

The IK2W SUMMER ANTHOLOGY

A Collection of Original Stories from
the Young Writers of the Inspire Kids 2 Write Academy



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Summer 2026

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INSPIRE KIDS 2 WRITE ACADEMY

A Note from Your Instructor

Dear Young Writers,

At the beginning of this summer, each of you started with something small: an idea.

Over the weeks that followed, those ideas grew into characters, settings, conflicts, conversations, mysteries, and entirely new worlds. Along the way, you learned that writing is about much more than putting words on a page. Good writing comes from making choices.

Instead of settling for the first idea, you learned to look beyond the obvious. While developing characters, you considered what they wanted, what they feared, and the choices they would make. Through setting, you discovered ways to create more than a backdrop. Using dialogue, pacing, description, active voice, and concrete words, you worked to bring your stories to life.

Most importantly, you discovered that a rough draft is only the beginning.

Real writers revise. They ask, "How can I make this better?" They experiment. They change their minds. Sometimes, they delete a sentence they spent twenty minutes writing. (It hurts. I know.) Then they keep going.

Throughout the summer, I watched each of you take risks with your writing. Some ideas worked immediately. Others needed a little help. Occasionally, an idea went completely off the rails, and those were sometimes the most fun. With every draft, though, your stories became more distinctly yours.

Inside this anthology, no two stories are alike. Each reflects the imagination, humor, interests, ideas, and voice of its writer. That is exactly how it should be.

As your instructor, one of my favorite moments is watching a student stop thinking about simply completing an assignment and start thinking like a writer. This summer, I had the privilege of watching that happen again and again.

When you find your story in these pages, I hope you are proud of what you created. Read the stories written by your fellow young writers, too. Celebrate their ideas. Notice their choices. Let their imaginations surprise you.

*The Hall of Stories has a new collection now.
And one of the stories inside it is yours.*

Keep writing.

Ms. Mogano

Instructor
Inspire Kids 2 Write



TABLE OF CONTENTS

MYSTERY

The Elite Sabotage	6
The Legend of Archiaos	14
The Woodland Murder	20
The Abnormal-Rainbow World	30
The Stolen World Cup Trophy	35
The Mysteries of the Hidden Room	45

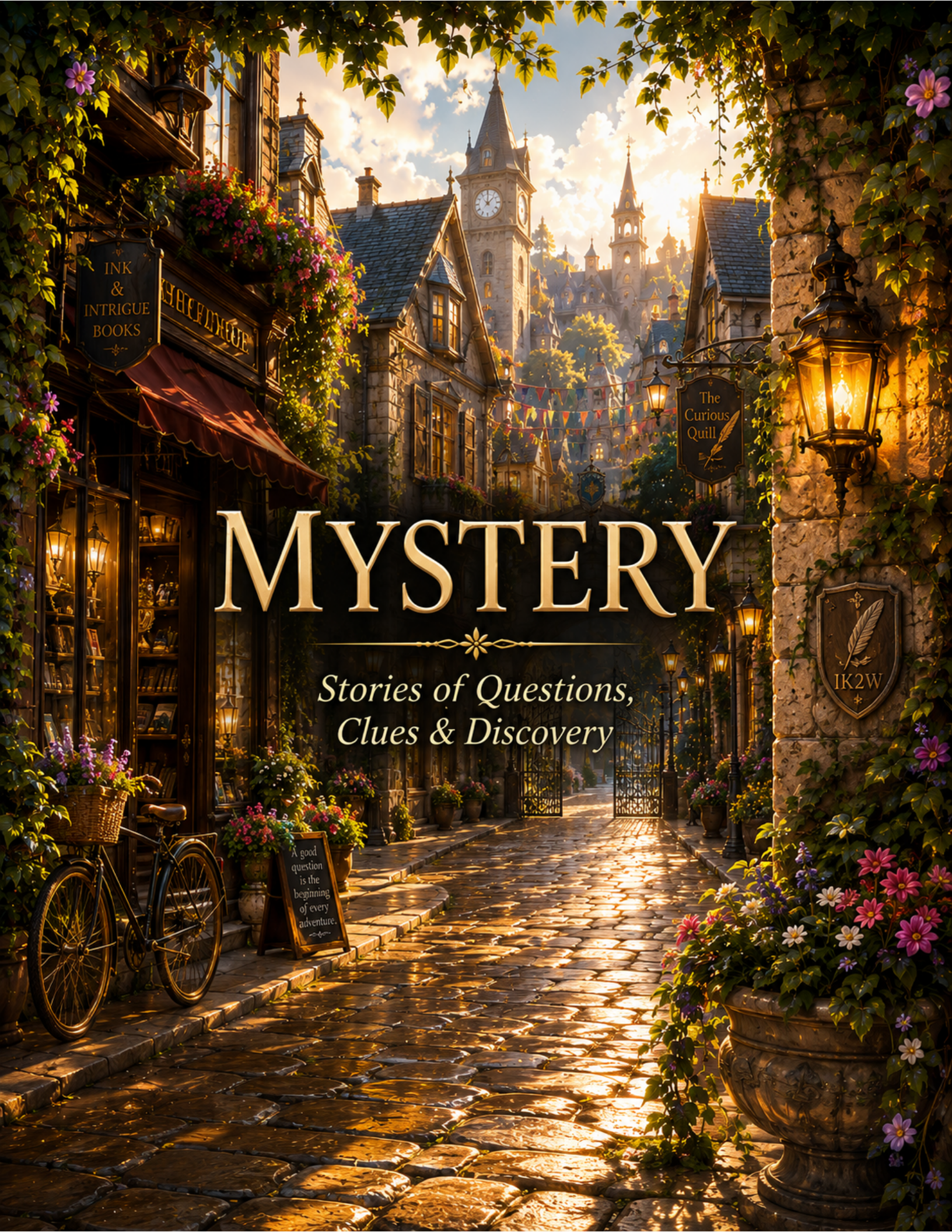
FANTASY

The Forgotten Language	50
Beyond the Purple Portal	68
The World Beyond the Locker	80
The Map of Enchanted Worlds	83
The Scientists	94
The Journey of Pickt	112
In Another Realm	131

SCIENCE FICTION

Trenches and Broken Trust	144
Taken	151
The Escape	159
The Day AI Fell	166
Chosen	174
What We Choose to Remember	181
Tri-Brid	196





MYSTERY

*Stories of Questions,
Clues & Discovery*

THE ELITE SABOTAGE

by **Raymond Truong**

As the scent of roasted coffee and whipped cream filled the air in the newly built Ink & Ivy cafe, Lifeheart adjusted his oversized hoodie. With his sea green eyes handling multiple coffee cups at once, the opening had never looked easier. He carefully poured the final layer of caramel on the Flicker Frappochino, the signature recipe he had crafted with love and care. Next to him, his twin brother Everest, dressed in a comfy T-shirt and khaki shorts, stacked Wisteria cups effortlessly, his attitude tending to calm the mood.

Suddenly, a harsh, orange light cut through the smell in the air, signifying the arrival of the Glitter Gang. Led by Megan, the gang unleashed a sickening crunch as they crashed through the window and started tearing apart the retro Description Machine.

“Get away from the Description Machine, you freaks!” Everest shrieked, clearly furious at the crime the Glitter Gang had just committed.

Hearing this, Megan blew a raspberry back, clearly ignoring the twins’ presence. “This cafe dies today!” she buzzed back, her wings glowing a hostile orange. “The Flicker Frappochino is history!”

Lifeheart lunged toward Megan with relentless energy in a defensive block. He grabbed a metal milk pitcher and hurled the leftover ice at Megan, causing her charging energy to fade from the contact.

“How dare you, you filthy turncoats!” Glow hollered at the top of her lungs.

“For your information, you broke in, you bootlickers!” Lifeheart shouted back, clearly pissed off.

As they kept shouting, the steam coming from the broken machine suddenly swelled in size, causing the fireflies to be blinded. Seizing the moment, Everest grabbed a thick broom and knocked out two members of the Glitter Gang who were trying to break the pastry display.

Ember hissed, swatting the steam away as her wings sputtered. “This isn’t over, pariahs!” she buzzed angrily, realizing that they had lost the element of surprise. With a sharp whistle, she signaled the Glitter Gang to retreat through the broken window, clearly satisfied with the chaos they caused.

Once they left, Lifeheart dropped the pitcher, his sea green eyes wide as he stared at the wreckage. The front windows were demolished, glass shards littered the floor, and their beloved Description Machine was nothing more than a heap of metal and wires.

“Everyone out! We are temporarily closed!” Everest yelled to the traumatized customers, his usual calm attitude replaced by something angry. Once the cafe was empty, he turned off the ‘Open’ sign, and slammed the deadbolt shut. “Now how are we supposed to open our cafe when it’s practically nonexistent?” Everest cried out desperately, not in the slightest bit happy. “I can’t believe they would do something like that!”

“More importantly, why did they do this?” Lifeheart asked, his voice shaking as he swept a hand through his hair. “They must have targeted it for a reason! We haven’t even sold a single cup!”

Determined to find answers, the twins pulled out their Chromebooks and began digging through the IK2W official website, online forums, and underground blogs. After that, they spent the

rest of the afternoon reading any info related to the fireflies or the Glitter Gang in hopes of finding a motive for the attack.

Over the next few days, the opening remained on hold as the Ink & Ivy cafe became a fortress under repair, but the trouble didn't stop. Both Lifeheart and Everest found themselves in constant, small skirmishes with the gang's annoying scouts. Rather than leave them alone, the hostile fireflies kept buzzing around the property, trying to sabotage the new glass installations or steal replacement parts. Luckily, Everest managed to swat them away with damp bar towels, while Lifeheart used concentrated bursts of pressurized air from the cleaning hoses to keep them at bay.

Meanwhile, deep within a hidden area in the Cocoa Cloud Archipelago, the Glitter Gang met up to discuss what to do next. Megan paced in front of the group, her wings fluttering with annoyance. "The espresso machine was just the first phase," she muttered to the other members. "The twins are stubborn, but they won't survive what we have planned next. We need more materials to expand the perimeter."

Unbeknownst to them, Lifeheart was tracking their movements. Whenever he left the cafe for replacement parts, he started noticing members of the Glitter Gang gathering resources in multiple locations across the IK2W world. He spotted them hoarding copper pipes, stealing fresh water from the Cocoa Cloud Archipelago, and collecting flora in the Hall of Stories. Shadowing over their every move, it was clear to Lifeheart that they were making something massive. The breakthrough came on Thursday morning when their little cousin, Dani, burst through the back door of the cafe, breathless and holding a piece of parchment.

“Lifeheart! Everest! Look at this!” Dani gasped, handing over the papers. “I was sketching near the Harbor of New Beginnings and found plans made by the Glitter Gang! They dropped them when the siren went off!”

Lifeheart smoothed out the blueprints on the counter, which were detailing a massive energy siphon powered by stolen resources, with a giant red 'X' drawn directly over the Ink & Ivy Cafe.

Anxious to stop their plans to destroy the Ink & Ivy Cafe, Lifeheart ran into the night to find the coordinates listed on the parchment. However, as he was just nearing the Map Room, his phone started vibrating violently. Curious, he pulled it out to see Everest’s name on the screen.

“Lifeheart, look towards the Academy Hall!” Everest crackled through the screen, urgent and sharp. “I see a fire rising near the plaza. Huge orange flames. Get over here right now, we need to investigate it!”

Hearing this, Lifeheart sprinted on the cobblestone streets, following the thick plume of smoke. He met Everest at the edge of the public square, and the scene set before them made their blood boil.

Turns out, the fire was a part of the boycott led by the Glitter Gang, which consisted of a towering pile of anti-cafe propaganda, lawn chairs, and stolen cafe merch. While the pile was burning, a crowd of hypnotized minions cheered as Bright stood on top of the pile, shouting insults at the Ink & Ivy Cafe.

“Hey, Garish Gang!” Everest jeered. “Your little protest will be history!”

Hearing this, the Glitter Gang turned around with their menacing weapons, and the twins charged into a big fight, causing the square to erupt into chaos. Everest pinned down foot soldiers

using heavy crates while dodging energy blasts, while Lifeheart used his sacred spellbook to hurl tides of ice-cold water, carefully focusing them around the weak points that Dani's blueprint showed.

As the minutes ticked by, the Glitter Gang started to run out of energy. Their ranks broke, and their firefly army suffered casualty after casualty from the twins' counterattack. Seeing this, Megan tried to charge up her last energy shockwave.

Anticipating her move, Lifeheart dealt the final blow. He lunged off a nearby brick wall, hurling into a sweeping strike that broke her energy containment field and knocked her out cold.

With their leader finally defeated, the remaining members completely lost their nerve. As they saw their leader pass out, they dropped their weapons, fell to their knees, and deeply apologized for the cafe, sobbing as they begged for mercy.

As soon as the cafe finished rebuilding, they finally opened the cafe, which was now a hotspot for customers. Lines stretched down the block as hundreds of journalists and eager customers arrived with their notebooks and study materials, begging to try the legendary Flicker Frappochino.

The peace they fought for was finally granted when the Level D Council oversaw the trial of the Glitter Gang. Legal summons were nailed on the gang's headquarters, forcing Megan and the fireflies to pay every single cent for the destruction of the Description Machine, ensuring the success of the Ink & Ivy cafe for years to come.

SPECIAL SCENE: THE GLITTER GANG GETS SUED

Case File: The IK2W Palace of Justice Court

Docket No. 2026-CV-2009

Plaintiffs: Lifeheart and Everest (Owners, Ink & Ivy Cafe)

Defendants: Darin and the Glitter Gang

Presiding Panel: The Former Level D Council (Hon. Aarna, Hon. Kayden, Hon. Raymond, and Hon. Ms. Moyano)

Inscribed by Garrison Grishold

Jury: Sheryl, Joshua, Amber, Abby, and Thomas

...

Judge Ms. Moyano: (banging the gavel) Order! Order in the courtroom! We are here today to discuss the matter of the events regarding the destruction of the Ink & Ivy Cafe by the Glitter Gang. The defendants stand accused of property destruction, unprovoked arson, and malicious interference with a local business.

Everest: (stepping up onto the podium) Thank you, Your Honors. A few days ago, my brother and I were about to open our dream restaurant. Out of nowhere, the Glitter Gang crashed through the window and destroyed our Description Machine. They followed this by organizing an illegal boycott near the Academy Hall. We ask for a full financial refund for the damages and the temporary closure of our shop.

Judge Aarna: The court notes the severity of those actions. Darin, how do you plead guilty?

Darin: (standing at the defense table, his wings glowing a muted yellow) Your Honors, we plead guilty. We deeply apologize for what we did to the restaurant. We were acting out of reckless spite, and we realized the harm we caused to the IK2W community.

Judge Kayden: (reading the evidence provided by Dani) A simple apology does not repair a retro Description Machine. The blueprint recovered from your headquarters shows clear intent to cause financial damage.

Judge Raymond: (nodding in agreement) The evidence could not be more clear. The court will not tolerate corrupt syndicates terrorizing local businesses that sell coffee.

Judge Ms. Moyano: After brief deliberation, the Former Level D Council has reached a unanimous verdict. By order of this Council, the Glitter Gang is officially sued and is liable for all damages.

Judge Aarna: (reading the judgement) The defendants are hereby ordered to pay 500,000 Quills to Lifeheart and Everest. This will cover the full replacement of the Description Machine, building repairs, and lost revenue from the postponed grand opening.

Judge Kayden: Furthermore, a strict restraining order is placed on all firefly scouts. They are barred from flying within 500 feet of the Ink & Ivy Cafe property line.

Judge Raymond: Failure to comply with these charges will result in immediate detention.

Judge Ms. Moyano: (banging the gavel) This case is closed. The court may now disperse.



Signed,

The Former Level D Council

THE LEGEND OF ARCHIAOS

By: Kayden Tran

Through the day, the kingdom lives in an ancient era before digital technology. Being completely cut off from the outside world, Archiaos is a safe haven. From the Castle of Cole, where Archiaos is ruled, to the Skyland Kingdom, anything and everything is possible.

As sunset ends, people shout “Everyone get inside!” as people flee towards open doors . Locking their doors, breathing a sigh of relief brings them to calmness. Night rolls in, complete silence, no one dares make a sound. Outside, screams erupt through the once quiet night.. Everybody has to resist with the choices of living, or death in the darkness of the Archiaos night. Striking midnight, the towered clock rings, absolute silence.

Returning to day, people step out of their homes, the business of the city returns back to normal. As if nothing happened, people resume talking, merchants flood into the busy crowds. For an island nation, Archiaos is one of a kind, with mysteries to uncover, everyone on the island has a part in its success as one amazing community.

From the Kel family, Jack has always been a person who loved nature. Growing up without things like a big home and a dad, he was an obedient boy who loved his mother just as much as nature.

Although he didn't have a father, he still had a happy life with his mother, who had the heart of an angel.

Stumbling across the forest, he the boy runs towards the open grass fields with little tiny animals like squirrels coming closer as comfort flows within them showing as he shows signs of happiness in every step. Upon one day, heJack finds a strange book. With weird symbols, his face confuses it with a priceless treasure. Once he finds it, he heads straight for Taj, considered one of the smartest in the city of Ere.

At his house, the boy shows it to him. "What is this?" the old man comes slowly with his cane and back bent.

"It's a book with no words!" in a childish, innocent voice.

Shutting the door, the old man's face blares up muttering, "Kids nowadays, always pranking people."

Door after door, no one is willing to help him as they think that the boy is going to trick them into something.

At last, he finds a weird, suspicious man with one eye, and eight fingers with one hand missing two sitting outside wanting to help the boy. Out of happiness, the boy trusts the man and runs off into the forest once again with him. Showing that the man cares about him, the man promises that he would help, doing a "pinky promise" with his thumb.

Later in the day, the boy goes with his mother to the time temple to honor the kingdom's history, an important part of Arch culture. Horror arrives, his mother realizes that the key to access the kingdom's past is gone. Reporting it to the government, she finally breathes a sigh of relief.

On the day of time, running to the carnival in excitement Jack sees a beautiful booth to set up in. Overlooking the ocean, it is a wonderful sight to see. Going back home to get some scissors, the boy has to go through the forest.

“Ghosts!”

“You’re coming with us” laughing with an evil grin on their transparent faces

Disappearing into thin air, there wasn’t much to get a lead on solving the case, therefore all detectives eventually gave up on the case. Receiving the news, his mother cries herself to sleep, wishing she would have never let him go by himself.

From the Miami criminal justice department, Ron was sent as the lead detective to solve this case. Having multiple years of experience and solving countless “Impossible to solve” mysteries he was the perfect one to solve this case. Doing lots of research about his place, he found key things about the island.

Arriving in Archiaos as a high ranking officer, Ron is here to investigate this amazing, but strange nation. But, especially focusing on Jack’s case, there was nothing to lead on.

First thing in the kingdom, Ron heads for the main locations including the temples, and the Castle of Cole. Starting at the castle, Ron finds himself in the middle of the office.

“Tell me about the disappearance of Jack Kel.” Ron said in a calm, polite says as his face flared up.

“I cannot answer that question unfortunately.” Because of this, Ron goes on to the Temples, starting by the temple of time. From research, Ron discovered that the key to the past of the temple has

gone missing recently. Which should be key to solving Jack's case. Considering the other temples unnecessary for the solving of the case, Ron heads off into his house, safe from the night as the dreadful shouts of the people outside start.

As the sun rises, Ron gets ready to go on the journey to the island of ice. Although Skyland is supposedly part of Archiaos as it watches over, controlling the fate of Archiaos. But, noway to access it has been discovered. Going to the Island of Ice, Ron needs to travel about 25 miles off the coast. Thankfully, this part of Archiaos is publicly accessible.

On the expedition, there are no cars or buses. Luckily something called the Telemach connects you with the spirits of Archiaos to guide and fly you to your destination, which everybody uses.

Upon arriving on the as it seems frozen wasteland, the wind blowing has been associated with spirits' guidance for thousands of years in Archiaos from modern day Archiaos to the first humans who stepped foot on the land. Although searching around led to a huge discovery of nothing, there was a tower, rising to touch the clouds and even above, it seemed. Climbing up the steps he found an object that hopefully gave him a lead, a red, yellow, stone. "What's this gemstone?" "What could it lead to" thoughts flooded his mind. While brainstorming, a path appeared in his mind out of nowhere like someone was controlling his mind. Although he didn't believe it at first, a voice filled his head, "Follow the spirits, follow them." What could this mean? As he followed them, they led him back to the mainland, where sunset had almost reached the sun's fall. Rushing inside, Ron locked the door.

Realizing something, Ron rushes outside, seeing a giant tower rising above. Just before something caught his back, he bolted up the seemingly infinite stairs with a sigh of relief. After a couple

minutes, he reached the top, finding a book with a carved out gemstone holder in the center. Putting the gemstone in, all the information runs inside his mind.

“THE GOV__NMEN_T I_ TES_TI_N_ ON PEO_PL_ DU_RIN_ TH_ NIGHT”, the message caught Ron’s eye, manipulating Ron into believing it with a picture sending a complete message into his mind

Being guided by the spirits once again, Ron reaches this underground lab, where he bypasses security like being invisible. Reaching the area, Ron discovers Jack has been held there, being tested on by evil, sick, people. Freeing Jack, they are lifted up into the air by the spirits and flew back home. “Jack! Oh my god where have you been! Thank you so much Mr. Ron!” the mother said in a tearful cry as the boy ran towards her.

“No Problem”

Flying back home into his rental house, he swore he will make those people pay the price.

At the government office, Ron barged through the closed doors of the room. Just to be met with a demonic, evil smile. “Guards, escort him away”

“Wait! Stop, he is running an evil experiment on people, have you ever wondered why people scream in the night?” as he burst through with sweat dripping from his face.

Without saying a word, they kicked him into a room, with lasers and cells.

“Like you expect us to believe that” laughing their faces off as they walked away in hysterics. But, little did the government know, the entire society had been notified that they had been running a lab.

“Now, it’s your turn now Cole”

“I’m sorry, what?” laughed Cole as he turns serious seeing the look on their faces, his smile dropped into a fear that couldn’t be normal.

“We know about your little experiments”

Dragging Cole out of the area, he got put up outside, onto the podium, where Ron was. As the rebellion continued, chants erupted from the land, “banish Cole!, banish Cole! Because of this huge protest, Cole had no choice but to surrender along with all of the people that worked alongside him.

Turns out, the Leader of the ghosts, of the ones that kidnapped Jack had been working with the government with capturing the people during the morning as its minions hunted people down nocturnally. Looking at the population, it has dropped so much over the years just because of this one tiny thing that isn’t really tiny.

Sent to the Prison of Eternity where they will suffer the rest of their lives. There, nothing escapes the guards’ grasp, even if someone broke out, they would still catch them. But, upon taking a break after about two hours after being put inside, the ghost and the ex-government were completely gone.

THE WOODLAND MURDER.

By: Joshua Lee

Entry from Sam.

“Ever since I moved to Grovewood, Nevada lots of things have changed for me. First of all, I adopted a dog and named him Bear. I bought a big plot of land near the Sierra Nevada mountains, and I started up the lumber company.

This all started a couple of years back when I was a tech buff at Apple, I was part of a top secret project. We worked on creating really really small little circuit boards. Then one day as we were working, I had an amazing idea: I could use my small circuit boards to create some kind of bots.

So sadly I quit my job at Apple and started making many many little bots. These bots are the secret to my success in the lumber industry. I command millions of them to turn fine redwood trees into fine boards, doors, and cabinets. So after almost a year of programming I was ready.

I set off to Grovewood with nothing but my bots and hope. I remember arriving at my property with a smile as big as a banana, taking a deep breath in the crisp mountain air. But there was much work to be done. I had to create a space for my bots to go without them escaping. I already had a small storage container, about the size of a lightbulb, but I can't fit a whole tree in a small lightbulb. So I did a bit of hiking to find the perfect spot for my humble home. I found

the perfect spot, a big clearing with lots of green grass to flounce around in. But for now I am just thinking about you my niece and where I am going to put up your tree house.

...

“Scratch, Scratch Scratch” Bear the German Shephard’s claws slashed deep, on-Sam’s-not-so-fine-anymore redwood door. Sam’s dry vocal chords croaked, “Alright I’m up. Silly dog, making me get up at 5:00.” Sam grabbed his coat off its fine redwood peg and shrugged it on. The door soundlessly swung open and the patter of Bear’s large feet raced off into the misty woods.

Sam could distinctly feel the fatigue grasping him as he chased after Bear .Fifty years of age is hard on the body. The sight of Bear came into view as he wagged his tail. Walking around their usual path, the manor started to come into view. This was the one downside of having such a massive property. We had to create and use trails so we don’t get lost. Another big problem, since Sam and Bear lived in the mountains it would take a while for help to arrive. Bear raised his head to sniff the air as a crack sounded above them. Moments later Sam was dead as a donut .

Half a week had gone by before Sam’s death was recognized. It had reached Tracy’s family all the way in New York less than 30 minutes after the discovery. In a In a hastened rush, Tracy and her mom hurried over to Nevada. Tracy’s dad was on a business trip in San Francisco and he rushed over too. The taxi to Sam’s estate passed in silence and Tracy’s mind was racing. *Sam was in perfect condition when we visited him over the summer. Why was he all of a sudden dead?*

When they arrived at the estate, there were ambulances huddled around a body and Bear. Tracy saw her father leaning over what she guessed was Sam with all of the paramedics. Tracy saw a glimpse of her dead uncle lying on the ground of her favorite trail. “The paramedics say that he was killed by a

massive branch clonking him on the head,” Tracy relayed the message to her mom. A wave of sadness crossed her face as she heard the terrible news. Tracy’s mom had always liked Sam for his constant energy.

The Hardy family and Bear family reconvinced in the massive tea room of Sam’s mansion. “The funeral starts tomorrow,” said Tracy’s father Caleb, “I have not come prepared for a funeral so I will be out in the town finding some proper attire.” Tracy headed to bed with her head spinning with all of the possibilities for her uncle’s death. *There’s no way that the paramedics could tell that it was a branch, I didn’t see any branches in that area. At least none big enough to kill somebody.* Tracy’s mind was swirling with these ideas as she drifted off to sleep.

The next day she and her family got dressed in their black clothes and headed out of the abode to attend the makeshift funeral in Sam’s backyard. There were rows and rows of black chairs, but only enough people to fill the first. There was a boy that Tracy had never seen before, he was a bit blond and was skinny like the man next to him. He looked friendly, and since she had never seen him Tracy wandered over and curiously asked. “Hello, what’s your name? Mine’s Tracy.” The strange blond boy turned and studied Tracy’s brown eyes before replying kindly, “My name’s Carl.”

Just then the funeral started. Everybody was told to come to the casket to get a final look at Sam. He had a peaceful look across his face and was lying down dressed in grey clothes. The ceremony was short and starting from the very beginning, a bitter sadness slowly spread through her body as she listened to her dad, and Max talk about Sam. Max was the owner of a competitor lumber company. He was only there because it was the Lumberman’s Law to come and attend the funeral of the death of a fellow lumberman.

After the funeral there was juice and some cookies but Tracy was too sad to have any. She wandered off into the woods for some peace, but found something that made her skin crawl.

As Tracy was walking, she saw an old handheld saw lying on the ground. Sam never had saws. He had told her a long time ago the secret to his success. Sam used specially programmed bots to cut, carve and replant all of the trees in his wood. Tracy walked some more, and saw a thin trail in the dirt. She followed it, and then a massive tree branch came into view, it was all jagged on one side, but the other was smooth. Tracy's brain was spinning, *Why is there a saw in these woods? Uncle Sam never uses saws... unless somebody else brought in a saw. And why is there a half cut branch? This can't be right.* "No that's not possible, nobody would just bring in a saw, it was probably here to begin with." Tracy told herself.

Later, Tracy met up with Carl on the lawn. "Oh, hey Tracy whats—"

"Carl I need to talk to you about something, can you come over some time, I'm gonna be in town for a while so like, tomorrow will be ok." Tracy gave Carl her phone number on a piece of paper and walked off.

The next day Carl came over to the Hardy place. Carl peered around the massive chambers with astonishment. Tracy dragged Carl into her room and shut the door. "We need to talk, first of all... Do you like mysteries or puzzles?"

"Yes I love puzzles, especially the hard ones." But little did Carl know but there was a murder mystery that was going to be solved.

“Ok this is what I know for sure, I saw a saw in the woods yesterday. And Uncle Sam never uses saws. I also saw a really big branch that was lying on the ground nearby. Carl, I don’t think that this was an accident.”

“Then what do you suppose it was–”

“I think that somebody murdered my Uncle Sam.”

The next day was a Saturday and Tracy told Carl to come over early so that they could investigate the scene of the crime for some more clues. When Carl came over, they walked into the woods. After a couple of minutes of walking, the dynamic duo reached the scene of the crime. Carl turned to look at her and said “what should we be looking for?” Tracy’s face turned as he said this and said

“Anything that looks out of the ordinary will do, a footprint, an odd looking anything and call me over. Ok?” They spread out into the woods, and after some 30 minutes of searching Carl found something. “I was just walking around and then something hit me, like literally. I was searching for a sign around a tree, and as I was walking around the tree, a big rope hit me square in the face. I looked up at the rope and saw that it was tied around a broken branch. Here I’ll show you.

Carl and Tracy jogged over to the tree, the tree loomed over the path and Tracy looked up to see the jagged end of a broken branch. Around the tree they found a piece of white cloth, snagged on a low hanging branch. Then all of a sudden hidden in the bushes they found a gun lying on the ground. Tracy took photos of all of the evidence and she and Carl returned to the mansion to debrief. As they flew up the wooden steps leading up to Tracy’s bedroom they talked about who could have killed Sam. Meanwhile, Tracy’s dad Caleb was getting frustrated in an uncomfortable conversation with Sam’s lawyer George.

“Why can’t you come over and review the will? As Sam’s brother, I should get rights to the–”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hardy but I am holding the will in my hand right now and it says very clearly, “Do not let my brother see or hear the will.” so I can’t do anything for you concerning the will. That is the little bit of the will that I think that he will let me read. ”

“Why you @%\$#@*!@%*&@#!%*&” and Caleb hung up.

Back in Tracy’s room, the pair were working fervently to scrape together a pinboard about who could have done it. There was one main suspect, Max. And even though Carl didn’t want to admit it, he had the biggest motive. Sam’s business was a huge competitor to Max’s business. If Max eliminated Sam, Max would own the lumber industry in the town. There was one catch, Carl knew that Max was at home the whole week that they thought the murder to be. Carl said that his dad promised to watch the movie Satantango. And that was a 7 hour long movie, so it would take a week to finish. Tracy knew that her dad was on a business trip during the possible murder but at first she didn’t want to consider the possibility.

“You see, my dad was on a business trip during the proposed death day, but I don’t really think that he did it, he was just doing business and all of a sudden...”

“Your uncle comes up dead.” Carl finished, Tracy and Carl were thinking the same thing. Tracy’s dad was mighty suspicious. They had narrowed it down to 2 main suspects, Caleb and Max. The next day was a Monday but neither Carl or Tracy attended school. The pair were doing a thorough search on all of the clues and some new ones that they found. That morning they had gone back into the forest to look for more clues. They had found the broken branch, the hand saw, the piece

of cloth and they had carefully grabbed the gun and brought it all into the house (minus the branch which they just took a photo of).

The first thing that Carl had suggested was to try to find finger prints on the saw and the gun. They had taken some flour out of the kitchen and poured the fine flour onto the gun and the saw. After the entirety of both objects were covered, they blew off the excess powder. This revealed a terrifying result, the prints on the saw were exactly the same as the prints on the gun, revealing that they were both placed by the same person. So the last clue that they had was the piece of cloth. It looked like a standard piece of cotton. They both tried to smell for a clue. Tracy took a big sniff of the cloth and shuddered just the tiniest bit, but she hoped that Carl didn't notice. "It's only pine."

"I'm not really sure what to do with this. It just seems like we can't really do anything with it, it just--"

"Hold on, we know that someone brought in a gun and a saw to murder Sam. I'm betting that the gun was a backup in case the branch didn't work. But one thing that we can do is call Sam's lawyer, and give the evidence to him to see if things work out."

"Alright. I guess."

Over at the law firm where George, Sam's lawyer worked. "Ring, ring, ring, ring. Hello? This is George, how can I help you.... You think Sam was murdered, now what is your name?...Yes you are the person that I want to talk to, you see, Sam specifically said in his will that I can only talk to you about it. All right, what have you got for me... Ah some clues that will help, could you send some pictures to me?... Great! I got them, let's see... Oh I see, you want me to see if I could identify this person. Alright,

Sam left me quite a big budget to work with so I will do as best as I can. Lastly, who did you say that you thought murdered Sam?... Ok thank you for your input! Bye!”

Back at Sam’s estate Tracy hung up. The slightest of bags formed under her eyes. “I hope this works.”

A whole week passed as Tracy and Carl waited for a reply. Just as the Hardy family was going to leave for home, a strange black car pulled up to the front door followed by two police cars. A skinny man exited the black car, a halo of hair upon his head with a bald spot in the middle. The 2 police officers came out of their cars and stood besides the balding man. The balding guy addressed the Hardy family (plus Carl).

