

Salt Lake Teens Write
Modern Elixir

Volume 9
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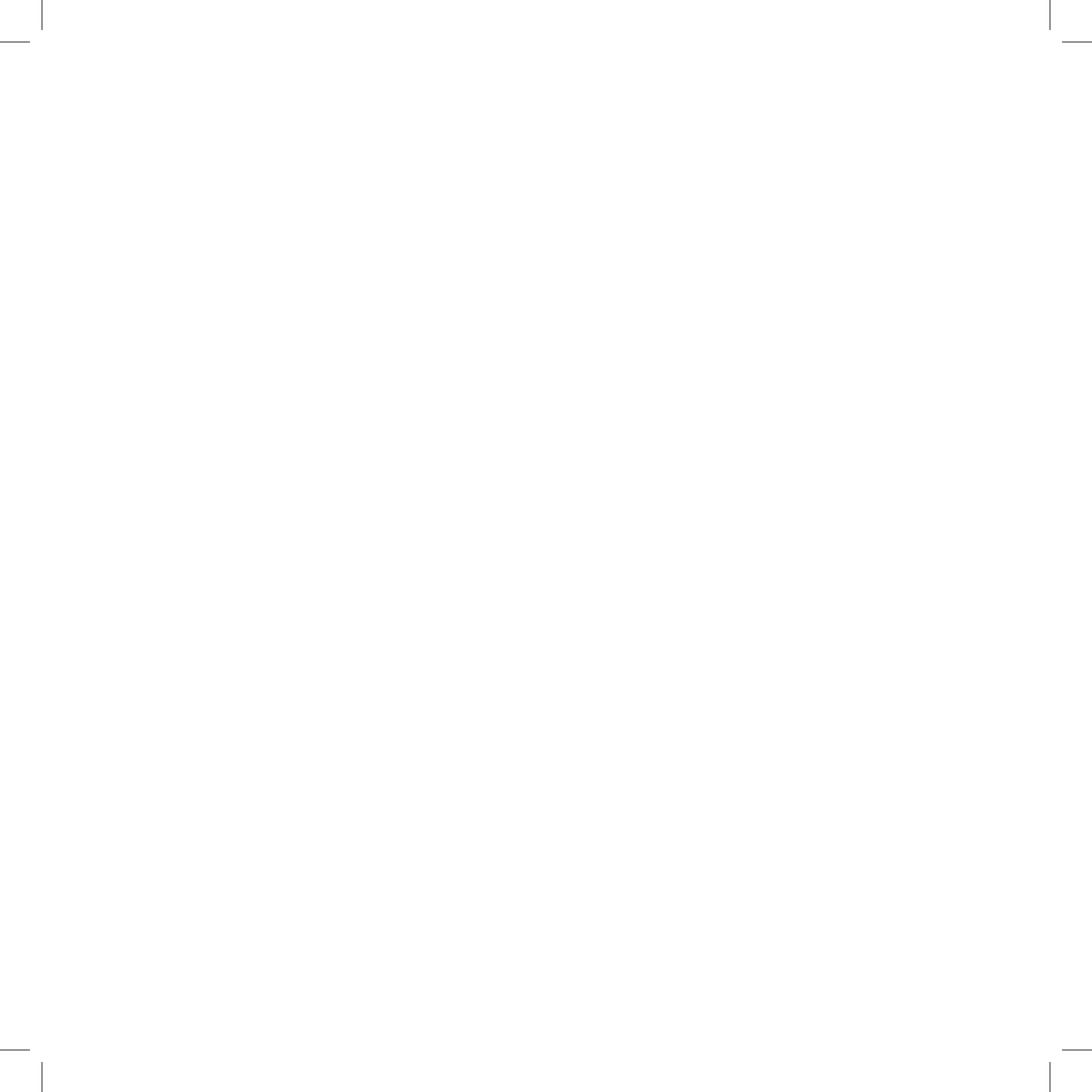
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- Kate Dastrup

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- Maeve Remke
- Erin Betts
- Asher Candell



Modern Elixir

Erik Allen

Caramel color

Elixir of Sugar, gulp

Delicious Bubbles

Carbon Dioxide water

This thing called Soda, I drink

That's Embarrassing

Kate Dastrup

Modern Elixir 12

William wiped the non-existent dirt off his cream-colored button-up, then putting on his favorite maroon sweater, he looked at himself in the mirror, checking himself out. He smiled when he saw he looked great and perfect.

He walked downstairs to see his grandmother in the kitchen making him his favorite breakfast waffles. Nutella waffles to be exact. She had also made some bacon and eggs for him.

"Morning grandma," he called out to her, but didn't turn around. "Good morning little Will," she answered. They sat down at her round table with a pastel yellow cover over it.

"Thank you grandmama," he said as he shoveled a spoonful of eggs into his mouth. She chuckled and closed her eyes. He noticed how this was an actual smile, unlike the others where he could tell she was forcing it. He knew she was in a lot of pain, but he couldn't do anything to help her. He would love to, but what would he do?

The moment ended sooner than William would've liked, since she started a coughing fit. She sighed when she was done, looking away from him. "Go to school, William," she said gravely, making William scared. She would never use that tone with him. He sighed and sat up putting his half eaten waffle into a Ziploc bag and grabbed his backpack.

"Love you," he exclaimed to her before he shut the door. He sighed as he started walking down to the bus stop.

The bus got there in about 5 minutes. He got his stuff then got up, walking onto the bus then sitting in the front where no one would sit since it had "nerd cooties." He thought those were jokes from preschool—Elementary but some kids at his school were still as mature as a 5 year old.

He sat while listening to people talking to their friends about their weekend or other kids trying to make fun of him.

When they finally arrived to school, he was the last one on the bus even though he was at the front of the bus.

He walked into his first class, trying to dodge Dolly's group of popular girls trying to make fun of him. Sadly, he ran right into a different group of bullies.

He was strong, his shirt almost ripped to shreds. It was Connel's gang. 'Of course, I had to run into him.' He screamed inside his head, worrying about what was to happen to him. He tried to back away from them, but one of the members quickly grabbed him. William groaned. 'Of course, it was Monday. What did I expect.'

The started mentally bullying him, not yet physically. One of the guys said something that was apparently Connel's line so they started to fight. While they were fighting, William managed to get out of there. He ran to the nearest bathroom, and didn't bother to look at which bathroom it was. He walked in and locked himself in one of the stalls. He took heavy breaths as he sat on the toilet seat.

His breath was caught in his throat when he heard the sounds of heels clicking on the tile, and Dolly's voice.

"No babe, I haven't seen him. Yes, when I do I'll tell you. Mhmm. Kiskey kiskey love," she said and started applying her make up.

William held his breath as he waited for her to leave. After 10 big minutes, he heard her walk out of the bathroom. He walked out of the stall and walked outside the bathroom. He checked the sign on the door and face palmed.

He had ran into the girls bathroom.

The Children Sat Bored

Zoe Madrid

The children sat bored by the window.
Not knowing what to do, all there was to do was sit.

While Mom did her makeup and hair, they waited.
The children sat bored, ready to leave.

The children sat bored, waiting for lunch.
Meanwhile the witch prepared her human supper.

The cook was beautiful. They were in love.
Cupid's glue on blue chairs. The children sat bored.

Zoe and the children sat bored. Words flew anxiously.
Waiting to take the test, that would give them life.

Behind the Mask

Erik Allen

A boy behind a mask
A smile song and dance
How gaily does he prance
A boy behind a mask
When the mask is off, see the face of his Master
A face etched by misery, he pulls the boy's strings
A boy behind a mask
A smile song and dance

02/14 Cosa Nostros

Jacob Stevenson

Be still my bleeding heart
Moonshine, blood, and typewriter.
Is only a part
Of stilling my bleeding heart.
I was a fighter, and
I was a liar.
So be still my dying heart,
Because of moonshine, blood, and those damn typewriters.

Grooves and Camera Clicks

Alyssa Nielsen

My shoulders were tense
The beeping nearby caused my breath to shorten.
The sun was beating down on my face
And feet were slamming against the pavement.
Everything seemed to yell "love yourself!"
With each camera click the stones came closer,
Shuttering off my confidence.
When people rushed by
And grooves pushed against my skin,
It reminded me that I was running out of time.
So I tried everything I could,
Until I couldn't patch myself up anymore.
I needed to learn how to love myself,
Despite all of my anxieties.
With the grooves against my skin
And camera clicks,
I was pushed,
To love myself exactly as I was.

Baby Ninjas

Maeve Remke

"BLASH" was the first hit. It was a mix between a red hot sauce splash and a stinky cheese boom. The two materials did not mix well, as stinky steam rose up in red fumes, and seconds after a bonfire of hot sauce erupted. Emily and I screamed, and began to run. Another blush sounded, less than 3 feet away from me and Emily. Emily and I ducked to the ground, and in a desperate summersault grabbed a chunk of stinky cheese as we clambered onto CHAN. CHAN was our Caring Hover Ambassador to a New. A New anything really, but mostly a new planet. A new home. Another blush sounded just behind me as the dark and light green door shut behind me. Another blush sounded, but CHAN had already shut his doors. Emily cried out in fear and anguish, as we both knew that the blush could have only been targeted at my parents. CHAN shook violently, and I took a dive at a very fluffy red chair to maintain my balance on. Emily was right behind me. After one more violent shake, CHAN smoothly lifted off into the air, leaving our doomed planet behind.

Emily and I raced to the back window of our ship and looked as the humongous Red-hot Spicy Sauce planet completely enveloped our humble Stinky Cheese planet with a final BLASH. Then both planets exploded in a massive show of beautiful stinky red-hot spicy cheese sauce fireworks. Emily and I clapped, because that was polite for a 2-year-old to do. But it was still sad. As the fireworks died down, CHAN's automated voice came over a speaker and said

"We are now entering our cruise zone. Feel free to eat the stinky cheese that is waiting in the cockpit." Emily and I exchanged glances before barreling towards the cockpit to eat the yellow-green goodness that CHAN had given us. The stench was so great in the cockpit that we both took huge, deep breaths before chowing down on our stinky feast. By the time all of the cheese was devoured, Emily's white ninja suit had a yellowish tinge, and my blue ninja suit was a bit of a green color. They smelled like stinky, stinky cheese that had farted stinky cheese gas again and

again and again. It smelled good. Emily and I buried our heads in our suits and fell asleep in the fluffy red chairs that were facing the wide window of the cockpit.

