Beatrice. Licking her lips and reassuring herself that this was just one of those silly accidents that happen occasionally, yet her job depended on those silly accidents. Searching the coat, she found what looked like coordinates and decided that if all hell breaks loose, it is today. Walking for another thirty minutes whilst the feeling in her gut greeted her like an old friend, it was time to be careful and as she passed by one of the cliffs, she thought she saw something akin to a hut at the edge of forest and start of cliffs. Beatrice ran like never before; it was like she was chasing once again her future as a desperate little girl. Panting as she stopped in front of the old ruins of what could have been a hut. She smacked the door open with full blown force and pointing the flashlight, in the very middle of the room was a tied Santoro. Beatrice knew that doing something so naive in a situation like this was extremely Dangerous, but if her career depended on it, her life might as well depend too. Approaching Evan, fear flashed across his face for a very second, something so significantly quick. He cried in relief as she untied him and with barely any energy he stood up and tried to warn her, but he dropped down on the floor. Behind him was her good old companion, Vina who held a sy-

ringe in her hand and a smug yet menacingly insane grin. “I knew you would come, Amigo.” She teased. Gulping in terror, Beatrice raised her hands. “This doesn’t have to end like this, Vina,” She begged and hoped to anyone and anything above for her good old M4 carbine. Kicking Vinas syringe out of her sinful hands with her leg, Beatrice wrestled and pinned her down, but luck was something she never had, only precise calculations. “How could you take him from me?!” Vina howled. “You knew how dare he was to me and that I would do anything for him, yet you were always in the way, you and your perfect Mahogany hair that stole his every look away from me!” She coughed up. “What are you talking about?” Beatrice asked in shock as Vina tried to get away from her grasp. “Are you that dumb? Are you my friend so illiterate that you forgot about me? The girl that sat next to you in Math and Chemistry? Who tried and tried to befriend you, yet you always ditched her and laughed at her with your girlfriends!” Vina admitted. She let out a silent oh in realisation, she was in a love and friendship triangle with someone she barely knew, something that should have ended ten years ago.

Something warm dripped down her chest with the already known copper smell. Her vision became darker and darker and grip on Vina softer. These last few moments were something she feared for her whole life. “Open the door, please” Beatrice begged in her last moments, at least her life ended as she worked on something she loved.

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## SO, WHAT NOW?

Lucas was a calm boy, always soft-spoken and never easily angered. He would always lay low, never really attracted any attention to himself except for the observations of other people he could not control due to his height. He inherited it from his father who was a basketball player in Canada, in his prime time he even signed a few contracts for known clubs which landed him enough money for the family to comfortably live in an upper middle-class neighbourhood. Basically, Lucas had anything he wanted his whole life even though he never asked for a lot.

School ended and Lucas just graduated his 3rd grade of high school. The first few weeks of summer break he spent in his dark depressed room thinking, so what now? All he felt was blue and lonely, but he knew he did it to himself, his lack of friends was nobody else's mistake but his. He loathed his quiet personality from those days on. His parents decided sending him to a summer camp was the most rational thing to do after they got concerned about him sadly rotting like a lifeless body in his bed. Even though his parents promised him only 2 weeks at the camp he felt a bit sceptical, but never really gave it much thought.

The time to leave for camp slowly crept into his life as he became more and more anxious thinking about it. You could say he was even a little bit excited coming to the realisation he could make friends there, or even would be forced to do so due to the boring but necessary group activities they would have. The day he arrived he was placed in a room full of bunk beds barely big enough to fit a grown man in it, there were a lot of other boys there which he got to meet but something kept him from getting too close to them. They were all weirdly quiet and all kept to their own friend groups. The first time encountering the other group, girls, was breakfast the next morning. He sat alone of course, being too scared to come close to anyone, after he ate as he was going to put away his tray an empty carton of juice hit the back of his head, "What the hell?" he muttered to himself. "Sorry! I thought I could get it into the bin but painfully missed." She laughed to herself, "My name is Lena, I'm honestly only here because rather than watching me do stupid stuff, my parents sent me off to

some camp that I am honestly either going to escape from or get kicked out of „She joked. “Yeah, sounds about right, my name is Lucas, nice to meet you. “I cringed at my reply. It was too natural to talk to her, she felt refreshing and down to earth, a change for once. “Cool to meet you too Lucas! “. She had a raspy voice, as if she spent the night singing, not sleeping in the nasty bunk beds they put them in. “See you at lunch.” she added, “Y-yeah see you.” He barely muttered out. Lucas thought about how he finally met a friend, he thought about her blonde hair and the freckles that covered her perky nose and how her green eyes were something else.