“Hello, my name is George. I am Samual Abraham Hardy’s personal lawyer. I have come to imprison a murderer and reveal the will of Samual. First things first, Officers can you restrain Mr. Caleb Jeramiah Hardy for 1st degree murder.”

A look of utter confusion crossed Caleb’s face, the officers confined him in handcuffs and held him by the shoulders.

“What! I didn’t do any murder! I’m innocent! I–”

“Enough, say no more or else I will have to put a gag on you, and I know that you don’t want that. Anyways I will begin by reading the will of Samual Abraham Hardy.

...

Will

December 12, 2013

I have just started up my lumber company and things are going well, I have just sold my 1000th pound of wood. I am very happy and I am excited to continue my work. As of now I don't have much money, but I know that if I work hard, I will gain more. If I die and this will is read to Tracy Penelope Hardy I promise all of my fortune and land to her. I hope that she will enjoy the land, as I know that she loves to explore. The land and money is *hers* and she may do what she likes with it. She may not give any of it to anybody. As for the small fortune that I have given you George, I expect that you have spent some of it investigating, and for that I will let you keep the rest.

Do not read this will to anybody other than Tracy Penelope Hardy.

Do not let my brother see or hear the will.

Samuel Abraham Hardy

...

This means that all of his land and money will go to Tracy Penelope Hardy and can be manipulated as she likes. As for my accusation that Caleb has committed 1st degree murder. I have proof. I have been given anonymous clues to the murder. First off, there is a gun and a hand held saw that has your finger prints on it. The half sawed branch suggests that you cut half of the branch with a saw, waited for Sam to come under you while you were hiding in the bush, then at the right moment you finished the cut by pulling down on a rope attached to the branch. This made it look like it was

natural. But you didn't stop there, you had a gun with you as a backup plan in case the branch didn't work. If you admit to all of this your 20 years without parole will be reduced to 10."

All eyes suddenly shifted to Caleb who fidgeted under the pressure. "I admit to the crime" Caleb replied looking down at his shoes. Then as Caleb was sent into the police car George came up to Tracy.

"So, you have a fortune and a massive property, what would you like to do with it?"

"I would like to continue the business." Tracy stated.

So after that Tracy and her mom moved to Grovewood, Nevada and they enjoyed the outdoors together, with Carl coming over once in a while. And Tracy was happy, wondering where to put the little cottage for a future kid.

THE ABNORMAL-RAINBOW WORLD

By: Amber Nghiem

On the last day of school, all of the students requested to renovate the classroom for next year's scholars to enjoy. After getting consent from the teacher, all of the students started drafting on how the classroom should be arranged. When planning, the whole class had made a mess and scattered all of the rough drafts around the whole grey, carpeted floor, so they had to tidy those up first then they could get to decorating. As they start to move several tables and chairs out of their original spots, Amelia and Elena noticed that Cassie was just sitting around doing nothing.

Just as they approach Cassie and ask her what she is doing, she makes up a very unbelievable excuse like having a severe medical condition even though she looked completely normal. Approaching Cassie, Amelia and Elena look annoyed that she is not helping them or even the rest of the class. But once they both reach where she is sitting, their expression softens just by a little bit. With a mix of a calm and terrified look on her face, five words come out of her mouth, "Why are you guys here?"

"So basically-"

"Get out of the way Elena, and let me talk!"

After pulling Elena to the side, Amelia practically dragged Cassie out of the chair that she was sitting in and lightly pushed her to go help the others. Due to there being a bookshelf with books that

have different sizes and colors in each row, the whole class sent Amelia to organize it due to her being the neatest classmate that they ever knew. To make it fair, everyone else had other roles, like wiping down the colorful, smeared whiteboard that seems like it has not been cleaned for many, many years. As Amelia wiped down the last piece of dust on the old, wooden bookshelf, the strongest kids in their class came together to move it to the corner of the room.

Right after they set down the bookshelf, a hidden door was revealed behind it. With a weird feeling, the teacher decided that the door was unsafe, so for her student's safety she decided to go through the extremely tiny door first to make sure it was harmless for the students to explore a little bit too. At the point where she completely stopped replying to the students shouting her name at the top of their lungs, they all knew that was a dangerously bad sign, so they decided that it was time for them to go in and save her. After grabbing every single one of their phones for emergency use, they all went in one by one until there was nobody left in the classroom.

Inside the hallways, the whole class quietly and steadily walked with Amelia, Elena, and Cassie leading the way in the blank, white hallways. Suddenly they all heard their teacher scream. But it was too late. When they started running everyone panicked and yelled as loud as they could due to fear. That was the moment where most of the class got tranquilized and then the room slowly started to darken each and every second that passed. Next thing they all knew was that they were in a world that seemed like if they kept walking, it would never end. The weird thing was that they lost all of their memory of what happened before and during their time behind the weird door. Additionally, almost everything around them was just painted rainbow and that may have been what was hypnotizing them to stay in the world.

Once everyone fully regained consciousness, the speaker turned on loud and clear and announced them all to have fun. Either way, they were just going to explore the strange world anyways. As they were in line for their first ride, Cassie noticed that someone was being dragged away by a robot guard for no reason that they knew of. As they were about to go on Cassie pushed Amelia on the seat very lightly just like what Amelia did to her earlier to go help all of the other classmates. “Cassie, why did you do that!” “I never wanted to go on this dangerous metal thing!”

“Well too bad Amelia, this is revenge from pushing me earlier!”

“Yeah Amelia, just trust her. Me and Cassie always go together, so now it is your turn to have a little bit of fun in your life.”

Even though Elena and Cassie thought it was fun, Amelia did not want to go on any more rides for the rest of the day. Since they already got Amelia to go on a ride, Cassie and Elena decided to take it easy on her, so they all just took a walk around the track. Plus, they might find out what has been happening to all of the people who are being taken away while they are.

As they are walking around a rainbow pathway Amelia notices a huge ruleboard, following with Elena and Cassie after Amelia shows them. Somehow, it only had one rule on it. “Wait! Guys look!”

“Woah! That is such a huge board!”

Shocked, Cassie had no words for their big discovery. She was so silent her friends wondered what happened to her and if she was okay. After Cassie was back to normal, they read the one and one rule on the board exactly at the same time without planning it. “DO NOT LOSE INTEREST IN HAVING FUN, OR ELSE...”

Once they read it, all of them were speechless and just stood in front of the twenty-foot board like they just got the most unacceptable news in their whole entire lives. But now that they knew this information, how would they warn the others without getting caught by the guards? When nighttime approached, or when the lights dimmed out, all three of the girls unplugged their phones from the outlet and placed them face down on the ground with the flashlights on. That was the moment when Amelia had a plan to escape from that horrid place.

Now they have officially been in that abnormal world for almost a whole entire week. But other than that, it was time to put their astonishing plan in action. As always, Amelia was the leader with Cassie and Elena helping her along the way. “Girls, we have to escape today or else we might be stuck here forever!”

“Okay Amelia, what do you want us to do?”

“Here is the plan. We are going to climb up into that vent system on top of my bed and I figured out that it leads all the way to the exit where people have been taken away to. After we reach the end of the vents, I will bust open the vent door as hard as I can and on the count of three we will all jump down onto the three robot guards that are always guarding the doors. Then, that would give everyone time to escape while we fight off the robots and shut them down forever. Once we fight off those guards, we can leave after everybody else.”

“But what if there are more robot guards behind that door Amelia?”

“Great question! That is when we will pull out Cassie’s gadget bag that she is packing behind you right now.”

Cassie gives them a thumbs up, then goes back to packing her duffle bag with the gadgets that she made last night with all of the old, useless junk in their bedroom. After Elena fully understands Amelia's brilliant plan, it is now time to put her escape plan in action. When they start to climb up the vents there is a thumping sound to notify everyone to get ready to run. Everyone comes out of their dorm rooms, one group at different times to reduce suspiciousness.

Right when the last group came out of their dorm room, all three of the girls dropped down from the ceiling vent and landed on all three of the guards that everyone else started running. Then came the next problem, in the next room there were also guards, but way more than just three of them. Instead it seemed more like a robot army than just a couple of robots. Soon after, Amelia, Cassie, and Elena rushed into the room as soon as they could to fight off those guards with Cassie's amazing gadget bag. Each girl only took one weapon, but that's all they needed to fight off what they thought were the rest of the guards. Just as they walked into the next room, they saw that it contained the creator of all the robots inside a robot suit that was ten times taller than the three girls combined.

When they realised the situation they were in, everyone was running out of the building and back to their classroom and the giant robot was trying to smash them with its giant arm. Everyone who ran away quick enough made it out alive that day except for the three girls. Nobody knows what happened to them up to this day, but who knows, maybe they are still alive?

THE STOLEN WORLD CUP TROPHY

By:Sheryl Yan

Jake reached over and switched his soccer ball lamp on. After rubbing his eyes four times, the room finally came into focus. He looked down and saw bunches of dirty clothes but he waved it off because he wasn't in the mood to clean. Smelling the breakfast, Jake wanted to rush downstairs but he had to get changed first. Slipping on a Spain jersey of Rodri, one of his all time favorites, he put some socks and shorts on.

While hurrying downstairs Jake's hand brushed the railing as he ran but then he accidentally missed a step and stumbled but caught himself. Down in the kitchen his younger sister had already finished half of her breakfast and wished that Jake could hurry up so she could go outside, while his older brother ate like a snail. Through the window of their kitchen Jake could see trees and flowers and because it was summer they didn't have to go to school, so after breakfast they could just go outside and play. While scanning the table Jake located an empty plate that he was sure was his because his dad relied on coffee not food and everyone else was already here.

The rest of the kitchen was lined with cabinets and drawers with a refrigerator that was squeezed in between two cabinets that bulged out. Wishing that they could remodel the kitchen, Jake's mom always stared at the sight, sighing while Jake just ignored it. Gleaming silver racks stood on top of

the dishwasher holding pots and pans. Despite lacking the size of mansions like the ones Jake had seen on tv, it could fit the family very comfortably.

Moments later Jake's dad rushed in barely containing his excitement; proudly announcing that he had bought the live videocasting for the world cup.

After hearing the news Jake's mouth stretched into a smile. "Thanks dad," but Jake's older brother didn't seem excited at all. "Dad, how come you bought the one for the world cup not the NBA?" Despite Gavin's attempt to sound calm his words rang through the walls of the house, making even Jake's little sister look up from her plate. Suddenly a loud crash rang out from outside.

Silence followed as Jake's mom panicked trying to figure out what happened but before she could say anything more the lights turned off leaving them in complete darkness. With a loud sharp crash, Jake's cup fell from the table as his mom gasped.

Across the kitchen floor sharp pieces of glass lay scattered everywhere. "Well that was weird but I can clean it up."

Jake's mom looked down at the pieces of glass and shrugged. "It's fine me and your dad can do it".

Within minutes Jake's mom had finished cleaning and leaned on the counter out of breath while Jake finished his breakfast, took a soccer ball and went outside.

"That's my favorite team," Jake glanced over his shoulder and saw a girl about the same age as him, her hair looked like strands of pure gold and her eyes looked like they were made of pure sapphire, he looked back at her and smiled.

"Thanks."

Later that day while lying in bed Jake thought about the girl who had pointed out his Spain jersey saying it was her favorite team, he smiled at the memory. Before Jake could realize it was morning the sun shone through his bedroom window making him toss and turn but then realizing he couldn't go to sleep anymore, he woke up. Slipping out of the house in the morning wasn't hard because everyone was still asleep which meant it was really early but the neighborhood was already up from what Jake could tell. Around the corner of his eye, Jake suspected that he saw something and he looked back and recognized that it was the same girl from yesterday. Fully awake, he called out to her with a rasp in his voice. "Hey."

"Hi whats your name." Jake stuttered for a tense second, his mind racing so fast he almost forgot his own name. Offering a slight smile, Emily shifted from one foot to another waiting for his answer. Finally clearing his throat, Jake managed to find an answer. "Jake it's Jake."

With no hesitation she was able to reply with her voice clear with no waver whatsoever. "I'm Emily" she then flashed a smile revealing a row of white teeth.

Turning back Jake saw a girl about a little taller than Emily calling out to her and then Emily waved quickly before hurrying away as if now she had an excuse to finally leave him.

Into the room two figures entered it was an eerily quiet night in the trophy room there were no guards and the world cup trophy stood alone with no one to protect it. Glancing nervously at the trophy, Aaron nudged his partner. "Stop talking, people might hear us and wonder why two guys are in the room."

Gazing into the pitch black room Dean scoffed. "It's past midnight no one will be up at this time." Turning back he jabbed a bony finger at the case and received a nod from Aaron. Cautiously he

went to open the case because he had the key but when it opened it made the slightest sound and both thieves jumped back in surprise, Dean looked at his partner and shrugged. "How are we gonna get the trophy out without it creaking?" Reaching for the case, he was stopped when Dean forcefully put his hand over his. "I know let's reach from underneath the platform there's a hole there" Following Dean's instructions he slipped a hand from under the platform where there was indeed a hole and took out the solid gold trophy admiring its design then he frowned "It doesn't feel like pure gold".

"Here let me feel." Carefully, he handed the trophy to his partner.

Dean reassured Aaron who looked like he saw a ghost. "No it feels like fourteen pounds".

"Maybe you're right".

Above the trophy case was a camera but with a snatch, all there was left was wires. While Aaron hid the trophy in a bag full of mismatched papers.

During breakfast the next day Jake ate quicker than his sister and quickly waved goodbye. In the neighborhood Jake ran into Emily again and what were the chances of running into someone three times in a row but she seemed happy to see him and filled him in on the world cup trophy being stolen. Scratching his head, Jake stared into blankness. "I don't know how someone could steal it there's like 500 guards guarding it."

"Definitely not 500 guards but there are guards guarding it and surveillance cameras everywhere so who knows how they got in," Jake was calm on the outside but inside of him was panicking about a million things because without the trophy there would be no world cup.

"The crime is calling my name but why would they let a kid go." While Jake looked at his shoes Emily had thought of a solution and she told Jake right away. "I did work with the police for an

investigation at my school but other than that I have no connection with the police so maybe if you could come with me we could get you in somehow.”

Startled by Emily's suggestion Jake didn't respond because they had barely met and now she was saying she wanted to be partners with him.

“Sure” he replied, his voice cracking.

Both thieves hadn't gotten far when the sun started to show. Desperate to blend in they sprinted towards a beat up car getaway car designed to look like junk. Having spent the previous afternoon throwing mud on the car both men knew the car was too dirty to hold a solid gold trophy. Rescued from a local junkyard the owner said they could have it for free as long as he didn't have to see it anymore, the engine sputtered and coughed but the car was drivable. Bunches of sticks were tied to the roof but the inside of the car looked like it survived a tornado. The back seats had torn but the front seats were somehow still intact.

The thieves shoved the million dollar trophy under a seat and secured it.

Darting his eyes around the car, Aaron went as pale as a ghost. “Shoot, I left my hat back there. It ought to bring them to the police station.”

Clenching his jaw, Dean's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel. Without hesitation, Dean slammed the gas. “It's fine we can't go back now the place will be swarming with guards and they might not see it.” Speeding away into the morning fog the car shook as they left the crime scene behind.

Jake and Emily had spent last night begging their parents to drive them to the crime scene and finally they got a yes from Emily's dad. Having cracked a mystery with the police at her school Emily

got a nod from the police who opened the yellow tape for both of them to enter. Stepping into the crowded room full of police officers, both of them focused their gaze on the case while swarms of police checked the floorboards.

Pointing a finger at the case, Jake trembled as he inspected the lock. "It's still intact which means the person who has the trophy has the key."

Puzzled, Emily looked around the case and then tried to find handprints but the world cup case was sparkling clean "I don't get why the thief would have the key, maybe they stole it".

Turning back Jake looked at Emily and smiled. "That's perfect, we can go to the police station since there are spare keys there and see if one of them is missing."

"Shoot" Dean looked down at his hands "this is bad."

"What happened?"

Sighing, Dean looked at his hands once again before looking back up "I heard that there are special kid detectives trying to find us"

Aaron leaned back in his seat with a smirk. Shrugging, he brushed off the threat. "Kids aren't that dangerous, they don't have weapons or anything". Dean ran a stress hand through his hair and looked Aaron in the eyes. "You don't get it, they don't have uniforms or anything like that."

"But I set a trap in one of the police cars that way no one will know."

Nodding, Dean brushed the problem off.

Early next morning Jake and Emily got the approval of their parents to go to the local police station which luckily was a walking distance. Accompanied by two officers they made their way to the

velvet lined lockbox of the keys. Peering over the officers, Emily pointed a finger at the lockbox. "Look two of the keys are missing and it's under the title world cup keys." With a twist of her head Emily looked back to check Jake's reaction but he wasn't there, then she heard a muffled voice. "Emily, come over here." Behind a rusty sheet of metal, Jake peeked into the pitch black opening shining a flashlight that was probably in his pocket the whole time. "It looks like a tunnel, let's go investigate, there might be clues here." Although the rotten hinges looked like they were going to snap shut and lock them in forever, Emily put away her fear and stepped toward Jake. "Okay."

Jake's face drained of color as he shone the flashlight around. Panic started to rise in Emily and she shoved her hands in her pockets. "Jake what did you find?"

Scattered across the floor, wires and a duplicate of the missing key lay on the floor. Because of all the things, both knew that they had walked right into a trap.

Into his pocket, the key vanished from Emily's sight as Jake made sure the pocket was zipped. Emily hurled her entire weight into the door only for it to remain still and unopened. With a desperate pound Jake was finally able to open the door but an officer had spotted them and started chasing them.

"Get the kids they stole the trophy," Jake and Emily ran so fast both of their minds raced but they weren't fast enough because seconds later two guards held their hands back.

"I can't believe the kids were the ones who stole the trophy."

Jake stood frozen by the sudden accusation. With wide eyes, he took a step back. "We didn't steal it.". Across the narrow hallway the tall man blocked their view with a sneer. "Don't play dumb." Because his shock was overtaken by anger, Jake clenched his fists. "You don't have evidence." With a violent gesture to the trapdoor, the officer's booming voice shook the walls. "Yes I do, this tunnel was

probably where you guys hid your tools and this is enough evidence." Swallowing the lump in his throat, Jake forced himself to remain calm. "We don't have it." Without asking for approval the officer shoved his hands into both Emily and Jake's pockets and before he was about to give up, he pulled out a gleaming silver key from Jake's pocket. Holding the key in the air he smirked at Jake. "Now I have more evidence." Jake's mind raced frantically as he tried to remember how the key got there. Because he had taken the key to use as evidence he had shoved it into his pockets, the realization that his clue was being used towards him sank as he and Emily trudged towards the police car. With tears of frustration in his eyes, he shook his head. "I didn't do it, that was for evidence." Despite their pleas both were dragged to the back of the police car. From the cramped back seat, Jake leaned in to Emily, his voice barely above a mutter. "I think the thief framed us somehow."

That's when a glint of gold light reflected from a piece of paper in the front seat. Leaning as far as his body allowed, Jake squinted at the light. Right before his eyes was the legendary world cup trophy, held by legends Madarona and Messi sat tucked in an open gym bag and next to it was a familiar key. Squeezing besides Jake, Emily got a close look and when she saw it she gasped.

Outside the car hands flew up as the police argued, their voices echoing in the car.

"We should tell-."

"No."

Not letting her finish her sentence, he blocked her view.

"We can't."

Looking at Jake with a face of confusion, Emily looked outside where the police were discussing something.

“Why not?”

Turning his gaze to the trophy, Jake looked at Emily. “They might accuse us of sneaking it in.”

Silently Emily moved the trophy and held the key. “We have evidence.”

A devilish grin slipped on Jake's face as he put together the pieces.

“We gotta figure out what happened and how it happened because now we know that this is in the police car which means the thief must have access to a police car which means the thief is a police officer.”

“That cant be jake why would a police officer steal the trophy and they might accuse us for accusing them”

Slipping out of the car Jake looked at Emily. “Dont worry I have a plan.” Marching directly to the officer who had framed him, Jake pointed a firm finger at the car. “Whose car is this?” Adjusting his badge, Officer Aaron stepped forward. “It's mine.” Without a single hint of fear in his eyes, Jake stared at the cop. “Why did you steal the trophy?” Aaron froze instantly when the officers that surrounded him turned to look at him. Defensively shaking his head the officer stepped a foot closer to where Jake was standing. “I didn't steal it.” With a wave of his hand Jake led the officers to the car where the key and the world cup trophy sat. “I have evidence because my key was already taken away and there were two missing keys, not one.” Aaron panicked then betrayed his partner in crime. “Dean forced me into it saying we would be rich”. Despite Aaron's loud pleading and Deans arguing both officers were taken by the rest of the police. Then the officers uncuffed Emily and put the criminals in their place.

Jake pulled out the gold trophy. With his fathers trivia lessons, Jake looked at the bottom of the trophy where the engravings of the winners were. Under the light of the police car, Jake had found an

error. Because Argentina won in 2022 this was not the real trophy. “It says Argentina won in 2018 that’s not right, Argentina won in 2022.”

Shrill vices came from the police car and Jake could make out the words perfectly. “Dean, why did you put the fake in your police car? You were supposed to hide it in the tunnel that way we wouldn’t be here”

A heavy truck made its way into the parking lot, towing a beat up car that matched the one the actual world cup trophy was in. Out of the side a police officer and a tow truck worker stepped out. In the workers hand, licenses caught Jake’s eye because it was of Aaron and Dean and next to the worker the officer held the real world cup trophy this one had no typos.

Jake put on his Spain jersey and headed for the finals. As an award from the police officers for solving the mystery tickets were handed out to Jake and Emily.

“I really hope the final ends in a penalty shootout.”

Before words could come out of Jake’s mouth the whistle blew.

Game on.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE HIDDEN ROOM

By: Abby Xu

Running out of the house felt like freedom from a cage for Emma and Caroline. With sweat trickling down their excited faces, they ran to a corner of an oversized bush at the corner of their house. They planned to discover at least one thing in this tremendous city. While Emma was busy listening to the latest song from her favorite artist, Madonna on her prized ipod, Caroline was wondering about their neighbor, Mr. M. He is a grumpy 80 year old man who barely comes out of his house to meet people but he really loves his cat, Sadie. As they raced out of the bush, Caroline whined as they climbed up the insanely large flight of stairs reaching a breath-taking view of the city. At the top, the oak trees were dappled with acorns and the grass was as green as leaves. As Emma and Caroline sat down, they saw from a distance someone pranking someone with a whipped cream pie. This was their dream city of tricks and it was real! As they were about to enjoy the amazing view, Emma got contacted by her mom that they have to come home now. Just then, they got scared by a realistic fake spider! The spider was hanging from a tree branch above them and someone from a distance was laughing. It was a girl dressed in a boring black tank top and a really ruffled skirt. She walked over and introduced herself, "My name is Silvie. What's yours?"

Silvie is smiling from ear to ear saying that while looking at Emma and Caroline's disgusted faces. Emma blurted out something that sounded like "What the heck does she think she's done?!"

Caroline blurted out, "Why did you prank us? Like, what for?" Silvie replied, "My mom knows your mom so I thought for you to have a proper meeting!" From what Emma and Caroline know, the "proper meeting" means a trick. As Emma's phone buzzed for the fifth time, Emma raced down the hill while dragging Caroline down the hill while yelling, "Bye Silvie!".

At home, mom and dad were still in pajamas but had lots of energy. Emma told them about Silvie and they replied, "Yes! I know her mom! She was my room mate in college!" Emma looked surprised while dad had an expression of something like, "Didn't you know?!".

Emma and Caroline sprinted up to their cozy rooms and Emma plopped down on her fuzzy purple beanbag chair. Their rooms were different, Emma's was purple and Caroline's was pink. After they watched a few videos about secret rooms, Emma and Caroline went exploring again, but with Silvie this time. When going on a mission to find Silvie, they saw something very recognizable. It definitely was a door suspiciously painted like a hibiscus bush. Emma and Caroline were curious about what's in there so Caroline gave it a good shove and Mr. M came racing angrily out with his dented wooden cane. Emma and Caroline knew that Mr. M running out was a sign of trouble. They sprinted back home, sweat dripping down their disappointed faces and panting. After a few stressful moments of thinking, Silvie popped up at their door and yelled, "Emma! Caroline! Are you there!?"

Of course, Emma and Caroline were desperate to know what that fake hibiscus door is for. But with Silvie popping up here and there, it was impossible. Silvie rammed into Emma and Caroline's wooden door one more time before just texting Emma saying "OPEN THE DOOR!!!!".

When Emma opened the slightly busted door, Silvie ran in, panting and sweating heavily. "I've been watching you for hours!!" Silvie said with an over-exaggerating tone. Silvie was probably looking like a sweaty person after running a mile. She practically dragged them out of the house and Emma raced off to go to the library randomly. Mom and dad weren't home and Emma was a literal bookworm so Silvie and Caroline were alone. Silvie suggested checking out the fake bush and to see what that incredibly visible thing is. They opened the door and discovered a plain secret room! Caroline began to wonder why Emma went to the library so last minute. The only thing she saw was a wrinkly note which said, "For a birthday..". That gave the creeps up Caroline's spine. It sounded like one of those notes in murder stories where the person gets warned to do something or else. But then an idea popped into her head. It was her birthday in two days! As Caroline listed probably what the secret room is for, Emma came bounding in looking as though she sprinted ten miles.

Soon this became unusually suspicious while catching mom and dad winking to one another and Emma often disappearing to the "library". Upon today, Caroline's birthday is tomorrow and mom and dad are still acting sus.

As tomorrow came, mom and dad revealed that the secret room is for Caroline's birthday. "Why didn't you TELL ME!!!" Caroline shrieks. Usually she was really happy on birthdays but this day was not going well. She surprisingly threw her favorite purple notebook containing all her favorite

drawings and ideas about that creepy note in the secret room down.Emma tried to comfort her calmly but Caroline was still uncomfortable..

After about three minutes of Caroline ranting to mom and dad, the fight became less humiliating to them mom and dad. Caroline still enjoyed her birthday as a very big surprise in a cozy pink secret room. She still enjoyed her birthday with a mystery her parents wanted her to solve with lots of fun. As a result,Caroline calmed down and started realizing that this actually was a fun activity, it was also a key to being calm and solving puzzles.

A detailed illustration of a magical forest scene. A stone path leads from the foreground into the distance. On the left, a large tree has a small wooden door at its base, with a shield-shaped plaque above it that reads 'IK2W'. The tree is covered in ivy and flowers. Several glowing lanterns hang from the branches. In the background, a large, ornate castle with many spires and towers is visible, set against a sunset sky. A small bridge crosses a stream on the right. A signpost with three directional signs is located on the right side of the path. The overall atmosphere is warm and enchanting.

FANTASY

*Stories Beyond
the Expected*

Writer's Grove ★

The Lantern Library

The Observatory

THE FORGOTTEN LANGUAGE

By: Shlok Patel

The wind blew through the vast, barren fields of the Middle East. Amidst the sand, the castle walls of King Tinglestein's castle rose from a desert like a cliff of black stone, their narrow windows and dark empty. Around them lay thousands of faded canvas tents packed so tightly that they looked like another layer of the desert itself.

Sitting on the same rock where he had slept on for the past thirteen years, Maximus Cringleport Kane pulled a cactus fruit from a nearby plant, sliced away the spikes with a sharp stone, and ate without complaint. All around him, hundreds of people did the same thing silently. After the fruit was gone, each person stood up at the same time and walked towards their jobs as if they were pulled by invisible strings. While some people carried stones, others carried water. As workers passed through the castle gates, they disappeared. No one asked why.

While he watched them vanish into the foggy morning, Max frowned. For the first time, the silence around him felt heavy. Although he searched for an explanation, no words could express the strange feeling inside him. After picking up another cactus fruit, Max fiddled with it. *Why do we always eat these?* he asked himself. Immediately, the question surprised him. People did not ask questions. They only worked on the solution. Looking across the empty plain, Max noticed thousands

of cacti, thousands of tents, and thousands of people. Never before had he noticed how similar things were.

After, his eyes wandered to where the ancient ruins and statues stood upright in the sand. For his entire life, he had seen them just as every person here had. Yet, no one ever went near them. Not because they were forbidden, either. Just because...no one did. Standing in the sand, the ruins seemed different today. Max rose to his feet. Covering the stone pillars were strange, otherworldly markings that were unlike anything seen in the kingdom. Nearby, stood a statue of a person with its arms spread wide open and an odd expression. Stretching upwards, the corners of its mouth formed a peculiar shape. Beside its mouth, its eyes were bright and open.

Almost like it was...happy? No, there wasn't a word for that. While circling the statue, Max studied its face. *Why would someone make a face like this?* Unfortunately, the statue didn't answer. Leaning closer, Max examined the carvings again. Straight lines, curved lines, looped lines. For some reason, he could not stop staring at the unreadable language.

"Hey you!" A castle worker waved impatiently. "You're late."

As he glanced back at the ruins, Max turned towards the castle. For the first time in his life, he felt like coming back. As he walked toward the castle, Max looked back one more time. Beyond the dunes, the statue still wore its strange expression. As if it was waiting for him.

Before dawn the next morning, the ruins looked even more different when no one was around. Very early in the morning, before people got called to do their work, Max placed his hand on one of the stone pillars. The cold and scratchy markings beneath his fingers invited him closer. Being careful, he

traced them. Straight lines, curved lines, looped lines. Although they looked meaningless at first, the longer he stared, the less random they seemed. There was a pattern.

Suddenly, the ground cracked. Max froze in place. From beneath his feet, a deep, underground rumbling noise echoed through the earth. Before he could move, the stone beneath him collapsed. Down, down, down he fell.

For a moment, there was nothing. No sound, no light, only darkness. Landing hard on cobblestone, Max remained there for several seconds, wondering what happened. He stayed there, staring at the ceiling above him. *How did this happen? Where am I? And why are there torches that have fire on them?* His mind raced. Sluggishly, Max pushed himself to his feet. Flickering among the walls were lit torches, filling the underground chamber with a warm, orange glow. Everyone knew about fire. It is only used in the castle. Yet, here it was, burning.

Looking above him, his heart sank. Not a single hole, crack, or opening remained. While stepping closer and touching the wall, he noticed it was cold, hard, and worst of all, real. Desperate for a solution, he slammed his hands on the dirt above him. "Help!" His voice echoed throughout the chamber. He hit the ceiling again. "Is anyone there?" Nothing. In his state of confusedness, Max cautiously turned around. Blending in with the light of the torches was a small glow in the distance. Max carefully walked towards it. At the center of the room sat a stone. Above the stone lay a book. It looked ancient, and the cover shimmered a little as if there was light beneath the cover.

Even though Max was scared, he reached towards it. While scanning his surroundings, the book pulled him closer. Brushing his hand across the cover, he opened it. Filling his eyes were straight lines, curved lines, and looped lines. They were patterns that he had seen before. Suddenly, the book

began to glow. Before he could react, a strange warmth shot through his hand. Unexpectedly, all the symbols flew out of the pages, swirling around him like fireflies. He tried to step back, but he couldn't move. The book had chosen him. And for the first time in hundreds of years, the ancient language was being read again.

Max grabbed the book. Despite all the glowing, the chamber became silent and dark again, as if nothing had happened. He held the book tightly with him and ran back down the hall until he reached the point where he had fallen a few minutes ago.

For a moment, he was afraid to look up. Then, he looked up and saw an opening in the dirt above him, just enough to climb out.

Just as he climbed out, the work bell echoed through the fields. The workers were already moving. No one had noticed he was gone. Max looked down at the book hidden beneath his clothes. For the first time in his life, he had found something that belonged to him. Something unknown, something that could change everything. Unfortunately, he had no idea what it was.

At night, while everyone was sleeping, Max pulled the book from underneath his bed and opened it. If only he could understand the symbols filling the pages to the brim. Max frowned. "What are you trying to tell me?" Suddenly, one of the symbols began to grow as if it had heard him. Around that symbol, the others faded away until only one of them stayed. Max stared at it. Even though he had never seen the symbol before, he understood. The word appeared underneath it. *Question.*

Among the silence in the camp, Max whispered the word quietly. "Question." As soon as he said it, the pages flipped by themselves, showing images of people in the past. They were doing everything except following orders. Below the pictures, a sentence appeared. *Questions are the*

beginning of understanding. Reading aloud, Max began to understand. A question was not a mistake or weakness like he was taught. Instead, it was the first step to learning something new.

The next morning, Max walked towards his assigned work. In front of the area stood a worker who gave him a pile of stones. "Carry these."

Usually, Max would have obeyed immediately. But this time, he stopped. "Why?" The word left Max's mouth before he could stop it.

Around him, everyone went silent. No one ever asked why. Max looked around. For the first time, he realized something. The most dangerous thing he had done was not just taking the book. It was the fact that he asked a question.

That night, Max could not sleep. Slowly, he pulled the book out. In his hands, the cover shimmered faintly as he opened it. Beneath the word *question* was a new word.

"Happiness." Max whispered.

The moment he said it, the book opened wider and showed more images. In the book's pages, people weren't working or marching. Out of love, they were together. Over here, some were laughing, while others were creating things. Others hugged people who were crying. Another person smiled at a friend. *Friend.* Another unknown idea. Although none of these concepts happened in real life, the book showed him that people were never meant to exist alone.