"Wake up, wake up." CHAN's automated voice rang through the ship. I startled awake under a huge stinky cheese wheel, and happily ate my way out. I looked around the red ship, and wondered why my parents chose such a disgusting color for our trip to a New. With a wonderful slurpy sound, Emily's head popped out of her own stinky cheese wheel that was covering her fluffy chair as well. After she glanced around the cockpit, she groaned.

"Why is the color so disgusting?" she whined. Emily always whined, but so did I. Our excuse was always that we are only 2 years old. Usually, we never answered each other's questions, but apparently CHAN didn't know that because a second later his voice again came over the speaker and said

"You do know that I am like a giant watermelon right? I am simply the color I am meant to be." CHAN followed his statement by showing us a picture of what he looked like from the outside. Emily and I both gasped in horror as we saw that CHAN had no fashion sense at

all, because he looked like a giant watermelon that was slowly inching through space.

"Um, CHAN?" Emily said as sweetly as she could while still being completely mortified. I couldn't even speak yet. CHAN clicked at us in reply so that we knew he was listening.

"CHAN..." Emily paused here to try and find a nice way to put it, but, finding none, she shrugged and continued speaking in her horrified but sweet tone.

"CHAN you look absolutely and horribly horrifying, and never show us what you look like again please."

CHAN didn't reply, but the image of the giant space watermelon disappeared. Thank goodness for it. For the rest of our journey through space, there were only chats between Emily and I, wake up calls from CHAN, and videos about the part of space we were passing on CHAN's big screen TV. It continued like this until the 18th day, when CHAN woke us up with a tourist video and his final message. "We are now entering the Milky Way. Do not touch the cows. Buckle up, we are almost to your New. Earth."

Emily and I looked at each other for only a

moment, then raced to our fluffy red seats to watch for cows, and our new home. Earth. I hadn't ever really heard of it, but I was sure it wasn't as stinky as Stinky Cheese planet. When we finally came into view of the planet, Emily and I instantly began to refer to it as planet Barf, because that is what it looked like. Like a huge star had barfed all over the unlucky planet. But what horrified us the most was that as we looked down at the blue seas and green lands, we could not even see a speck of Stinky Cheese. Emily sobbed. I was about to cry to when CHAN suddenly announced "Alright baby ninjas, we are now entering a crash zone. Brace yourselves." Then, with a final shudder from CHAN, we entered a complete free-for-all plummet through space and to Barf. Emily screamed.

Asteroids and the Girl With The Purple Hippopotamus Earrings

Zoe Madrid

The asteroid glistened in plasmic energy.

"What constellation could you find," they said.

"Use your imagination," they say.

"I can't see anything but a woman wearing a purple earring as big as a hippopotamus?"

"Now keep the image there, see it, and now feel it."

A wave of stars and comets washed over me. See it, feel it, be it.

Next Time

Nimaa Osman

First week

39 in hospitals 12 in intensive care 50 dead
And all they wonder is what's in his head
Families racing around trying to find out
If one of theirs has been taken out
News stations rushing to get headlines
Everyone wants to know who has committed these crimes
What about the victims?
Who will remember their names
After all of this is done?
I see Tweets, Statuses, and shares
A great way to make everyone aware
So now that we know, what comes next?
You can only do so much within a text.

Week number 2

The media coverage is almost gone
Only the true activists are still hanging on
Other communities show their support
Money, Flowers, Posters, Vigils
By this time the case is left to the court

Week Number 3

The hashtag is no longer trending

This story is coming to its ending
Families left with less members
This has just become something to remember

You

Alyssa Nielsen

You undo me,
I become a putty in your hands.
You could pull me apart strand by strand,
And I wouldn't object.
Your words weaken me,
Making me stutter.
Your touch stops me in my tracks,
Making me wonder how I ever lived without you.
And I know that if I ever tasted your lips,
Felt them meld with mine,
I could never stop loving you,
Until the end of time.

Snake Speaks with The Girl With The Purple Hippopotamus Earring

Zoe Madrid

"Can't you see it?" the snake said. "What a weirdo!" the snake said. He was closer now. I could feel it. "Can't you feel us!?" The snakes slithered.

"No," I replied in my language. My language of vibrations and feeling. I remember my mother. She glistened like a purple hippopotamus earring. That light stayed in my mind and she is with me.

The Beast Life: Light and Shadow Sub-Series

D.V. Baldwin

Introduction

In the past some people openly used power to help heal, protect, and guide those that needed it. While others used power to hurt, destroy and manipulate those same people. This power goes by many names. But we'll just call it magic...To keep it simple. Now I know what you're thinking: magic is fake. It's not real. It's only a superstition. Aw yes you're right to those who don't believe in magic it's fake. But to those who do believe in magic it's very much real. Especially to those who were born in to magic and were raised and taught to wield the power that lies within them. Even further back in magical history it started on another planet...a planet called Mythica. It's a similar planet to Earth. But they who used to live on Mythica no longer live on their home planet. Why you might ask. I'll tell you why. They were kicked out of their homes forced to live on Earth for no good reason. Fortunately for them they knew how life worked on Earth

so they fit right in except for the magic bit. As the generations went by, one couple, two very powerful royal magic users had lived a very long time. Cursed with Immortality until one of their children learns to cure them from the curse. They waited for many generations and one day they grew unsure of their fate and went to a seer and asked when the child who would be the cure of their curse and when would the child be born and what would the child's name be. The seer responded she could not foretell every detail of the child but she could fulfill the task she was asked. For she could see the desperate need for hope in this couple's eye's. So the seer gathered forth her most powerful Divination object known as The Dragon's Eye Crystals. Created by the Dragon King of Old on Mythica. The Dragon King was known as Khimni and his Queen Kym both created by the Universe itself born in two forms the first forms they took and were born as was Dragons Khimni was born in the form of the first Elemental

Dragon possessing power over all the elements known as: Fire, Water, Land, Air, Chi, and Mind. Making him the ruler of all of Mythica. Kym was born in the form of a Galaxy Dragon possessing power over all the Powers of the Universe known as: Galactical magics which consists of Lunar magic, Solar magic, Divination, Light magic, Dark magic, White magic, Black magic, and Making her ruler over all life and death, power and creation. It is said on Mythica the two Dragon rulers judge the people of Mythica when they pass over to the next life according to their acts, desires, hearts, intentions, if they used magic with a good intention and what energy they put into the universe or whether they abused their power.

The seer was also Immortal and knew of all the things the couple had done for their people and for her personally the couple had saved her life growing up and wanted to repay them for their kindness. Once the seer had grabbed the Dragon Eye Crystals she set them up in front of the couple. The Dragon Eye Crystals were a set of three Crystals imbued with the energy of both Dragon rulers and glowed with a Magical Aura of multiple colors each crystal foresaw one part of three parts of what

needed to be seen by the seer. One crystal that glowed Blye as a clear blue summer day sky and showed the seer the first part of the future and read the child would be male and born of the blessing of the Dragon King like the first child the Queen's barring. The second crystal was Green like healthy Grass and read that the boy's name would be Seth and would be born in the 21st century and would be incorruptible. The third crystal was a mix of two colors pink and purple and read the year of the time they would be cured of their curse and was on his 28 birthday he would come up with a incantation of the heart and set all the Immortals free from their cursed state. And that is where our story begins.

Celadon Green

Fiona Bowen

Modern Elixir 28

The low green light cast an eerie glow over the hard metal face, shiny features still and emotionless, unaware of the woman who worked so tirelessly to bring it to life.

Her hands were blue and green with bruises, arms covered in no small amount of bandages. She was crouched over a work table, putting the finishing touches on a finely crafted humanoid leg. It was so close. Nearly complete. She connected a wire or two, watching with delight as the fully jointed toes wiggle. It was almost perfection.

So close. Soon.

She stood, carrying the leg over to the rest of it, fully assembled and seated in a chair. She knelt, ignoring the pop in her hips and the whispers in the back of her mind.

Fastening the leg in its place is simple enough and it is completed. She gazed upon it in wonder and waited with anticipation for the first sign of life.

And for a moment... it lived.

A flicker of pale blue around its joints and its hollow eyes. A slow blink of purely aesthetic eyelids. And then a low **thrum** and a terrible quiet.

A sick feeling in the pit of her stomach forced her to turn her back on her creation. So close. Too close. She took a seat at her work table and shut her own eyes at the feeling of being watched. There was no giving up. She would try again.

But should she?

With resolution in her fists, she cracked open the machine's chest, delicately removed the glowing blue work of art—a mass of glass and wire and so, so many churning gears—and set to work.

The heart would work.

It was the answer. She'd never gotten this close before it fell into her lap. It was the key.

Had to be.

Or else...

She worked tirelessly. The sense of being watched never ceasing, the blue of the heart hummed beneath her fingertips and the sun refused to rise.

Yellow Rain Words Stuck in the Winter Tree

Zoe Madrid

Ayelen stood at the bottom of the Winter Tree.

"How could you wish so much to go to the Yellow Rain Academy? Milo asked.

"To learn of course!" Ayelen exclaimed. "All those yellow rain words to learn. A whole universe to explore."

The Academy stood high above, on the top of the Winter Tree, where the green lived.

"Fawn! But don't you love it down here with me?" Milo questioned tiredly.

They stayed up all night perfecting Ayelen's resume and speech. Milo always stood by her.

"Of course I do! But there are opportunities up there that there aren't down here."

Opia

Emma Kerkman

Rain splattered down onto the dirty street, pooling in the gaps between the cobbles, washing away the day's layer of excrement, mud, and dropped food. Clumps of the sodden filth collected in the shallow trenches between the houses and the narrow, towering buildings.

At the end of the street stood the clock tower, the clock face lit from behind by dozens of oil lanterns burning low and steadily. It cast a round shadow on the street below, stretching across wet, empty space, falling on the lone figure of a girl.

The door to the clock face opened, and the girl looked up at the man hanging out of it. She knew him, but not very well. But she did know that the fall would be a fitting way to die.

"Cerina," someone said, and she turned. In the shadow of the clock stood a man. He walked towards her and stumbled on the slick cobbles, and as he tripped, she saw a bit of red blood fall from the breast of his velvet shirt and splatter on the ground.

"From the Sword?" she asked as the man reached out to hold himself up on her shoulder. She didn't need to ask, though; she would know a wound from the Sword on any man. After all, it was the same kind of wound she bore herself.

"Yes," he said, breathless. "Yes."