The time between lunch was spent with the rest of the groups, a woodworking project that he not only did not pay attention to, but neither did she. “Hey, want to sneak off to the lake?” she whispered. “I don’t know Lena, what if they catch us?” He placed his hand on his mouth so other people could not hear him speak. “Come on, it’s just a stupid camp and anyways, I want to have a smoke.”. He accepted and with ease, they ran away to the lake, Lucas did something rebellious for the first time in his life and even tried a cigarette. However, he felt a bit concerned sitting on a cold rock near the lake, they could easily find them if the main staff went searching. Lena felt his concern and told him to relax, they talked for what felt like hours together. Lucas found out that Lena came from a less fortunate family, sometimes they didn’t even have food on the table. She became kind of a troublemaker, and she ended up at the camp as kind of a relief for the summer for her parents. They connected through that conversation and found out a lot about each other. Days went on and they had a deal to meet every day after dinner at the lake even though they hung out at every group activity.

Just as the night fell, right when finishing dinner, he visited the lake to wait for her. She was late which isn’t like her, she’s always there on time or even before him smoking a cigarette and when she finally showed up, she felt kind of off, “I had an argument with one of the rangers, they caught me smoking and I got into a bit of trouble... I said some really bad things while I was angry, I think they might be putting me into punishment.” she said while her eyes filled with tears. “Punishment? but this is a summer camp? can’t you just leave this place?” I asked shakily. “No Lucas, you can’t leave.” she creepily whispered. His heart sank. It started beating fast and his breathing became heavy, “What are you talking about? This is just a regular campground with regular people, right?”. Suddenly, they heard footsteps. She pulled him behind the rock dangerously close to the lake, “Crouch and be quiet” she whispered as she started whimpering. The footsteps got louder and closer to them when they were just above them on the rock, an arm grabbed Lena’s petite arm and started

dragging her into the forest. The air was heavy and hard to breathe, Lucas couldn't mutter a single word, he was terrified and didn't know what to do next. He was all alone there in the dark, cold forest trying his best to keep quiet while being terrified, he was going to be found next. After what felt like forever, he finally went back to the camp and while shaking still in all of his outside clothes just laid in bed all night thinking about what just happened. Everything was tense, everything felt insane. He suddenly got up when he heard a whisper, "Leave.". It was Lena, she showed up in his room and had a black eye, she just wasn't like herself and apart from somehow showing up in his room he was more concerned about her bruise, "Oh my god, are you okay? what happened back there?" he whispered as to not be heard by the other boys. "This place isn't what it seems, leave now." she explained, "But Lena, talk to me, we can do this together" he tried to convince her. "I can't leave, nobody can. you know how you arrived, and no boys came after you, it's because this place is made to raise you right, which means to basically torture you into thinking you are nothing but a servant. They are coming for me soon, leave while you can.". He couldn't believe what he heard, without saying anything he got up and as he opened the door to the room there they were, two rangers patiently waiting for them to come out. They fiercely jumped at Lucas, but he fought them off enough to be able to drag Lena and himself out of the building. a few of them continued to follow them as they ran off into the forest and ran until they found the wire gate that separated the camp from the rest of the rest of civilisation. He climbed up the wire gate, and as he put out his hand to help her get up Lena said, "I'm sorry" she said, "Huh? What's going on?" he asked as she took his arm and dragged him down from the gate to the floor, two rangers mercilessly came and grabbed Lucas. He heard one last apologetic sentence from Lena as he fell unconscious from the shock. "He knows too much..." was the last sentence he heard he heard.

He woke up on a cold wooden floor and could barely open his eyes from the bright summer sunshine. "Hello?" he asked as he opened his eyes, he realises he is in his room laying on the wooden floor and after questioning if it all even happened, he found the bruises on his body.