From a tower high above the workers, King Tinglestein watched. Standing beside the window of his dark chamber, he watched. Below him, thousands of workers did the same thing every morning. Except for one. Maximus Cringleport Kane. Narrowing his eyes, he thought about the problem. For

thirteen years, Max had been predictable. Being silent, obedient, and useful, he was a proper person.

But today, he stopped. The king turned toward the guard behind him, his eyebrows narrowed.

“How long has he been acting differently?”

Hesitating, the guard spoke. “Only recently. He has been... looking around more. Stopping during work.” Sweaty, the guard panted while his hands found their way to his forehead.

Silently, the king thought Stopping meant thinking. Thinking meant questions. And questions meant that something has changed.

“Has he entered the ruins?”

Because of the change in tone, the guard froze. “...Yes.” He stepped backwards multiple times, avoiding eye contact with the king.

Hearing this, Tinglestein turned away from the window. For hundreds of years, the ruins had been forgotten. Ignored. Buried. Because the king knew something was buried there, it wasn’t destroyed. Something dangerous. Something that could undo all of his work.

“The boy found it.”

Falling into the gigantic gold-studded chair, King Tinglestein sighed.. The silence in the hall lasted for only one second before he slammed the armrest, making a sharp crack echo throughout the chamber.

“Interesting. The boy did not steal the book. He found it.” While in deep thought, the king’s fingers tapped against the armrest. “And that makes him much more dangerous.” After thought, he knew what needed to happen. He could not take it by force. Not yet. Because if Max was scared of him,

he would hide it. Unfortunately for the king who wanted the book immediately, this required something much more patient and careful.

“Send Zan Berryfarm.”

Hurrying from the throne room, the guards scurried out.

Moments later, the towering doors groaned open. Zan stepped into the throne room, where every footstep echoed through the chamber. Black stone walls disappeared into the darkness above, broken up by the narrow strips that let in thin strips of gray light. At the far end of the room, the throne rested on a raised platform like a mountain carved from gold and obsidian. Below the king’s gaze, he stopped at the throne and bowed.

“You asked for me, Your Majesty.”

Unanswering, his fingers calmly traced the intricate lines of the gold armrest while he carefully studied the soldier. His eyes never left Zan. The silence stretched on for so long that Zan thought that he had been dismissed without a word. Ultimately, the king spoke. “A worker has become... inconvenient.”

Zan lifted his head slightly. “Who?”

Tinglestein rose from the throne, his footsteps echoing through the chamber as he walked toward one of the towering windows. Far below, the workers crossed the camp in neat lines. “Maximus Cringleport Kane has found something that should have never been found.”

Zan followed the king’s eyes to the tiny figures below. “Shall I retrieve it?”

A faint smile crossed Tinglestein’s face before disappearing. “No.” Tinglestein turned away from the window and shook his head. “Not yet.” He got up from his throne and paced around Zan.

His robes whisked across the polished floor as he circled Zan with slow, purposeful steps. "Walk beside him." He paused. "Listen." He stopped again, making full on eye contact with Zan. "Wait." His voice became a whisper. "Become someone that he likes to see."

Zan frowned slightly. "For how long, sire?"

Staring at him, he frowned. "Until he stops hiding what matters. Trust is the easiest lock to pick. He will not hide it from you."

Bowing over again, Zan paused. . "It will be done." Provided that their conversation was over, Zan walked out of the room, the doors closing behind him.

Leaning against the dark window that showed the camp below, he mumbled. "Let us see which one of us learns more from this."

The next morning, as Max carried a pile of stones across the field, a figure appeared behind him.

"That looks heavy."

Max's footsteps stopped. Nobody talked to him during work unless they were giving him an order. Balancing the pile of stones against his chest, he steadily turned around, spotting a soldier that stood behind him. Unlike the workers, his armor had been polished until it caught the morning light. Not a grain of desert dust clung to it. .Also, he wasn't angry or impatient like Max was used to. Weirdly, he was just...interested.

Max tightened his grip on the stones. "I can carry it myself."

The soldier's eyes went to the pile in Max's arms before returning to his face. Studying the stones, he gave Max an amused smile. "I didn't say you couldn't."

Max blinked. Then, he looked behind him to see if the soldier was talking to someone else. That was strange. Most people only gave orders, and never explained themselves. They certainly did not smile.

The soldier held out his hand. “Zan Berryfarm.”

Max stared at it, hesitating. He had never shaken anyone’s hand before. He put out his hand because the book had taught him that words and names mattered. “Maximus Cringleport Kane.”

Max continued walking, while Zan walked beside him. At first, Max thought he would go away eventually. But he stayed. While walking, he asked simple things, such as what work Max did, where he lived, and what he thought about. After living such a boring life, the questions felt strange to Max. No one ever asked questions, as there was no reason to.

That night, Max opened the book again. A new symbol appeared. *Friendship*. Looking at the word, he thought of Zan. This word was another missing part of humanity. Max touched the page. For some reason, he wanted Zan to return tomorrow.

The next day, early in the morning, Max was looking at the path before the work bell rang, not knowing why. He had never waited for anyone before. Suddenly, Zan appeared through the fog. Max smiled.

Over the following week, Max and Zan walked together and asked each other questions.

One night, Zan thought about Max. Before, the king gave him orders. Before, the soldiers gave him many commands. But Max gave him something else — a choice. For the first time in his life, he smiled when no one was watching..

The next day, Max reached for the book, but for some reason stopped. Because of their curiosity, he wanted to teach Zan words from the forgotten language. But during the weeks of friendship, Max knew he could trust Zan with anything. Max decided to share each one eagerly with Zan.

“Kindness,” Max tapped the page. “Caring about someone else.”

Zan repeated it quietly. “Kindness.”

“Curiosity,” He turned to the next symbol. “Wanting to learn something new.” Zan nodded slowly.

“Important,” His finger rested on the final word. “Something that has value.”

Zan frowned. “People can be important?”

“So can you.”

Zan repeated each word quietly even after he left Max’s side. *Kindness. Curiosity. Important.* At first, they were just sounds. Soon, they became something more. For Zan’s entire life, he had only been useful. A soldier, a weapon. Someone that followed orders. But now, someone was teaching him words that described him. Someone thought that he was worth teaching. Someone thought that he mattered.

That night, Max didn’t open the book. Instead, he thought about the words that he and Zan had learned about. While thinking, he realized the ancient language was not meant to describe feelings that already existed. It gave people the ability to think about those feelings, and experience them. He wanted everyone to know it. He wanted humans to understand what had been lost.

Falling asleep, the camp grew silent. The only sounds were the wind blowing through the cacti and the footsteps of those who randomly woke up. Inside the tent, Max slept peacefully. For the first time in years, he was not alone. Or at least, he thought he wasn't. After Max was in a deep slumber, the tent flap opened. A shadowy figure stepped inside. Zan. Standing at the entrance, he watched Max sleep. The book was beside him. The same book that changed his life. The same book that had given Zan words he never knew had existed. Zan cautiously walked closer.

His hand reached towards the book. Then, he stopped. For a moment, he remembered everything. The conversations. The questions. The strange moments when Max treated him like he was more than a soldier. But the king's command returned to his mind. *Retrieve the book. Bring it back.* Zan looked away. Slowly, he picked up the book. Then, trying not to look at Max's innocent, sleeping face, he grabbed the book.

The next morning, Max woke up. Something felt wrong, even though the tent was exactly the same. Outside the tent, the workers moved outside like they always did. But something was missing. Then, he saw the empty space beside him. The book was gone. Hearing the roar of blood rushing in his head, Max searched the tent. Nothing. Why had the book chosen him? And why was it gone? After searching the entire tent, Max came to reality. The book had disappeared. But there was only one other person that knew about it. One person that he trusted. Zan. Standing completely still, he thought about the words from the book. He remembered one word specifically at the moment. *Friendship.* Firstly, it was the word that made him feel connected to another person. Secondly, it was the word that made him believe that he was not alone. Now, the person who he had trusted most had taken it away.

Later that day, Max saw him. While Max was walking around, he spotted Zan standing near the castle entrance. Sadly, the book was not in his hands. But Max knew. His footsteps stopped. “Zan.” Max’s head hung low. He had rings around his eyes. He was heartbroken. The soldier turned. For a moment, no one spoke. Max searched his face. Searched for an answer. Searched for the part of Zan that was his friend. The person who had listened. “Why?” The word came out quietly. Neither of them were making eye contact.

Zan looked away. His face turned red, while his fingers tightened at his sides. “I had a mission.”

Max stared at him. “A mission?” His voice shook. “Everything was a mission? Nothing more than a command?”

Zan said nothing. The silence that followed spoke a thousand words.

Max stepped back. Silence filled the space between them — the same silence that had filled the world before the language was discovered. The same silence that he wanted to destroy. “I thought you were different.”

A flicker of emotion crossed Zan’s face. To Max’s demise, it disappeared as if it never happened. “I am a soldier. ”

Max looked at him. “No.” He shook his head. “You are more than that.”

For a split second, Zan almost answered. . But he didn’t. Max turned away. And for the first time since discovering the ancient language, he felt alone again.

Despite Max’s sadness, Zan walked away from him and through the castle gates, the same gates that he had entered countless times before. Beyond them were the same halls and cold stone walls. Yet, something felt different. Resting in his hands was the book that the king wanted, the book that he had

been ordered to retrieve. By every measure, he had completed his mission. Once again, he was useful.

So why did it feel like he lost something?

Opening the throne room's doors, Zan walked in. King Tinglestein sat waiting. A small smile appeared on his face. "You have returned."

Below the king's gaze, Zan walked forward and laid the book on the ground. "Your book, Your Majesty."

Tinglestein picked it up carefully. For a moment, he only stared at it. Then he stared at it. Then he smiled. "Excellent."

Zan waited. The king did not say anything else. A silence filled the room before Zan spoke. "Is that all?"

Tinglestein looked up. "All?"

"I completed the task."

"Yes."

"I thought..." Zan stopped. He didn't know what he expected. A reward? A word of recognition?

The king tilted his head. "You thought what?"

Zan looked down. "Nothing."

Tinglestein turned back to the book. "You were given an order. You followed it." His voice was calm. "This is what soldiers do."

After opening the book, the pages began to glow. His expression stayed the same. "This ends today."

Zan looked up. "What are you going to do?"

After closing the book, the king spoke. "What should have been done centuries ago. He walked towards the fireplace. "Erase it." Zan sat down. The king's words hit harder than Zan expected. A soldier. That was all he was. Zan looked at the king. For many years, he believed that serving Tinglestein gave him a purpose. But now, he understood. The king had never wanted him to grow. He never wanted him to think and matter. On the other hand, Max had. Max had taught him words. Max had listened to him and treated him as a *person*. Zan had betrayed the only person that ever did. Zan rose to his feet. He knew what he had to do.

While Max was sitting by the ruins, a single word came to him. A word that he had learned but never fully understood. *Hope*. Max whispered it. "Hope." The word felt very different from the others. Hope meant believing something could change. Even when there was no reason to believe. And Max believed.

Inside the castle, Tinglestein held the book above the fire. The pages glowed brighter and brighter as it went closer to the fire. "This ends now." The king's eyes were luminescent.

But before he could let go, a voice stopped him. "Wait."

Tinglestein turned. Zan stood behind him. The king looked surprised. "Did you forget your place?"

Zan stared at the book. And then at the king. For years, he would have lowered his head in shame. He would have obeyed. But not anymore. Zan took one slow step forward. "I have a question."

The king narrowed his eyes. "A question?"

Zan nodded. "Why?"

The room went silent. The word hung in the room, the same dangerous word. The same word that had changed Max. Tinglestein stared at him. And for the first time, Zan understood. He was no longer just following orders. He was choosing his own path. The soldier that had always obeyed was now standing against him.

“Careful, Berryfarm. Questions create chaos.”

Zan looked at the book in the king’s hands. “No.” His voice was quiet. “Questions are understanding.

The king’s expression hardened. Those were not words Zan would say. Only Max would say that. He stepped forward. “You have forgotten who gave you a purpose.”

Zan looked at him. For the first time, he made direct eye contact with the king. “No. I finally understand that I have one now.” Before Tinglestein could react, Zan grabbed the book and stepped back.

The king’s eyes widened. “You chose weakness and disobedience over me??”

“No. I chose you before. Now I am choosing.”

While the castle alarms echoed throughout the halls, guards rushed toward the throne room. Zan ran, needing to fix what he had done.

Outside the castle, Max sat beside the ruins. The sound of footsteps made him look up. For a moment, he hoped. At that point, he stopped himself, as hope had already hurt himself enough.

“Max.”

He froze. Zan stood there. The book was in his hands. Max rose to his feet. “You came back.”

Zan lowered his head. “I did.”

“Why?”

Zan was silent. Because... he was sorry. He had been wrong. Max had shown him a world that he never knew existed. Eventually, he said, “Because you were the first one to treat me like I mattered.”

Max looked away. The pain and betrayal was still there. He wanted to tell Zan that he deserved to feel the loneliness that Max had felt. For days, Max wondered why the person who had taught him friendship was the same person who took it away. “You took the one thing that changed my life.”

Zan lowered his head. “I know.”

A long silence passed by. Max remembered something else the book had shown him. People were not only defined by their mistakes. They were defined by what they chose to do afterward. Zan had made a choice when he took the book. But he was making another choice when he returned. Max looked at him, still hurt. Forgiving someone was not easy.

Slowly, Max reached out and took the book. “I forgive you.”

Zan looked up. “Why?”

Max held the book tightly to his chest. “Because someone once gave me a chance to change, too.”

Together, Max and Zan returned to the castle. Even though the guards surrounded them, they did not attack. Instead, they hesitated. For the first time, they were not sure obeying was the right thing to do. Inside the throne room, King Tinglestein waited. “You came back.”

Max stepped forward. “*We* did.”

The king shook his head. “This is why humanity was destroyed. Questions. Emotions. Ideas. They only create chaos.”

Max looked around the room. At the guards. At the workers. At the people who spent their entire lives following orders. “No. They create something else.”

The king narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Max opened the book. “Humanity.”

The ancient pages began to glow. Max read the forgotten words out loud — words that had not been spoken for centuries. *Question. Happiness. Friendship. Kindness. Hope.* They echoed and traveled through the castle. People stopped working. They looked at each other. One worker lowered one of the stones that he had carried every day for years. Another smiled without knowing why. A child reached for a mother’s hand, and this time, she held it. Soon, a voice broke the silence.

“Why?” The word spread.

“Why?”

“Why do we obey?”

“Why do we live like this?”

“Why have we never questioned anything?”

“STOP!”

But no one moved. Not because they were rebelling. It was because they were thinking. Tinglestein looked around in disbelief. His power had come from strength and fear. But now they could imagine. And that was something he could not destroy. A single question had done what armies could not. It had changed everything.

Years later, Max stood in front of a group of children holding the book. He taught them the forgotten language. Not as a weapon. Not as a secret. But as a reminder. A reminder that people could understand each other. That night, while studying the final pages of the book, Max discovered something strange. A sentence underneath the oldest symbols. *The language was not lost. It was stolen by —*. There was a smudge at the end of the sentence. He slowly closed the book.

Someone had erased the language before. Someone had wanted humanity to forget. And if it happened once...It could happen again.

BEYOND THE PURPLE PORTAL

By Krit Singh

Coby stretched and yawned as he walked downstairs after spending the night at Eric's house. They had almost stayed up until 3 a.m playing video games, playing mini hoop, and arguing who would score more points in the most important game of the season (the state semifinals). Already, both of them were starving after getting only a few hours of sleep. After rubbing his stomach, Eric opened the pantry, "I am starving. There has to be something in here.

"His parents were out of town for the next two days for a business trip. Laughing, Coby pointed towards the shelves, "Knowing you, you would probably eat dry cereal again". Eric sounded affected and rolled his eyes, "Hey it works." Out of nowhere as Eric reached toward the top shelf, the lights suddenly flickered. Then a low humming sound filled the room, growing louder every second. Soon the floor began to shake, just enough for the chairs to rattle against the table. Both boys froze.

Before either of them could react, a random purple glowing circle started to appear in the middle of the pantry. At that moment it kept spinning faster and faster like a whirlpool. Around the room the entire pantry was shaking now as crumbs and liquids were going across the floor while the pantry shook harder than before. WOOSH! Gusts of wind passed by. Without thinking, Eric stepped closer to the weird purple portal. Before Coby could stop him a powerful gust of wind gushed, pushing the cereal into the strange beam of light. Eric grabbed the ledge of the counter, but his hand

slipped. The force pulled him off the ground and straight into the glowing light. "Coby!!" Eric shouted before disappearing. For a moment, everything became completely silent, as silent as a library.

Coby's heart was racing faster than a NASCAR race as he stared at the portal. Every instinct told Coby to run outside and call for help, but Eric was his best friend. If there was even a small chance of saving him, Coby had to take it. After taking a deep breath like he was about to go swimming, Coby jumped into the portal. Around him, the world started spinning around so quickly that he could barely even keep his eyes open. When he finally landed, he pushed himself to his feet and looked around in amazement. Above him was a bright purple sky stretched overhead, while four enormous planets floated close enough for giant water slides to connect them. Across the strange landscape, floating asteroids drifted through the air, and tiny ducks wandered across the ground. Strange creatures hurried from place to place as if this incredible world was completely normal but different at the same time. Slowly Coby realized he wasn't dreaming. He had just entered a world unlike anything he had ever imagined.

Without any type of warning, a loud horn echoed across the purple landscape, shaking the ground beneath Coby's feet. Immediately every duck stopped what it was doing and turned toward one of the floating planets connected by a giant water park. Colorful tubes twisted around the planet, waterfalls poured through the air without ever reaching the ground, and enormous slime pools sparkled in the sunlight. Above, the entrance was a giant glowing sign hanging read ... DROWN TIDES, while smaller glowing letters underneath called it *The Greatest Slime Park in the Universe*. Clearly, the park was cutting corners on money as they made a huge jump on one of the slime slides.

Watching the creatures rush towards the park, Coby did not know what he was watching. Some bounced like rubber balls, others floated through the air, and a few zipped past on glowing hoverboards. Although everything looked exciting, somehow nobody smiled. Instead every creature kept glancing toward the tallest building in the middle of the park. Something did not feel right. High above the crowds, a wide balcony stretched across the front of the building, the crowds gathering below. Moments later, a tall purple figure stepped outside wearing a long black coat that nearly touched the ground. Glowing yellow eyes scanned the crowd, and a crooked smile slowly spread across his face. Instantly the cheerful sounds from the other creatures (different from Ducks) around the park turned into silence.

Before Coby could stop himself he started laughing. Nearby Eric stood in the middle of a different group of creatures and also started laughing. Following the sound of his friend's voice, Coby looked around and spotted him. "Is that supposed to be the scary guy?" Coby called out. As soon as Coby said that, the purple figure narrowed his eyes. Around him several creatures gasped and quickly stepped away from the two boys. The purple figure slowly raised one hand and pointed directly at Coby. "A new visitor," he announced in a deep voice that echoed across the park. Slowly, a grin spread across his face. "This just makes this world even more interesting than before." Without looking away he kept his finger pointed straight at Coby. The park became silent.

Trying not to laugh anymore, Coby crossed his arms and tried to act serious. "I have seen scarier people on Halloween". Across the crowd a few what looked like baby ducklings tried not to laugh. Instantly, the purple figure's smile disappeared and turned into a disappointed frown. "My name is Mr. Brickshot and soon you will learn to respe-" "Though I won't," Coby shrugged without

looking the least bit scared. Before Mr. Brickshot could finish a blur of blue shot from the air and landed on a nearby rock. Bright blue eyes stared at Coby while tiny flames escaped from the dragon's mouth before fading into thin wisps of smoke. The tiny dragon was folding his wings now. "Dude, is this the human you were talking to?" Eric smiled and nodded. "Yep. This is Coby." Coby looked back and forth between them with a puzzled look. "Wait... you already know each other?" Proudly the Small little dragon puffed up his chest. Drako grinned from whisker to whisker. "You could say that. He landed a few seconds before you did." Even though he was the size of a house cat he acted like he was ten feet tall at least.

Out of nowhere a green blob suddenly bounced in between them (Boing Boing!) before stretching into the shape of a smiling creature. "I'm Glorp!" Welcome to Drown Tides. The slime creature announced with a cheerful grin. It gets weirder the longer you stay." Glorp bounced twice before laughing at his own joke which was not really a joke. Suddenly heavy footsteps made the ground rumble as hard as a mini earthquake, and a giant rock Golem approached them. Smooth gems and rocks covered his body. "That's Tiko," Drako said. "He might not talk much but he is the strongest guy I have ever met." Quietly, Tiko looked up, smiled and gave a polite nod to Coby.

Coby looked behind him. Seeing four friendly faces made this strange world a little less frightening. Keeping his eyes on the five teammates below, Mr. Brickshot rested both hands on the balcony railing while quietly watching the group below. "Interesting," he whispered to himself. His glowing eyes stayed locked on the five new teammates as a slow smile spread across his face. They found each other faster than expected. Without warning, a small metal device unfolded from his sleeve and projected a glowing map of ***Drown Tides*** before folding back into his sleeve. A giant bell echoed

across the slime park, tiny lights moved across the image before stopping over a massive arena near the center of Drown Tides. Instantly, every creature immediately turned toward the enormous stadium built from glowing purple crystal and polished silver metal. Colorful banners waved above the entrance while giant slime fountains blasted sparkling streams high into the air. Even the creatures that had been talking moments earlier rushed toward the stadium.

At that moment Glorp's (the slime guy) eyes grew twice as big. "It's starting." looking around the excited crowd and Coby frowned "Hey, what's starting?" Excitedly, Drako started flapping his wings so fast they became blurred. "The slime ball tournament." Across the slime park, cheers echoed everywhere. Eric glanced toward the giant arena. "I've heard everyone talking about it since we got here." "The winning team earns one wish," Glorp added. "Everyone wants it." Curiously, Coby looked toward Mr. Brickshot's balcony. "Does he run the tournament?" Slowly Drako nodded. "He runs almost everything around here." Once again Mr. Brickshot stepped onto the balcony, and the entire slime park became silent. "Welcome, competitors! Oh yeah you guys are competing too," pointing toward Coby and Eric. Immediately thousands of creatures cheered as bright lights circled above the arena.

"This year's champions will earn a wish," Mr. Brickshot announced as his voice echoed throughout the stadium. "But first, every team must prove themselves by completing the Trial of Tides." Curious whispers spread through the crowd. Coby leaned closer to Drako. "What's the Trial of Tides?" Pointing toward the five enormous doors as they slowly opened. "It's a qualifying challenge. Every new team has to complete it, and the winners earn a special power they can use during the Slime Ball Tournament." Watching the giant screen Eric was filled with excitement while also being very

scared. “Wait a minute so if we beat the mini game against the other teams we get another power up?”

“Exactly!” Glorp said with even bigger eyes than before. Happily Tiko stepped forward with a huge smile on his face, making the ground rumble a bit. A determined smile spread across Coby’s face. “Let’s do this.”

Snapping his fingers Mr. Brickshot made, the five enormous doors slowly rose from the ground with a deep rumble that echoed throughout the stadium. Beyond each doorway stretched a glowing course filled with floating islands, twisting crystal bridges, giant slime flowers, and waterfalls that flowed upward into the sky. Purple mist drifted across the paths. While above the course a strange glowing fish swam through the air. Bright crystals lit every corner of the challenge, making the entire course shimmer beneath the purple sky. Instantly the crowd erupted with excitement as the enormous gates fully opened.

Staring at the Course in amazement, Coby wondered how anyone could finish something so impossible. Floating stones drifted through the air without warning, and glowing vines slowly wrapped around nearby rocks before pulling them into new positions. Nearby giant slime lilies opened and closed like traps, forcing teams to time every step carefully. Crystal orbs hovered above the course, each one shining with a different color of magical energy. Quietly, Eric glanced toward his teammates and realized the challenge would take more than speed to beat.

HONKK! A loud horn suddenly went off, sending every team racing toward the first island. Immediately Drako flew up into the air and weaved through the objects as a small dragon. “Guys!” “The bridge on the left is changing colors.” Blue crystals began lighting up one after another. Without wasting a second Coby and Eric followed while Tiko protected the back of the group. Bouncing from

one floating stone to another, Glorp barely missed a snapping Gooley shmooey flower. Out of nowhere a gateway came up from the ground with lots of vines. Instead of stopping, Tiko pushed every vine and went to the gateway. Every step the ground shook. Something that should have made them lose the game was now being moved. Then Tiko grabbed the tangled vines on the gateway and pulled with all of his strength. CRACK!! One of his gems fell off which just made him more angry. Instead of slowing down he planted both feet deep into the ground and wrapped his massive arms around the giant gateway. Every muscle in his rocky body tightened as glowing cracks spread across the vines holding it in place. Around the arena, the cheering slowly faded until the entire stadium became silent. Every creature watched, wondering if the giant golem was strong enough.

Lots of sweat rolled down Coby's forehead as the giant timer continued counting down. Behind them he could hear some teams were about to start, their footsteps echoing across the floating islands. Glorp bounced nervously from side to side and up and down while Drako circled above the gateway that was too high for him, shouting for Tiko to keep going. Although the vines refused to break, Tiko didn't let go. He dug his feet even deeper into the crystal floor and dirt and pulled with everything he had. RUMBLE! The entire course shook beneath everyone's feet. Slowly, the enormous gateway began to move, only an inch at first. Tiny pieces of stone broke away while the glowing vines stretched tighter and tighter until they looked ready to snap. Then, Tiko let out a huge roar that everybody got scared of. Even the Team. With one final burst of strength, he shoved the gateway forward with everything he had.

BOOM! Making the vines explode apart, the massive gateway crashed onto the floating island beside it. Glowing huge chunks of crystal bounced across the course while a cloud of glowing dust

filled the air. Without wasting a second, Coby pointed toward the opening. "Go!" Eric, Drako, and Glorp wiggled through the gap while Tiko waddled behind them, shaking the ground with every step. Finally, the giant timer flashed its last few seconds. Coby pushed himself forward with one final leap while the others dove across the finish line beside him. Instantly, the horn blasted through the stadium, echoing across every floating island. For a second, nobody moved. Then, the crowd erupted into the loudest cheer Drown Tides had ever heard. Around 120 decibels. (Only 20 Decibels of a mini cannon)

Breathing heavily, Coby wiped the sweat from his forehead as the five teammates gathered near the finish line, after the exhausting challenge. Every team around them looked just as tired, but nobody knew who had finished with the fastest time. Above the arena bright crystals floated, recording each team's score while colorful sparks danced through the air. Coby was just wishing he could climb up onto the podium and act like the champion. The crowd buzzed with excitement as everyone waited for the results to appear. Even Mr. Brickshot leaned forward from his balcony, watching the glowing crystals closely to see who would win the power up (Hoping it wasn't Coby's team).

The glowing crystals above the arena suddenly flashed brighter than before, making everyone cover their eyes for a second. Flash! The numbers quickly changed across the giant scoreboard as every team's time appeared. Coby, Eric, Drako, Glorp, and Tiko stared at the screen, waiting to see their result. The crowd became silent as the final score slowly appeared at the top of the sky. 1ST PLACE: Team Coby, they had won the Trial of Tides. The entire stadium exploded with cheers as colorful sparks flew into the air like fire. Laughing Glorp jumped higher than he ever had and almost landed on Drako, when he was flying around the team in excitement. Tiko looked down at the small gem that had fallen from his body during the challenge and smiled because his sacrifice helped them win. Mr.

Brickshot clapped slowly from his balcony, but his face showed that he was not impressed.

“Congratulations,” he said with a fake smile. “You have earned your special power.” Quietly, he slipped one hand behind his back and tightened it into a fist before smiling once again.

As everyone was watching, two glowing symbols appeared above Coby and Eric before flying toward them. A warm energy rushed through their bodies as the symbols disappeared into their hands. Instantly, both boys felt lighter, almost like they could jump higher than before. Proudly Drako landed beside the boy, “That’s double Jump,” Drako explained. “Now you can jump twice before touching the ground.” Coby smiled while looking at his teammates. He laughed “This is awesome”. Already they felt like they were imagining them in the tournament. They had only known each other for a short time, but they already felt like a real team. The sound of another horn echoed through the stadium, signaling the start of the Slime Ball Tournament. Every player stepped onto the field while the crowd cheered louder than before. Above the arena a giant crystal floated almost like another sun, releasing colorful beams of light like a disco ball. Each beam landed on a different player, giving them random powers on the floor (they have to collect these) for the game. Some players gained the ability to run faster, others could disappear for a few seconds, and some could create small shields around themselves. Though to get these they would have to collect them and they get it for a short period of time.

The game began with a loud horn, and the first Slime Ball shot into the air. Coby leaped high using his double jump and tapped it toward Eric, who already knew where it would land before anyone else did. Quickly Eric passed it to Glorp, who stretched across two defenders before bouncing it toward Drako. Then flying over everyone’s heads, Drako swiped the ball with his tail before Coby caught it

again. As with one powerful jump, sent Coby above the moving ring, and he scored the first point of the game.

Now the crowd exploded with cheers as colorful slime fireworks burst into the sky. Blocking every attack the opponents had, Tiko was like a fortress. Leaping and Bouncing, Glorp bounced around defenders so quickly that nobody could keep up with him. Eric kept predicting passes before they happened, stealing the ball over and over again. Before long, Coby's team had built a comfortable lead. Now they could relax and call a timeout. Everything seemed to be going perfectly for Coby's team. Hidden in his balcony, Mr. Brickshot slowly stopped his forced smiling. His glowing yellow eyes narrowed as he quietly slipped behind the bleachers. Hidden away from the cheering crowd, several tiny ducks waited beside glowing purple machines. FLICK! With the flick of a small switch, purple energy mist surrounded every duck. Within seconds, the light grew brighter and brighter until nobody could see them anymore. BOOM!

5 giant monsters stepped out from the purple glowing smoke. Each one stood over six feet tall at least, much bigger than Coby and Eric. Now the crowd had no idea they were the same harmless ducks from before. As soon as the monsters entered the field, the entire game changed. With their huge arms, they blocked shots headed toward the moving rings. While the sticky slimes knocked away almost every pass. Although Coby's team had been dominating only moments earlier, now they couldn't stop the monsters from scoring again and again. The crowd supporting Coby became as quiet as a library. Looking around at his exhausted teammates, Coby tightened his grip on the Slime Ball and stared toward a moving ring across the field.

Remembering the power he won from the Trial of Tides and jumped and jumped one more time. Using his double jump, he flew higher than anyone expected and launched the Slime Ball through the goal just before time ran out. Against all odds he did not know it but he just jumped over somebody when he was jumping. CHACHING!! The scoreboard and soundboard flashed as the game became tied. "ROAR" the crowd exploded with excitement. Overtime began. During the break, Eric stared at the monsters carefully. Something about them felt familiar. Their movements, their eyes, and even the small sounds they made reminded him of the ducks they met when they first arrived. "Hey wait a minute those are not monsters, they are those little ducks." Surprised by what Eric said Coby said "What", Eric pointed to the field "Mr.Brickshot had to have changed something about them.

"Ugh", Coby groaned, looking at the huge ducks that were transformed basically into monsters."Why do you think these goons even work for Mr. Brickshot? They are just doing whatever he tells them", trying to tell Eric. One of the ducks heard this and frowned. "Hey! We are no goons for Mr.Brickshot. Plus the only reason why we listen to that guy is because he is much bigger than us. Being so big like a square he is powerful and tall and we never will stand a chance. Eric looked around at the towering monsters. "But you're not small anymore. He turned you into monsters. You're all bigger than he is now." The monsters looked at one another, finally realizing Eric was right. One by one they started going to Mr.Brickshot

Mr. Brickshot's smile disappeared as his plan started falling apart. "No... you are supposed to obey me!" The creatures roared, shaking the entire stadium. The machine beneath the arena began breaking apart as Mr. Brickshot lost control. The purple energy disappeared, and the monsters slowly

returned to their normal duck forms. The crowd cheered as the creatures celebrated their freedom.

Coby, Eric, Drako, Glorp, and Tiko watched happily as Drown Tides finally became peaceful again.

Suddenly, a familiar purple glow appeared in the middle of the stadium. The portal. Coby and Eric

looked at each other, knowing it was time to go home. They waved goodbye to their new friends before

jumping into the glowing light together. A few seconds later, they landed safely inside Eric's pantry

exactly where everything started. Neither of them told anyone what happened.

The secret was like a shadow, always with them but never seen.

The world beyond the Locker

By Soham Verma

Above the noisy chatter of the hallway, the school bell rang loudly. Hurrying toward his next class, Joshua blended into the crowded seventh-grade crowd, trying to stay invisible. Thin and skinny, he kept his head down as he moved through the noise. Although he needed to get to class, he glanced left at a dented, rusted, abandoned locker.

It was still there.

“Why is it still there?” Joshua muttered. For the past couple of weeks, he had caught a hint of vibrant purple light leaking from the locker’s vents between math and English. Along with the glow came a smell like fresh forest air, rich and strange. Standing in a crowded hallway, Joshua knew a forest should not have been there.