"Then you know I cannot save you," she replied, her tone indifferent. *I knew this would happen*, she reminded herself. *I knew this would happen so I shouldn't be surprised, nor should I be upset.*

"I know," he sighed. "I know you can't save me, but you can still *help* me." The whites of his teeth flashed in the pale light as he smiled, giddy off of adrenaline. His hair lied plastered to his fore-head, making his deep-set green eyes look even lonelier.

"Is it done?" she asked, catching him by the elbow as he slumped forward. She couldn't afford to ruin another coat with more blood.

"Not yet, but it will be," he replied. "When the clock strikes twelve. Watch." He nodded his head towards the clock and she looked up. The man was still waiting there, but now he was balanced on the frame of the window, light as a bird but without the wings to fly.

"You Thrall'd him?" she asked, a hint of genuine surprise in her voice. "I didn't think you'd have the guts, Thoren. Or the strength."

He offered her another one of his rare grins, revealing deep-set dimples in his cheeks. "There's a lot about me you don't know, sweetheart." But even though his tone was casual, his voice was strained, wheezing. His words were tight, like someone caught his lungs in a vice and was squeezing, squeezing until his last breath left him.

But she knew his words were untrue, yet she could never tell him why. Even if she wanted to explain everything, she wouldn't have the time. He wouldn't have the time.

Or so she thought, anyway.

"You should go," she said, looking down at the hand he had pressed to his chest, a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood. "It wouldn't do to defile this street with two bodies in one night."

"Where?" he asked, leaning more on her.

"Where should I go? You know I have nowhere, Cerina. I have you, and I have... nothing." The look on his face was broken, pleading, and strangely open. She'd never seen him look so young—or so earnest—before.

I owe nothing to this man, a voice in the back of her head supplied. He works for me, and I owe him nothing.

But you're not going to simply let him die alone, are you? another voice supplied, drowning out the other one. You brought this on him. You knew how it would end. The least you can do is offer him a sort of meaningless solace in his final hours.

"Come with me," she sighed, catching him under his arm. "Let's get you somewhere dry."

"You're not going to stay and watch it end?" he asked, head resting on her shoulder as she turned him down the street, stepping out of the clock's light pooling on the ground.

"I don't have to," she replied just as the midnight bells began tolling, one noticeably missing. "It's already done."

Between the gaps in the song, above the roar of the rain, she heard the sickening crack of

bones on cobbled streets, the wet squelch of flesh meeting filthy ground, as a part of the world end-ed behind her.

*

Cerina opened the door to her apartment with one hand, the other clutching Thoren's arm as he leaned on her. He was heavier than she expected, but the extra weight might've come from how much of this was her fault.

Up until now, Cerina had never had an issue with using people. But with Thoren... she felt a smidgeon of what she assumed was guilt. Quite unusual. Though... she also never had to stick around and see what became of her pawns after she was done. That was probably why.

And Thoren shouldn't be the exception, a voice in her head supplied. They all should've met a different end.

Shut up, she told it.

"What do you need?" she asked, biting back the harshness in her tone as she lowered Thoren's limp form down onto her loveseat, wincing as he left a trail of watered-down blood in his wake.

"A towel," he replied, offering her a strained smile as he reclined. "A towel and maybe a cup of tea."

With a silent nod, she left him there and entered her kitchen. Setting her well-loved kettle on the stove, she kicked the oven until she heard the gas sputter to life and lit the burner.

And then she had nothing to do but wait for the inevitable. Nothing to do to busy her hands, nothing to do to drown out the sound of Thoren's raspy breathing coming from the other room. Nothing to do to take her mind off of the only way this could possibly end.

Why do you do it, Cerina? a voice in her head asked her, soft yet jarring against the backdrop of her other thoughts.

Why do I do what? she replied, tersely.

Why do you even bother pretending? Nothing ever means anything to you, anymore. You lost the ability to care when you sold your heart to the Sword, so why do you pretend to care?

Why do I? she wondered in response.

Maybe it's because you miss being able to

care, another voice supplied.

That's incorrect, she laughed at it, but there was no conviction in her words.

"Cerina?" Thoren called from the other room, startling her out of her thoughts.

"Yes?" she replied, not bothering to go to the doorway.

"Can you come here a second?"

Cerina forced her feet to move and walked into the room. She stopped and sat on the chair by his feet, watching him silently. His eyes were half closed, and his breathing was getting more and more irregular as the minutes went by.

"Is there nothing you can do?" he asked, hoarsely.

She shook her head. "You knew the risks when you agreed to kill Cyrrus Baron, Thoren. You knew I wouldn't be able to save you if he even so much as nicked you with the Sword. Even the strongest healers cannot close wounds from that blade."

A pensive look crossed his face. "You never told me why."

"Why what?"

"Why the Sword's wounds are always fatal."

She pursed her lips and looked away, focusing on the worn, faded wallpaper of her great-room, eyes tracing near-invisible patterns as she grasped for an answer. It would be best to be honest.

"It drains you of your soul," she said, turning back to him. "It steals your life for its own use, since the Demon of the Chalice has no living body of its own to keep its soul alive. That's all I know. So now there's nothing to be done but wait."

"I'm well aware of that fact, thank you very much," he mumbled, slouching further into the worn fabric of the loveseat.

"Do you regret it?" she found herself asking, fingers playing with the lace at the edge of her sleeve. "Sacrificing yourself to kill the master of the Sword?"

"No," he replied, barely thinking about his answer. "I don't regret it. The Sword is—was—a menace. Without a living master, it can't hurt any more people or ruin any more lives." A pause, then he spoke again.

"But... even if you *can't* save me, isn't there *something* you can do to at least take away from the pain?"

The pain? she wondered, then realized. *That's right,* she sighed. *Just because I don't feel pain doesn't mean other people have that same immunity.*

"I'm not a healer, Thoren. I'm not even a Deadspeaker. I can do nothing."

"You don't have to be a Deadspeaker in order to help me," he said, and she sensed a challenge in his words.

"You're insinuating something."

"I'm insinuating that you're not a healer or a Deadspeaker, but something even more powerful," he hissed, propping himself up on his elbows with a grunt.

"What makes you think that?"

"I've heard the rumors about you, Cerina. You may be a small-time criminal in the underworld, but you're still a small-time criminal with a well-known name. And in order for that to happen, you have to do something pretty big."

Instead of replying, Cerina met his piercing gaze with a cool one of her own, rose from her chair, and smoothed out her damp, bloodstained dress. "I think I hear the water boiling," she said. "I'll be right back."

Selfish, a voice in her head chided her as she skittered out of the room. *Coward. Why do you always run?*

I'm not running, she thought in reply. *I'm protecting myself.*

From what? it demanded, harsher. *Protecting yourself from what?*

Cerina didn't bother replying. Instead, she lifted up the kettle with a spare rag, the metal hot under her fingers. Pouring a single mug, she dug out the only tea she owned from the piles of rags on her counter and shaved a thin slice into the cup.

"Here," she said, walking back into the great room and handing the mug to Thoren, whose breathing had grown ever more ragged. "Be careful, it's hot."

He took a deep breath and sighed, letting the mug rest on his stomach, above his crumpled waistcoat and below the cherry-red stain

of blood slowly spreading across his breast. "Tell me a story," he said, a hidden command behind his words.

"No," she said, startling him. "Don't try to Thrall me, Vocator. It's rude."

His forehead crinkled in confusion, pushing his wet hair up and out of his green eyes. "Did you just—how did you resist my Thrall?"

Cerina looked away. *It wouldn't hurt to tell him, a voice in her head prompted her. He's going to die anyway, so what's the harm?*

But I've never told anyone before, she argued.

So? He's already half figured it out, anyway. Might as well let him die with one less question on his mind.

Shut up.

"I don't have a heart," she said a few seconds later, grey eyes darting from the worn rug on the floor up to his face, mildly eager to see his reaction. His expression was irritatingly closed as he coughed a little, a small dribble of blood falling from between his lips.

"You don't have a heart," he repeated, very slowly. "How do you not have a heart?"

"I lost it," she sighed. "A long time ago, before I knew what it meant, or what would happen if I did."

"Did you lose it or did you sell it?" he asked, a small smile appearing on his face, his usually ruddy cheeks now a washed-out peach.

She fixed him with a glare, but found it hard to muster any anger towards a dying man. "Fine. I sold it," she replied. "I sold it to the very Sword that's killing you."

Thoren's eyes went wide, and he tipped his head back to rest on the arm of the loveseat. For a second, the two of them were completely silent. For a second, Cerina wondered if he died of shock.

"Things are beginning to fit together," he laughed lightly, disproving her theory.

"I figured they might."

"So then Cyrrus Baron, the master of the Demon in the Sword..."

"Was my legal master, the legal holder of my heart," she finished for him. "Congratulations, you've figured me out."

"I highly doubt that," he laughed, smiling up

at her. "But riddle me this: the reason you wanted him dead was to get your heart back?"

"No," she said, looking away. "That's not exactly how it works."

"Then explain it to me. I know there's more to the story than you're letting on."

"There isn't," she said, lacing her fingers together. "I was young, and foolish. I got caught up in the moment, in my... grief. And I was willing to do anything to save myself from falling over the edge, so I sold him my heart to get rid of my emotions altogether."

Thoren pushed himself up on his elbows and looked over at her with something new in his eyes. She broke eye contact before it could turn into something more, though.

"You sold your heart to get rid of your emotions?" he asked, voice tenderer than usual.

"I did," she said.

"And do you regret it?"

"Sometimes."

"Only sometimes?"

"Only sometimes."

His eyes burned green rings into the sides of her skull. "There's one thing I don't understand," he said a moment later, furrowing his brows. "What did you ask for in return? To lose your emotions?"

"No, that part came with the sale of my heart," she said. "I don't usually tell people this, but I'll tell you if you really want to know."

"Well, it's not like I have much else to do," he chuckled, spitting up more blood. Outside, thunder slammed loud enough to rattle the windows and make the lights flicker.

"Opia," she said, quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"Opia," she said again, catching his gaze. "I have what's called Opia."

"Never heard of it."

"Most people haven't. As far as I know, I'm the only one in the world who has it."

"Care to elaborate?" he asked as she trailed off into silence.

Cerina looked up at her chandelier, which was slowly swinging and flickering as the storm outside worsened, and let out a heavy breath.

You should tell him, a voice in her head supplied. *He deserves to know.*

He works for me. He doesn't deserve anything, she replied, tersely.

Do you really believe that?

No, she thought to herself, privately. *No, I don't.*

She told it to shut up instead.

"Opia is a word in the English language that defines an abstract, a feeling," she began, rising to her feet. "It's defined as 'the ambiguous intensity that comes with looking someone in the eye', but I find that a bit too wordy to be practical." She offered a faintly sheepish smile. "The only way I can really explain it is like you're standing in a doorway, and you know someone's standing on the other side of that doorway, looking back at you, but you can't tell if you're the one looking in the door or the one looking out."

Thoren pondered her words for a second.

"And what can you do with this ability?" he asked, leaning back on his elbows, angling himself to look her in the eye.

"I'm the person in the doorway," she said. "I can look in—or out, depending on the situation—of someone else's eyes."

"And when you look out, what do you see?"

"I see the world as they see it. It can be disorienting, but I can see how they interpret things, how other people appear to them. It's helpful when I want to understand other people, the things that motivate them, and the things that might convince them to do what I want."

Thoren's expression was carefully neutral. "And when you look in?"

"I can see what they're thinking," she said, offering him a shallow smile. "It's not like telepathy, though. I can't interact with their thoughts, and I can't talk to them. I'm a bystander witnessing the world going on around me. Thought, it's still useful when I want information they aren't giving me."

When she finished, Thoren blinked up at her, and as much as he pretended to contemplate

them, Cerina knew he barely understood. But that was fine. Opia was hard for even her to understand.

After a moment, Cerina noticed his movements were getting slower, lazier. *His end is nearing*, she realized, a slight pang of disappointment settling in her gut. She had no time to reflect on that tiny bit of feeling, though, because Thoren wasn't quite done yet.

"Try it on me," he said, startling her.

"Try what?"

"Opia. Look into me."

"You're dying, Thoren. I... I don't want to see that."

"Then look out from my eyes."

"Why?"

"Just do it," he pleaded, reaching out for her hand with his free one. "Please? A last gift to a dying man?"

Sighing, Cerina moved closer and crouched by his side, gripping his cool, clammy palm.

"Alright, fine. Look at me."

Thoren caught her gaze and she pushed her mind forward. With a faint crackle of static and the pop that came with changing altitude quickly, Cerina was in his head.

Reorienting herself, Cerina blinked once, twice, and squinted as she watched herself from his eyes.

The color of her skin, eyes, and hair was a little different than she was used to seeing, but it wasn't unexpected. Most people's minds processed colors differently, she'd learned.

Even though her face was haggard and drawn from his perspective, lined with seriousness and worry, there was also something almost placating about her face that she found unnerving. Even with her stern expression, she looked brighter, almost. Like she was glowing from some internal light, even as tired as she appeared on the outside.

Cerina didn't understand it, but there were usually many things about her powers that she didn't understand, so she paid it no mind.

When she pulled her conscience away, Thoren was still looking at her.

"What did you see?" he asked, searching her

face for answers.

"Myself," she said.

"Is that all?"

"I wasn't looking for anything particular."

Thoren coughed again and turned away, wiping the blood from his lips onto his shoulder. "Can I ask you something?" he asked, his grip on her hand slackening. She took that as her cue to pull away, but as she did, his grip tightened again.

"Go ahead."

"Has anyone ever told you that they loved you?"

The question took her by surprise. No, a voice in her head supplied. "Yes," she lied.

He frowned and leaned in closer. "You did it again."

"Did what?"

"Thwarted my Thralling. I keep forgetting you don't have a heart, which means no strings for my Thralling to pull."

"Yet you still try," she said, smiling softly.

"You're persistent until the end, Thoren, I'll give you that."

"You know me too well," he chuckled, the laugh morphing into coughing and the coughing morphing into breathless wheezing. "Tell me one more thing," he said when he recovered himself. "Why do you lie? About your powers?"

"To protect myself," she replied. "I lie to protect myself."

"But why? You have no heart left to be broken, nothing left to protect."

"Why do you care?"

He turned away, and Cerina resisted the urge to look in through his eyes and see what he was thinking.

"I care because I care about you, Cerina."

"Why?" she asked, genuinely curious as he slid her hand up to his chest, where she could feel the light, erratic beating of his heart through the thick fabric of his waistcoat. "Why care about me? I'm a heartless nobody, a face in the crowd. I barely have enough sway as a criminal to hire someone for a job."

"You have something in you most people don't

have," he replied. "A light. A glow. And I don't know what it is—I don't even know why I can see it in the first place—but very few people have it. It makes you special."

"I saw the glow," she found herself saying as she squeezed his hand. "When I looked out from your eyes, I saw the glow. But that doesn't answer my question. Why do you care about *me*?"

He closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh. "Because it makes you beautiful, Cerina."

Cerina froze momentarily before quietly rising from where she was crouched, extracting her hand from his grasp. "You should drink your tea," she sighed, turning away so she didn't have to meet his eyes again. "Before it gets too cold."

"It's probably still hot. We've only been sitting here for a few minutes."

"Drink your tea, Thoren."

"I will, if you get me that towel you promised."

You shouldn't leave him, a voice inside her head supplied as she sighed and walked away, trailing slowly across her apartment to

the linen closet down the hall. *You shouldn't leave him.*

Well, why not? she demanded, scowling. *He's going to die anyway, no matter what I do, so why not?*

Would you want to die alone? it asked, chiding her like a parent would scold a small child.

No, she replied, *I wouldn't.*

Then go back to him, Cerina. You said you wouldn't leave him.

So she did. Towel in hand, she returned to his side. But by then, she was too late.

"Oh, Thoren," she sighed, setting the towel down beside his still-damp head, gently reaching out to brush the hair from his eyes. They were wide open, staring at the ceiling. But now, instead of the vibrant bottle green they once were, they looked almost grey, just like hers. The grey people's eyes turned when their hearts finally stopped, finally failed.

Picking up the mug of tea in his lap, she frowned down at it before carrying it into the kitchen. "You didn't drink your tea," she muttered, mostly to herself.

In the back of her head, she heard him laugh and saw him grin before saying *I'm sorry*.

*

Outside her apartment, the light drizzle of rain had increased into a steady downpour, flooding the streets with dirty water, water that contained a miniscule amount of Thoren's blood and a miniscule amount of her tears.

Cerina never cried. She wasn't entirely certain if she *could*, not since selling her heart. Tears came with feelings, and feelings were something she didn't have. Not anymore, anyway.

But that night, she did cry. Just a little.

She cried because she wasn't able to cry when she really needed to.

The roads were completely empty as she walked from her apartment back to the circle of light from the clock tower. By then, the hour hand had moved to one and the minute hand to three, but the body of Cyrrus Baron was still right where she left it. Bloody and broken, a suitable end for a man who strove to leave carnage in his wake.

The Sword was trapped under him, and Cerina had to roll over his broken corpse to get at it. She took a moment to stare down at him, taking in the broken form of the man who'd once seemed like a god among mortals. But he was just a man, like all the rest of them, and even someone as powerful as he couldn't resist the power of a trained Vocator.

For a moment, Cerina let the scene play out in her mind. She watched as Thoren, bleeding and mortally wounded, used the power of his words to back Cyrrus up until he was standing in the window of the clock tower. She imagined the pained grin on Thoren's face as he instructed Cyrrus to wait until midnight to jump, then the sigh of relief as he finally released his control over the man and the demon struggling in his sword.

The last thing she imagined was the panic on Cyrrus's face as the Thrall wore off right when he jumped, and how he must've drawn the Sword in the hopes of making a last-minute wish before he fell to his death. He likely ran out of time.

Cerina unbent Cyrrus's fingers and raised the Sword by its hilt. The tip of the blade was faintly pink with watered-down blood.

Thorin's blood.

"You owe me something," she said, holding the blade an arm's length away. "Wake up, you bastard. You owe me something."

"I owe nothing to any man," the Sword hummed in her hand, the metal growing warm to the touch. Warm like the handle to her kettle as she made Thoren tea.

"I am not a man," she said, gripping it tighter, "and you owe me something."

"And what do you think I owe you?"

"My heart. Give it back."

"I cannot return something that was never given in the first place."

"Call it re-gifting, then," she said, bitterly.

The Sword went quiet, and after it didn't reply immediately, Cerina debated taking the contrary thing and dashing it against the cobbles until the obsidian-black blade shattered into a million shards of steel.

"Why?" it asked, breaking the silence as it sensed her irritation.

Why? she thought. Why? You dare sit here

and ask me why when you know perfectly well yourself?

Instead, she replied, "Because I need it. I need to feel again."

"Why?"

"Because I was unable to feel when I needed to feel the most."

"Why?"

"Because I have lost something dear to me—because of you—and you owe me," she hissed, patience growing thin as she clutched the blade with all the strength in her hands.

If the Sword had eyes, it would've been looking at her with curiosity. A few quiet seconds passed, and the metal grip grew hotter in her hands.

"Do you want to know why you hear voices in your head?" it asked, a light singsong to its voice.

Cerina looked down at it, doubtfully. "I want to know what it will cost, and what it has to do with getting my heart back."

"Smart girl," the Sword laughed, as much as a

Sword could laugh. "But this I will give you for free. No hidden fees."

"Then fine," she said, still doubtful. "Tell me what the voices are."

"When you look into someone's head, there is a cost," it said. "The cost is a piece of your soul. But the price goes both ways: one piece for you, one piece for the other party. You won't notice it at first, but eventually, the soul shards begin to add up. They fill up the gap in your soul, re-placing the parts you lose. And, while the people you look in on never seem to change, slowly, slowly, you will begin to change. You'll hear some of them talking to you. You'll have some of their ideas. You might even begin to think about the world as they did, you never know."

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked, numb to whatever reaction she was supposed to have. "What point are you trying to make?"

"I'm saying that you're not really you, my dear, so I can't return your heart. If you had asked me *before* you discovered Opia, then maybe I could have returned it. But now, it is too late."

Cerina dropped the Sword in a rare moment of surprise. Staring down at it, she pressed her

lips into a thin line as she watched rainwater wash over it, covering it in a thin layer of film and silt.

"So I will be like this forever?" she asked, voice quiet, small.

"Yes," the Sword replied, not sounding at all sorry.

"You couldn't have told me this before? Back when I made the deal?"

"You never asked."

Cerina took a long, slow breath. "What happens when I use up all the pieces of my soul I have left? Will I know?"

"No," it replied, "you will not know. And I cannot tell you what will happen."

"Why not? What will it cost for you to tell me?"

"Nothing, my dear, for I do not know the answer to that question."

Cerina glowered down at the blade beneath her feet. *Stupid thing*, she thought, dejectedly. *If it can no longer help me, I don't have any reason to stay out here. Maybe if I leave it here, it will wash away and get buried in the bottom of the river.*

But even if she did leave it, the Demon of the Chalice would still live on, forever mocking her for her infantile foolishness.