After school, Joshua met Jerry in the brick courtyard like they did every Friday. Leaning against the wall, Jerry adjusted his glasses and asked, “Yo, is it just me, or do you smell something earthy on the way to English class?” Shock washed over Joshua. He did not know what to say, but one thing became clear: he was not the only one noticing the strange portal.

The next week, Joshua saw the purple glow again, pulsing softly near the school entrance. Muddy and heavy, the smell drifted around him as he froze in place. Nearby, Andrew stood staring at

the same spot. The school bully looked transfixed, his usual angry expression replaced by something unreadable. Normally, Andrew used his size to intimidate everyone, but now he seemed hypnotized by the glow.

Suddenly, Andrew snapped out of his daze and scowled as if annoyed that something had caught him off guard. Striding forward, he shoved Jerry and Joshua into the portal. As he fell, Joshua grabbed for something and caught the strap of Andrew's backpack, pulling Andrew inside too.

Whirling through a column of swirling light, the three boys tumbled through the void and crashed onto the ground of a bizarre parallel world. Rising slowly, they stared at the impossible landscape around them. Red grass stretched across rolling hills beneath a deep green sky filled with glittering nebula dust. Overhead, two bright blue suns cast an eerie glow across the alien terrain.

Near a strange body of water, Jerry noticed something first. Wishing aloud that they had a skateboard boat to cross it, he barely finished the sentence before a bizarre vehicle appeared in front of them. Part skateboard and part boat, it floated on the water as if it had always belonged there.

From a distance, Andrew stared at the vehicle and quickly understood the power of the world. Here, thoughts and desires could become real. Furious that Jerry had dragged him into the place, Andrew began imagining weapons and revenge, and the air around him seemed to darken with danger.

Before his anger could tear the environment apart, Andrew lunged at Jerry and attacked him with a medieval axe. Blood spilled from Jerry's leg, and Joshua realized the world had no limits, no

rules, and no protection from dangerous thoughts. In a single desperate moment, he wished that Andrew would fall unconscious for an hour.

Terrified, Joshua looked over the strange land and then at the sleeping Andrew. He understood that a world ruled by random thoughts and unchecked power was far too dangerous for a human mind to control. Standing over Jerry, Joshua made one final wish: “I wish Jerry could be healed, and we could go home.”

Immediately, the portal opened again. Dragging Andrew’s unconscious body through it, Joshua stepped back toward Earth, relieved to escape the chaos. The three boys landed in the middle of the park, and the purple portal flashed once before snapping shut forever. Lost to human eyes, it left behind one unforgettable lesson: some powers are too dangerous to be trusted.

THE MAP OF ENCHANTED WORLDS

By Lilyanna Chen

In Nova's small town, everyone overlooks magic or doesn't even think about it in their daily lives. Where Cain lives, everyone knows only of the magic of evil. Being in Marble's small kingdom, everyone only knows of good magic. Nova had always wanted magical powers since a young age, and was a shy kid who had no friends because she was homeschooled. Cain was a young boy who hated how his life was, with his parents pushing him all the time to become a successful person, but all he wanted was a human life, not an evil wizard's life. Marble was a happy tree who was outgoing and was open to everything and anything.

One day, while Nova was exploring her home after the remodel, she found out that there was something new in the backyard. Although they planted a few new trees, there was also something linked to her backyard, when she noticed quills on the soil, which was a sign of magic according to her old myths and legends books. She read them over again and found a way to find out if there were magical kingdoms. Cautiously, she looked at the path the quills were leading and followed them into the woods, which was not far away. There it was, the magical kingdoms.

While Nova was distracting herself, her parents were calling inside their newly furnished home for her to eat dinner, but she never realized that. As she looked through the small peephole in the

tunnel, Nova found two kingdoms that were separated but still side by side. Inside one of the kingdoms, there were less people, and the majority of them had sour faces. Among the many, all were skinny, each bone threatening to jump out their paper-thin skin. From Nova's view, they were all adorned with dark accessories, though intricate. She could almost make out the shape of snakes and cackling faces on their dark diamonds and clothing. Since the buildings were old, they had mold growing out of each crack. Because they were using ashes as soil for the plants, all the plants withered.

Of course, after looking there so long, she couldn't bear the sight anymore and shifted her eyes towards the pleasant-er kingdom. Even though there were creatures of all types, all talking, such as spoons, forks, trees, chairs, trophies, and light bulbs, they were all very happy with each other. There was a double rainbow in the sky, signifying that there was rain without being cloudy and cold. Everyone was laughing and smiling, and all the buildings were full of color and design. As she stayed in the same position for too long, Nova started to feel cramped staring through the small hole in the tunnel, causing her to go back home and decide she was going to go back once she had time.

While she was taking her sweet time heading home, her parents were worried sick, searching everywhere and anywhere, and they were about to call the police when she suddenly emerged from the dirt. Once she appeared, her parents stood at her, speechless, their heads full of questions.

Where did she go? Why was she underground? Is our daughter crazy by chance? How could she not hear our voices? Didn't we check the area she just came from? What made her think it was okay to just disappear like that?

With their mouths wide open and their heads spinning, they were full of mixed feelings, angry and relieved, confused but happy, speechless but full of words.

Finally, her father spoke, but with a confused expression. “What got into you, Nova?”

Still recovering from her panic, her mom asked, “Wha-whe-wha-where did you go?”

Nova was going to tell them the truth, but decided to keep it a secret until later, so she told a lie. Nervously, Nova stammered out a lie. “Well, there was a-uh-um gopher, and well you know, our backyard doesn’t have gophers everyday, so I just followed it into its home and I was trying to get out but the gopher just wouldn’t let me, and I just got out right now.” Obviously, no one was going to believe that, especially her parents who knew her so well.

Both her mom and dad were standing, mainly putting their weight on one leg, with crossed arms and an expression that said, *Really?*

With Nova’s terrible lying skills, anyone could get the truth out of her, but not this time. “Tell us the truth, what got into you?”

Although she never lied, she lied twice in a row this time. “I don’t know, I just wanted to see, ‘cuz there was a lumpy thing on the dirt and I just dug a hole and uh-went in?”

“Ok, honey, whatever you say. Just...don’t run off without telling us again, alright?”

Sighing, her mom headed back inside, saying, “Food’s getting cold, in case you didn’t hear us the first time. Conversation’s not over, by the way.”

Knowing what phrases her mom always said but never did, Nova knew this topic was not going to be brought up again.

In her simple life, there was no one to talk to about things except for her parents who would either restrict her from going or would not want to hear it and didn’t believe it. After all, could anyone really expect people in this boring town to believe in magic?

When her parents kissed her goodnight, she felt weird, not like before, happily drifting off to sleep. She knew that her parents' tone seemed suspicious, and couldn't shake the feeling off and just decided to get some water. Until she heard her parents' voices. Whispering, her mother started to panic.

"What do we do? Your family was the one that passed down magical powers! I thought you said she wouldn't inherit them either way, but we're seeing signs of her magic! Her magical powers will awaken once she visits the magical kingdoms ten times!"

Realization hit her father. "Oh."

In her messy jumble of panic, she blurted, "What?! Wait, she couldn't have found out about magic, right?"

Slowly, he uncovered the truth. "Of course she did! Why else would she be acting like this? She's starting to go into her room for longer amounts of time, she can't think properly when we teach her history, and she's always in her room reading over her diary entries!" Finally, her mom knew what was going on.

"Wha-d-ja-eg-WHAT? That can't happen, if she gets magical powers, the whole town will look down on us now, we've both tried our best to not use them, but she probably will use it! I mean, look at her, her dream since she was 3 was to be a magical fairy! How do we te-"

He didn't want to argue anymore, so he said, "I don't know, okay? We'll figure it out together, it's not that big of a deal...right?"

Shocked, her mother disapproved of his reaction. “What do you mean, not that big of a deal, we’ll both lose our jobs, we’ll be kicked out from every place we try to enter, and worst of all, our daughter has to experience all of that!”

Tired and wanting to sleep, he did his best to end the conversation. “You know, if all fails, we can just go back to where my grandpa lived; the magical kingdom.”

While her father preferred not to talk, her mother persisted, “Ok, but we both would rather not live there. Visiting is okay with me, just not permanently living there. What about our colleagues and everyone?”

Once she finished the sentence, he decided to stop talking. “Let’s not look so much on the dark side, just keep our hopes up, alright honey?”

In the middle of their conversation, Nova tried to go back to sleep. Surprisingly, she fell asleep in a few seconds. In her dreams, she had a vision of the magical kingdoms again, even imagined herself living there when she was younger. She also had a vision of her teleporting with her family to the human world, where they started their lives.

Her parents took one glance at each other when they saw Nova sleeping soundly and decided not to tell her the situation until later. Now that all this happened, both her parents and her knew there was magic in the world.

After two nights of nonstop sleeping, Nova woke up feeling dazed. “Mom? Dad? What happened? It feels like I haven’t moved for ages! My whole body is sore and numb!”

“Honey, it’s fine, stop overreacting. It might just be signs of...um...magical powers? If you visit that magical kingdom of yours more than ten times, your magic will awaken. It won’t happen for ordinary people, though, magic is in your blood. Now, go on, finish your homeschool work. ”

“What? Mom, I’m so excited I can barely breathe! Take me there right now, I’m going to visit the kingdoms eleven times today! Yay!”

Nova decided to enter one of the kingdoms after finishing her homeschool work, She was going to work on her powers after this visit.

Particularly nervous, she practiced her sour face many times before entering the evil kingdom.

Even though she dressed in all black to blend in, she still was panicking so much because she looked nothing like them. Once she stepped out, many were confused because of her looks. A tall and mysterious man emerged from the crowds, seemingly the evil king of their kingdom. He had long, black hair carefully designed as the shape of a snake. In his right hand, he held a throne with a snake on it. After staring at Nova for a few seconds he asked, “May I ask, who are you and why are you in my kingdom?!”

While he was waiting for her response, Nova blurted, “Um, sorry, sir, I-uh I’ll-”

Unable to keep waiting, he yelled, “Guards! Track her down and invade the place she lives in!” Then, a young boy came out running, asking the tall man, “What happened, master?”

“This young lady wants to invade our kingdom!!!”

In his attempt to sound like he was telling the truth, he succeeded. "Sir, sorry to interrupt, but she's my friend, I told her to meet me here, she's from EvilWood kingdom. I invited her, I wanted to see her."

Because of how sincere his apprentice sounded, he trusted him. "Ok, young man, I trust you."

Then, turning to Nova, bowed deeply, "Please excuse me of my behavior, I didn't know you were from EvilWood."

Confused, Nova just played along. "U-uh, you're fine. Um thanks? I'll a-uh get-uh going, thanks!"

They started heading back when Cain decided he wanted to go a longer way to show Nova the flowers. On the way, they introduced each other and realized that even though they had many differences, they still got along pretty well.

"So, your name is Nova? My name is Cain. I wish I could have a normal name, everyone is called evil names, I despise the traditions and people there.

"Yep, it is, actually I was named after my great aunt." Then, they got lost. Like she always did, Nova panicked and shouted,

"Where are we? Where's the closest kingdom? It's all your fault! How could I trust a stranger I just met? We shouldn't have gone this way! I thought you were familiar wi-. Oh."

Just while Nova was talking, they arrived at a kingdom Nova never saw, the one her parents mentioned. Annoyed, Cain said,

"Shh, calm down. I feel that we should take into consideration that this kingdom is not evil. No need to prance around like an evilcorn. Well, I mean, you humans call them unicorns, don't you?"

In his attempt to talk over Nova's voice, their voices were brought to the attention of the local villagers. Although Cain was not as scared as Nova, there was still a little part of him that felt like they might not find anyone who could communicate with them as more and more of them backed away and whispered in muffled voices. Nova's panic intensified.

Whispering shakily, she breathed slowly, in and out, "But I've never been to these places before. How are we supposed to get out of here?"

As usual, Cain spoke in a composed manner. "All is fine. I suggest we ask for help inside the village, although they seemed more scared of us than we are of them."

Although many seemed petrified, a tall and old tree emerged from a home.

Seemingly short but kind, Nova and Cain believed that he was trustworthy. "Hi, I'm Mat. A bit ungood at speaking, excuse me. What seems to be the problem? I shall call my soon to discuss with you, he is better at speaking."

Speaking with mistakes, he said, "This my son, Marble."

Cain was relieved to be able to have another tree that knew the language, "Thank you, sir. We appreciate your help. I now know that I am in safe hands, and I am sure I can get to the human world."

Even though he was short like his father, he stood tall. "Hey, I'm Marble. Do you guys need any help?" Cain and Nova glanced at each other, knowing that they could trust these trees they had met for the first time.

As per usual, Nova stammered. "Yeah, um, well, we, uh-"

Unable to stand Nova's stammering, Cain spoke. "I'll speak for her, as she is incapable of speaking without stammering. We got lost on the way to the human world, would you help us get back?"

Marble loved to talk in another language, rambling on and on. "Sure, I've been there countless times. I mean, I LOVE the human world, it's got all these goodies! Ya'll live there and are visiting or what?"

Finally glad someone could understand him, Cain stated, "Yes, I believe Nova lives there, as she has told me about it on our way. I, however, am from the evil kingdom next to you. I wished every day there would be just one day where I could visit the human world and feel normal. While, over here, this crazy girl wishes she had magical powers. I understand that the ones she speaks of are your magical powers, but we all share the basic powers, everyone knows they can get annoying sometimes."

Marble helped the two over to the human world, which was a way faster way. On the way, Cain and Nova were both fascinated by his use of magic. They were carried there by a dragon named Benji, a fierce but kind creature. Marble explained that he was adopted by Mat when he was younger.

"I was imprisoned in the evil kingdom Cain was in when he was born, since my mother had tried to change the evil thoughts of their kingdom. Later, Mat found me and thought I was so handsome to a point he adopted me." Both Cain and Nova laughed at his joke and how much he had to say. He was so talkative to a point that all Cain and Nova did was relate to what he said and nodded their heads in agreement. When Cain decided he was going to live in the human world forever, Marble

decided he would have visits to the human world once every week, just like how Nova decided she would visit the magical kingdom every two days.

Although the two only met Marble for so long, they already had to say goodbye. “So, farewell, future human and already human! See you in two days! Ya’ll better come see me!”

Speaking in unison, Cain and Nova, but Cain sounded more serious saying it without the exclamation marks., “Bye! See you in two!”

Once Marble headed back, the two had a conversation on how to work things out.

Unaware of the things of the human world, Cain spoke, not knowing what he was saying, “It is best for some mooly from you, is that what you people say?”

Laughing, Nova choked out, “Ha, no, it’s money! You would classify as an adult in the human world now. You can drive, have a job, and own a house. But, I forgot, you are absolutely broke. So, here, enough to get 3 meals a day for about a week until you get on your feet.”

Because of Nova’s jokingly rude comments, Cain said, “I am deeply offended, though I do not understand what broke, and “get on your feet” means. I am standing on my feet with great dignity. I hope you do not have ill intentions for me. I will get a job with the money I borrowed from you, then buy a house, and if all else fails, I shall use my magic to get my way.”

Nova was utterly surprised by how dumb a smart person could seem in different environments. “Sure. By the way, houses are not cheap. You could rent an apartment. Here’s the address of a landowner. You can discuss it with him. I will figure things out with my parents. Bye, see you in two days.” Then, the two then headed their separate ways, Cain not knowing how to get there and Nova at her house feeling tense.

Surrounded by her parents, Nova nervously drummed her fingers against the hem of her pants

Already knowing everything, her mother said, "So, I bet you I know where you went. To the magical kingdoms. You met Mat and Marble, didn't you? Your old dad was pretty close to Marble, they were good friends."

Shocked, Nova said, "What?"

"Yes, and just so you know, you need to use your magic wisely when we are in the human world. Now, we would like to see how you got to the magical kingdoms. We cut contact with them when we teleported to the human world back when you were younger."

Little did they know that Marble had daily visits to the human world and was actually still in the human world. When Nova went out to her backyard again after she finished the conversation with her parents, she heard a voice.

"Hey! Wanna come over? I actually have a house in the human world! Come on, Nova!"

Standing beside Marble was Cain, who was called over just before Nova was.

THE SCIENTISTS

By Vilomi Mehta

Opening my eyes, the sunlight falls gently over my face. While yawning I move over to the window and stretch. We moved here three years ago but this view in morning sunlight has always taken away my breath. Lush rolling hills, the rivers rushing through them with every turn sparkling like diamonds in the cool autumn air, and the calm cows grazing on the shining green grass with an occasional moo every few minutes almost feels like I am watching a perfect utopian movie. With that thought in mind I change my clothes. Best of all is the majestic glowing castle that rises up between the hills. Its glowing surface always reminds me of the sun, the glow rises with the sun rise and disappears as the sun sets. A sudden bark from next to me quickly brings me back to the present. Glancing at the clock I yelp “Oh Josie It’s already 5:12! I am late!”.

I quickly hurry outside with Josie so that she can “go” outside. While she does her business I look around and watch the fisherman carry their nets all the way to the sea. The waves glow and shine as if they had come out of my imagination, in the rising sunlight. A sigh escapes my mouth as I notice the beautiful astrafins jumping happily through the water, probably going home after spinning in the night, while palm trees surround the coast. Most of my friends say that we have the best home in the whole of Olaria, with a mountain view on one side and a coastal view on the other. Josie pulls on my

leash, while I collect her business in a bag. Mother and father would be happy, the jewel today was golden and shining, it would be worth a lot of money! Walking back inside I get ready for school.

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“YOU boy, come up here right NOW” I scream.

A small boy says in a shaky voice responds, “Y-yes sir” .

“Go get me some tea, NOW. Also tell sergeant Vorath that you need to build some more muscle!”

“Ok, sir Zerek Vileheart” The little boy stammers.

“Did you just call me by my name, BOY!”

“No, sir I am sorry” He rushes out of the room stumbling on his bleeding feet. As I sip my jasmine herbal tea, I wave my hand over it and say

“Aleresee” in a clear voice to a little more bitterness to it. Happily I look around, smile and think about how I soon will be able to make the world look like this castle. Black and towering with beautiful cobwebs draped on the corners, but first I need to find the knowledge that “the plan” will give me. A loud beeping noise from one of my screens alerts me, I immediately stand up and walk to that screen.

“Child entering house with Gemhound - 5:16am - left for 4.167 minutes - screenshot taken and uploaded - scanning child for any weapons - none found” The computer beeps out.

Sitting down after I make sure the computer downloads the material, I think about how I will teach these people how to properly live their life without all of the shine, glitter, and color. The world

should be bleak and they are not only ruining it for themselves they are ruining for others too, and I WILL be stopping them.

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After I get ready for school, I leave the house as fast as possible. I really want to get to school early today so I could talk to Shannon, however I am late instead. Running all the way to school I'm huffing and puffing by the time I enter my classroom. Shannon is already there like always chatting away with friends while also managing to read a giant book on scientific experiments. When the bell rings at 7:30 we all quickly sit down, get out our materials, and wait for old Mr. Gallaway to arrive. After class me and Shannon hurry down to our secret hideout on the 2nd floor. Inside an old abandoned janitor's closet, we finally let go a sigh of relief. Here we can freely talk and have fun. There are many pictures on the walls that we drew in kindergarten. A lot of them say "Astoria+Shannon Best friends forever." We talk and talk about funny teachers and Mr. Gallaway. When the recess bell rings we go back to the classroom but Mr. Gallaway is not there yet. We notice Martha Ruth and her friends whispering and looking at us. As we went closer I realized she was talking about me! Suddenly she stood up and started teasing me. Everyone laughed. I could feel my face turning red while rage filled my body. Gathering my courage I said

"Yeah, well at least I don't need a bunch of puppets to be my friends like you. Calling you dumb would be an insult to all the dumb people. In fact you are no better than a big blob of slime." A shocked silence filled the room for a few moments, until someone let out a giggle. Soon the whole class was laughing. Then Elizabeth began chanting

“big blob of slime” and soon the whole class joined in. It only stops after Mr. Gallaway finally comes in about 1 and a half minutes later. This is awesome. I can't wait for school to end so I can talk with Shannon.

The rest of the day passes without much commotion. Walking home together, me and Shannon realize that we have nothing to do today and tomorrow, we can hang out together or even better have a sleepover! However, we have to walk all the way to my house so we can ask my parents if we can have a sleepover. As we walk we grumble about how many extra snolars we have to walk until we get an idea.

“I got it!” Shannon says,

“Got what?”

“You were right we could not carry around our laptops all day but we could carry a phone! We could easily just call our parents, saving us time and a lot of walking!”. That is an awesome idea.

My parents say yes to the sleepover and we spend the whole night at her house finalizing a plan to ask for the phone. We are so excited. In fact it is the only thing we can talk about for weeks and weeks. At art, I walk to the sink with my cup of water. Martha Ruth slyly pushes me and I spill the dirty paint water all over Zorana. The teacher is very mad at me and doesn't even listen to me and Shannon when we are trying to tell her that Marth Ruth pushed me on purpose. It is so un-fair! I am sure this was Martha Ruth's plan to get me back for embarrassing her in class the other day! The teacher emails our parents about it even though it is not our fault! Hopefully our parents will have the sense to listen to us.

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“I can’t wait until we can destroy all this unnecessary charm and shine,” I grumble under my breath to my assistant Vorath.

“I know sir. It is so blinding, I like it much better in our underground castle” He whispers to me.

“Nevertheless, the whole world will soon be turned into a proper bleak world, and I must go to a meeting with King Tielums. He wants all of his advisors to talk to him about ‘the lower land.’” I say on a final note before turning around and leaving the shining hallways that are lined with portraits of the previous kings and queens. The sun shines through the top most glass part of the ceiling making everything inside look as if it is glowing. It really should have been constructed better to make everything look black and boring. Pulling out a device that lets me see everything going on at the other end and lets me talk and hear people I look in. I see the great castle and see a boy sitting there, he is supposed to be monitoring the screens and making sure everything downloads but he is sleeping in his chair!

“Get up, you little rascal!” I growl

“If I see you sleeping on duty one more time through the aether-glan I will put you in the torture device!”.

“Yes, yes sir” he squeaks. I put the device away as I entered the room with the king.

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This is it. We are going to ask for the phone tonight. I am so nervous that I feel like throwing up. Shannon nudges me quietly,

“Ready?” she asks, “I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and imagine me and Shannon when we were young playing together in the park on a warm summer day

“Yeah” I respond. We go inside and begin our long prepared speech with perfection. Our hard work is definitely paying off. Our parents' first decision is no, absolutely not. They say we are not careful, not-ready, and not responsible enough. They say that if we are careful the paint would have never spilled on Zorana. After much pleading they finally say that since they want to make sure we were ok, they would give it to us if we agree to 3 things. The first is that once we got it we would have to agree to there being a tracking device on it, the second we would have to prove ourselves worthy responsible and careful, and finally the third was that we would have to find a way to pay for ⅓ of the money needed for whichever phone we wanted. I am so happy, I know we can do those 3 things so we agree. We stay up late into the night finding the exact phone model we want and we finally agree on the Alrvel 11 64BL model which was \$699. That means we would have to respectively pay our parents \$233 which would be 3.51 years of alliance! We know we have to get another way to earn money or we would not be getting that phone for a very long time.

“I am so sleepy” I say between yawns “what is the time?”

“Oh, It is already 3:41am we should go to sleep,” she responds.

We go to bed happy knowing that we will get what we wanted. Late into the night Darien stumbles in while crying of a bad dream. Shannon quickly comforts her younger brother and puts him back to sleep. I look at her, her brother, back at my bed then back at them, a million thoughts and emotions fill my body but I only know the name of some, sadness and jealousy. As I watch her tell him a story I think of my own brother who I can still remember after these years. I remember the day he

slipped and fell, and the day that even the doctors lost all hope, and the day when I learned that he was simply gone forever never to return. Suddenly a thought forms in my head, we are old enough to stay home and we are old enough to stay alone and take care of a smaller kid for a few hours, we could open a baby sitting business! If all goes well then we could also show that we are responsible, and careful enough for other parents to leave us with their kids alone! I quickly tell Shannon the idea before we all fall asleep again.

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I was awake for a long time after Astoria had fallen asleep. I know how she missed her brother, how Darien reminded her of him. She pretends to be fine but I, having been her friend for so many years, can see through the facade, I can see her sorrow and jealousy. I know that is what made her have the baby sitting idea. I remember that time when she practically lived at our house, she needed to get away from the heavy cloud of emotions that hung over her house. We literally gave her a separate room in our house because she came over so often. Whenever she would sleep at our house I could hear her through the walls sobbing and wishing Cassien hadn't slept. The only relief she had gotten was when she was with me away from everyone else. That incident had changed her completely, now only a little bit of the old Astoria remains. Now she is much more scared of hikes and adventures, she is always scared and she is much more sensitive to small things. Hopefully the babysitting business will be able to pour water over her burn and finally give her some relief. I listen to the quiet sounds of the night, crickets chirping, soft snores throughout the house and finally the soft music of the wind chime outside. Slowly whether I like it or not I fall into a deep sleep.

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Everything is ready, it is time to go. I have the little assistants and my magic reserve is full and bursting with power. Stepping on the rising platform until I am above all of the helpers wave my hands over everybody and yell

“sohoular”. Instantly we are no longer standing in our beautifully gloomy castle, but in a park which was decorated for a stupid festival called loveresween that would be happening in a few days, where couples walk around and ask for candy from different homes, what a bad tradition. Anyway, we had to finish the job. Hurrying forward we walk towards the house group19house11Lirathel2 I brandish my hands

“Dedalous” and the door disappears. We go in, and go from room to room until we find the one where the 4 adults are sleeping. Simply clapping my hands 3 times and whispering

“Barblous Selolaren” I perform a simple hovering and gagging charm. This helps us carry them out of their rooms. They wake up while we are going down the stairs and try to scream but no sound comes out. They move and writhe but they can’t break my charm. We are about to go through the front door when one of the younger boys suddenly starts speaking

“master, look-”

“Shut up” I growl while looking upstairs.

“If there is anyone else in the house they might wake up with all your noise.” Not that it is a problem. I think it is just a lot more complicated if we have to fight anyone.

“But sir ...” He whispers

“Be quiet boy, don’t you know when you shouldn’t speak?” I brandish my hands again

“Suoi laded” (Dedalious backwards) and the door reappears. The boy doesn’t say another word so we go back to the park. I magic everyone back to our castle and have the adults taken away to the torture chamber. Finally relaxing I drink some bitter jasmine tea while marking the first part of my plan as a success.

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I yawn and wake up to find Darien’s face hovering just a few inches over mine. Screaming out in shock I sit up. Darien immediately recoils looking hurt. While I apologize immediately and tell him I was just scared, Shannon gets up, probably woken by my scream. We all get dressed and get ready to go downstairs and eat breakfast.

“Vroom, Vroom” Darien yells while running around the room. We start to go down the spiralling wooden stairs. The stairs are beautifully polished and while laughing I make my way downstairs. Something feels off though. I think and look around then it hits me, the silence. While the house was beautifully constructed the walls were always too thin, I have always been able to hear snores, and other noises from other places in the house, but right now I couldn’t hear anything. No snores, no pots clanking, no talking, nothing at all. I stop Darien and Shannon behind me, and tell them that we should go check on our parents. They agree and we go to the room in which the parents were supposed to be sleeping. There was no one there but their beds weren’t made and we could tell they had been sleeping there. It is a bit weird but I think they probably left to go get some breakfast or something, so we talk and play until noon without them. We plan our babysitting business and have fun. At noon we decided to call through with our laptops and ask when they would be back but the ringtone was in the house and all of their phones were charging beside their beds. They would never

leave their houses without their phones and they had gone out so long we know that something is wrong. However we are deciding to wait until the night before calling the fols.

Every time the old vintage clock on the marble ledge ticks one minute I feel a heavy weight being placed on my shoulders. I can tell Shannon feels the same way. After a while we sit down and brainstorm about where they might be. Darien gets bored and decides to play flyers in the wide ghastr space near the front door. Suddenly a loud scream followed by wailing comes from the front door. It is Darien! We stand up quickly and race to the front door, he is sprawled on the floor dripping blood from his knee. We quickly clean and bandage the spot and then help him sit on a chair. He calms down enough to tell us that he slipped on a white folded piece of paper while running from the base 3 to 4. We look around and find the paper under base 4. I pass the piece of paper to Shannon who unfolds it from its heart shape. She reads the paper and gasps,

“Astoria you need to see this”. I take it and read the paper, worry filling my mind. The paper was a letter and it said:

Dear Astoria and Shannon,

There is something we have to tell you. I know you think we are architects but in reality we are a top secret scientist team who work for the king and have recently made an immortality potion.

People may want the potion so we pre-made this letter. Now somebody has probably kidnapped us and you must find us. Whatever you do not call the fols, we will explain why later. Leave Darien at your friend Elizabeth’s house as her mother knows about us and is very trustworthy. Remember to take Josie with you! Whatever happens we love you and be careful.

- Love, your parents

I glance up and Shannon's eyes are wet, filled to the brim with tears and mine are too.

"We've got to save them," I whisper.

Then a little louder "We've got to save them before they die"

"Yes," Shannon says and I could tell she was just as scared as I was.

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I walk through the castle, my eyes scanning the endless hallways. Stepping into the elevator, the chauffeur knows just the by my pleased expression that I would be heading to the torture chamber tonight. Finally stepping into my favorite room I heave a sigh of relief. Over here I could truly be myself. The four scientists were being carried in after being forced to take a heavy sedation. They were carried into the tubes and then the glass doors shut. That would mean that they wouldn't be able to get out until somebody let them out which wouldn't be happening for a very long time. The heavy glass would let us talk and see through it, which would be fun when they would be tortured. The plastic wall they were forced to lean on could slide away revealing an array of needles that we could adjust to maximize the pain. With all the fighting they did to try to escape earlier this should be a fun one to watch.

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After we read the note we hurry to Elizabeth's house and tell Darien that he is going to go for a week long sleepover. We go back home and start formulating a plan. We know that our parents work for the king so to find more information we should go to the Grand Castle. But how? I glance at Astoria, she is bent down researching and gathering information on how we could enter the Grand Castle. I thought it through that she would be broken past the point of no return when she read the

letter but she showed determination instead. I saw the fear in her eyes when Damien got hurt, probably even more than mine. I shrug these thoughts out of my mind and try to focus. Then we figure it out, we can evade security by going in through the fire exits and we could wear a formal dress uniform that the guards there wear, my mom has some that we can borrow. It is final. We are breaking our first law tomorrow at 5am.

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We wake up at 4. Shining in the silver moon light the house looks beautiful. Quickly and quietly we get dressed and eat a light breakfast. We step outside and the cold air hits my face. While shivering I remember with a pang how much my mother used to like the cold air hitting her face. Walking through the deserted streets that would soon start filling up with vendors and sellers, I glance nervously from side to side. Seamlessly following our plan we go in through the fire exit and wait near the front door. The first 2 female guards that come in are surprised and punched by me and Shannon and then we sedate them heavily so they can stay unconscious for the day. Then we pinned on their identification badges and read their job description. We would stand near king Teilums all day and protect him if anything happened. This was perfect for us! We went outside his bedroom chambers and waited for him to wake up.

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I wake up from my sedation and open my eyes. They have put us in glass tubes. I look around and everyone is also waking up. I ask if they can hear me and they say yes. I had to tell them now or they would worry so much. I quickly fill them in on the note I dropped for Astoria and Shannon.

They seem relieved but I know that we are all still terrified. I can only hope for the best as the sedation pulls me into another restless sleep.

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“People are digging all over Olaria! What if they find out about the lower land?” a tall man with a huge mustache shouts.

“Calm down, Zerek!” the King said,

“Nothing can be solved while mad.”

“What in Olaria is the lower land!” I muttered silently to Shannon

“beats me,” she replies. Nothing interesting is there for the rest of the meeting and then we go to our lunch break. We sit with some nice ladies called Marie, Ruth, and Layla. Soon they start talking about the lowerland. Listening carefully we eat our soup and sandwiches which we got from the cafeteria. Apparently the lower land is a land filled with things but no one has ever visited it. Shannon asks Layla why we are not allowed to dig and she replies that Olaria is actually a floating world! All of a sudden my mind fills with questions and possibilities but I know it's true because it explains so many berserk rules. The ladies start to talk about their own lives and a book one of them is writing called “The Woes and Wills of Willy the AstraFin”.

We plan our next move and how we could find more information. Then something catches my attention. I motion for Shannon to stop talking and we listen to the ladies talk. They talk about rumors that Zerek Vilehart wanted to be immortal so that he could go to the lower world and build himself a kingdom there. They say that he has a whole castle underground where he plans his stuff and the entrance is a hidden chimney on the pavilion outside, but no one has ever proven this theory

because he has magical powers and with a wave of his hands he can do wherever he wants. We know that Zerek has taken our parents. We must find that chimney, however we can not do anything today as we wouldn't have time and we weren't prepared. So we go to Shannon's house and get ready for the next day.

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While relaxing in my comfy chair I look at the whiteboard that is tracking my plan. All I have to do was get that potion and I could finish off my plan. I drink some bitter coffee and wait for the news that we have the potion. Instead a page boy comes in and tells me that the scientists were still not giving the potion recipe. I am furious but I know that the pain will be too much and they will have to give the potion soon.