A small voice in the back of her mind stopped her from walking away forever. *It's probably lying, it said. You should try again.*

What reason would it have to lie? she asked in reply, though what she really wanted to ask was *What difference would it make?* Asking more questions wouldn't bring Thorin back. That kind of magic wasn't within the Sword's power. She'd know: that was why she sought out the Sword in the first place.

A human heart is a valuable thing, the voice offered, pushing her other thoughts aside. A good bargaining chip if you know how to use it.

And I didn't, she sighed, staring up at the dark, starless sky. I didn't, and look where that's got me.

Rain splattered down onto the dirty street, pooling in the gaps in the cobbles, washing blood from the day's bodies over the feet of a young girl. She stared at the clock tower standing at the end of the street, watching as the minute hand slowly circled the dim face.

The door to the clock's face was still open, and the girl let out a sigh as she remembered what the dead man in front of her looked like when he stood silhouetted inside it. The fall was a fit-ting way to die. Tragic, but fitting, and a better way to die than dying alone on the loveseat of a woman who had no heart to give him in return.

Cerina didn't often listen to the voices in her head. Most of the time, the advice they offered her was contrary and completely counterproductive to what she was trying to achieve. But today, she'd listened to them long enough to realize that maybe they were right, sometimes. Or, if not *right*, a little more human, at least.

So Cerina looked away from the clock, away from the starless sky, away from the shadow of death looming over her, and picked up the Sword one last time.

"I would like to make a trade," she said, holding it an arm's length away.

"And what could you possibly have that I would want?" it asked her, sounding irate—at least, as irate as a sword could sound.

"Fragments of over a hundred human souls, in exchange for my heart."

"And what makes you think I still have your heart?" it asked.

"I highly doubt your kinds of customers would have any use for another one," she said.

"Fine, fine," the Sword replied. "But are you sure?"

"Am I sure of what?"

"That you wish to give up part of your soul for a heart? Do you know what will happen to you with only half a soul?"

"Do you?" she countered, and when the Sword went silent, continued, "I know what I want, Demon of the Chalice. I want my heart back, in exchange for the souls."

The Sword tilted to the side and hummed, like a curious puppy. "May I ask why?" it asked.

"No. Now, can you do it or not?" Cerina snapped, running out of patience.

The Sword warmed in her hands, and Cerina felt like it was laughing at her. "This is a very different conversation than the one we had

when you and I last talked," it said, sounding smug. "Strange, because the situation seems to be quite the same."

"Now how do you know that?"

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," the Sword sang, and Cerina clenched her jaw.

"Fine. I want my heart back because I would rather have a heart than a soul."

"Aww, come on, that's not your reasoning," it chuckled.

"I want it back because I would like to *feel* again. Everything. Even grief."

"Almost, almost..."

"You listen here," she hissed. "Because of you and your soul leeching, Thorin is *dead*, and because I sold my heart to you, I could not cry for him—and I want to cry for him, because he has no one else to do it and because it's my fault he's dead in the first place!"

"And?"

"And I would like to be able to tell someone I love them and mean it! I would like to be able to tell someone they're beautiful and mean it!

Because, when he said it to me, I was unable to believe him. And now, he's dead, and I'll never hear it again. *And*, even if I *had* told him I loved him in return, it would have meant nothing to me. Absolutely nothing!"

The Sword hummed again, and Cerina *definitely* felt like it was laughing at her.

"It's amazing how much more honest people are when they have a heart, isn't it?" it asked, smiling—at least, smiling as much as a sword could smile.

Once Imagined

Maeve Remke

First of all; a welcome. Welcome to the land of imaginary, the unimagined. That's right, close your eyes. See it. Do you see the peppermint walk that practically flows through the sea of grass that glows in the bright pink sun? Do you see the crimson sign that invites you into the land? What does it say? Tell me...Yes, whisper into my pages. I am there, telling you a story. Telling you the things you need to know.

Second of all; You must meet Zero. Do you see him now? He is gliding down the peppermint road, towards us. Look at his fine white collar! When he gets closer you will be able to see that the pattern of his collar is like a pearly white inchworm that cut the fabric as it inched along. Can you see his fine blue shirt? More of a vest, really. If you look hard enough you will be able to see his translucent tail. It shimmers in the sun, like a pearl in the sea.

No, he is not a ghost. That is the third thing. He is no ghost.

Third of all: Zero is not a ghost, he is an Imagined. Almost. He is not quite imagined, and you will not be able to tell if he is imagined, because the way you tell is when the Imaginaries turn translucent, then they are being imagined, then if they disappear, they are claimed. Claimed by a child who needs a friend. But who knows if Zero has one? He was translucent to begin with.

Zero is getting closer now! See his small blue curl of hair? It bounces up and down on his white forehead as he floats closer, just inches from the pathway we stand on. Remember, he is not a ghost. He is Zero. Now see his eyes! They are rimmed in a faint blue, you can see them now. They are only slight indents in his face, but he can see, more like feel. But it is seeing when he is here. And see his smile! A small curve in the middle of his face, just below his eyes. His lips are blue, very very faintly though. Now you see him, you can tell just who he is. Call to him, I assure you that he is kind.

Too late! He has just gone! Did you see it? Did you see him disappear? He was gone with a cloud of wisps and a peep of surprise. Go and touch the blue mist he has left behind! Quickly, or you will lose him! He is one to watch I tell you, he has a big story ahead of him. You have his mist now? Quick, eat it. Or, drink it. Simply wash it over you, but into your mouth. It will give you the power you need to stay with Zero, as he is imagined.

Yes, yes, that was good, very very good, now watch your hands. They are fading, you can see the peppermint road through them, now close your eyes, you can only see the bright color yellow. Bright as daisies, as lemons, now fall through it, into the Upside Down. It will feel like cream that washes over you and feels like... gold. There is no other way to describe this. Gold is falling through the imagined, and into the mind of Zero. Here our story will start.

Make yourself small, it is easier to break into the mind of Zero. Here we are! You see only blackness as deep and dark as the moon with no sun, simply drifting through the galaxy. That is exactly what it feels like too. Zero is closing his eyes, but when he opens them he will be the storyteller, and you will be on earth, and you will be the Imaginer in the imagining, but this is Zero, the Imagined.

A Smile is Worn

Erik Allen

Behind the Mask

A Smile is Worn

My Heart is Whole

Where Love should have been,

And is! Because

this memory of you

and those "damn typewriters"

Do you remember me?

you do, even when I'm

behind the mask

My Small Bean,

Who isn't so small anymore

Somali Bantu

Nimaa Osman

We are born in the same place.
We speak the same language.
I wear a Bati as you do.
I eat Baris eyo Heleep just like you.
My Dad was born on this soil.
My grandpa grew those trees.
Your Grandpa built that house.
Your father owns that store.
So where is it? Where is the difference?
I don't see it, I don't hear it. But I sure do feel it.
Why is this your land and not mine?
Why are we enslaved by our own country.
The place we call home is where we feel the most hate.
We are discriminated by the ones who could identify with us the most.
Mistreated and beaten for our genetic makeup.
Our blood is the same color so you said our skin is different
Our skin is the same color so you said our face is different.
My face is shaped like yours so what is different now?
Different isn't the problem.
Different isn't what's killing my people.

Summer

Alyssa Nielsen

Rocks along the bank,
Ones to throw and make wishes,
River flowing near,
Curvy, winding road next door.
There with a friend, watching stars.

The Written Word

Erik Allen

O, how strange things lead to strange universes,
The written word conveys such meanings and
How easily our soul is attracted
To the thirst of knowledge, 'tis unquenchable
We crave knowledge evermore, absorbing it, as
Flame devours the air we breathe, feverishly, we
Authors pour heart and soul and time into those
Bound pages; that which cause the heart to race
And the soul to glow

Feeling "Purple"

Zoe Madrid

This purple, purple, purple, purple. It doesn't pop! It is only purple, not what I want to be. Purple, not perfect, no sir, only horrible, unlike green.

Spacemadness

Fiona Bowen

Things are quiet here. The sound of my breath carries much farther than I'd like, and even the softest whisper sounds like a shout.

The hard metal floor beneath me is cold against my back, chilling me down to the bone... but I don't move, I try to embrace the silence, become one with this noiseless cavity in the jaws of space.

Time felt different here. There were no clocks, no sun to rise or set. The lights came on as I entered rooms and went off when I left. There was no way of knowing how long I'd been here, how long I would be here.

The ceiling above me was a map of the stars. A reflected mimicry of the stars you could see from earth, a painful reminder of what I'd left behind, what I'd never see again. The only thing I had left of my life there was myself and my thoughts.

The ship rocks slightly and I slide across the floor a few feet.

When I'd volunteered to be one of the first people to step foot on a new planet, I'd thought it would be nothing but adventure. I wasn't supposed to wake up ahead of schedule.

But here I was. Awake. Full of crippling loneliness. Slowly losing my mind.

I force myself to sit up. Then stand. The ship rocks and I don't even try to catch myself as I pitch to the floor. I bet the rattling of the ship was what woke me, jostled some important thing loose and upset my thousand year slumber.

The floor is cold.
My head throbs.

I groan and rise once more, this time I remain standing. I make my way to the door that slides open as I reach it and pass through into the next room, its lights switching on just as the room I exit lights turn off.

I wander. Doors sliding, lights turning on and

then off as I move from room to room, each one as bland and full of complex technology as the next until I find myself in the room where I'd awoke.

It looked like a morgue. Rows upon rows of drawers set into the walls just big enough for a body. I'd climbed out of one of those. It was still open some distance away.

I walk along the leftmost wall, fingers grazing the little doors. Each one had a name on it, a little silver plaque, in alphabetical order like we were books in a library rather than people. I pause, pressing one of the plaques. It sinks in and a holographic screen appears, with a photo and information on the person inside.

JACOB BARNES. MILITARY PILOT. 25.

No one here was useless. Everyone was chosen because they had talents or knowledge that was deemed useful. I'd wandered this room a few times, there was an unnerving amount of military personnel.

I press the plaque again, not bothering to read the rest of his file. The hologram flickers and vanishes. And I walk on.

My application had been accepted given my background as a botanist. I guess they figured

I'd be helpful in determining if anything that grew on this new planet was edible. Though how could we be sure the plant life would be anything like what I knew of? Maybe it went by different rules, maybe none of it was edible. Not to people at least.

I sigh, my fingers absentmindedly scrabbling for pockets on the skintight reflective suit I wore, its colors shifting from blue to purple to green in the light.

I find myself standing before my open tomb, waiting, dark and cold and smelling faintly of disinfectant despite the years. I just stand before it, staring at my name plaque like it might bring an answer as to why me, of all people, had been so unlucky.

ANNIE MOORE. BOTANICAL SCIENTIST. 27.

I press the plaque almost too quickly for me to read the hologram it brings up. Like it'll give me an idea, a reason, a purpose.

I know my purpose. Generally. I used to anyhow. But here, trapped in space... I wasn't sure I even knew who I was anymore.

As dramatic as it sounds.

But you can be as dramatic as you want in the middle of space.

Feeling resigned, I clamber onto the morgue-like shelf and roll myself into the wall, hearing the satisfying click as the magnets found each other and sealed the door shut. I breathe quietly, hoping that if I can convince myself I've died, or gone comatose I can return to my previous state of mindlessness and wake up in a couple hundred years like I'm supposed to.

I don't. Nothing in the darkness comes to life to put me out. I simply lay on cold metal and feel the ship rock.

And rock.

And rock.

I can feel my chest tighten and my throat starts to hurt. I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, balling up my fists and trying to ignore the hot tears spilling down my cheeks.

This really was it.

All those movies and books on space travel where some poor sap wakes up unexpectedly... that was me now.

And there was no going back, no escape, no one to rescue me, no one to keep me company unless the ship malfunctions again and wakes someone else up. All the machinery here was tamper-proof, so no 'passengers'ing

myself out of this one.

But no tampering meant no way to figure out what went wrong, no way to go back into cryosleep. No chance at second chances.

I roll back out of the wall and tumble off the morgue slab to lay on the cold metal of the floor instead.

Better get used to being lonely.

Left

Erik Allen

Snores resound through this empty house through which we walk. Watch your step: that's a pair of dentures on the floor. Pictures, old and gray, lay on the mantel. They all picture the same smiling couple, two women. One has them surrounded by laughing, playing children, and look, another another shows the beautiful couple sleeping in each other's arms. Here, let's dust this one off. This photograph has a little girl with her parents, the couple, and it's labeled First Day of School with a faded date written as well. Ah, let's ascend the magnificent steps where a stair elevator rests at the top. More pictures line the walls, each one newer than the last. All are laden with the dust of years. Ah, here we are, the bedroom of our dear hostess. Hark, she speaks whilst asleep, of her beloved partner. She cries out in mourning, "Don't leave me, please don't go!" The radio at her bedside plays sorrowful Elvis.

Where Love, Really, Shouldn't Have Been

Jake Stevenson

Do you remember me?

Of course you do!

Sitting there at your desk, on that darn
typewriter.

Where love should have been? No! Where love
shouldn't have been.

Working in a small bean, rundown office.

Behind that mask of professionalism,
Where love shouldn't have been.

This memory of you, this memory of us,
Where love shouldn't have been.

Monday's Muffins

Jim Blakesley

Jumping over the Austrian pine
In the front yard
On his way to school
He greets his friends
High 5s all around
By the church
Spring in his step and
In the air
Giving each one
Boys and girls —
21 kids on the street —
A pumpkin muffin
Every Monday
It was a thing his Mom did,
It's a gift she shared,
That's how she raises boys.

All the way
Up the road to school
Even the last steep run
The *Kid* practiced his dribble
Sometimes with both hands and
Most days
Without a ball
Memories of flour always on the floor

Confident, adored
It's a gift she shared,
That's how she raises boys.

In the Water

Erik Allen

Disembodied eyeballs, floating in the water
Look me in the eyes, dare you not look away
Beware if you get close, I will not falter

Hold my breath, this life or death matter
However long I must, I will stay
My eyelids will not flutter

Bubbles race toward the surface
Yearning for the sky
Lungs tighten and clench

Vision rings red then black
Mine eyes do not waver
You falter and fade away

Illusions of my sanity

Lior Braves a Hurricane

Emma Kerkman



Floating Angel

Fiona Bowen



Untitled

Logan Rusho



Dancing Immortals

Fiona Bowen



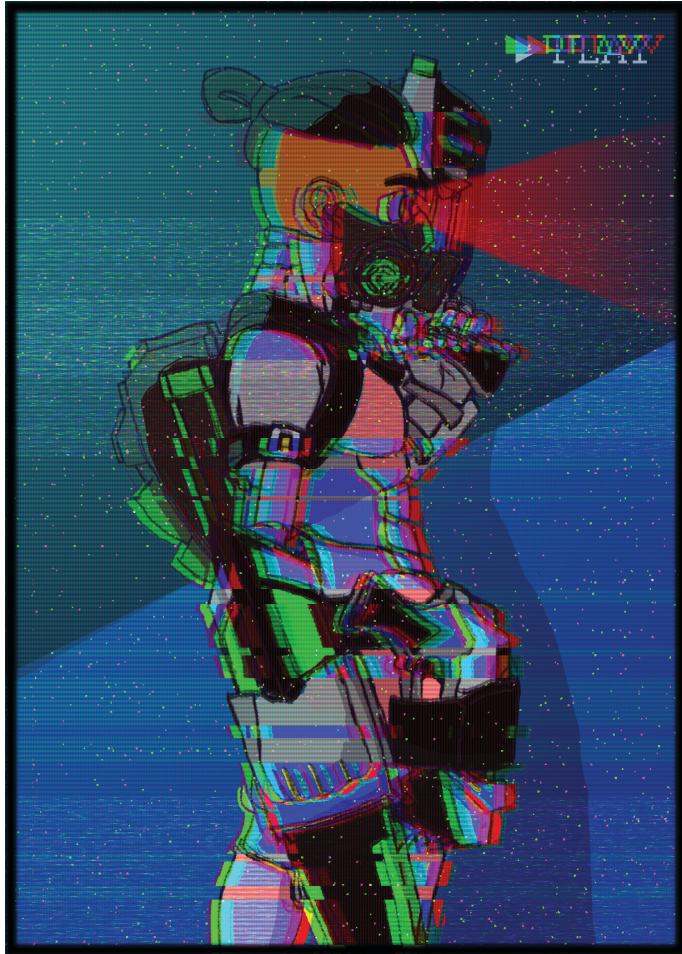
Rainbow Glamor

Fiona Bowen



HER

Emma Kerkman



Mushroom Tea

Fiona Bowen



Begrudging Snowday

Fiona Bowen

Modern Elixir 70



I'm Married Now

Jo Hogan

I'm married now
Three words, no context, no understanding
On repeat, it screams over and over:

I'm married now.
I'm married now.
I'm married now.

I'm married now
It's not screamed this time
Instead it's whispered quietly
As if somehow I am supposed to understand what's going on

I'm married now
I can see her this time
Her auburn red hair in loose curls down her back
Her sapphire blue eyes gathering tears in the corners

I'm married now
She says it slowly
With each word articulated into a forceful stab
The knife jabs, twists, and retreats
Poised ready for the next word
Each time it's more painful
More honest

I'm married now
It was her heart breaking when she said it
Bleeding and open for anyone walking by to see
But I can't figure out this twist
She is supposed to be happy; I know this
I mean, I really know this
Yet, when I look at her I can see she's not

I'm married now
When she whispers it this time
I see her pull her bottom lip slowly between her teeth
The tears glisten in her blue eyes
Shifting uncomfortably to the other foot before making eye contact
It's not her marriage she's upset about; it's you
I'm married now
This time she tells you; not me
And I'm angry because you broke her heart
You've hurt her; I know it

I'm married now
She fiddles with the ring on her left hand
Pulls her bottom lip between her teeth
Tears glisten in her blue eyes
She shifts uncomfortably
But this time
The knife jabs, it twists, and retreats from your heart

I'm married now
This time it's your heart broken and bleeding
I've seen that look before
I've seen that face contorted in agony
And now I understand

I'm married now
I whisper while fiddling with my wedding ring
Shifting uncomfortably while tears silently streak down my cheeks

I'm married now
I tell you
My first love, my first kiss
My first heartbreak

I'm married now
But it was never to you

Truth Part I

Alyssa Nielsen

Truth.

What is it?

Where can I find it?

It doesn't seem tangible,

Not even existent.

I'm lost, confused

And I don't know where to find relief.

But truth exists.

And I will find it.

With time and patience,

I will find it somewhere.

I will not stop searching,

Not until I find it.

Truth Part II

Alyssa Nielsen

I have found the truth.
I have found the relief I sought,
What brings me true joy,
What I call home.
The truth is not lonely or harsh,
Truth is like being embraced by the sun.
It gives me peace and comfort,
Support through unconditional love,
Even when I feel alone.
Now I know that I am loved,
by God and others,
And that is my truth.

The Story of a Girl Who Had Too Many Ears

Kate Dastrup

A girl went to Claire's to go and get her ears pierced. Only problem was that she had a bunch of ears, making people scream and run away. The lady who worked there called security and they came to take her away.

They threw her into the sewers, saying "this is where you belong!" Since then, she's lived down in the sewers, not letting anyone see her. She then became the creature in the sewers.

Years pass by and she's roaming the sewers when something hits her head. She grabs the thing and sees purple hippo earrings. She smiles up at the light where it came from.

She tried to get her ears pierced again, and this time they let her. Now she has purple hippo earrings on only two of her ears.

Wilton & Casper

Kate Dastrup

Wilton walked the halls of Oakwood High keeping his head down low so no bullies can see him. Though his pearly white hair gave him away like always, and the bullies know exactly who he was. Wilton started shaking, scared of what they might do to him. It was only last week when they gave him the black eye and the large bruise on his lower back from the kicks, and the punches, and the slaps. Yeah, he was pretty scared.

"Hey nerd, " one spat. One that used to be his friend in fact.

"Y-yeah?" Wilton stuttered.

"Look," he's afraid of us." He teased. Tears started speckling in Wilton's eyes.

"Yeah, and he has every right to.

"Look, Wilton, I'm really sorry we treated," someone said. Wilton looked up to see a new face. "What?" Wilton said to himself.

"You don't have to forgive us. We don't deserve

it. But, I'm gonna stop and if they ever try to hurt you again, I'll help you," he said, then walked away. Leaving his friends in shock.

"Hey! Get back here Casper!" the leader shouted. But the boy, Casper, just kept walking and flipped them off from behind. Wilton turned back to the group only to see that most of them had started to leave too, leaving only the leader and two others. They looked too shocked and mad to do anything.

Wilton realized his good fortune quickly and started to scramble away from the group, but this time with no injuries and a huge smile on his face.