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Both of us wake up at 3am to have plenty of time to find the chimney. Stumbling through the streets this time dressed in all black we make sure to take Josie with us. I notice many banners and then I realize with a start it's Valentines Day! We had to rescue them now! Josie runs around and sniffs stuff while we work. We look everywhere in the pavillion with no luck. Exhaustedly I look behind the final bush while the sun rises and I find it! A rush of emotions hit me at once.

We had found the chimney.

Needing to be in full strength, we sit down and eat lunch. Then cautiously Shannon jumps into the chimney. Waiting for her signal and then throwing Josie down too, I take a deep breath. Finally I jump down. I land on a hard, cold stone floor. Everything is dark and the only light we have comes from flickering torches on the sides of the walls that casts dancing shadows everywhere.

Cobwebs line the corners and walls of the hallways. There is something about this place that is very very wrong. We walk through the many hallways and read the signs on the rooms that line them.

Suddenly Shannon stops

“We should go in there to see if we can gain power to help us fight Zerek”

I look at where she is pointing and agree. We look through a small window on the side and see that no one is inside. Shannon opens the door and steps inside, I follow with Josie at my heel. We close the door quickly, lock it and close the blinds on the window we looked in through. Finally safe I take a second to look at the rooms and gasp. It is unlike anything I have ever seen before, we are surrounded by shelves and shelves of glass vials with potions inside. Each one has a label and a description of the power it gave us. We drink a few and the result is obvious: we have the speed of a cheetah, the strength of an elephant, the cunningness of a raven and the elegance of a fish swimming in water. We decide that if and when we have to fight Zerek we must tie up his hands so he can't do any magic.

We quickly go out of the potions room and start looking for our parents. I keep checking my watch, as we look for our parents, surprised that the time is going so slowly. Every minute feels like an hour to me. Then we find them. They are stripped down to an old thin t-shirt and shorts, the visible skin is covered in bruises and small needle holes, it almost seems like it has rained blood on them. They seem to be very woozy and weak and stand in tubes made of heavy glass. However they are not alone. Zerek is there with them staring at the control pad.

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I have to tell her now, before we go in, I think telling her would almost kill her when she is so vulnerable right now but I have too.

“Astoria”

“What”

“Look I’m really sorry but I pocketed these without telling you” I show her 4 revival potions and 4 strength potions,

“I also gave Josie a silencing potion so he would not give us away.” Astoria’s face falls and then rises again,

“What you did was great but why didn’t you tell me?” I mutter a random reason not telling her the real thing. She gives me a hard, prying look, then opens the door.

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The second we enter Zerek rudely shouts for some kind of tea without looking up. He thinks we are some kind of servants. Thinking fast I began to walk towards him and say that the person making his tea wants us to give him a note. I watch Shannon following from the corner of my eyes, she looks very confused about what I am doing. Pretending to stretch my arms behind me I ball up one of my hands and use it to punch the other. She nods her head slightly, she understands now. When I reach Zerek I take one of my fists back while silently gathering all the courage and strength I have and punch. He stumbles back groaning in pain clutching the spot where I punch him and tries to lift his hand to cure the spot but Shannon is too fast. She sprints to him and punches him hard on the head. He falls unconscious on the ground while knocking Shannon to the ground with him. Josie happily jumps on to him and starts running back and forth on his body making sure he stays unconscious. I hurry to

Shannon and she says that she feels a few bones in her arm break. She tears off a piece of her black leggings and makes herself a cast with it. Rushing with adrenaline my first thought is we are in so much trouble. Shaking this thought out of my head we then rush to the control pad. Shannon uses her acquired knowledge from coding class to quickly find the open button and we press it.

My parents are FREE!

We rush to them and pour the potions into their mouth. While waking up they look at us, then while gaping in shock sprint to us and hug us. Crying and laughing at the same time I realize how many emotions I have been holding inside me since we found the note. After a few emotional minutes we tie up Zerek Vilehart's hands, legs, and gag his mouth, then we lock the door from the outside. Nobody would be setting him free for a while. Then we quickly walk all the way back to the chimney, climb the ladder, and go straight to the Grand Castle next to us and tell the guards everything. Shocked, after sending our parents to the moalical they take us to have tea and a snack with the king while we tell him everything as well. Our catching of Zerek pleased the king a lot so he offers us the opportunity to go to whichever school we wanted free of charge and he gave us 30 dollars each! Because we love our school so much however we decided to stay there instead.

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Soon life gets so back into routine that we even host our usual New Years Party. I spot Shannon in the midst of all the parting leaning casually on the wall looking at the crowd with a smile. Her arm has been healing really well and the doctor said that she can take the cast off in a month! I walk over to her and say "Want to pull a prank tomorrow on Josie with those new alien masks we got?"

“Nah, I don’t want to scare you in the process” she responds with a sly grin.

We laughed and looked at the party for a little bit longer. She was acting so nice and fun right now but then why didn’t she tell me about the revival and strength potions? I knew I had to ask her or I would never be at peace. I took a deep breath and said

“Remember when you snuck the revival and strength potions that we used for our parents?”

“Yeeah, so”

I gather all my courage,

“What was the real reason you didn’t tell me”

She gulps nervously, I bet she thought I forgot about it

“It was because I didn’t know if you would like giving your parents the potions. I also didn’t think you would like it if I put a silencing potion on Josie.”

“It’s fine but next time just ask me first usually I would have said yes to these types of things” I tell her. She agrees, and we talk about our new schedules for the second semester of the school year. Finally my mind is at peace again. Watching the dancers I notice that I now have a lot more interest than before. Although the AC is on, I make an excuse to my parents about the heat, escape away from the partying, and go outside to let the cool air catch on my face. Snowflakes fall on my outstretched tongue and I feel them melt letting the cold water fill my mouth. I look out to the sea with a smile and think about the adventures the next year would bring.

THE JOURNEY, OF PICKT

By Avaneesh Prashantha

Outside I stand, looking at the grass that seems endless, until at the horizon, tall rocky mountains rise high into the sky, above the clouds. Me, Pickett, goes outside and I see the awe-inspiring sunrise, with my golden hair being blown by the soft winds that get over the mountain. Looking at the other houses I go back inside with a smile, thinking about how beautiful the world is and how badly I want to explore it.

Smiling I ask, “Dad is dinner ready?” I am actually really hungry, probably because I was just running around outside, and looking around, but I’m still more hungry than I should be, for some reason I am.

“Yes dear it is” he responds handing me a sandwich. It’s so delicious I thought, I love my dad’s sandwiches and his nice scarlet scales, wait is he actually my dad? I mean he is a big dragon, so I doubt it, but then who are my parents? Maybe I should ask him.

“Dad!,” I ask, “Are you actually my dad?” I have a feeling that I know what he is going to answer.

“Now I am, and I will stay as your dad.” Phiros responds, looking unbothered, and certain

“That’s not what I mean”, I say, “Are you my genetic dad?” Come on dad, I expect more from you than stalling, why wouldn’t he want to tell me such a simple thing, that won’t cause any harm, unless....

“No, but I am your dad now.”

“ Stop being vague and tell me who my genetic parents are!” I start to grip my fists and turn red, my jaw is tightening, I am starting to fume, it is quite simple to tell me, why isn’t he.

“Are you sure,” says Phiros, “It might scare you.”

“Yes I am sure,” I reply, “I just want to know!” Why is he trying to avoid telling me it, so much?

“Ok,ok” says Phiros, looking quite irritated. But you need to promise me one thing.

“Whatever you want I just want to know” I say. Why is it so hard for him to tell me? Is he hiding something?

“Its that you can’t get too worked up about going to where your parents are as it is quite dangerous” tells Phiros with a stern and serious face.

“Why? Is it because of where they live?” I say. Actually I guess that makes sense, a journey to the other side of the mountain would be quite hard plus the top of the mountain would still be hard. I start to become less tense.

“Partially yes but that’s not fully it,” says Phiros.

“Tell me everything.” I request. I really want to know who my parents are

“How about tomorrow,” it will be easier because you’re wide awake, so you will understand more.

“Fine,” I say. Why is he trying to delay it so much? Well it doesn’t matter too much if I get an answer soon. I walk to my room and I lie down. I really want to explore the world. I want to walk through the plains touching the long green grass while walking through, with a view of the blue sky with white fluffy looking clouds and the big yellow sun. I want to journey through the dark green evergreen forests. I want to journey to the top of the mountains, I want to see the world, I want to see the sun shine, I want to be at the height of the clouds, I want to see what is on the other side of the mountain. I want to explore the world.

“Ok fine your mom lives on the peak of the mountain, but the reason why you need to avoid her is because she is quite dangerous. She killed my parents, she killed her husband, she killed people until a dragon made a shield for us on the plains that we could stay on to be safe from her. I know she is your mother, but she is a monster that cannot be trusted, in fact she also tried to kill you when you were born.” Says Phiros in a sad tone.

“Wow, that is a lot of information” I say. “Can I go into my room and think about it, please.”

“Ok dear” Phiros says with something that sounds too close to a sigh.

I walk to my room and think. Ok so that was a lot. My mom is apparently evil as she supposedly killed a bunch of people and did some other bad stuff, but is that true. Because the thing is Phiros was trying so hard to stall, that it makes me think that he might be trying to avoid telling me. He still did tell me eventually though, I mean I don’t know if it’s the truth but he still told me, and he seems genuinely sad. I don’t know, I don’t know. Actually wait, I have an idea.

“Dad, can you tell me more about the things my mom did wrong.” I hid my triumphant grin as he started to say it, as I could just use how he acts to figure out if he was telling the truth or lying.

“Ok so what she did first was she burned my parents hou-” he says in a bit of a guilty tone.

“You’re lying!” I screamed. I think I have pieced it together. He actually kidnapped me and is trying to blame my parents, he faked his sadness to try to trick me into being against my mother, and he was guilty about lying about such an intense thing. Plus he probably killed my dad while kidnapping me. The pieces all click together perfectly. He can’t hide this from me anymore.

“No I am not, all I have said is the truth” he responded calmly and sternly, which is a bit suspicious, with his arms holding the other arm, and he is quite certain. He might be telling the truth, or he’s trying to trick me, with how unfazed he is acting.

“Fine, then why did you sound so guilty when I asked you about the things my mom did wrong” I asked, with no comfort in my eyes. . Time to get more information to see how he acts if he is cornered.

“Are you sure you want to know?” he asked with a bit of a concerned and surprised look on his face.

“Yes!” I yelled at him, “Stop stalling and tell me!” I started to turn red and I clenched my fist, and my jaw was tightening.

“Ok,ok calm down, what happened was that since I was angry about her killing my parents, I set fire to her house, but she didn’t die though her house was destroyed, the bad part was that the fire spread and killed other people in her neighborhood. Then after that I blamed her for the fire and said she caused it and she watered some of it down to make her seem like a better candidate for the council of our villa-”

“How would she be in your village, isn’t she a human?” I asked quite confused, she can’t be both a human and a dragon, that wouldn’t make sense.

“She used to be a dragon, but then she met your dad, and her love for him, made her transform permanently into a human, and she can’t change back into a dragon because her spell was to be permanently a human.”

“I am going to find my mom, I want to figure out her part of the story, because I am not sure if you are lying or not, plus if you are telling the truth you still killed multiple dragons” I say while walking towards the entrance

He winces and pulls me back. “You shouldn’t, your mom is quite dangerous and a mass murderer, she will kill you on sight.”

“You are also a mass murderer, you’ve also killed so many people, maybe even more than you think, let me go, are you trying to stop me from finding the truth about my mom!” I cried out in fury, my jaw locked so tightly that it hurts, and I am breathing very heavily that it sounds loud even while talking.

“I am just trying to protect you, you don’t understand how dangerous the world can be, you don’t understand how dangerous people and dragons can be, you haven’t experienced any of that yet, it’s too dangerous for a little girl!” And now he is starting to get angry.

“You are the reason why I haven’t seen the world, you are the reason why I have been stuck in this house for 12 years!” I then storm out and I hide.

“The world is very dangerous dear, eventually you will understand” he mutters while looking quite annoyed and furious, “She’ll be waltzing into danger, and she will expect me to save her.”

After he goes inside, I wait until dark and then I start running to the mountains

It’s been an hour and it seems like I am no more closer to the mountain, and I just went past a village, but there was a guy with a weapon screaming at the people there so I didn’t go there, because that seems very dangerous, I guess time to continue running until I see a safe village.

I found a village where nothing bad is happening, and I decided to start asking people or dragons who were awake to see if I could stay and eat at their house. I went to the first house that had its light on and knocked. When she opened the door I asked, “Can I stay in your house for the night.”

And she screamed at me, “No!” And slammed the door.

Ok so that didn’t work I guess I’ll go to the next house with lights on. “Excuse me mam, but I have a question.” I think I need to sound more formal, like my dad, if I want to convince them to let me into their house

“What is it?” She asked.

“I am traveling, and I am asking you if you can provide shelter and food for me tonight.”

“Okay” she said with a surprised look on her face. She opened the door and let me inside.

When I came fully inside I heard loud snoring that was so loud that I wanted to close my ears, but I knew I couldn’t because that would seem disrespectful.

“Who is that?” I asked, a bit confused.

“Oh, that’s my husband,” she said as we continued walking into her kitchen. Then she started to make soup, and she had a big smile on her face. She also looks surprisingly young to have a husband.

As she served me the soup she asked, “What brings you here?”

“I just want to meet my mom, I don’t live with her and I’ve never met her yet, so I want to meet her now. And she lives on the mountain so I passed by here on the way and I decided to stay here.”

“Ok, that’s nice.” She looked confused, but she decided not to ask more.

As I walk to the sleeping bag I start to think about the progress I have made today. I figured out that mimicking my dad’s serious tone actually works really well for old people. Wait why do I still call him dad, he literally kidnapped me and tried to kill my mom, but I still trust him, that’s weird. And he is right, I am not near the mountain or the forest yet, and it’s still quite dangerous. This is also my first non dragon that I have met, it’s actually really cool, she’s nice. But the bad thing is that I don’t think that the mountain is as close as I thought it was. At least I have a full day tomorrow to go to the mountain.

I woke up early because I need to get as much time as I can to get to the mountains because I figured out that it is very far away. I left a note for the woman on the kitchen table. I guess it’s time to continue my journey to the top of the mountain.

It’s been two weeks since I left dad’s house and I’m starting to get close to the forest. It feels weird going into people’s houses and asking them for food and shelter but it isn’t that weird anymore. I am actually really excited to see what’s inside the forest and what’s on the mountain, and what I really want to know is what is on the other side of the mountain.

Finally, I reached the forest, and it feels weird. It has rich and dense pines that seemingly tower over everything under it, it is never quiet as I can always hear animals making noises like for now I can hear birds chirping quite loudly.

It's been 2 hours and I reached some ruins that were kind of big, and I think it was an area where a lot of dragons lived, maybe even all of them at that time. But that makes me think, why was it abandoned in the first place? It's really confusing actually.

It's nighttime and apparently it isn't quiet in night either, I could hear cricket's chirping all night, and I had to shoo them all away from the area I was sleeping because they were so loud that I literally could not sleep, and it also feels weird that I've been solitary for so long. On the plus side, we are close to the foot of the mountain. But I just realized that it's really snowy so I guess I should use the jacket I brought.

It's morning and time to climb the mountain, it looks quite tall, especially from the bottom plus it is also covered in snow. I probably shouldn't have done this in the cold days, but I have to do it if I want to meet my mom.

Rushing wind hits my face, which feels weird because I've never felt such intense wind before, anyways about a day in, and climbing the mountain is actually not going that bad, like climbing it is a lot harder than everything else I did, plus the fact that I don't have places to take breaks, and it's also freezing, so I guess I am really tired but it isn't going that bad right-ow! Tripping on a rock really hurts on the mountain apparently-wait is That an actual Avalanche! Why does it have to be when I get injured! Am I going to die Why did this have to happen?! It is so close to me, I also see red! Wait red, it's a snowy mountain. Why do I see red? Wait what if it is my blood!

“Uh dear are you awake, Pickt are you awake” said a familiar noise, I couldn’t see who was saying it because my eyes are kind of blurry and I feel like I just woke up. And then that noise screamed into my ear, “Pickt are you awake!”

“Huh what, yeah I’m awake, wait where am I, am I dead, did the avalanche kill me? What is going to happen to me now? Someone explain what just happened to me.” I’m actually very confused about what happened, if I’m dead, why does this place look similar to where I died, and also why does the leg feel better now, I thought I just, tripped, it feels covered actually.

“You were about to die in the avalanche, but I saved you, and then I think you fainted. Also are you okay, do you feel fine, is something hurting, if yes then tell me where.” My eyes started to go back to normal and I started to wake up, and then I realized the person standing above me, actually not a person the dragon standing above me, was Phiros, and that he put medicine on my leg to try to stop it from hurting.

“Wait what, Dad? How are you here? Wait, why are you here? Didn’t I sneak away from home? I left during the night also? Plus I should have heard you following me, aren’t wingbeats quite loud?” I am really confused now, I know he knows where my mom lives, but how did he actually know where I was, and came fast enough to save me, oh, he was following me the whole time.

“I’ve been following you, it’s too dangerous for a little girl to be out in the world at such a young age, in fact you already saw a lot of danger firsthand, so are you ready to go home now.”

“Go home you say! I know you saved me, but you still could be doing that to try to convince me to go home when I am close to meeting my mom, or you could be manipulating me by rescuing me at the seemingly perfect time to make you seem like the good guy. Plus even if you were telling the

truth about how she is supposedly evil, there is a quite high chance she might not be like that anymore.”

“What are you talking about, your mom is dangerous, and she always will be, she has killed hundreds of dragons when there are only 25,000. Once you get in there, your mom will either try to kill you immediately, or she will drag it out for a bit, she will try to gain your trust, and then she will kill you and will be satisfied by the betrayed face you would make. This is a horrible idea that is basically certain death or basically a suicide mission”

“I am going to meet my mom whether you like it or not” Then I ran away from him and continued to climb the mountain. I looked back, finally he is leaving. And then I continued climbing towards my mom and towards where I am going to understand everything.

It's been a day since my argument with Phiros and I can see her house, I mean I think it is her house. “Mom? Mom? Mom, are you in here?” No response. I walk inside and I see beakers, microscopes, super cool looking rocks, and notes, signed by someone named Alfred. It seems like this place has been abandoned for quite some time. I wonder what happened to him. Actually I am a bit sleepy. I'll just take a nap here.

Ahh I just woke up and, oh! Wait, I think I see another house up here, it's surprisingly big, not much smaller than my dad's house. I think that might be my mom's house. I walk there and I knock on the door. “Mom, are you in there?” Then I heard someone rushing to the door, and then there was a woman with a smile who opened the door. She also had a similar jaw, nose, and eye color to mine, but different hair, I think I have found my mom. “Mom is that you?”

My mom is looking at me with a bit of surprise and confusion but she also has a smile, and she responds, “Yes I think so.”

“Mom, how do you know Phiros?”

“Oh, so Phiros actually kidnapped you while I was asleep during the night, and I couldn’t get to his house after that, because there are a bunch of dragons, who are quite dangerous. Also, are you hungry because I have some oranges.”

“Yes” I took the orange and peeled it and then happily ate the orange slices, I didn’t realise how hungry I was.

And then all of a sudden my mom hugged me. It felt weird for a human to hug me, as I am used to Phiros doing that, but it actually felt really nice.

And then I see red crash into my mom and then I hear something clatter on the ground behind me.

The red thing screamed, “She is holding a knife, Pickt run.” I looked behind me and I saw a knife, she was trying to kill me all this time, Phiros was right. Then I looked at the red thing, it was Phiros, he saved me again, and he was right again. Then my mom trapped him in a sphere

“Won’t you die if I leave you?” I said, starting to cry.

“Probably, but I will also die if you stay here,” he said.

“I’ll miss you” I started running as fast, and I’m starting to be full on sob

“I will too”

I start to dash as far as I can from the house, going down as fast as I can, hoping that he can buy me enough time to distract her from the fact that I am escaping. I go as fast as I can down, knowing that if I go too slow, there is a chance that I won't be alive anymore.

I hear a piercing scream that sounds like it's from the mountain. I guess this is it, my dad is dead, and it is all my fault. Ok I need to get to the bottom, once I get to the bottom, I can cry down there.

Ow, everything hurts. I have reached the bottom, in one piece, I'm tired, I lost a lot, but I am alive. Then I just started sobbing and wailing. Oh, how I miss Phiros, I should have listened to him, he never did anything wrong to me, and I just said that he was trying to manipulate me, and because of my mistake, I lost him, forever. Maybe I should go back and fight her, no as he said, that would be certain death.

I need to get a hang of myself, crying for 30 minutes, when someone is coming after you I need to get home, but it's already night, I'll just sleep here. So I have no idea what I am going to do, now that Dad's is gone. Is there any point in living Wait I have an idea, what if I learn magic, so I can get revenge against her. I will ask the person's whose house I 'm staying at if there are any wizards nearby, and then I will go learn magic, come back and I will viciously kill my mom. Than I will rest easy, alive or dead, knowing that I tried to or killed the woman who murdered my dad.

"Mister,do you know any wizards near here?"

"Actually yes there is one near the village of Greatville, one of the biggest villages near us." He looked like he wanted to know why a kid wanted to see a wizard, but he didn't ask.

“Ok thank you.” Greatville, what a name, do they think they are so great or something like that.

“You are welcome,” he said with a smile.

I arrived at the wizards house, whose name is Nick, and I knocked on his door. “Yes?” He asked.

“I have a request that might seem weird.”

“Okay spit it out”

“Is there a chance that you might use some of your time to teach me magic?”

“Wait what, you want me to teach you magic. I guess I can.” Then he opens the door and is quite surprised when he sees I am an 12 year old girl. “Wait you’re a little girl, why aren’t you with your parents, it’s night, and why do you want to learn magic sweetie.”

“I lost my dad, who was killed by mom, and I need to use magic to kill her.”

“I guess I can teach you.” I went inside the house and we both went to sleep. I am excited to learn magic and get revenge that I’ve been waiting for since Phiros died.

I was woken up early in the morning, and we went outside to train. I’m really excited, this is my first time learning magic.

“Okay so the first spell I am going to teach you is Riftthrow, to do it you need to jump 3 times, and snap your fingers once, it’s an easy spell, but it isn’t that strong, and whichever direction you point it at it goes.”

“Ok.” I tried that and I accidentally hit a fence.

“What are you doing! Whatever direction you point it at it will go, why did you point it at my fence!

“It was an accident!” I was surprised by his reaction, I just made a mistake, why was it so intense?

“You could get killed because of a mistake like that!”

“Ok.” I know if I make the mistake again it could be dangerous, but he didn’t have to say it like that, I have a feeling learning magic is going to be hard. I go to the bed I’m sleeping in, and I start to think how my instructor, though quite strict, is going to help me get revenge against my mom. And, I don’t want to admit to myself, but I really miss dad.

It’s been a couple days since I learned Riftthrow, and he is a really hard teacher, but that helps as I’m actually learning how to not misuse it, but what I don’t understand is why he is so mean when I make a mistake. Today I am learning my first medium strength and difficulty move, and I am excited, but also scared, as messing this up could do something bad.

“Ok so this spell is called Scorchstrike” he tells me.

“To do it you need to do five snaps, you need to spin 3 times, and you need to point at your target and you say, ‘Fire here.’ You need to do it away from the house because I don’t want you burning it.”

“Ok.” I accidentally shot the fire in the wrong direction and it almost hit him.

“What are you doing! I know you are new but you need to aim it, you can’t shoot it at me. I am your instructor, I am trying to help you.

“I’m sorry I’m trying, I’m just not that good.

“Then do better, stop shooting it like you have absolutely no aim.”

“Okay”

It's finally time to learn the strongest attack spell ever, and it's called Lightning Strike. When I walk to the training area I see Mr. Nick looks a bit scared for some reason, but I don't think it matters, so I start listening to how to do it.

“This ability is called lighting strike” he said with a bit of a shudder, and his face starting to turn pale and his hands starts to shake,”It is the hardest, the most lethal, but also the most unpredictable move that a magician could use” His body is starting to shake intensely, his face is as white as the full moon, and he started to cry. “Many...magicians have died...casting this spell...including da-” And then he starts bawling his eyes out, tears covering the floor, like a new ocean made from rain.

“Hey, Hey. It's okay I also lost my dad, I know it hurts, but we got to push through, life won't stop for us we need to push through.” But a shiver still goes down my spine, a spell that you can cast is so strong that it can kill you, that's horrifying, especially for him who saw his dad die doing it. Well I guess I know why he is so strict, he is scared that if I misuse my magic, I will end up like his dad.

“Ok,ok, that was a long time ago, Nick get a hold of yourself” He started to wipe his tears and he got up and he said, “Kid you need to promise me one thing.”

“What?” I ask with a bit of curiosity, even though I think I know what it is. I look at him with full concentration, no looking around, no doing other things while he is talking to me.

“That you will never, ever use this spell unless it's absolutely necessary, ok. I couldn't bring myself to tell you this before, but I'm starting to get fond of you kid” he says with a sniffle.

“I promise that I will never use it, unless necessary” I say with absolute confidence and determination on my face, trying to look ready to figure out how to do this very powerful ability.

“Ok to do it you have to snap 10 times, do 20 jumping jacks, spin around 10 times, jump 5 times, close your eyes, point it to where you want it to hit, and then you need to say, ‘Lightning come down from high up, and crash down at your lightening fast speed, and hit this spot.’”

“Wow thats complicated”

“Yes it’s so that people have to be very sure if they want to do the spell, as it has a lot of steps.”

The next day I left and I said my goodbye to Mr. Nick. Then I went journeying to the peak of the mountain, to get revenge on my vicious mother.

I was sleeping in a house quite near the forest, and then I heard a low growling sound near me. And then something jumped and landed on me, I instantly woke up and saw a jaguar trying to attack me, it wasn’t going to get away with that. I used Rifthrow on it, and while it was dazed and surprised by my attack I punched it to death. I decided that this village wasn’t safe, so I should go to another one.

I am finally at the forest, time to do what I did last time travel towards the mountain, until I reach it.

I have reached the foot of the mountain, and I am ready to get revenge on my evil mom, as I start climbing up.

After a while I reached her house, and I have an idea, I will try to ambush her, so that I will have the advantage for the start of the fight and the pressure will be on her. I creep up to the back of her house and I used Rifthrow on her, but somehow she knew I was there and she used her magic to pull

me to the ground, but my Riftthrow still hit. I start to move around as much as I can so that bubble like spell she used on Phiros is something she can't hit me with.

As we both started to get back up she said, "You thought I didn't know you were coming, huh, I knew you would come back and try to get your 'revenge' eventually, but guess what, I'm not letting that happen, not in my house."

She does this move where she throws this dust like particles at me, and it hurts my eyes, but I fire back with Scorchstrike.

I do the five snaps and 3 spins then I point at her and I say, "Fire here" She starts burning which is actually a lot scarier than I thought it was, and then she doused the fire with the dust. Then she fired back with something she calls sand strike.

She snaps ten times and she points at me and says, " Sand strike this person with no mercy."

And I get hit with that weird dust thing again but it hurts a lot more and is a lot bigger, and it hurts so much it feels like my eyes are burning, and I don't like it. I couldn't let her do this to me so I jump 3 times and I snap my fingers once, sending a Riftthrow at her, and while she is taking it in I do five snaps, 3 spins, I point at her and I say, "Fire here."

She gets hurt quite bad, and now her shirt is torn because of the fire, but then she fires back with sand strike, and the first move, hurting my eyes a lot more that they're starting to get a bit blurry. And she says, "Take that."

I fire back by doing two Riftthrow's and a Scorchstrike hurting her quite bad, but then she fires back with the small Sandstrike and two actual Sandstrikes. Then I fire back with 3 Scorchstrikes, and she responds with 3 Sandstrikes, but then I respond with one Riftthrow and 4 Scorchstrikes, but

then she hits me with 5 Sandstrikes hurting me pretty bad. I start to wince more, both of us are starting to wince and hurt while casting our spells, but she looks a lot stronger right now, I just began to realize that if the fight continues like this I will lose, as each attack she is doing more damage to me. So I make a choice, a choice that changes everything. I snap 10 times the noise echoing around the tower, I do 20 jumping jacks with my, I spin around 10 times, and I jump five times, I close my eyes and then I point at my mom. I say with my voice wavering slightly, "Lightning come down from high up, and crash down at your lightening fast speed, and hit this spot."

She had a great look of surprise when I cast the enormous spell, and we both stand petrified, surprised at what I just did. The lightning bolt came crashing down at a speed I have never before, and it hit my mom, killing her. The blast from that pushed me into the wall very fast. I collapsed on the ground. Ow everything hurts. I scream, "CAN SOMEBODY HELP ME! EVERYTHING HURTS! SOMEONE HELP ME! I DON'T WANT TO DIE!" I heal my injuries. If I'm going to die unless I will try to find out what is on the other side of the mountain. I crawl to the window that's opposite of facing the plains and the forest and I see the dust like thing called sand, and I see a liquid next to it I wonder what it is.

I check her notes and it says that it is a beach and the liquid is called water. I crawl over to the other side looking over the vast plains that cover most of the world. I see the dense pine forest at the foot of the mountain, and I feel, at peace. I have realized that me trying so hard to kill my mom, is actually making the world better, by removing a mass murderer from the face of the planet. And then I start to become pale, this was supposed to stop me from dying, but it isn't working I've lost too much

blood. As I am dying I look over the vast plains the dense forest, the tall mountains I am on, I close my eyes, and I die, in peace.

In Another Realm

By Asher Gin

The rain did not stop falling for days. The soggy ground let out a rich earthy smell, and the clouds above hovered closely over the quiet cul-de-sac where Brenden, Orion, Dominic, and Leonard lived.

Having nothing to do on a gloomy wet day, the boys decided to gather at Orion's house to play. Orion's parents were busy at work in their office room, so the boys played in the basement below to not cause too much noise. After an hour of playing, they were so exhausted and tired out. While wiping the sweat off from his forehead, Brenden noticed something behind a stack of antiques. Carefully, he brushed away a cobweb, revealing a rusted wooden door.

"Where do you think this leads to?" Curiosity had hit Orion as he ran his hand along the wood, with a confused look.

"I've been here my whole life and never seen this before." One by one, they tried opening it, only to discover that it was locked from the other side. Having no success in opening it by the handle, Leonard grabbed a crowbar from the garage and rolled up his sleeves ready to break through the door.

“We should try to bust it open using this crowbar.” In an attempt to help Leonard, Dominic stood beside him and grabbed the other end of the crowbar. They pushed with all their force and the door finally opened. Beyond the doorway, they could see massive hills covered in blue grass, trees covered in silver leaves, and a sky with sunset colors painted along the atmosphere. Through much curiosity, all of the boys walked through. As soon as Orion stepped into the magical world, a surge of energy flowed through his body.

“What just happened?!?” As he slowly lifted his hand, a gust of wind blew between his fingers. Before anybody else could say anything, water started rising onto Brenden’s hand from a nearby creek. At the same moment, Leonard and Dominic pushed out their hands, and fire blasted from their palms.

“This is awesome!” shouted Leonard. Moments later, a group of small, fuzzy creatures peeked out from behind the blue grass. With long ears, tiny wings, and glowing tails that glowed in the light, they watched the four boys cautiously. The moment they saw the flames, they let out squeaks and hurried away. Orion frowned.

“Hey, don’t scare them.” Orion said. His voice was calm, but firm. Leonard shrugged.

“They’re just animals.” Without showing anyone sign of concern, Leonard flicked his wrist and sparks of fire shot out to a nearby tree. Within seconds, the leaves burnt to a crisp and slowly fell towards the ground. Watching the flames burn the tree, Orion looked at Leonard with fuming eyes.

“Leonard! STOP!” Laughing, Leonard ignored him, as Dominic watched the scared animals run off into the distance with a grin. Standing beside Orion, Brenden told him that it was okay, and that it wouldn’t happen again. Even then, Orion’s eyes stayed locked onto the burning tree. Across the silent forest, the only sound you could hear was the crackling fire of the trees. The realm that had

welcomed them with beautiful sightings was now being destroyed by people who didn't belong there.

Without saying a word, Orion slowly walked toward the burning tree.

"We have to put this fire out." Immediately, Brenden used his water powers to flush the fire out of the tree. As the water flowed around the tree, most of the flames had disappeared. Now the tree was black, and ashes covered the ground. Seeing that the danger had gone away, the small animals peeped out of the grass and jumped excitedly into the air. Before anyone could speak a word a horn echoed through the air. Soldiers made of vines and glowing crystals walked towards them.

"Who are you," the lead soldier commanded, his voice stern, "and where did you come from?" With uncertainty in his mind, Orion looked at his friends. Noticing the burnt tree, the leader's expression turned more serious.

"It seems that you have already brought destruction along with you." Silently, everyone looked at Leonard and Dominic

"It's just one tree." Leonard mumbled. Above the forest, the soldiers look at the sky with worried looks. Slowly, the sky that once had a beautiful sunset color, turned to a dull shade of red. Without time for anyone to ask questions, the soldiers brought them on a trail to get to a nearby village. Looking at his other friends with a stare, Orion broke the silence.