Statue Garden in Winter

Erik Allen

Brushing white softness

Swish swoosh whoosh whoomph crunch, whisper

The whisper of cloth

Brushing, whispering, sweeping

Swish swoosh whoosh whoomph crunch whisper

This Memory of You.

Alyssa Nielsen

It was a rainy day, just after winter. It had already brought me hope, but then this happened. We were both walking by ourselves, enjoying our own company and just taking some time to feel, observe. Everyone had left the exhibit and it was only us feeling the rivets of the plane that hung over our heads. I asked "Have you seen the Soviet plane up at the top?"

"No."

"Let's go up, it's really cool."

We went up the stairs, feeling how flush those rivets were as we climbed. It was cool that someone else paid attention to those details because the details always excited me but no one really understood why. We slowly made our way up to the Soviet plane and you reached out, brushing the wing of the plane. I went to reach out to the wing, but I was scared that if I did, the plane would crash to the floor. But slowly, I reached out and quickly touched the wing.

Then we stood there for a few seconds or minutes in silence. It was the most comfortable I felt in years. I hadn't felt that relaxed in so long, I almost didn't know what to do with it.

After that, we went back down and joined the rest of the group. But, I still felt calm. It was because in that silence I found that I could trust you, in talks and silence. I discovered that I could trust myself that not everything would come crashing down, that not everything had to be a mess.

Tuesdays, Always

Logan Rusho

Modern Elixir 80

It was Tuesday, of course. It was always Tuesday. 7:23 on a Tuesday morning, light cloud cover. A constant breeze, stirring old fabric in predetermined patterns. It felt like it had never been anything but Tuesday, this Tuesday, every day. People went about their business, not seeming to notice the repetition. They smiled at all the same people, followed invisible trails set ages ago, and it was *infuriating*.

Árni wondered if the other people, trapped in their routine, ever noticed it was still Tuesday. He fought off the pull to repeat his motions, to finish the book he finished ages ago, the fifteen pages burned into his memory. To walk the footsteps that must have been branded into the ground, following the exact motions he made the very First Tuesday. His muscles ached and screamed every time he stepped off of his chosen path, sliding a different book off his shelf with difficulty, skipping a separate way to his same destination.

It was different, going outside on Tuesday.

He had a harder time moving out of his easy, trapped plane—it was like trying to fight through molasses, thick and sluggish. Árni didn't battle as much, outside, after the first few times. Other people, the poor folk who didn't see the constant repetition, would round on him. They could feel something wrong, wrong with how he moved—they turned, a blind anger fuelled by something they didn't quite understand, lashing out on the man. It was odd, really, that they could flicker out of their invisible prisons to attack him, but Árni had a feeling they didn't know it was happening. Their eyes were blank, even as they snarled and clawed at Árni's dark skin. He stilled, his feet paused above a path he knew far too well. The people around him turned, emotion draining out of their face and returning to what they were before.

It was always Tuesday. Until it wasn't.

Árni rolled over with a sigh, absently scrubbing at his face. He noted absently that there wasn't a weight to his actions, and

they didn't feel like they rippled through his memories. He froze, the sound of rain pounding on his window—a sound he hadn't heard in god knows how long—dragging him out of his sleepy haze. He scrambled across his bed, clutching at his alarm clock eagerly. The red numbers blinked back at him pleasantly.

12:42 PM, Wednesday, October Third.

It was Wednesday. It was Wednesday.

Árni ran a hand through his hair, messed in bed head—he hadn't had proper bed head in what may have been years, hysterical laughter choking him.

It was Wednesday. He had complete freedom, finally—and he had no idea what to do with it.

He tugged sharply at his hair, eyes twitching back and forth. It was wrong, something was wrong, it couldn't be Wednesday, it just couldn't. There had to be some catch, he muttered to himself. There had to be something. Some reason he was released from his cruel prison, why he was allowed to live life again. Paranoia tugged at the back of his mind, dragging him deeper into darkness.

It couldn't be Wednesday, it had to still be Tuesday—

Árni tore out of his apartment, pyjama pants tangling around his legs and nearly tripping him.

He grabbed the nearest pedestrian by the shoulders—a man he had never seen before.

"What day is it?" He asked urgently, eyes wide and flickering across the man's face rapidly.

The man tried to pull away, looking nervous in Árni's grasp.

"It's Wednesday, but I don't see—" The man said hesitantly. Árni barked a laugh. "It's—it's really Wednesday, huh?" He said quietly, stumbling backward. The man straightened his suit jacket and walked off quickly, glancing over his shoulder occasionally. Árni giggled to himself, sinking to his knees on the grubby sidewalk.

Who knows what to do with a Wednesday, these days. Only Tuesdays.

They Just Don't Know

Kate Dastrup

Daren strolled down the hall with such pride, a new girlfriend under his muscled arm.

"Move out of my way freak," he shoved the younger mate into his locker.

Everyone in the hall moved away from him and his girlfriend of the week. Well, everyone but one.

This specific kid was fed up with the way he was treating all his peers.

"Hey! Move!" Daren yelled like he was an alpha lion, but the kid didn't budge. "I'm warning you," he hollered again. He tried to shove the kid out of the way but he still didn't budge. Daren pulled up his fist to fight, but as he swung, the boy turned and grabbed his arm.

"You really are a asshole," the kid whispered in Daren's ear. He felt badly when he used a word his Grandma didn't like. Daren shuddered in fear as he pulled out a very sharp sword.

Daren shrieked in pain as the sword came down on his arm, slicing it to the size of a Cornotaurus¹. Everyone in the hallway gasped, some screaming for help or nearby teachers.

The boy, whose name was Kyle, snatched his other arm from around the girl and did the same to that one.

Daren was on the floor screaming in agony. Blood surrounded him. Teachers saw the scene and gasped, soon quickly grabbing Kyle and storming out of the school. One of the teachers called the police and an ambulance to come to the school as quickly as possible.

The police grabbed Kyle and moved him to the back of their car while the doctors got Daren to the hospital.

Kyle went to court, and was obviously guilty, and spent five years in prison.

¹ Cornotaurus is a South American dinosaur with tiny arms..

A Gynormous Hug

Zoe Madrid

She made her decision and left for 2 years, always thinking of Milo. When she earned the knowledge and trust of a teacher ... she had a favor to ask. To come and teach her down below, to see Milo again, to be with him; to tell him she was sorry and missed him every day. The teacher agreed. She saw Milo, gave him a GYNORMOUS hug and told him she would never leave him again.

Strays

Maeve Remke

Modern Elixir 84

"We don't have much of a choice, Bruce." He says roughly, his voice like distant thunder. He reaches out to lash at a large Rottweiler in front of him. The dog takes the blow without flinching.

"It's been 5 years. I'm surprised he hasn't attracted more attention." The dog dips his head and growls at the floor. The man rubs his forehead. "I know, Bruce. I know. But after 5 years, we have to do whatever it takes." The dog paws at the ground, then turns around and paws softly out of the room. The man falls into a steel chair behind him.

"Times up, Thomas." A woman's voice slides into the room. Her nimble hands lock a pair of handcuffs onto the man's wrist. She steps under the flickering light overhead and stares down at the man. "I have a question for you, Thomas." She whispers, as if worried someone will hear.

"You could choose to talk with anyone." She glanced nervously over her shoulder before

continuing. "Why would you choose that dog?" The man looks at her steadily in the eyes.

"I have more faith in the dog than I do in any other human." The man says loudly, as if daring for someone to retort. The woman doesn't respond, then she curls her hand into a fist and waps the man in the side of his head. The man slumps forward.

"That's why you're here, Thomas." She whispers sadly before reaching up and pulling the chain on the light. Darkness falls through the room. Empty silence thickens the air, lasting only a second before being sliced cleanly with a horrifying scream, quickly silenced.

You, me and the endless nothing

Fiona Bowen

You and I are perched on the edge of the nothing. Looking out over the complete and ever-expanding... nothingness. As far as the eye can see and beyond.

I am a being of logic and reason. You are a creature of fantasy and imagination. The nothingness hums.

You, keeping your eyes on the humming nothing, lean over to whisper "what if... there wasn't nothing?" There's an odd glint to your eyes, as though an idea is beginning to form, "imagine if there were... something."

"Something? Out of the nothing?" I scoff, "don't be silly. There has to be something for other somethings to come from. Nothing is only that. Nothing."

"Don't be glum." You say with a wild grin, dropping a hand to my shoulder and pointing out into the nothing, "watch."

I roll my eyes, removing your hand, but nonetheless, I gaze out after your pointed finger. I feel it before I see it.

An odd warmth creeping across my skin, moving like something with many small legs. Something.

And then a glowing, dim at first and hard to place but growing fast— growing and glowing until an explosion of heat washes over us and innumerable tiny flecks of light dance about us.

A steaming mug is cupped in your hands and your legs are swinging ever so carelessly out over the bothersome nothing and your eyes are shining with excitement and with the reflections of the tiny pinprick... stars.

I shiver, suddenly noticing the warm mug in my hands. A something I could've sworn neither you nor I held before you made your outrageous claims of something's that somehow became true.

"Isn't it beautiful?" You say it reverently, gaze fixed upward.

"That's one word for it," I shrug, "one might also say shocking or improbable or—"

I narrow my eyes at a particularly bright star, “—blinding.”

You simply wave a dismissive hand and clink our coffee mugs together friendly like. “You like knowledge. Surety. Tangibility.”

I’m not sure where you’re going with this. I’ve spilled a few drops of coffee onto myself and it seems to have stained... whatever any of that means.

“So,” you continue excitedly, “what if I were to tell you that there’s more.” “More?” I rub my thumb over the stain, “more what?”

“More something!” You laugh, tone hinting at its obviousness, “look at what there is now, things where before there wasn’t! And there’s more to come.”

Despite the definitive somethings, I still feel that this is some quirk, some oddity soon to be mended... returned to the nothing.

“What sort of somethings?” I allow myself to ask, setting my mug on a table that hadn’t been there before.

“So many. Too many to name.” You rise from a chair that hadn’t existed until you left it, you

take a step and your bare feet sink into lush green grass, “this is only the beginning... such infinite nothing held so much potential, and now is the time that potential is realized.”

The sound of waves hitting the shore reaches my ears, and though things like the sea and sand and sound are impossibly new I somehow know what they all are.

“Reality is just the beginning.” You beckon me to follow, so I do. The warmth of sun-soaked earth calms me with each step.

“Why?” I ask, “for what purpose? What does anything of this really do?”