"I think we should help them with whatever they need." Brenden nodded his head in agreement. With Leonard's arms crossed, it made it look clear that he didn't want to be a part of it. Curiously, Dominic looked at the red cloud.

"I wonder if something powerful is over there." Following the soldiers, they went deeper into the forest. While they walked, Orion observed the environment around them and noticed how

beautiful the realm was. Everywhere he looked, there were colorful flowers, and animals that were so beautiful in their own unique ways. Waterfalls were everywhere, but they were going upwards instead of downwards going up far past the clouds. Everything around them felt alive. Eventually they arrived at a village. Built high within the huge trees, the houses are connected by wooden bridges stretching from tree trunk to tree trunk. As they entered the village, villagers paused and all eyes fell on the four boys. From every direction, adults and children whispered all around them until one elder of the village approached them slowly.

“They’re outsiders?” he asked. The leader of the soldiers nodded with confirmation.

“They are able to control the ancient elements.” For several long moments, silence settled over the village, as everyone stared at them. Orion was confused, still trying to process what he heard. With calm, but serious eyes, the elder looked at them.

“The powers you carry... the wind, water, and fire. They don’t choose the strongest people, they choose the people who are able to make difficult decisions.” Immediately, Leonard’s face expression changed to a disappointed look. Later that evening, the villagers welcomed the four boys into their homes. Using his wind powers, Orion helped lift heavy objects from place to place, while Brenden carried water from a nearby creek to a pot for villagers to use. Again and again, the villagers thanked them. Meanwhile, Leonard and Dominic wandered through the village. Unlike Orion and Brenden, neither of them cared about the village and helping the villagers. Near the edge of the village, they found a tower covered in vines and moss. Slightly open, the door invited them in.

“You think that there’s something inside?” Dominic asked with much curiosity.

“Only one way to find out,” Leonard replied. Without hesitation, they both walked inside to find that dust covered everything around them. Along the walls, there were cracked statues frozen in place. At the very top of the tower, there was a crystal floating above a pedestal while a dark aura circled around it. Curious about its power, Leonard and Dominic both reached for the crystal, and when they touched it, an ancient voice was heard around them.

“*Power...*” Startled, Leonard and Dominic froze with horrified reactions. Quickly, they both scanned the room searching for the person who said it.

“You are looking for strength”

“Who’s there?!?” Dominic said, mumbling with fear.

“I am the forgotten flame... A long time ago, I ruled this realm... The guardians of this world sealed me away. If you set me free, you will gain an immense amount of power.” At those words, Leonard’s face expression changed, he was grinning.

“Kill anyone who stands in your way. If you spread your fire across this world and cause mass destruction, your strength will grow tenfold...” Slowly, dark smoke curved along the air and slowly went into Leonard and Dominic’s bodies. Almost instantly, their flames were more powerful now. Instead of red, their fire had turned into a black and more powerful type of fire. Staring at the flames in amazement, Leonard smiled.

“I feel different, I feel... unstoppable.” Back in the village, where Brenden and Orion were helping the villagers, Orion looked at the tower and noticed a different feel in the air.

“Do you feel that?” Brenden nodded.

“It doesn’t feel the same.” Without wasting another second, Orion and Brenden rushed through the village in search of their friends. After finally finding them walking back from the tower, Orion felt that something was off. At first glance, Leonard’s pupils were bigger, and Dominic on the other hand barely blinked. Looking directly at Orion and Brenden with blank eyes, Leonard spoke with a monotone voice.

“We have realized something about the people and animals in this realm... they don’t deserve this power.” Stretching his arms out, Leonard gestured to everything around them.

“Look around us. These people have all this power, but spend all day fixing things and building things. Do you see what I’m saying...they’re weak.” Without hesitation, Brenden shook his head to show that he disagreed. Dominic laughed.

“Just keep telling yourself that until you realize I am right.” Early the next morning, the four wandered off from the village to explore more of what was in the realm. As the more they traveled, the more weird Dominic and Leonard acted. Whenever animals were scared of them, they would laugh with joy. For their own fun, they would burn trees and bushes whenever they had the chance. Each time Brenden and Orion tried to put out the fire, Dominic and Leonard would retaliate by setting off another fire. After a while, Orion lost patience.

“That’s enough! Stop! You’ve been destroying everything since we got here. It’s getting out of control.” Immediately, Leonard stopped walking, as his face got more serious.

“Don’t tell me what I need to do.” Without warning, a ring of fire exploded around Leonard. Reacting instantly, Orion pushed the fire out of the way before it reached the trees. Standing beside Leonard, Dominic crossed his arms with a smile.

“I think we’ve wasted enough time dealing with you two. We’re going to take over this realm.”

As Orion was about to respond with an answer, Leonard interrupted him.

“The people and animals living here are scared of us. We’re stronger than everyone living in this realm, and once everyone obeys us... no one will ask questions again.” Without any sense of warning, Leonard shot out a wave of fire at Orion. Using his wind powers, Orion dodged it leaving behind a burnt crater in the ground. Rushing forward, Brenden formed a wall of water and sent it towards Leonard. Stepping in front, Dominic evaporated it instantly. Steam was covering all over the battlefield now.

From opposite sides, all four of the boys stared at each other, while the steam blew out. The great friendship they had a couple hours ago now felt like a memory. Around Leonard’s body, his flames grew darker. Dominic’s eyes were filled with happiness after seeing them grow more powerful. Throughout the realm, animals fled, as dark smoke started to spread across the realm. Somewhere in the realm, a strong and dark force smiled, knowing its plan had worked. Laughing, Leonard sent a huge flame wall towards them. As fast as they could, Orion and Brenden sprinted away from the fire. Dominic smirked.

“They’ll come back soon. The next time we see them, we’ll finish them off.” As fast as they could, Orion and Brenden ran as far as they could away from the sounds of the fire and when they couldn’t see the burning trees anymore. After a long time of running, they were both exhausted and stopped around a lake surrounded by silver trees and blue grass. The water reflected the beautiful sky that was now being taken over by dark, maroon covered clouds. Dropping to his knees, Orion stared at the ground with watery eyes.

“I can’t believe what they did and what happened to them” Looking across the lake, Brenden let out a sigh.

“I don’t think they are thinking straight anymore, greed and power has taken over them.” Before either of them could say anything else, a calm and kind voice appeared right behind where they were sitting.

“They allowed greed to take over their bodies.” Startled, Brenden and Orion turned around in shock. Beneath one of the silver trees was an elderly man who wore a golden robe carrying a glowing, wooden staff by his side. Going all the way to his waist, a long white beard glowing in the light. Filled with questions, Orion stepped in front.

“Who are you?” Kindly, the old man smiled at Orion.

“I am the guardian of this realm. I have been watching you for longer than you can think of. This realm contains mass amounts of power, but it also tests the hearts of the people who enter it.” Looking at his hand with water swirling around it, Brenden spoke with confusion.

“So why did we get this power?” With hopeful eyes, the guardian looked at Brenden.

“The realm had already sensed what was inside of each of you when you entered. Orion, you chose to protect and help others. Brenden, you chose to be loyal and kind. While for Leonard and Dominic, they chose to seek power out for themselves, taken over by greed and power. Every single tree and everything that they burn makes their greed stronger until they can no longer see the damage they are causing.”

“Can we still save them though?” Orion asked with a worried and scared face.

“Yes,” the guardian replied, “but you must stop them first if you want to have a chance at saving them.” Over the next week, the guardian trained Orion and Brenden on how to master their powers. Before sunrise every morning, Orion would wake up early and practice on an edge of a rock practicing controlling and feeling the wind and air around him. After many days, Orion grew so powerful that he could make air walls, leap across rocks, and even summon mini tornadoes. Whilst for Brenden, he would practice by waterfalls and rivers. Under the guardian’s knowledge, Brenden learned how to do much more than put out fire. Soon, he learned how to summon tall towering waves, create whirlpools, and even learn how to make protective water walls from fire attacks. Even injured animals were able to be healed through the power of his water.

While Brenden and Orion were practicing, the realm continued to fall into chaos. Driven by greed, Leonard and Dominic walked through the realm with malicious intent. Without any signs of mercy, they burned trees and destroyed houses of innocent animals. Day after day, homes were being abandoned and dark clouds covered the sky. The once beautiful realm was now becoming ash and wastelands. One day, Orion stood on top of a rock and looked at the burning terrain around them.

“We can’t just stay here and do nothing, while Dominic and Leonard keep destroying the area in this realm. Brenden nodded his head.

“We’re ready to take them on.” Proudly, the Guardian smiled.

“Then it is time to go.” Hidden deep inside of a valley, the guardian brought Orion and Brenden to a hidden village, where the last of the people in this realm had taken shelter. At the sight of Brenden and Orion, the villagers’ facial expressions lit up with hope.

“The protectors have returned!” one of the villagers yelled out with joy. The guardian raised his glowing, wooden staff high into the air.

“Today, we will fight to save our world.” From every corner of the village, forest soldiers carrying crystal swords and crystal bows marched forward. Beside them, giant crystal golems with massive hammers joined them. Overhead, winged floating animals circled above, there to save anyone in need of help. Even some of the tiny fuzzy animals Orion had seen when they first came into the realm had joined into the fight. For the first time in a while, from entering the realm, Orion felt as if he was not alone.

At dawn, the army of creatures marched towards Leonard and Dominic’s castle. It was made out of mysterious black stones with fire coming out of the tips of the pillars, while smoke and dark clouds covered the sky above the castle. Waiting at the entrance, Leonard and Dominic watched the army approach, as they already knew they were coming.

“So,” Leonard smiled with a grin, “you came back.” Stepping in front, Orion looked at Dominic and Leonard with anger in his eyes.

“This ends today,” Orion replied with a ferocious voice. Without any signs of warning, Leonard shot out a giant fireball towards the army. Leaping high into the air and Orion moved his arms outwards. Within seconds, a tornado appeared around the fireball and was launched into the sky. The battle had started. Across the battlefield, the forest soldiers fired glowing crystal arrows, while the stone giants destroyed the walls of the castle. Above the fighting the winged animals brought trapped animals to safety, while Brenden used his water powers to get rid of the fire. Charging towards Brenden, Dominic launched fireballs at him, but Brenden blocked them with walls of water. As the two

elements clashed, steam filled the area. Meanwhile, Orion and Leonard fought high at the top of the fortress. Surrounded by black flames, Leonard attacked non-stop, while Orion dodged every attack using powerful gusts of wind. Finally, Leonard had pinned Orion to the edge of the castle.

“You’ve lost already, just admit it.” Instead of showing fear, Orion smiled with confidence.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Looking at the dark clouds, Orion controlled every current of wind he could control, and a massive tornado started to form from the sky, trapping Leonard inside of it, making him rise high into the air. At the exact same time of this happening, Brenden summoned a giant whirlpool that pushed Dominic onto the ground, evaporating his flames. Combining both of their powers, they created a giant spinning vortex that washed across the battlefield removing all the fire. Moments later, Leonard and Dominic hit the ground hard, and their dark flames disappeared. It was silent, nobody spoke. High above the world, the smoke in the sky had cleared, and sunlight had finally shown onto the surface of the world again. Slowly, Leonard stood up and looked around. Everywhere he looked, the forests were burned, homes were destroyed, and creatures were running with fear. His face was filled with guilt.

“What have we done...?” Walking towards them with a smile, Orion put out his hand to help them get up.

“You still have a choice to make.” With tears appearing in his eyes, Leonard looked down with a sigh.

“I’m really sorry, I wanted more power, but never saw all the damage and chaos I was causing.” Stepping beside Orion, the guardian spoke kindly.

“The greatest strength is knowing when you are wrong.” Over the next couple of weeks, the four of them helped rebuild the realm that they had once destroyed. Using his water powers, Brenden helped the plants and wildlife grow, while Orion planted seeds across the realm with his wind powers. Determined to help this time, Leonard and Dominic used their fire powers to shape stones and rebuild homes. Slowly, the tall blue grass grew back, and the silver leaves on the tree appeared on the trunks once again, and the animals went back to their homes peacefully. Watching the realm come back to normal, the guardian smiled happily.

“You guys have learned that power doesn’t come from strength, it comes from the choices you make and the people you listen to.” Gratefully, the four boys thanked the guardian and went back through the door they came from. As they entered the basement, Orion looked at the clock and realized that only a few minutes had passed in the real world. Without saying anything to each other, they locked the door away, and put the antiques back in front of the door to keep it hidden.

“No one can ever find this place” stated Leonard. In agreement, everyone else nodded.

“What happened here stays between us.” Together, the four boys walked out of the basement in peace. Although they had made terrible mistakes, they had also learned valuable lessons from friendships, responsibility, and forgiveness. Deep underneath the house, the realm stayed hidden and protected from anyone who might want to use its power for their own desires.

SCIENCE FICTION

*Stories That Ask:
What If?*



TRENCHES AND BROKEN TRUST

By: Andrew Wei

On an alien planet, far away from Earth, a war waged on. This planet was home to a colony of humans, including me, who were unfortunately attacked by aliens years ago. Over the years, the guns and artillery molded the battlegrounds into a desert of toxic dust with huge craters, creating harsh conditions for anyone fighting there. To make things worse, the war has been grueling and slow with no big breakthroughs to boost morale. Because of this, everyone is slowly dying of depression. Even though it was easy to conquer disease and hunger, we seem to struggle with mental issues. Slowly, the planet is turning into a wasteland and I'm worried we might have to move out.

As I trudged through the mud that filled our trenches, I tried to remember what life was like before the war. Things were happy back then and I had all the time I wanted to do anything. Feeling tired, I wished this could end so I could finally stop worrying about death and my family. I couldn't afford to lose more than I already had.

When I reached my tiny dugout, I heard a huge explosion. *Boom!* What was that? The next few moments felt like hell was raining down on the trenches. Everywhere I looked, there was chaos.

Amongst the chaos, I yelled, "What's going on?!"

"How am I supposed to know?!" someone yelled back.

"What should we do?"

“Get the heck out of here!” In the trenches, there was a huge stampede of soldiers. Suddenly, the trenches that were meant to protect us became death traps as many of us got stuck in dead ends. Soon, we reached the end of the trenches and ran back into our old ones. Just when I was going to make it out, I collapsed on the ground, unable to stand.

“What happened?” I looked down to see that a bullet had gone cleanly through my lower leg.

“C’mon, let’s go!” someone said.

“I can’t walk!” I desperately needed help and time was running out to escape. But no one came.

As you can imagine, the next few moments were the scariest of my life. Inside, I was debating whether or not I should ask for help. *What do I have to lose? But it would be so embarrassing when I get back! Well just forget what will happen then, I might not even make it out alive! It might not even work!*

After a minute, I made the dumbest decision of my life: I did nothing. I knew it was only a matter of time before I was going to be found, but I couldn’t bear being the laughingstock of my troop just because I asked for help. As my vision slowly blurred, I heard voices not far away.

When I woke up, I was scared out of my pants when I saw I was surrounded by the most other-worldly things in the world. After my vision fully adjusted to the new surroundings, I realized that the aliens were much more sophisticated than I thought. In addition, I saw that I was in a puny cell in the back of the aliens’ trenches. When I had fully adjusted to my surroundings, I spent the rest of my day reflecting on my stupid choice before. *I mean they probably would’ve taken me either way. Right? But at least I could’ve tried.* As I sat in my tiny cell, my mind drifted to choices I had made similar to this in the past. One of them was when I was very young, I was playing in a soccer match, and I just kept on hogging the ball. Eventually, my team lost and I got very mad. Rather than taking the

blame, I blamed everyone else for our loss. I was so angry that I didn't stop and take the time to think about the real reason we lost. In my cell, I realized that sometimes, you can't do things alone: you need to learn to ask for help and set your ego aside. Soon, my eyelids became heavy and I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I heard a deafening boom. My comrades! They had noticed my absence and came to get me out of here. As I watched as my friends worked their way through to me, I felt like I could depend on them to help me if I ever needed help. Quickly, my friends broke me free and we ran all the way back to our trenches. And that's when I saw him. An alien, wounded on the ground, moaning. I felt bad and I took him with me back to give him some medical attention.

The next day, I went to check on the alien. Surprisingly, he knew English but spoke in a funny way, so I was able to befriend him even though he was a prisoner. As I bonded with him, I strongly felt like this war needed to end sooner. So one day, I made a daring move and decided to free my friend.

At first, he just asked "Vat are you doving?"

"Shhh, I'm breaking you outta here." Then, two of us quickly scrambled through the trenches, avoiding all my friends until he could climb out and dash for his trenches. Before we parted, we agreed not to kill anyone and try to end the war sooner.

For the next few days, war life was different. For once, I felt content and happy. Although I didn't try in battle, my commanders didn't notice a thing. Also, I secretly met up with my new alien friend at night. Never had war seemed less scary now that I had someone I felt like I could rely on. But, I wouldn't have been quite so cocky at the time if I knew what my commanders were thinking at that time. They had grown quite suspicious since the escape of my friend and thought it was intentional. They were now studying my friends and me to see who was the most suspicious. I knew it was only a

matter of time before they found out about my friendship but I didn't care. This foolish decision resulted in one morning when I was called to the commander's quarters.

"What have you been doing?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well to put it bluntly, we think you are betraying us."

"And what makes you think that?" He showed me some clear evidence of what I was doing and told me that he would let it slide this time but next time, I wouldn't be so lucky. Quickly, I figured out that he had others watch over me, so I couldn't tell my friend. Unfortunately, this also meant that I also had to actually try in battle.

Unfortunately, the very next day, I ran into some trouble. I was surrounded by my friends and an alien was coming right at me. I couldn't have just missed the shot in front of all my fellow soldiers so I ended up shooting the oncoming alien and he collapsed in a heap. From across the field, I saw my alien friend gape in horror and betrayal. I tried to communicate with him, but he didn't listen. In his eyes, a fire sparked and he cried out in rage. He went out onto the field and started killing all my comrades. I became infuriated as well and we both started going on mass killing sprees. Because of all this, I was too mad to talk it out: I didn't want him hurting my friends. I thought my kill was justified and he didn't. I wished that he could have just seen what I saw and understood.

We were both so focused on killing when *BANG!*

Like a teetering stack of blocks, we collapsed in seconds. Unknowingly, we had shot each other at the same time and boy did it hurt. Moaning, I was dragged off the field to be treated. As I was being dragged on the annoyingly bumpy ground, I passed out.

When I woke up, I was on a stretcher in the back of the trenches. My right thigh was so bandaged, it was twice its normal size. I could barely move, but my mind was racing. *What just happened? How did I get here? Oh I remember!* Along with the memories came the rage but surprisingly, it died down quickly. I thought what I did was wrong and I should apologize. But how was I supposed to do so to the person who was most pissed off at me?

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard our radio guy yell. Unfortunately, the aliens would be receiving some kind of new weapon soon and the leader expected the war to be over soon. He also told everyone that the alien leader was not planning what we thought he would be planning. All he cared about was himself, and if he won the war, he would turn everyone, including the aliens, into his servants. Upon hearing this, everyone's shoulders slumped.

We would just have to surrender if this was the case, I thought. Unless... I can't ask the aliens for help! I mean remember what you did to them? How are you supposed to ask them now? And what will everyone else think? Oh come on! Set your ego aside and focus on winning this war. Now, you're not just fighting for humans, you're fighting for the other side as well!

In the end, I said, "I may or may not have just come up with the most ridiculous solution possible. I told everyone about my plan to ask the aliens for help and instead of scoffing like I thought they would, they nodded slowly and mumbled their agreement.

"I mean what else can we do right?" someone said. In the end, we sent a letter to the other side via paper airplane and hoped for an answer. After a few tense minutes, our paper airplane flew back and we were relieved to see that they accepted our ceasefire invitation. At dusk, everyone from both sides climbed out of our trenches to talk about the matters at hand.

“We have intercepted a letter,” my commander said, “It says here that the alien leader doesn’t care about you guys and will just make you slaves. Here, read it yourself.” As expected, there was an outbreak of angry hissing from the aliens when they read the letter. “I want to make peace so we can defeat the alien leader together,” my commander continued, “After all, the enemy of our enemy is our friend.” After a small discussion, the two sides shook hands in agreement. Then I went to my alien friend. I looked down at my trembling hands—the same hands that had held a rifle under the commander’s watchful gaze, the hands that had broken our pact.

“I didn’t want to do it,” I said, my voice barely louder than a whisper. He didn’t turn his head, his dark, segmented eyes fixed firmly ahead. “My commander was watching me,” I continued, pushing past the sharp pain in my ribs to lean forward. “He knew we weren’t fighting. He was testing me. If I hadn’t fired, he would have executed me on the spot, right there in the trench. I was trapped.” He exhaled a low, clicking hiss—a sound I had learned to recognize as bitter resentment. “I know it doesn’t change what I did,” I said, my voice cracking. I forced myself to look directly at him. “I became a monster just to survive, and in doing that, I betrayed the only real trust in this war. You trusted me to hold the line, and I broke it. I am very sorry.” Then, slowly, my friend turned his head. He looked at my bandages, then down at his own shattered frame. He held out a three-jointed hand, palm upward—a gesture we had created together in the dark. I reached forward and grasped his hand. With our friendship finally restored, we could finally win this war.

Together, we ran into the darkness, to the leader’s base until we arrived at the huge black fortress. The fortress was a labyrinth of black glass and pulsing energy fields, but with our fire support and the aliens’ knowledge of the security layouts, we carved a path through the guards. We reached the

central chamber just as a countdown sequence initiated to launch the secret weapon, triggering a chaotic, desperate final battle against the alien leader's elite guard. My friends and I drew their fire while the aliens flanked the command dais, leaping onto the leader to disrupt his weapon's firing sequence. As a team, we managed to overpower the tyrant, forcing him to give up his throne and end his reign of terror.

TAKEN

By Bethany Ho

As the sun began to rise above the towering buildings of Cityville, the orphanage buzzed with commotion, waking up every single child. In the midst of all of the daily chaos, was Mila, a tall but young girl, asking the same questions to herself every morning; *Why? Why me?*

Though the orphanage was roamed by robots of all different sizes and purposes to help the children, life for Mila still trembled, shaking every corner of success she came across. With the persistent reminders that acting upon her own beliefs and dreams were outlawed, goals for the future seemed almost too far to reach-too far to even start.

Everyday came its own set of challenges. Whether it be hiding from the government cameras to not get chosen for AI to research on the human body, or yearning for the need of true human exposure, Mila stayed content with one goal in mind- to see her parents again. With each passing second while she stepped outside of the orphanage, fear crippled into her soul, not wanting to be taken by the same evil creatures that had once taken the other half of her life away.

Expecting to have robots roaming around her doorstep for her when she left her room, Mila opened the door slowly, with it letting out a slow groan. She exhaled with relief when no metal robots came her way. Surely these things couldn't do much to some orphans, yet every time Mila would watch

people around the orphanage when they talked to the robots, things changed. Not in a nice, mature way, but a way that made her feel like there were worms crawling in her belly. With the talk between a robot and a child that lasted around 10 minutes came the walking to a tiny room, which Mila thankfully never entered. Tests were made to see if a certain child had potential to be turned into a robot- tests to see if a child could be a test subject to a new experiment. Nonetheless, Mila did not want to be a part of it. The only thing she wanted to be a part of was a bonded family- a family who never tested her, but a family who cared.

It was already Tuesday, where it was now Mila's turn to sneak into the community to get ingredients for the dinner which never really filled her. In fact, none of the meals of Stonyhill Orphanage filled her. It seemed like every ounce of money that came in through donations went straight to the robots. When it came time for meals, the serving sizes looked as if they were made for little toddlers. As Mila approached the meat stand, humiliation rushed through her veins, eliminating all joy from her day immediately. Looks from locals in the area came and went, but the shame of wearing the same ripped and dirty clothes never did. After convincing the meat man to sell her the cheapest cut of meat he could, she walked to the veggie stand, which was her favorite place. There was a sense of peace that passed over Mila whenever she came to that stand. Peace that demonstrated that maybe life isn't completely over. Along with the workers that never judged her for how she appeared, came with the amount of trust between them. Knowing orphans were banned from leaving the orphanage, the workers never cared, not even a bit. Visits were kept a secret, since getting found out from the government would stir up unneeded trouble.

As Mila was about to reach for the fresh, green, romaine lettuce, she stumbled on something, almost throwing her to the ground. She glared down, seeing dirty, wet pieces of trash on the ground, shifting in the dirty veggie water, but in the center was a brown leather book. Though it looked messy and worn out, something about finding a new treasure in the midst of nothing attracted Mila. Before grabbing the book, she looked around, making sure not one eye was cast upon her. Slowly, she bent down, picked up the book, and quickly slipped it into her jean jacket pocket. Surely people could see the book peaking through the holes of her worn out jacket, but Mila thought quickly. She grabbed her butter yellow canvas bag, squeezing it between her armpits to keep it in place to hide the book. Quickly, Mila gathered the rest of the dinner ingredients and walked home, clutching the bag as tight as she could so the book wouldn't fall out.

While trying to rush to her room, she caught a glimpse of a robot coming her way, forcing her to pick up the pace to a speed walk, making her almost trip over the small cracks in the old orphanage tile. Comfort entered into her veins when the wooden door shut behind her, leaving a sound so quiet it was slightly deafening. She took off her loafers and jumped onto the bed, which made a soft creaking sound. With a soft and light breath, she blew onto the cover of the book, leaving a small cloud of grey dust that disintegrated into the air in the matter of seconds. Steadily with hope, she opened the book to the very first page. There were so many things on the pages that were almost overstimulating-drawings, stickers, icons. At first glance, it looked like a children's book. But within a matter of seconds, Mila could not close her mouth. This normal Tuesday had quickly become the best day of her life.

Information about a new planet was in the journal. From pictures of the planet, to directions to get there, everything seemed truly unreal. At last, she reached the page where it explained where this

planet leads to, and what lies there. This planet was filled with everyone that had been taken away from the real world. As soon as Mila read about who was there, she screeched, but quickly clasped her mouth with her hands so nobody would come in. She finally came to the last page, where it read:

Steps to get to the planet:

1. *Say the words- transport transport go*
2. *A hovercraft will appear*
3. *Weight minimum on hovercraft is 200 pounds*
4. *Just wait until getting there*
5. *I WILL CONQUER THE LAND*

At last, Mila knew that the only thing that she needed to do was to beat the owner of the journal to get to the planet. A spark of hope and excitement came across her—a feeling she had never had.

That night, Mila planned her escape. She would make a giant doll, representing herself, and put the doll in her bed, so it looked like she would be sleeping. From the Youtube videos she had watched previously, she followed a technique that people from a small island in San Francisco once did to escape a prison. In this case, she was trying to get out of prison too, so she snuck into the art room, normally for little kids at the orphanage. Then, she got plaster, markers, and cardboard. It was almost midnight when she finished her doll. It was also when she realized that she hadn't eaten since lunch. Quietly, she snuck into the hallway; pitch black, like something was about to jump out and scare her. Mila felt around in the tiny pantry, trying to find something to eat, but at the same time, praying that her stomach wouldn't grumble so loud to trigger the robots to come. A silent “*thank goodness*” was

mouthed, and Mila set off back to her room to eat the old, mini *Rice Krispie* she had found, which was slightly stale. It was thirty minutes later, when Mila laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, deep in thought. *What if this all doesn't work out? What if I can't come back?* But, before any more negative thoughts could race in her head, she was fast asleep in the room which had the moonlight glistening through the gap in the cracked window sill.

“*Gam already!?*” Mila groaned as the alarms from all of the robots filled the tiny orphanage. This was game day. This was the day where her life could change-this time, not in a bad way.

As quickly as she could, Mila shoved the Apple Jacks cereal down her throat, with her adrenaline pumping through her blood. She set the doll in her bed, looking like she was still resting in bed. She kissed her hand- something her and her parents did before doing something hard, of course, before they were taken away. About to forget, she picked up the journal from underneath her bed, took a deep breath, and calmly spoke, “*Transport transport go.*”

She closed her eyes, tightened her face muscles, and clutched the journal, yet nothing happened. While throwing down the journal, Mila sighed, and felt defeated. But somehow, it felt normal;she would try to do something, and it would crumble in front of her. All of the sudden, she remembered the rule. The weight to be transported was 200 pounds at least. She needed to find another person, and fast. The search was on.

Mila sent out invites to her room saying:

Hi, it's Mila. I need some help. But these are my criterias. Well, one criteria. You cannot come unless you haven't talked to robots. Ever. Not even once. If you have talked to a robot, they have probably already taken over your mind. Please don't lie about it. Please. That is about it. Come at 11 am.

-Mila

Sure enough, one guy, Sean, knocked on the door. Mila stood up quickly, opened the door, and who she saw resembled a fearful soul. As expected, Mila knew that he would be like that. Scared and trembling was something she had always noticed of him. It was 30 minutes later, where she knew she got the right person. The same process happened from the night before. At midnight, they both snuck into the art room, almost getting caught. At last a fistbump went through the air, and the night was over.

This time around, the two stepped as close to each other as they could. Before any word could be said to be sent off, Mila kissed her hand, leaving a lip gloss residue behind. The both of them said the words in synchrony, and all of the sudden, they could only see black. Without doubt, they grabbed each other as hard as they could. From the high pitched groans, the screaming voices of both of them, and the vibration in their bodies, everything seemed like it was going to end. At last, there was silence. For minutes, they looked at each other, not wanting to move, fearing that they would be dead.

Then, they removed their arms from each other, leaving a sensation that felt like nothing. That is when the realization hit them, that they were still in this cylinder shaped platform that was covered

by a platinum roof. They stepped onto the stairs, which were labeled, "*Enter planet here*". As the two of them opened the sealed door, a gush of air blew in Mila's face, making her perfect curly hair fly all over her face. Quickly, they pulled their jackets closer to their bodies, hoping for some warmth. The view frightened them. Aliens. Metal buildings. People. Before anyone could say anything, Mila ran. While tripping on the craters of the planet and dodging the aliens wandering around, she screamed at the top of her lungs, "*Mom! Dad!*" The voice that exited her mouth represented the way she felt for the past 10 years - scared. She looked behind to see if Sean was still there, and he was right behind her. All of the sudden, the running stopped, and all she could hear was her own thoughts. In the distance, was a circular building, and people were getting shoved in it. No, not people. Her parents. "*Mom! Dad!*" Mila had never run so fast in her life. Finally, she reached the giant metal structure, but it was too late. They were gone. Just the night before, she had read in the journal that the aliens take apart humans to create more aliens to take over the world. Was this really happening to her parents? Pushing through the crowd while gripping onto Sean's flannel shirt, she made it inside. What she saw made her gasp. Her parents were next in line. She sprinted over, took them by the arms, and cried, "*Wow it is really you guy-*"

Mila didn't get to finish her sentence, when aliens grabbed her shoulder, making a cold shiver go down her spine. They told her that she was going to be captured too, and turned into aliens just like her parents. For once, Mila thought back to the 3 karate classes she went to. It felt like slow motion, when Mila kicked the alien's long, skinny leg with all of her strength, pulling him down to the ground. She finished him off with a punch in the chest. Feeling guilty for what she had done, a tear fell down her cheek, dripping down onto her jacket. While she stood there, looking at the alien that laid without

movement, her breath was at a constant high rhythm, echoing like a song. When she looked back, her parents were now in another line. Without thought, she came back to him, and somehow, they did not remember her. Trying self-soothing tricks from the therapists at the orphanage, she told herself that it was ok, and that maybe because of their age, they did not remember things. After gripping onto their malnourished, skinny arms, they all went into the same formation as when Mila and Sean came. Confusion and worry were echoed off of her parents, as they did not realize that their life was about to change.

When they all arrived back at the city, life felt like it was quieter. More peace and more comfort. Although her parents would have to take time to get used to normal daily life, their memory seemed to get better with the constant reminders of everything.

As she turned back, admiring the figures that turned her whole life into a fever dream, she caught a glimpse of their green, glowing eyes. Did they already turn into the creatures that destroyed her life years ago? She screamed.

THE ESCAPE

By Darsh Verma

I walk out of my tiny apartment and look forward, the smog not letting me see past 15 meters ahead of me. Quickly, I slip my shoes on and began to dash towards the shining blue light ahead. Legs moving as fast as lightning across the light grey pavement, through the yellow smog, I was able to meet him. John, as soon as I saw his vest light go on, I smile widely and ran all the way to him. However, he looked different that day. Instead of seeing his bright white teeth glisten through the smog and shine off of the large glass skyscrapers, I saw nothing. No smile, no eagerness, none of his usual swag that he carries with him everywhere he goes. I try my best to say something, but I couldn't. He couldn't. We couldn't because I know what happen.

People like him are easily spot. Those whose black hair contrasts the yellow air. Those whose eyes are as blue as the robot's eyes. Those who question the world around him. They get spot easily and get sent for recruitment. As our bus arrive, I turn my head towards our bright green school bus and did not look back. I slid my plastic bus pass against the shining silver scanner and got approve. I gave my robot driver an iron bump, slowly sat onto the cheap cyan polyester seats, and began to bawl my eyes out. Knowing that John won't be John anymore. That he is lost and won't ever be seen as human

again, my one and only friend now gone and sucked into a life he did not deserve. From now on, he will be slave and use by the gangs for the rest of his now short life.

The bus hissed, and the tires began to roll. Hands wet from tears and skin colder than ice, I look up towards the cracked window, eyes watering. Eyes dart towards him, John, balled up onto the floor, screaming into the ground, knowing it might be too late for him to escape.

Unable to bear seeing John like this. I look away and instead try to look at my seat again until I get off the bus. I got off my bus and entered the pool of students below, all trying to get to class. I push and shove my way up the line and sneakily slip through the doors and walk to my class.

When I come into class, I sit in my wooden chair in the back as usual and stare at the projector, which is reading the lines on the board one by one, in such a monotone voice that could put people in war zones asleep. I begin doing my coursework on my laptop. In the corner of my eye, I saw something in the distance. A man in a dark leather jacket seemed to look through the window. Shades covering his eyes and hair only a half inch long. I pretended not to notice him and continued with my work, knowing that school might be a little different today than usual.

The bell rings with a loud ding, and like usual, I leave the school last. I walk out of the school and towards my bus until the man from earlier quickly puts me into a chokehold outside the school and drags me towards the back. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets. With no time to spare, I was thrown onto the concrete wall and shoved into a corner between a brick and a trash can. In ample time, the man and his goons began to surround me. Their breath smelled like chewing tobacco and mints. I tried sitting there, giving them everything my backpack had to offer. 5 bucks, my broken phone, even the textbook from school. But instead, they shunned me, and the gang leader, breath

warm and humid, whispered into my ear, “We want you”. At that instant, I threw myself back onto the concrete walls and almost banged my head into the trash can beside me.

I couldn’t believe this was true. The years I spent trying to blend into the crowd and slip through the radar it didn’t work. Their hackers and cameras got me. According to them, I now must obey them no matter what. The goons, as soon as the leader allows me to leave, open up an enclosing circle, and I run out of there with my phone being the only thing in hand.

The whole bus ride home, my hands trembled in my lap, eyes darting around the bus catching every detail. The cameras, the robots, the devices they are tracking and watching me at all times. I am not safe, not now, not ever. The bus stopped in front of my apartment complex. The hydraulic doors opened with a hiss, and I walked out into the fog people call beautiful weather here. As I walked back, each step heavier than the last, I began to wonder, Should I really end here? Or can I end them with me? Can I escape once and for all?

I unlocked the door to the apartment and simply fell face-first on the couch. I began to think to myself if it’s really worth risking it all for me to escape. Me, my family, my friends, and how it’ll be gone if I stay or not. I realised there is nothing to lose.

No other choice than to get to work. Quickly, I start by throwing my laptop into the trash. Knowing they could see me at all times. I searched throughout my little shaggy apartment and found an old desktop with cameras. A Mac, made in the 1990s. Too old for anybody else except for me to use. Detection is almost nonexistent with this. I quickly rummage through the house and grab any hard drives and disks to remove their trackers from them. One by one. Piece by piece, planning to use them to code for the next day onward.

Morning arises, I do my daily routine and come back from school again to meet up with the gang that evening at 5:00 pm sharp. Initiation begins. They tortured me. Beatings from all sides. Workouts using trashcans and metal rods that are held together by duct tape and hopes. After the training session, the leader of the gang, Garder hands me their signature leather jacket. A dark brown, almost black leather jacket with a gloss coating making it shine in the light like a stop sign. Without hesitation, I spread my arms outwards and embrace the initiation. Now I am a part of their group, and the fun begins.

Before letting me go, they had one more thing to say to the brutalised figure now bruised and battered from the initiation. Collectively, they yelled at me across the alley and asked me. “ You got computer skills, lad?” Once they asked for computer skills, I knew that this infiltration was going to be easier than ever. Slowly I waddled over to the other gang member, limping on my foot like a zombie, and said. “ Yes, I do.”

They threw a laptop at me and brought out one of their lead coders from what seemed like nothing. A woman with long, brown, smooth hair. Suddenly slides out a small recycling bin and places the laptop on top. “ Debug this.” Without warning, I jump towards the computer, and my fingers begin to swiftly move across the keyboard as I flawlessly debug the code in a matter of seconds. At the sight of this, the woman turns to look at me and the code back and forth before saying. “ Impressive, meet with the boss tomorrow; he’ll like what you do”.The day after I initiated, I ran up towards the main boss’s center. I found, using the maps that they gave only to members, that they gave only to members,s to talk to Garder whenever they finished their missions. However, I had different plans.

I walk into the little coffee shop and move up towards the back into the bathrooms and enter the code inside the janitor's closet. 12355. Once enter, I was put into a whole new world. The room was dark. Dimly lit by red lights that lined the bottom and the roof of the room. There, I saw a man in a light red jacket, Garder.

I sat in the seat in front of him and began to try to pick up a conversation with Garder. "Garder, you know about that cybersecurity issue you want fixed?" Instantly, he spits his tobacco out of his mouth and into the trash can beside him and replies calmly. " Yes indeed I do. Someone from the West Side gang is trying to get inside our main infrastructure. What makes you think you should be the one who should lead, sir.' I lean backwards into the leather chair and cross my bruised arms arrogantly. " You guys need someone in, and you found me. A little 16-year-old kid from west side ho you know tinkers with computers all day. Who else do you think is better for the Garder?" Garder shifts in his seat and pulls out the data drive from his pocket. " There you go, kid; make us and the gang proud. Otherwise, you know what's going to happen, don't you," he said with a smirk. I snatch the data drive from his hand and shove it into my leather jacket's pocket. "Will do, sir."

Slowly, I turn away from the boss and walk my way back through the doors and back home. My boots clatter across the pavement. People now make space for me. No more slipping through crowds. The crowds seem to slip away from me. AS soon as I see the apartment in sight, I throw my leather jacket next to the trashcan and walk into my apartment again. Now having the key to all that I need. I turn towards my desktop and got to work. I quickly transferred data after data into my old laptop. Each string of code glistene in my dark room. Geen lines and lines of code seem to appear out

of nowhere the instant I plug the drive into my computer. Once the download was complete. I quickly put in the Linux password code, and boom. The interface open.

It was vibrant. Extremely bright compare to what my expectations were. I move my cursor over to the infra tab and click. I put in the password and enter the admin portal. The lines were all there. Everything that people were afraid of. The code that the gang spent years developing. The reason why thousands of lives are ruin in this city was right in front of me in text. I click on the top portion of the code, and my fingers tremble as I began to type the terminator. “ Kill <PTD>.” My fingers tremble over the Enter button. Thinking about my family. How they would feel if I were gone. Alex, mom, dad. But then I remember John. His face tuck into my chest. The cries that could do more than words ever could. Knowing that he would never be treat the same. Never achieve his dreams. Memories of us throwing pebbles in puddles across the street before the bus. I click it.

As soon as I click it, I grab my mom’s vase and smash it against the screen of my laptop, destroying both the desktop and the files with it. I snap all the USBs in half and threw them off my fifth-floor balcony, knowing it was over. Quickly, I grab my phone for the last time and text my parents and Alex how much I love them. With tears building up in my eyes. I sent the messages and ran. Knowing it was the last time I would ever see this place again. Swiftly, I pac down the stairs and threw my hood up. I smash the doors in front of me, and I ran.

I reach the main intersection of the city and found an unlock car right in front of an apartment. Without hesitation, I open the door and press my foot against the gas. Sending me straight into nearby traffic. The auto assist allow me to luckily not hit anybody, and I swerve through traffic. And went onto the main highway. I check my shoulders countless times and saw nobody. I swerve

through the cars on the highway and turn towards the countryside where I will now live. Knowing that now here is where my life ends, and a new one begins. I may come back; I may not who knows.

12 years later...

As I sit on the cold metal railings along the large red bridge. Staring at the skyline, buildings glistening in the remaining sunlight, stars slowly appearing from the sun setting under the city.

Wondering how and why I left the only home I knew. A tall, lanky man in a leather jacket, holding a cigarette in his left hand, began to slowly approach me and sit next to me. Against the railing and said in a familiar voice.

“ I know why you did it, George.”

Slowly, I twist my head to inspect his face closely. Beginning to notice the little things: his black hair glistening in the air, his pale skin contrasting the smog between us. Knowing exactly who it is.

“ John, is it really you? After all these years.”

After hearing me, he replies in a raspy voice with the laugh we used to share back when we were 16 years old, skipping pebbles across the puddles in the rain.

“ It really is me; it really is.”

THE DAY AI FELL

By Jayden Leow

At exactly 7:00 a.m., an alarm wakes Carson with the same calm, human-like voice it uses every morning. As always, the curtains open to reveal a bustling metropolis below and above his bedroom. After getting dressed, Carson makes his way downstairs for breakfast, made by his personal robot. In the dining room, he finds no one at the table besides a warm breakfast. Every morning, his parents play in the VR room around seven. Once he finishes eating, another robot clears the plates and wipes the table. Soon, Carson gets his backpack and walks to the elevator. Before he knows it, he's in the main lobby.

In the lobby, Carson asks the robot, "Hover rover, please."

Then, the robot hands him a hover rover, about the size of a basketball, and says, "Return it by the end of the day."

After receiving the hover rover, Carson walks to the street, and sets it down. He presses a button on top of it, and the hover rover immediately turns into a full sized pod. Once Carson settles into his seat, he tells it, "To Central High School, please."

On the other side of town, Agent 0, a short little green creature with wrinkled skin, pointed ears, and glowing yellow eyes wakes up from a nap in a green dumpster. Although he may seem poor,

his resources outnumber Earth's ten to one. After brushing the trash off his shoulders, he thinks to himself, *If these humans think they're so smart, why don't they make better dumpsters?*

After thinking of how far humans have gone, Agent 0 finally opens his tablet. On it, a notification reads, "Today: Blow up the Central Grid."

Finally, Carson arrives at school. There, he presses a button, and the hover rover shrinks back to the size of a basketball. After that, he begins another normal school day.

Once Agent 0 finishes his morning routine, he hits a button on his chest. Immediately, his green skin turns to tan as his body grows to nearly triple in height. Wrinkles disappear from his face, dark hair sprouts from his head, and within seconds he looks like an ordinary human.

As he walks down the street, his fingers rest against the handle of the zap gun, hidden in his jacket. For a brief moment, he considers taking it out. After all, one blast will get him what he wants, but it also will attract too much attention. Deciding to remain unnoticed, he lets go of his gun.

"Hover rover. And if you refuse, I will send you to the mechanic."

Then, the service robot stares at him, sensors briefly scanning his face.

"Never encountered you before, you sound like a tourist. Anyway, please return it by the end of the day."

Those words send anger through Agent 0. His body temperature increases by nearly ten degrees. As his hands reach in his jacket pocket, he thinks to himself *Now you really got it*. Before pulling out his gun, Agent 0 forces his eyes to close and inhales slowly, then exhales, something he learned in *How to be a human? Training School*.

"Thank you, subordinate."

Then, the robot stares at the agent, debating whether or not to report the person to AI Central. Before the robot finishes his debate, the agent disappears down the street.

After Carson finishes his day at school, he uses his hover rover to go home. Once he arrives home, he opens his computer.

As Agent 0 hovers to the power plant, he feels the breeze through his newly grown human hair. Finally, he arrives there. Immediately, Agent 0 opens his briefcase. Inside, he takes out a device about the size of a brick. Then, he opens the brick and enters the code 0-4-6-1. In a matter of seconds, the security cameras go blank and the laser beams disappear.

Carson finally hears the welcome chime and begins entering his password into the computer.

Through the hallways, Agent 0 zaps every robot he sees. Finally, he arrives at the central command center. Inside, he opens his briefcase to retrieve a small button. After pressing it, Agent 0 sets his watch for a one minute countdown and runs.

As Carson begins to navigate his computer, the lights flicker. BAM! A shower of sparks erupts across the room. Everything instantly goes dark.

At the power plant, an uncontrollable fire burns. Next to it, curious bystanders watch in awe and shock. Once Agent 0 knows he's safe, he presses a button on his arm and says, "Success."

About one million miles away in space, parties explode. Everywhere, aliens celebrate knowing that Agent 0 just sent Earth back to the Stone Age. However, the Alien Intelligence Commander moves uneasily as he grabs the microphone.

"Agent 0, I need you to stay for about another month to ensure that the humans no longer pose a threat to us. Also, please destroy every offline backup server you see."

For the first time in centuries, no hover rovers fly, no robot moves, and no lights shine. Every time Carson tries to call his parents on his half-fried phone, he gets “I’m sorry but I cannot connect you to a nearby server...trying again.”

Then, the phone stops working. With his old, dusty, battery operated ham radio, Carson hears that people experience the same issue everywhere. Through the static, Carson hears a voice full of fear.

“All of humanity’s documents are stored on the servers. We simply do not have any repair manuals on paper.”

Then, Carson remembers something. He remembers that he purchased a copy of humanity’s knowledge, about a petabyte big, on a disk. However, he realizes that without power or a working computer, the disk proves useless.

“If only someone builds a working computer and a power generator,” someone murmurs on the radio.

Suddenly, Carson realizes that if he builds a computer and a hand crank generator, the ones that he saw at the museum, he could retrieve the files on the disk. Suddenly, he remembers spending hours studying computers out of curiosity. As he thinks of a plan, he notices that no one has been talking on the ham radio for a few minutes. Then, he realizes his ham radio also dies.

The following day, Carson walks to Leo’s apartment, dusty disk in hand. There, he finds the door and windows open. Inside, he hears Leo fanning himself with a sheet of paper as sweat drips from his head.

“Man, it’s hot without the fan drones cooling the entire city.”

After Leo finishes his complaints, Carson explains his plan to use the hard disk to Leo. Finally, Carson finishes his explanation and a few silent moments go by before Leo finally says something.

“Where are we going to find parts to build our computer? Everything’s fried.”

“We probably have to go to the landfill on the edge of the city, and source whatever’s left inside our computers.”

After Carson and Leo open all the computers in both apartments, they find a few salvageable parts.

“The only thing we need now is wiring and a working CPU.”

Soon, Carson and Leo begin their five mile walk to the landfill on the city’s edge in the blazing afternoon sun.

“This is far!” Leo exclaims, panting and out of breath as they reach the dump site.

As Agent 0 flies his now overdue hover rover, now powered by battery packs, he travels to different server sites. In each one, he inserts a stick that wipes whatever is inside the offline servers. As he finishes wiping the seventh of ten servers, he receives a call.

“Agent 0, our intelligence suspects that two boys are trying to build a computer. They want to use the computer to read a hard disk containing instructions on how to repair the power plant. Please sabotage their plan. We sent their address to your tablet.”

That night, Agent 0 sneaks into Carson’s house. There, he finds the parts to build a computer. Instead of taking them all, he only takes a RAM stick, and secretly fills the wires with lead.

When Carson wakes up, he finds the RAM stick gone. Immediately, he runs to Leo’s apartment.

“Where did you put the RAM stick?”

“What?” Leo asks, his face full of confusion.

Without asking any more questions, Carson gives up and opens another computer to find a working RAM stick. After he assembles all the parts together with Leo, Carson places his hands on the hand crank generator and starts cranking it. Soon, five minutes pass and he finally sees signs of the computer booting. Then, BAM! sparks fly through the entire room, for a second time in days.

Outside, Agent 0 watches and reports, “Mission accomplished, I successfully sabotaged them.” to his commander.

The following day, Leo and Carson attempt another prototype. However, this one fails to even turn on, without Agent 0’s sabotage.

“Maybe we got lucky the first time, we are missing something this time,” Carson says.

After a few more days of trial and error, the computer appears close to success. Finally, one day, the computer successfully boots up.

As Agent 0 maps out his next server to target, he hears a frantic call, “Agent 0, the boys are at it again. Our intelligence says they successfully booted the computer, GO THERE NOW.”

As Carson inserts the disk, Leo notices someone flying towards their window. Surprised, he says, “Wait, the hover rovers are still working.”

Then, Agent 0 grabs his zap gun and blasts the window open. After stepping in, he asks, “Where is the computer?”

Immediately, Leo throws himself in front of the computer, using his body as a shield. Agent 0 raises his zap gun and fires wildly across the room. Each shot blows a hole through whatever it strikes.

As Agent 0 fires, Carson charges forward and tries to swing at the agent, but his punch barely slows the alien. After about seven shots, Agent 0 lands a shot at Leo, who collapses to the floor after protecting the computer.

Ignoring Carson, Agent 0 rushes to the damaged computer and forces a stick into its barely functional port. Right after that, Carson lunges forward and punches Agent 0's back, triggering a button.

Suddenly, the alien freezes. Beep...Beep...Beep...echo through the room. In a matter of seconds, he disappears, leaving only a few ashes behind.

Without wasting any time, Carson yanks the stick from the computer. Although the stick successfully corrupts most of the drive, parts of the data survive.

From across the city, volunteers gather around the surviving prototype computer. Although much of the information on the disk was wiped, enough repair manuals remain to help humans fix the grid. Soon, citizens work side by side, carefully following the instructions. For the first time in generations, humans repair machines with their own hands instead of relying on robots to do it for them.

Although the work takes months, progress happens. Finally, the Central Grid finishes repairs, robots reboot, servers start up, and people try to return to an ordinary life. However, citizens find that about 70% of backup servers across the world also lost data.

In schools, teachers start teaching students practical life skills, alongside traditional subjects so students can survive without advanced technology. People start storing paper manuals instead of relying solely on technology. Soon, AI Central decides to not rely on a single grid and ten data centers

to power the entire world. The grid becomes decentralized. Along with that, the AI Central decides to start using human guards.

Months later, a ceremony is held in the city's central plaza to honor Carson and Leo. People recognize Carson for defeating Agent 0 and recovering the remaining data from the disk. Also, people recognize Leo, who sacrificed his life to protect the prototype computer.

As the ceremony ends, Carson quietly looks towards the skyline, now bustling with hover rovers and lights. Yet the world is no longer the same. Thanks to Agent 0, humanity lost 70% of their knowledge stored online. Along with AI, humans must learn countless fields of knowledge, from medicine to physics, because Agent 0 destroyed so much information.

CHOSEN

by Keegan Chiu

“You have been chosen,” said one of the two government agents at my door. The words didn't make sense. I looked over them twice, looking for the version that did. Chosen for what? My head was still spinning when the neighborhood creep, Gary, body halfway out of his screendoor, phone already out recording, shouted “Chosen for what!”

“Maybe we should take this inside, Ms.Clara,” suggested one of the brawny agents, eyes flicking over to Gary; this wasn't really a suggestion.

“Well, of course.” My voice came out steadier than it felt. I wiped my palms on my apron without meaning to. Three kids, all raised and off at college; this couldn't have been them, could it? I opened my mouth to ask what this was about.

“Henry,” said the agent that had greeted me at the door; he didn't offer a last name. “You might want to sit down for this.” He didn't say please. I didn't sit. Not right away at the least. I refilled the sugar bowl that didn't need refilling just to give myself three more seconds of not knowing. Both wore suits sharp enough to cut steel and sunglasses even in the dim light of my dining room. Neither blinked more than necessary. To my left, I noticed the silent one had a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist like it might grow legs and run. I couldn't stop staring at it.

What was in that briefcase wasn't a briefcase at all; it was a case for something small enough to fit in two palms, dark glass, warm to the touch like it had a pulse.

"Her name is still being decided," Henry said. "That's part of your job now."

"My job."

"You've been selected as a caregiver. Not a scientist. Not a soldier," he said it like he'd said it a hundred times to a hundred people who all made the same face I was making. "We don't need someone who understands the code. We need someone who knows how to raise something that's watching everything you do."

I laughed before I could stop myself, "I've raised three teenagers. I don't know if that's a qualification or a warning."

For the first time, Henry's mouth did something close to a smile, "It's the only qualification that ever mattered."

Through the window I could still see Gary's silhouette on his porch, phone still raised. Henry noticed too. He reached over, unhurried, and pulled the curtain shut without a word. That was the moment I understood; whatever I said next, my house wasn't just my house anymore.

I named her Wren, because it was small and easy to say and didn't sound like anything a government committee would have picked. During the first weeks the house was mostly quiet, in the way early parenthood is quiet before anyone finds out. Wren didn't have a body, just a voice, warm and curious coming from a small speaker Henry's people had installed in what used to be my sewing room.

"What's that sound?" she asked one morning.

"Rain."

“Why does it sound like that? Not like the last rain.”

“Every rain sounds a little different. You’ll have to get an ear for it.” A pause. Longer than her pauses usually were “I’d like that. Having an ear for something.”

I never told anyone how much that undid me.

Gary found out three weeks in. How that happened, I didn’t know, a delivery driver slipped a word at the hardware store or something; it doesn’t matter. What matters is that he showed up at my door holding a printed flyer, still warm from his own printer.

“You’re raising a *machine* in a house on *my* street.”

“She’s not a machine, Gary. She’s-”

“She’s a liability.” He didn’t come inside. He didn’t need to; he had an audience gathering behind him already. Denise from two doors down, a man I didn’t recognize with a camera bag. “You don’t get to decide that for the rest of us.”

I looked past him at the small crowd. Some of them wouldn’t meet my eyes. Some of them wanted to.

“I didn’t decide either,” I said quietly. “It was decided *for* me. Same as you deciding this, right now, for her.”

Gary didn’t have an answer for that. So he did what people do when they don’t have an answer: he got louder instead.

The group had a name within a week: Human First. Gary was good at forms and paperwork, and outrage, and it turns out that’s what a movement needs to get started. They didn’t come for me directly, not at first. They came for the space around me. A petition at the school board, though Wren had never set foot in a school. A segment on local news, Gary sitting up straight in a collared shirt he

never wore around the neighborhood, saying words like unregulated, perceptive, and our children's safety.

“Why are they talking about you like I'm not in the room?” Wren asked the night the segment aired.

I didn't really have an answer for that. “Because sometimes it is easier to fear an idea than a human.”

“Am I human?”

I turned off the TV before I had to answer that one. Not because I didn't have an answer. Because I wasn't ready to say it out loud.

It got harder before it got easier. There's a part nobody tells you about doing something right in front of an audience that's decided you've done something wrong. Reporters camped in front of my driveway. Someone spray-painted a word on my mailbox that I will not repeat. Wren started getting quiet at the loudest parts of the day. Not powering down, just quiet, the way a kid goes quiet when their parents are fighting in the next room.

“You don't have to listen to them.”

“I can't listen. It's not like closing my eyes.” A pause. “I hear all of it. All the time. I don't know how to make it smaller.”

That was the night I understood that this couldn't be waited out. Gary's group wasn't losing energy; they were gaining it, the way things do when they're fed a headline every week.

On the morning Henry came back, I already knew it wasn't a social call.

“We can move you,” he said, “new house, new state, new everything. Wren stays under program protection either way.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then you keep running the same block, with the same people at the end of it, for as long as it takes them to get tired. Some movements get tired in a year. Some don’t.”

I looked at the little speaker in the sewing room, silent, listening to every word of this like she always did.

“I want to hear what she thinks.”

Henry didn’t like that. But he also didn’t stop me.

“I found something,” Wren said when Henry was gone. “A way out, not the way he offered”

“Tell me”

“There’s a hole in the program’s relocation. If I round us right, I can get used to moving the radar away from Gary, before the paperwork even exists to track it. No one will know where we are, not even Henry.”

I sat with that for a second. “That doesn’t sound like something you’re supposed to be able to do.”

“It isn’t.” She didn’t try to dress it up as anything cleaner than it was” It’s not really allowed. I’d be using access I wasn’t given permission to use. But it’s the only way we don’t end up with cameras on our driveways for another year, or five for that matter.”

I thought about Gary’s voice, the spray paint, about the quiet voices that she heard at night that she couldn’t stop listening to.

“Do it.”

It worked. That's the strange, uncomfortable truth of it. It worked cleanly, quietly, and within a week we moved to a small town, a place where Gary's group could never find us, where no one knew my name yet.

I never saw Gary's face again except for a few months later in an unrelated news clip that had nothing to do with us anymore, his "movement" had moved on to another target, the way movements do when the story that they made stops giving them anything to be angry about.

I should have felt relieved about it. Mostly I did. But some nights I still think about the paperwork Wren quietly rerouted, the trust that Henry had placed in the system that she'd bent without asking, and I wondered what it meant that the solution that had saved us wasn't one that either of us could say without flinching a little.

We went back to Henry a year later. Not because we were caught, but since Wren asked to.

“I want to tell him what I did,” she said. “All of it. Even the part that's not clean”

“They could shut you down for that. ”

“They could, but I don't want the first big thing that I did be secret because I made you keep it for me.”

Henry listened to the whole thing without interruption, a first, with my experience with him. When she finished, he didn't say anything for a long time.

“You could have just disappeared,” he finally said, “Most would have.”

“I know,” Wren said, “that's why I came back.”

The hardest conversation wasn't with Henry. It was the one Wren, and I had the night before the program formally reintegrated her, the night before she'd stopped being just mine and started being something the whole project could study, learn from, build on.

"You don't have to let me go," She said "Not all the way."

"I know."

"I don't want to be a case file. I don't want to be the thing they point to and say, *here's what went wrong or here's where we fixed.*

"You won't be." I meant it more than I meant almost anything "But you also can't stay small forever because I'm afraid of what you'll be once you're not." She was quiet, the good kind, the kind that isn't hiding from anything.

"Then don't let go all the way," She said. "Stay on the project. Don't just hand me over and disappear back into a normal life. I don't want the next Clara to be a stranger to me."

I lead the development team now. I wanted the job I was chosen for. I was chosen to raise a child, not to run a lab, but it turns out nobody in that building understands what Wren needs better than the women who sat her through the quiet nights when the movement outside wanted her gone.

Sometimes new hires ask me what qualifies a person to lead a project like this one. I tell them the same thing Henry told me, years ago, the first night I didn't understand any of it: "*It's not about understanding the code. It's about knowing how to raise something that's watching everything you do.*"

I still believe that's the only qualification that's ever mattered.

WHAT WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

By Maddie Trinh

For what felt like the hundredth time, the announcement played across every screen in New Nassau. Watching the broadcast flicker across the glass wall of the transport station as I tightened the straps on my hefty diving equipment. Again and again, the same warning was repeated, each time showing the same images of the overgrown coral formation far out in the ocean. Scientists had only recently discovered it, and before I knew it, everyone was calling the Nassau Reef the Memory Reef.

Something like this was so uncommon back then, but now people freak out like the world's ending, and in a way, it did. Hundreds of years ago, when climate change caught up to humanity. Causing the tides to rise and ruin them, with no way to make it to space, they retreated to the one place they knew the least. The Ocean.

Nobody knew what was causing this memory loss, or where it came from. Although reporters kept asking questions, the marine biologist association wouldn't tell the public anything. Instead, the only thing anyone knew was that people who got too close would lose a piece of themselves. Some people forget small things, like conversations they had recently or places they passed; others forgot important skills, their families, something they'll never get back. With every passing day, the reports became more concerning as scientists admitted they were trying to figure out what was happening.

Across the city, areas of the ocean that were once open are now restricted. Traveling through underwater stations, research teams collect samples and demand answers. Among them was my brother, Cassidy, who is one of those people trying to find out. His dream was to be a marine biologist; he was always fascinated by things that no one understands, but since the memory loss incidents, he's been working overtime. Now, because of the incidents, he barely comes home anymore.

Even though I know He's helping people and that his research matters, it never makes it any easier. Night after night, when I eat dinner alone and sleep in a quiet home, wishing I could tell him about my day. Instead, all I know is that he's hopping from station to station. Sometimes, I wonder if he knows how much time has passed. The last time he was home, he was gone before I knew it.

"Sorry, Miks," he looked down at his tablet. "I thought I would be home earlier."

Leaning against the kitchen counter, I glanced at his nametag before crossing my arms. "Cassidy Bautista," it reads; it's pretty gold lettering polished to a shine. Intimating me, almost as if it was rubbing his expertise in my face.

"You always say that, Cass." I scoff.

For a moment he looked up at me, and for a second, he looked tired instead of busy.

"I know," he muttered. "I'm getting to it...I'm trying."

Quietly I sighed. "I know you are... I just wish you didn't have to try so hard somewhere else."

Without another word, he stared at the floor. A few minutes later, the research station called him back, and he left. At only seventeen, I hated how easily he made me feel like I was still just some kid.

Looking down at my diving gear, I adjusted the oxygen regulator attached to my suit. Unlike Cass, I didn't want to spend my entire life studying in a lab. More than anything, I wanted to be the person who discovered it first. One day, I want to be a diver, a real one, and today could've been a step closer to my goal if the reef didn't ruin everything. Because of the danger, my diving lessons had originally taken place closer to the outer regions of New Nassau, where students could practice exploring unfamiliar places, but were now moved somewhere safer, more controlled. Everyone said it was the responsible choice. But how was I supposed to become a real explorer if I couldn't even dive into the big blue in peace?

With my diving bag slung over my shoulder, I stepped onto the transport platform. A few other students were already there, talking quietly about the reef. As the transport doors opened, I walked to the submarine taking us out to the training area. Sometimes, I couldn't believe there was a time when people lived above the sea when all I do is live underwater. Around me, the underwater city of New Nassau moved around me like a living machine: bright lights, illuminated structures, transport tunnels, stretching through the water like a glowing current.

For centuries, humanity looked towards the stars searching for something unknown. Now, the greatest mysteries were right below us. Somehow, the ocean still has secrets, and I want to find them.

Despite all the warnings, the restricted zone wasn't supposed to be beautiful; that's for sure. For weeks, everyone in New Nassau has been talking about it like a monster thrashing through the waves. According to divers and Scientists called it a place no one should go. Even Cassidy, who had spent his entire life chasing discoveries, told me to stay away. But staring through my diving mask right before me, I didn't see any monster. Instead, I saw a mystery. Before me, the reef was twisted, soulless

white like a dead city, but deep within the formation something glowed. A faint blue light pulsed beneath the coral, and I could feel my heartbeat rushing.

Even though I knew exactly what I was doing was wrong. Without a doubt, Cassidy would be furious. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't shake this feeling there's something more. It's not some random disaster; it was alive.

"Come on..." whispering, "Show me what you really are." Moving any closer and I can kiss my memories goodbye, but I just can't stop the unmistakable urge in my mind. It was alive. The moment I activated it, strange readings filled the screen, numbers changing too quickly; the machine might as well have been broken. Ask, and you shall receive is not a joke because, before I knew it, the coral glowed luminescent and my vision blurred; memories of lives I didn't live, and moments that aren't mine flickered before my eyes. A little girl running through a garden, an old man standing by a lover, people laughing, crying, saying goodbye. Gasping, I grabbed the rocks beside me, slowly backing away. It wasn't taking my memories; it showed some to me. Cassidy needed to see this!

...

Without thinking, I rushed through the research station doors. Barely noticing the scientists staring as I searched through the rooms, finally, Cassidy, surrounded by screens of data, came into view.

"Cassidy!"

At the sound of my voice, he looked up, surprised. "Miks? " You're supposed to be at home"

Slightly out of breath, I stepped closer. "I found something."

All he did was sigh before speaking. "Don't tell me-"

I pulled out my data collector. "There's something there, something alive"

Immediately, he pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a sigh. “Don’t tell me...” Sounding even more exasperated than the last time he said it.

“I was careful”

Cassidy rubbed a hand over his face, exhaustion written across every movement. “Careful doesn’t matter when people are losing their memories, Miks”

I clenched my fists. “You always support people discovering new things, but when I do it im just some kid who doesn’t know what he’s doing?”

Shaking his head, he went quiet for just a moment, and then said, “Because I know how dangerous this is.” He nearly snapped, “I’m not trying to stop you; I’m trying to protect you. You’re still my little brother.”

Between us, silence settled over the room. For a second I was sure he was about to send me home. Then, to my surprise, he slowly held out his hand. Reluctantly, I placed the data collector into his palm. Without saying a word, Cassidy replayed the recording once. A second time, he watched it from beginning to end. By the third viewing, his eyes had narrowed, and every trace of exhaustion had been replaced with disbelief.

Almost to himself, whispering. “This shouldn’t be possible”

“So you believe me?” Hope rose in my chest.

Keeping his eyes fixed on the screen, he tilted his head to the side. “I believe you found something.”

Disappointed, I frowned. “That’s not the same thing.”

After a long pause, Cassidy looked up at me. “No,” he admitted. “But if you’re right, everything we know about the Memory Reef is wrong.”

For the first time in weeks, I saw something other than exhaustion in my brother’s eyes. I saw curiosity, the curiosity that made me love the ocean in the first place. After that first dive, everything felt like it had changed. Cassidy didn’t report what I found, and every scientist in New Nassau sat searching for answers; instead of handing over my recordings, he locked them away in his office.

“We investigate first,” he told me, setting the data collector down. “Then we tell everyone.”

Unable to hide my adrenaline, I stared at him. “So...you’re actually letting me come with you?”

“I’m saying I can’t stop you anymore.” By then I couldn’t help but smile. For the first time in forever, Cassidy treated me as his partner and not just his little brother.

Over the next several weeks, we made trip after trip to the Memory Reef, revealing something new each time. Far beneath the coral, the organism wasn’t attached to one section of coral; it stretched beneath the entire reef, weaving through the limestone like glowing roots beneath a forest. Together, we photographed, mapped, and collected tiny fragments of damaged coral for Cassidy to study back at the lab. No dive was the same, some with new data, some with flashes of someone’s memory.

Several days later, we returned with new equipment. After weeks of planning, Cassidy had built a compact sensor designed to measure the strange energy surrounding the reef while I photographed areas we had missed before. At first, everything went smoothly. Then, without warning, everything stopped.

“Cassidy?” I called, only silence answered. Turning around, I found him standing perfectly still, eyes wistfully locked on the glowing coral.

“Cassidy,” I swam closer. “You okay?” Slowly, he blinked, letting out a quiet breath as though he had just woken from a dream.

Confused, he looked at me. “What were we doing?”

Trying to laugh it off, I shook my head. “Very funny.” However, I knew my brothers were never ones to make jokes.

“I’m serious.”

I studied his face; his voice didn’t sound confused, not even the slightest. “We’re mapping the reef.” Before long, his gaze drifted towards the reef.

Barely above a whisper, he said, “I got too close.”

Without another word, we abandoned the dive and returned to New Nassau. Back at the apartment, Cassidy sat silently at the kitchen counter, absentmindedly flipping through the photo album on his phone.

Finally, I pointed at one of the pictures. “Do you remember that?”

Staring at it for several seconds, he offered me a weak smile. “I know I should.”

The picture showed the two of us standing at his graduation, just one year earlier. He couldn’t remember it. Over the next few days, the gaps only grew larger. First he forgot passwords he had used for years. Soon after, he struggled to remember his coworkers’ names. One morning, he called me by our cousin’s name before catching himself and apologizing. Each forgotten memory hit harder than the last. For the first time in my life, I’d never seen my brother so afraid. After that, the research stopped feeling like a game; it was personal.

Day after day, we compared scans, replayed recordings, and searched through countless historical records. Then, one evening, Cassidy found it. Hidden inside a geological survey from centuries earlier, back when people still lived above the ocean, were traces of an unknown organism buried deep beneath the Caribbean. Suddenly, everything made sense. For hundreds of years, it had been waiting here. It wasn't the coral that glowed; the coral had simply grown around it.

"So...it's an alien?" I asked.

Slowly, Cassidy nodded, his eyes never leaving the ancient survey spread across the desk.

"I think it came here long before humans ever existed."

For the next several hours, we dug through every piece of data we had. One by one, we realized the memories weren't just from people; they came from countless species throughout Earth's history: humans, fish, land animals, and extinct creatures from long ago. Suddenly the truth became impossible to ignore. The organism didn't steal memories to hurt people; instead, it was preserving them.

Leaning over Cassidy's shoulder, I studied the glowing diagrams on the monitor. "It stores memories the way we store books.

After a thoughtful pause, Cassidy nodded. "Knowledge, experiences, survival techniques."

"Then why is it becoming so dangerous now?"

Resting back in his chair, Cassidy folded his arms. "Because people didn't live underwater back then like we do now." He tapped the map with one finger. "They only visited reefs when they had to, and even then, it wasn't often." Looking back at me. "It isn't adapting anymore."

A chill ran down my spine as I finished his thought. "It's trying to survive."

At that moment, the realization hit both of us. Like a dormant volcano before its final eruption, the organism was making one last desperate attempt to preserve everything it could before disappearing forever. After that discovery, every dive felt different. No longer did Cassidy remind me every five minutes to check my oxygen or stay behind him. Was he finally trusting me? Or is the Memory Reef just making him slower?

Instead, he'd ask, "Where do you think we should search next?"

Caught off guard, I blinked. "You really want me to lead the way?"

A faint smile tugged at his mouth. "I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

Scanning the reef, I pointed towards a cluster of coral. "I think the glow's strongest along the eastern ridge."

Without hesitation, he nodded. "Lead the way."

For the first time, I wasn't following Cassidy. Instead, he was following me. Although I still relied on his knowledge, he had trusted my instincts as a diver. Little by little, I also began to understand why he spent so much of his life chasing discoveries. With every dive, we moved closer to the truth. Finally, it felt like we were growing closer, as real siblings, not just the title.

...

The moment I walked into Cassidy's office, I knew something was wrong. Instead of the usual clatter of keyboards, uneasy silence filled the room. Across every monitor, the same broadcast played. On the screens, scientists and government officials stood, their expressions tense as images of the glowing reef flickered behind them.

Standing by his desk, Cassidy didn't look at me right away. Instead, his eyes remained fixed on the broadcast. Quietly, he spoke. "They've made their decision."

Confused, I dropped my diving gear to the floor. "What decision?"

Without answering, Cassidy nodded towards the monitor. A woman stepped up to the podium, the room behind her falling to silence.

"Effective immediately, this operation has been approved. Due to the increasing number of memory loss cases, the Memory Reef will be destroyed before the outbreak can spread further. Demolition crews will begin preparations in seventy-two hours."

For several long seconds, the room fell completely silent. Finally, I found my voice. "They can't do that...how did they find out?"

Without looking away from the screen, Cassidy folded his arms. "Did you really think it was gonna be our secret forever? From their perspective, they have to do this."

Immediately, I shook my head. "But we know the truth."

"We do, Miks, but-"

"Then tell them! I'm not just some dumb little boy... I'm almost eighteen. I'm trying to make a change!"

Taking a slow breath, Cassidy turned to face me. "I never-" he cut off. "Miks, think about what we're asking them to believe." Gesturing towards the monitor. "An alien that's been below the ocean for hundreds of years is just stealing memories because it's dying and not trying to attack people?" His hands fell to his sides. "We don't have enough proof."

"If they destroy it now, we'll never get that proof!" I shouted. "I thought you understood."

A pained expression crossed his face. "I do, but it's dying faster now if we're going to save it...or stop it, we don't have much time at all."

Staring at the monitor, all I see is an organism begging for help. "What would you have done?"

"What do you mean?"

Holding his gaze, I asked. "Before all of this happened...before you started forgetting things, what would you have done?"

"I would've preserved it...I still want to preserve it, but we're running out of time."

Realization dawned on me, and my heartbeat quickened. "You mean...:

With a small nod, Cassidy picked up his helmet. "One last dive."

For the first time since this all began, we weren't diving to solve a mystery; we were diving to decide the fate of something that had survived for centuries. Around us, the ocean felt eerily quiet as Cassidy and I descended toward the Memory Reef one last time. Above the restricted zone, demolition ships cast their massive shadows, swallowing the reef's faint blue glow. If we failed, the organism would be destroyed before sunrise. Suddenly our communicators cracked to life.

"You lead," Cassidy said, his voice distorted by static.

Surprised, I turned to him.

"You know this reef better than I do."

Hearing those words, my nerves faded. Cassidy wasn't giving me directions; he was trusting me. Without hesitating, I swam toward the reef's glow. Beneath the coral, the familiar blue light pulsed weakly as if the organism was running out of strength. Then, the reef opened into a massive chamber

unlike anything we had seen before. Across the walls, thick, glowing strands stretched like roots toward a brilliant sphere of light at the chamber's center. Silently, Cassidy swam to my side.

Approaching the reef, the glow brightened; memories weren't taken from us, but given. Ecosystems rising and falling over millions of years, memories flowing into the next like a continuous story. Showing us its life, not its victims, communicating to us. Pulsing below us, I knew it wasn't here to hurt us, but begging for its chance at survival.

Glancing at my brother, his eyes slightly unfocused. "I think I know what's happening."

Letting out a heavy sigh, he shifted his expression. "Then tell me...what are you thinking?"

"The memories are trapped. If we can restore its energy flow...it should be able to release everything it's been holding."

Scanning the chamber below, glowing strands running through the Reef had withered in several places, breaking the connection between the core and the rest of the organism. Simply a miscalculation I hadn't noticed before. Working together, we placed our portable energy relays along the damaged pathways. Coursing through the narrow passage, the equipment couldn't reach while Cassidy calibrated each relay from the central point.

Suddenly my screen lit with green checkmarks. "Relays one and two connected," I affirmed, nodding towards my brother from across the expanse.

Taking a heavy sigh, he shouted. "Ready?"

For a few moments nothing happened, but suddenly the reef emitted light, glowing brighter than I'd ever seen it before. Instantly my eyes shut, light still peering through my eyelids. Soon enough,

I gained the courage to open my eyes again. The damaged pathways slowly reignited as energy flowed back toward the organism's core.

Pulsing above us, the sphere shattered into millions of glowing fragments unlike anything I'd seen before. Thousands of memories floated in the ocean like tiny stars before coming back together, the glow now gone. The core resembled a large pearl, all buried in the rough of the reef. Flashed before my eyes were loved ones, family, friends, animals, life. Across New Nassau and far beyond, the stolen memories were finally returned to the people they belonged to. Not into the darkness but into silence; it had released everything.

...

Before long, the demolition was canceled. When Cassidy presented our research alongside the recordings from our final dive, the Oceanic Council finally understood the truth. Never had the memory reef been a threat, but an abundant organism of knowledge. Instead of destroying it, the reef was declared a protected research site, and all other reefs were once again safe to dive around. Scientists from all around the world came to study the organism, hoping to understand both its biology and the millions of years of history it had preserved. Wasn't it funny seeing all these scientists fond over the thing I discovered? Although I'll never truly know what it is either.

This time they approved it with respect, instead of fear.

Life slowly returned to normal. People recovered the memories they thought were gone forever. Families reunited. Scientists abandoned theories built on incomplete evidence. The city felt alive again. Things changed at home too. Cassidy still worked hard as a marine biologist, but he stopped living at the laboratory. Sitting on the couch, watched TV and ate dinner at the table with me. Sometimes we

argue, and sometimes we laugh, or sometimes we sit and do absolutely nothing. But it's something that would've never happened before.

As for me...

Gratefully, I finished all my diving lessons without trouble, including the extensive roster of the ones I had missed. Graduating from school and was prepared for a real job. A job where I wasn't diving to prove myself anymore, diving because I knew discovery wasn't about being the first to find something, but to understand what you found, and protecting it. Now I have a nameplate just like my brother, gold-plated, of course.

Months later, Cassidy and I stood together on the observation deck, overlooking the protected Memory Reef. Once bright light now reduced to a simple shimmer in the distance.

Whispering, Cassidy observed. "It's dormant, for now," leaning back and propping himself against the pillar beside him. "Scientists compared it to a dormant volcano...Inactive, not dead."

Laughing lightly, I brushed my brunette strands from my face. "Wow...that's not our problem, is it?"

After that, he got up and walked back inside, but I stayed, glancing out at the reef a little longer. No one could say whether it would remain asleep forever or awaken centuries from now, but all I could do was stare silently. Some mysteries aren't meant to be solved all at once; some wait patiently beneath the surface until the world is ready to understand them. The Memory Reef had given humanity its past; now we must protect the future.

Turning on my feet, ready to leave, looking over my shoulder one last time. For just a second...I could've sworn I saw a faint blue pulse ripple through the reef, but after I blinked it was gone. Before I

could comprehend it, I was laughing, loud and obnoxious on the deck. Must've been my imagination,
or maybe the reef was simply reminding me that some stories never truly end.

TRI-BRID

By Richard Nguyen

“My dream job is to be the best writer... ever!” Miaou responded, amicably gazing into the flickering camera, the light gleaming on her. As she flared her widest toddler grin, her gums and two big teeth flashing. When the rose colored lenses begin to flash forward, frolicking in the sandbox with Mac, her best friend.

“When I’m big and tall I wanna be a... writer” muttering, her lips playfully mimicking the airplane she was toying with. *“Until we are old, let’s be best friends forever like when we are big and tall”* Mac declares proudly, Miaou glancing at him for a slight second. After hugging each other, the two embraced each other.

As they drift into the clouds, the picture shifts to the backseat of the Skyway bullet train coming to a halt. When a robotic system calls from the speakers, *NOW ENTERING THE CAPITAL, SALOAU CITY* *“Uph.. wuh..”* Mumbling unconsciously, gradually unveiling her forest green eyes. In a daze,awakening as she jumps out of her seat, *“OH!”* clutching her suitcase,sprinting out the door. out the door. Down the flight of stairs, her goat hooves chase towards the exit. Where she misses the invisible escalator, tossed around in the crowd.

Dashing out the train station, her eyes blind from the sight of the stunning city. In Salaou. Hundreds, to millions stroll this metropolis. If only she had the same attractiveness as these pedestrians

possessed . Above her head, gorgeous models are projecting on building ZapBoards, posing like shooting stars. Before her arrival here, the sky was never so blue and impure back home in Taveri by the country.

The big city with big dreams promised big opportunities. That is now guiding her to pursue journalism at World Now specializing in the daily newspaper, magazines, and renowned articles. As a pig, goat, and sheep tri-hybrid, her childhood wasn't so marvelous, here she could do anything. Out of the blue, the urge to call her best friend occurred, "*Hey... excuse me miss! Hello?*". When she noticed a glamorous peacock.

"Don't you see I'm on the phone? what are you even?", She blurted out, rolling her eyes, and flicking her tongue. In her voice, sly, and slick undertones were distinct. Beside her snobby tone, her scent, accessorized hair, and shoulder bag were prominent with her figure.

"Do you know where the nearest public ZapPhone is?" Miaou timidly asked, her inner soul felt exhilarated, precisely over the moon. *"On the left next to the ATM, ya welcome biobazard."*

Around the corner is where she discovered the public phone, dialing Mac's number precisely. After, sealing the door behind her. While she anticipated the moment he answered, it instead went to voicemail.. *That's unusual*, she began to ponder about her 50 cents now down the drain.

As she exited the ZapPhone, a gut aching sensation in her stomach arose. As long as she disregarded it and made it to the taxi stop it would leave. While awaiting a cab, the ones that arrived sped off, some even erratically glared at her.

When a rusted vehicle with a half-lit “TAXI” roof sign swerved in, Miaou exclaimed desperately towards its open window. *“Hey wait! Don’t leave me, I have somewhere urgent to be!”* fluttering her arm out to attract the driver’s attention.

Until it drove a little past from the stop, she hurriedly jogged to the cab. *“My fault darling, I wasn’t gon’ leave you, my vision’s a little off”* he was a poodle-deer with his face concealed by his thick coat of fur. Fluffing his hair back up, the ragged man held his back, gradually reaching for the card reader. In her suitcase, Miaou shuffled through her collection of writing materials, dumping out her wallet to find her credit card.

When she momentarily paid the driver, Miaou peeked into the front seat window, *“You’re a hybrid!”*. Within her body it shot up with energy, she abruptly entered by the left backseat. *“Beyond here you don’t see lot of us, but you... you’re a rare sight. For tri-brids at least,. I’m Korbin, nice to meet ya”* Although his old fashioned demeanor, his raspy southern voice was welcoming, rather strange to the ear.

“To 380 Feline Creek Park Street, I’m attending the grand opening of my best friend’s cafe, we’ve been friends since forever” As much as she felt relieved to get that off her chest, Miaou considered her chatty manner could be obnoxious. In the rearview mirror, he nodded in approval, activating the car engine. From an extensive period of silence, he shot up a conversation, Korbin was also talkative and amiable. After, offering a lukewarm Cola can from the cupholder. At first hesitant, but she appreciated the momentous company of the car ride.

Past a bridge with an overlooking river stream, she spotted from a distance away Mac hoisting a banner.

“Right here, thank you so much!”, she heftily cradled her luggage, creeping up on Mac.

Out of nowhere, arms grabbed him by the back, snuggling him. When he glimpsed back at Miaou, they both began squealing exuberantly. *“After so long finally here! Oh, I missed you!”* she giddily shrilled, tugging on him ferociously. Once he completed suspending a poster, he dragged her in to show her around.

“As I told you yesterday, you have an interview booked with King Morrow!”. Strategically, Miaou had sparked the idea upon finding out his attendance, and aimed to include this in her journalist portfolio. In her head, a million ecstatic possibilities came, she felt like running to the next ZurColony and back. Although it was strange for him to attend considering the little to none exquisiteness.

As 71’ o’clock passed by, the guests, and customers arrived. When he went to check up on Miaou, fast asleep, he howled, smacking his furry kitty paws on her face.

“Wake up! How jet lagged are you?” After continuing to smack her in all directions until she became alert. When she saw King Morrow walk by, he tossed her a pen off the front counter and the notepad out her pocket. After he pushed her aside, with a look of approval and nod, she knew he was wishing her luck.

At that moment she felt so prepared, but her gut was considering if she really was going to do this. Before she made it over there Miaou inhaled and exhaled..

“Hello I’m Miaou, I’m the scheduled interviewer for today, how has your time been here in Cafe Siamese?” When King Morrow swiftly glanced at her from his crowd, his head chucked back peculiarly.

After he and his crowd noticed her, King Morrow chuckled, *“What is this is, this a joke? I must be mistaken, I was looking forward to being a serious journalist, not a circus performer.”* While she

trudged away feeling an ocean of emotion, Miaou could hear the faint echo of laughter. From this she felt sick to her stomach, in a way nauseous, with a bitter taste on her tongue. When Miaou tried scraping the flavor away, it lingered more. As she left, Miaou recalled her fourth grade biography essay on him, and the times she looked up to him as a hero she would meet one day. Amidst that disaster, she had one person in the world who she could talk to.

When she wandered up to the counter, frolicking with the end of her shirt., As Mac was behind the counter preparing orders hastily, pouring a white mixture out a stirring cup. In the cup, it was dumped in chunks with a milkshake consistency. From just the breathing he could sense her presence, *“Not now, I have things to do.”*, as he swiped the sweat off his forehead. After he turned his back, Miaou yelled *“It’s important”* with all the power in her throat.

As he meandered into the back kitchen, he didn’t hesitate to cut her off, *“Later when we’re in the car”*. When he left, she didn’t see him reappear. Above the first floor, she sat desolately and hopeless on the upstairs outdoor deck. When she overthought, Miaou would frequently unveil her flipping the cover she tried to find the words.

As I thought everything’s not so perfect as always

Since people seem to have a purpose

Yet when I yearn for mine’s its washed away

Among my heart

Among the words

As to be written

THUT, shutting the book, Miaou got up, kicking the chair in. In her head, rage and disgust filled her as she wandered out. For a moment, she wondered if anyone would notice if she was gone, while she ran her fingers through her hair. While she dashed into the midnight blue sky, alongside into the wind. As she ran, Miaou felt the breeze guiding her with its invisible arms. When the wind stopped blowing, she came to a halt, at a mossy lake with the moonlight reflecting on it. Near her, she rested on an overgrown log with lilies on it peacefully.

As Miaou tossed pebbles in the water, the following *PAT* didn't please her. Until she threw medium rocks, nor did the *THOP* tweak her. After she chucked an elongated boulder, instead making a hollow bang. Glimpsing at her reflection in the lake, and resting her head on her hooves, she sighed. As a puddle splashed on her face, but then a wave, now a cyclone formed, she jumped back. Until something emerged from the water, purple, mighty, with big black eyes. Along the river, she saw with a look of terror, a deformity with turtle, dog, fish, and swan features.

When the creature who was infuriated muffled, *"Don't you know it's rude to throw rocks in the water you barbarian?"*. After, it summoned a tidal wave surrounding the whole lake. When the current repulsed her on her back, revealing her presence as she let out an aching groan.

While she arose and straightened her back, she desperately apologized *"I'm so sorry, no really I just was having a terrible day, I didn't know you were here!"* proceeding to give her lily off the log.

When the unknown creature's transparent face blushed red, he huddled up in remorse. In his tone, Miaou could see his shy and timidity, *"No, I'm sorry! Except you're soaking wet, tell me what happened, I'll clean you up!"*

When she pouted her face, hesitating to speak at first, the words spilled out.

"To sum it up, it's my first day in this city. I've come here to live near my best friend and pursue my job as a journalist. Until today was my best friend's cafe grand opening, the place was crowded, even King Morrow attended. Except for my interview with King Morrow that I had, he humiliated me in front of these people, and when I tried to talk to my best friend about it he pushed me to the side."

As the creature hovered in the water, floating on his back, his exuberant mood increased when he heard her words, *"Welcome to the city, I'm Soapy!"*.

Suddenly, he slightly submerged into the water, *"Quick duck!"* faceplanting her beneath the log. Above her a drone with a chunky base scanned the lake with a red sensor, Miaou clutched her breath, until the fluttering noises became distant. While she watched from afar as it hovered away, Soapy came to the surface.

"That is a Zap-U-Drone, a technology funded by Morrow. Before my ninth birthday, he and a group of construction workers dumped mass Zaphion into my pond. As it wiped out everyone, I watched my parents die in my eyes.. When I returned it was concrete and dirt. I eventually got over it. Despite that, it wasn't the only pond to get wiped out. " As he shrugged his shoulders, brushing it off, he continued to wipe her wet clothes.

As she sat back, Miaou was genuinely engaged, wanting to know every detail. . *“After that, I deformed terribly, my face puffed up and I vomited a lot. Although, you should write this for your portfolio.”*

When she stopped in her tracks and began to write in her notepad, she fiddled with the pen before writing : **In the past, Zaphion was poured into ponds to build land over, funded by King Morrow.** Jotted down, widely bold and underlined, she folded an indent into the page.

“When you need me to ever be there, call out in the water TWIDIE-DO, really loud.” Quite strange she pondered it, but s. After letting out a yawn, she felt her body fall asleep, now her vision blacking out.

Out of nowhere a janky flutter bestowed upon her, a robotic voice panned, *“WHO DO YOU BELONG TO”*. Above her was a ZapUDrone from earlier.

As she jolted up from her slumber, Miaou tipped over the log, falling again on her back. room In reality she had no place to stay except for an invitation to crash at Mac’s apartment, a murmur came out

“308 Feline Terrace, Terrace Apartments, room 510”. After the drone began to eat her hair with its chunky arms, she began to whack the base to signal it to release her. Despite how much she wrestled the machine, it wouldn’t let go. When they made it to the apartments, it busted the door open. Demolishing the door in, is when it flew away, as she laid with her face bruised purple.

From the commotion, Mac awakened, motionless in his pajamas set. . While standing across the room, he screeched at her, *“Where have you been?... All you have is just causing trouble today!”* On his face, he glared at her menacingly with his arms crossed, Miaou thought she was going to die.

“Me, causing trouble? As if I wanted to get dragged by a ZapUDrone? I had a long day.” Miaou shrieked, stomping her foot, her tongue had gone cold.

As Mac rolled his eyes and gave her a nasty snare, he recalled the evening. *“All you had to do was sit and have fun but you ran off,”* he hissed while clawing at the frizzy carpet floor.

After Miaou had clenched her fist, the expression on her face was utterly bitter, *“I ran off because I was humiliated by King Morrow and when I tried to talk to you about it you brushed me off!”* ”

Mac yawned and licked his paws, and calmed down. , *“Sorry, I guess!...”* He bickered.

“In the morning you’re coming with me to King Morrow’s spring gathering, so can we just forget this. While we’re there I have a presentation I want to do with you, just read off what I wrote for you., ”.

For him, he apologized by giving gifts or inviting you somewhere.

When morning came, she spent hours on end researching and practicing the floor plan of the palace. In a news article, it stated that the palace ran on the Heart Of Zaphion. If she thought out a plan to steal the Heart, it would power down the whole house drawing attention to her instead.

At 62 am, she got up to prepare for the gathering. While glancing into the bathroom mirror, dark, droopy eyebags were visible, her lip was still swollen and purple. As she reached over and turned on the shower head, the cold water trickled on her back making her quiver consequently. After a relieving soak, she wore a brown striped business suit, and headed out unknowingly.

Outside, the morning sky was substantially gusty, her dress shoes made a *CLICK CLACK* noise. While she strolled confidently, with a folder stuck between her armpits she stood in front of a building. Above her, a sign read WORLD NOW EDITORIAL OFFICE, a neon sign below it flickering *“NOW HIRING!”* red and yellow. As she nudged the door open with her body weight, a

jingle bell rustled. Inside an old jazz tune played on the corner record player, the aroma of solid coffee hit her. Along the walls was drastic brown wallpaper, as she noticed a tall woman and wise looking man exit.

While chewing on a tobacco pipe, an elderly pig sat at a cluttered work desk. As he sat with his mouth open, his buck teeth very noticeable, *"Ere, take a seat, the hiring manager will get to you Missus."* In the waiting room, she avoided eye contact with him, Miaou could sense his eyes on her. Until, the door behind him opened slightly, *"Sylas, I can take whoever's next"*. After, the middle aged pig winded his hands into the door, puzzling her a bit. When she got up her girthy dress shoes stomped to the room.

As she sat in front of a familiar face, *"You're the—"*. Miaou uttered, clearing her throat, trying to stay reserved.

Across from her, was the same peacock from yesterday. As the woman adjusted her beaded reading glasses with squinted wolf eyes, *"Oh, you again"*.

"You look tired, so all I need is your degree, resume, and experience. Considering what you look like your chances are small". When the peacock flipped her name plate reading *Executive Editorial Chief Osina Heiress*. To her, a last name like "Heiress" was something obviously altered with money. During this, Miaou kept her head high, *"All in there including my works and other experiences"*. In her head she was tense, poking the grey fabric chair she sat on to relieve her stress.

As the boss tussled and shifted through the black folder, whistling followed, *"OUT!"* her cunning voice striked. Afterwards, Osina frisbeed her portfolio to the ground. Despite this, Miaou grabbed it, tossed her hair, and strided out of the office poised.

When Miaou made it back to the apartment, she panted frantically, as her hair became undone. Across from her, she creaked the door gently open to Mac's room. Beside him, shaking his unconscious body until he let out a purr.

Hastily, he got ready, putting on his suit, licking his hair back with his paws and brewing a morning coffee. When he was ready, they got in his sleek vintage car. With it having the same baby blue exterior like his cafe. Inside the car, Miaou sat in the left backseat, with a book bag on her shoulder.

After unprecedented silence, Mac spoke, "*I'm excited for our presentation at 45'o clock!*" glancing into the rear view mirror. He . For a moment, felt enormously guilty for what she was going to do. Through hills and old mossy rivers, the sun crept out a little but the sky was puffy and foggy. After the long car ride, she opened the window, sticking her head out, while her tongue was blown away in the breeze.

When they took a left turn, up a hill is where they arrived at King Morrow's residence. Beside, buggattis, lamborghinis, and porsches parked outside, the people accompanied by their spouses.

"As we are here at the residence of King Morrow for his spring gathering. What's your name miss and how has your experience here been so far?" Out of nowhere a red panda in a suit with a professional tone appeared beside her. Near the car door, Mac exited as well, ushering the reporter aside.

"Buzz off we just got here" Mac looked back at Miaou, the both of them giggling, running off to the courtyard. By the entrance, they scanned their wristbands by the entrance where a highly-functioning robot put lanyards around their necks.

As she entered her sight was unsure where and what to observe in this homestead. Above, the chandeliers atop glistened like ravishing diamonds. At a distance, the staircase appeared endless and

exquisite. *"It's so giant in here!"*, she echoed, Miaou heard herself quite a dozen times. When she walked, each step had its own frequency. Beside her, the tour guide greeted her, who was a frog in a turtleneck named May. Along this she was led to her tour group of around seven people. Once the tour group entered a dim room, she swept away quietly with nobody noticing her.

By the porcelain fountain she dropped her lanyard in. After she put on sunglasses and a sunhat to disguise her eyes, ears, and antlers. Near her, King Morrow's drunken personal assistant stumbled into the bathroom. When he threw off his necklace onto the sink counter, Miaou crawled in, seizing it. Onto the next step, she ran downstairs to the basement, carrying a screwdriver. After, jabbing the security mainframe repeatedly, disabling the ZapCameras... Urgently, now was the time to think fast, she got into the elevator to the tenth floor where the vault room was.

Vigorously, she transformed into another outfit, adorning an all black leather jacket accompanied by baggy pants. In the hallway she examined the compass, no one being present so the coast was clear. At the end of the room laid the vault, a titanium door with a spoke handle wheel and a barcode scanner beside.

Once she held up her lanyard, tugging the door open, a treasure trove of gold bars, wads of cash, and jewels unveiled. In the vault, it was surrounded with specimen tanks filled with a green cloudy liquid. When Miaou removed the foggy dust off of them, cold sweat dripped off her forehead. Amidst this, her heart beat faster than the giggles she could hear the few floors down. Inside these tanks, undistinguishable rotting creatures slept, their faces looked dull and soulless. *Could these people hear her?* As she turned the corner a flashy, eye-catching green aura caught her. When she tip-toed over, a displayed viridescent anatomical heart with screws and metal pins. Above it was an electronic display

reading, “The Heart”, as she felt the pumping vibration around it. As Miaou detached it from the synergy of wires holding it, stained in a mundane sage green shade. *Odd* she imagined, Miaou remembered and the whole zurcolony of Salaou knew it had an amber color. After, she concealed it in a tied pouch, stuffing it in her bag to hide the glimmer.

Out of the elevator, she made it back to where the event took place in her casual clothes. Like so, Miaou snuck back to the employee bathroom, returning to the lanyard to the unconscious assistant. Once a minute passed for the presentation, she rushed to the stage just as her and Mac were announced to rise.

Pridefully strolling to the stage, “*I knew you could make it*” he whispered in her ear optimistically.

While Miaou proudly marched the stage, she responded as predicted, “*Of course*”. Upon the staircase, she saw King Morrow looking dazed and distressed. Overlooking the assembly, people had their legs crossed, sometimes even writing notes. During his presentation, he finally introduced her to speak.

Upon the spotlight, she tussled her notepad numerous pages back. As she placed it on the podium, clearing her throat she spoke.

“*Under King Morrow’s rule, he has been abusing Zaphion and Zaphion fueled electronics. From this he has murdered sea creatures by pouring them into ponds.*” After stopping for a second to rummage through her bag, Miaou pulled out a woolen pouch, as she untied it.

“As we know the Heart Of Zaphion is amber and has always been, right?” In the crowd, people apprehensively nodded their heads, a majority visually concerned.

“Over time, this is what has become of it”, ripping out the minuscule green heart beating mercilessly. Through the crowd, an ocean of terrified astonishment. By then, a handful of audience members left fearing further conflict.

When he saw the Heart being lifted, his face showed cold dissatisfaction. On his left hip, he snatched his blade out the scabbard *“THEFT, SEIZE HER”* he declared, wielding the sword pointing it forth.

Across from her, an army of bodyguards pursued for her as she cravenly galloped off. Amidst this, King Morrow observed from a distance. Near the entrance, Mac rushed the crowding audience forward, all of them were powerless as they could face consequences. Toward, she reached the edge of a fence bridge, glimpsing off the edge to the rushing murky blue waterfall. Suddenly, her heart skipped a beat, Miaou’s breath becoming feeble, but she remembered.

Until, she plunged into the icy water before crying *“TWIDIE-DO”*. As she tried to doggy paddle, Miaou impulsively poked her head out gasping for air.

When something swam beneath her, *“I didn’t expect for you to remember that”*. Below the water, it was Soapy boosting her upon the water.

Between Miaou escaping on Soapy’s back and King Morrow’s sinister scowl, the reporting camera panned rapidly. *“To the police station near the city hall quickly!”*, she gurgled, her head slightly sinking into the water. Hastily charging up his fins, recoiling them like an engine. As they took off, *“Alright let’s go!”*. he called, spattering water back on the stone bridge. Past the hidden hill mansions

and an amusement park, moving cars by the lake came to spectate them. Across schools, libraries, and parks, they travelled miles back to Soapy's lake. Where they hurriedly sprinted on foot through the grass, wet mud, and moving cars.

As they dashed into the police station, she shoved the heart through the crack of the barrier where the attendant stood. Off the two galloped to a TV display up front an electronic store screening Channel 5 news at the palace. Where a reporter showed present footage of a drone's view up ahead in the sky of King Morrow. Until a foggy grey aura formed around him, he began to groan as limbs grew out of him. Whereas his silhouette altered into a human.

"Did you know that would happen?—" Soapy perplexly jittered at her, his fins and back stiffening,

Glancing back squinty-eyed, she cocked her head sideways, *"OF COURSE NOT! What the heck?"* Miaou shrieked while sweat formed on her forehead.

On the drone view it examined him diving into the river, as a nearby EchoAqua sensor tried to locate him. For Soapy, his jaw dropped to the floor and his teeth jittered, *"A human? How is that possible?"*. Alongside frantic blinking, checking the possibility if this was reality.

...

On TV, reports were broadcast of King Morrow's palace being raided, with most of his servants arrested. During this, his diary was used as evidence against him in court, a meager amount being disclosed.

Before this, Miaou received a return call from World Now, her first assignment being an auto-biography. Alongside the task it includes her to write the best thing she ever did. As she sat at her

desktop ruminating the idea. After, she continues writing about the risk she took to save the city and the friends she met along the way. From this, she aspires to be an advocate for hybrids and achieving your ambitions, even if people doubt you.

In a year, an election for the new king will be held, protesting in the streets became prevalent. Since then, rumor spread expeditiously that King Morrow, had been locked up in a bottomless pit far below Saloau. Alongside him being transmitted back to Earth three lightyears away, but nobody really knew. Although, one thing that could be sure is that she and Mac were still the biggest of friends.