“What does it do?” You chuckle, fingertips brushing tree bark as you step over protruding roots, “everything. It does everything. It’s reason and motive and method and purpose.

It’s beginning and ending, it’s the start of creation eternal.

It’s the start of life and love and incredibly intricate details so small and perfect and powerful you could never hope to understand them all.”

I furrow my brows, feeling the slight beginnings of a headache. All of these colors and sounds... so new and strange were making my head spin.

Seeming to sense my turmoil, you give my arm a cheery pat, "Don't think on it too hard, it will only get more confusing... As is the way of life."

"Life?" I rub at my forehead, "you have such fancy ideas."

"As is the way of life." You repeat. You stoop, bending gracefully to touch the vibrant grass, growing greener and taller with each breath.

My toes curl against the grass, and as I notice the wildflowers scattered across the green, tiny purple and blue heads peering up from the ground, I almost feel a flash of relief—there is finally a peace that never existed in the nothing. A strange sense of rightness washes over me and as fast as it appears I push it away.

You pluck one of the wildflowers and tuck it into my hair with a laugh, "You can feel it too now. Something is better than nothing."

"You can't compare nothing to anything." I

murmur, but the conviction I once felt is fading. And once again it feels like relief.

You simply shake your head, seeing straight through me as you tuck a second flower into my hair. Taking the ever-expanding something in perfect stride you skip off down a worn dirt path, leading into a wood that grew larger with each step you took into it.

The sense of rightness grabs me by the ankles, pulling me after you.

The air smells like pine sap and honey, thick moss covers tree trunks and toadstools peep from every nook and cranny.

Where was this going? There seemed no end to the something, and somehow it was more daunting than the thought of treading into the nothing... Which I wasn't so sure existed anymore.

"What about the nothing?" I say, voicing my thoughts.

"The nothing is gone; and if it isn't yet it will be," You confirm, eyes fixed on a startlingly blue butterfly, "and for the better. I was beginning to wonder how much longer I could stand it."

How much time had been wasted by the nothing? I couldn't be sure, given how I wasn't aware of time until now. But something told me it was too long.

"What do we do now?"

"Anything. Everything. All of it." You are admiring a ladybug climbing up your arm, "until the next phase."

"Next phase? How much more is there?" A bird calls out somewhere far above our heads, the distant sound of water is growing closer the farther we meander into the wood.

"Much, much more." Leaves and twigs crunch underfoot, for a moment a cloud passes over the sun, things grow dark and a faint chill runs through me, "this world will not always be so beautiful... One day it will return to nothing, but before it is nothing it will become burnt and deformed, a ruined shadow of its current self."

"Why?"

"It is the way of life... To take. To create. There must always be balance." There's a sadness in your voice, a sadness that leaves a bitter taste in the air, "the creatures destined to walk this

world will not understand that balance until far too late."

The rightness reaches into my chest and pulls me toward the babbling stream. You follow. Both of us walk quietly, soaking up your words. Something tells me that what you said wasn't truly yours, only yours to say.

Something tells me that neither of us are quite us anymore.

The stream whispers at our feet, reflecting our faces and shuddering as I take a seat on the riverbank to dip my toes in the water. Our images flicker in and out of realism and abstract.

"I suppose everything must end at one point or another." I muster a hint of my inner cynic. "Life and death do go hand and hand after all!"

"Mm." You take a seat beside me, placing your hand, palm up on my knee. I take it.

"I hope that wasn't an attempt at a joke. For it was terrible." You raise an eyebrow, smiling.

"Ha." I shake my head, smiling down at the flowing waters that brush our toes, carrying along tiny silver fish and millions of colored pebbles.

"You are just as much a part of this as I." You lift your eyes upward, watching the birds that flitted overhead, "but I suppose you've caught on to that by now."

I sigh, fish tickling my ankles as the water level gradually rises, "I think I'd much prefer existing here than... keeping things on track."

"You said it yourself, everything ends sometime." You lift a hand and a small red songbird alights on your extended finger, "besides, it's far too late to back out now. We are right in the thick of it."

Around us, the forest hums with life. Lush and green and full of heartbeats. "When?"

The bird leaves your hand, fluttering toward me to land on my shoulder. I wince as the bird's vibrant red feathers fade to a dull grey.

"Sooner rather than later." You release my hand, your own palm nearly as grey as the bird you sweep from my shoulder.

In your gentle hold the bird shivers, slowly, far slower than it had turned grey, it returns to its original red. And as it flaps into the air I can see your hand is back to a rich and earthy red-brown.

You rise, brushing small forest debris from your legs, offering your hands to me, to help me stand.

I shake my head, getting to my feet alone as you drop your arms to your sides.

"Sooner rather than later," I repeat your words to your rather dispirited face. You nod, expression set.

For a moment we are still, time and life sweeping past us as we regard each other, too many questions and too few words.

Are we still possible?

"Watch the sunset with me." I say, "just once before it truly begins."

"I'd watch a billion sunsets with you... If I could." You whisper, swaying back and forth a moment, "though I suppose one can't hurt."

Once again, you extend your hand, and this time I take it. One sunset couldn't hurt.

And together, picking our way out of the trees and their growing shadows, we reach an edge, a very small bit of nothing that dissolves into a true edge, rocky and craggy and bursting with stunted sideways trees and their roots.

A sharp cliff face, leading down to a sandy beach, lapping waves flowing in and out, reflecting gold in a shimmering thread to the low hanging sun, so far and yet so warm.

We close our eyes, soaking in the feeling of the first sunset as the first day comes to a close.

"So long I suppose." You murmur into my hair.

I grasp your other hand, meeting your eyes and nodding at the sun, "Just wait a moment."

So you do.

And we stand together as the sun sets, taking its life and warmth with it as the moon takes its place in the sky, illuminating the pines behind and the ocean below in a wash of silver.

So it ends.

And so it begins.

The Lab Story

Maeve Remke

I wake up gasping. The cold morning dew stains my skin and I quickly sit up. I grab the sleeping bag that is thrown to the side of me, a sure sign that I have been having nightmares again. And again, I cannot remember a single thing that took place in my sleep. As I stuff my sleeping bag into my torn backpack, I see something on the palm of my hand. Curiously, I look at it closer. It looks like someone has burned a symbol into my skin. It looks like, an eagle, kind of. But the eagle has wings of, wind? I shrug and continue packing up my stuff. When you sleep on the streets, you wake up to strange things every morning. I wouldn't have been surprised if I had woken up tied to a tree, completely naked, and surrounded by police officers. Which happened once. I wasn't surprised, just scared of the cops and embarrassed for my exposure. When they got me down, I ran. If they had caught me, I would have been put up for adoption. Not good.

I finish packing up and cast a wary glance around the park to make sure that I am not

being followed by any officers. Nobody but Taj is there, and Taj is still sleeping. Taj is the homeless who shared my spot last night. We had a nice meal that he picked up at the homeless shelter before booking it from the spot. The homeless shelter was never a place to stay. Especially for 13-year-old me.

I swing my backpack over my shoulders and am about to take off when my hand suddenly erupts in pain. A burning kind of pain. I gasp at the sudden explosion from my hand and immediately bring it down into the dew, which eases the pain a little bit. But not a lot.

"Evo, you burn yourself? You got any matches? I knew you did! Little liar. You have matches!" Taj is suddenly sitting up in his bed and laughing at me, apparently still trying to cheat me of my matches. I groan in response. Taj laughs again.

"No, Taj. No matches. And even if I had them, you wouldn't get any." Taj shrugs and throws a cigarette butt at me. "And I didn't burn myself.

Somebody else did." I sigh and try to take my hand from the cool grass, but the pain is so immediate that I fall back to the floor in a heap. Taj laughs again, which turns into a cough. I wait until he collects himself before I sit back up, hand sitting pitifully in the grass.

"Well kid, bring it here. I know a thing or two about burns." Taj wheezes with a wink. I trudge over to him, dragging my hand in the grass. Taj laughs, but stops short. Not wanting to risk another coughing storm I guess. When I reach him, Taj grabs my hand and pulls it close to his face. I almost scream and the searing pain.

"This is a fresh burn. Probably why it's hurting you a lot." Taj observes, throwing my hand away. I almost scream at him that I don't care about why it is hurting, just how to stop it but I hold my tongue as Taj obliviously continues.

"It looks like an eagle, but with weird wings." I'm a slightly relieved that he can see the eagle too.

"I think it has wings of wind." I say, trying to laugh but finding myself stop short when I see Taj. "Taj, you alright?" Taj's face has drained of all color and he is sitting stock still. "Taj?" At first I think he's having a heart attack, but then he speaks.

"Run." I almost can't hear him at first, his voice is so raspy and small. But then he says it again. "Run, Evo. Run! Before they catch you! Run!" I stumble back a few steps, scared beyond reason.

"Why? Taj! Why?!" Taj grabs my hand from the ground and turns it so that I am looking at the burn mark on my palm.

"Because of this, Evo! This!" I shake off Taj's grip and try to jam my hand back into the grass before the pain hits, but Taj grabs my wrist again and shoves me away. "Just go!" I stumble back, but am too scared to go any farther. Taj pulls his other hand from the sleeping bag and pulls a black glove off of it. He turns his hand around to show me a burn mark of a sleeping cat with antlers instead of ears. Then he closes his eyes and begins to murmur something.

I am sure that he has finally lost his marbles and I look up, hardly noticing the pain in my hand as I call for help. But nobody is in the park this early. Except for...

A second after I call, three police officers appear in the distance, sprinting towards Taj and I. I can see Taj scowl but he continues murmuring. I stare at the police officers a

moment. They look like they are wearing white suits, but maybe it is just the fog of the morning messing with my gaze. I kneel down and grab Taj by the wrist.

"Taj, we have to go." Taj doesn't respond. He continues chanting his meaningless words. I turn his wrist around to look at the burn mark on his palm. Not new like mine, but still visible. And the cat isn't laying down anymore, it's standing up. Was it even laying down before? I can't remember. I shake Taj's arm, and when I get no response I slam it into the ground. Taj howls. Only, it sounds more like his hand howls. Maybe, the cat? No. I don't even notice that Taj has stopped chanting until the police footsteps are clearly heard. Taj grabs my hand, and I suddenly feel something.

I hear the hum of butterfly wings and the buzz of hurrying honey bees, I see the curling petals of flowers dripping in morning dew. I can smell the moss and peaceful age of a forest, I can taste rich meat and crisp lettuce, taking part in the circle of life. I feel the silky fur of a green cat beneath my hand, then I am back in the real world. The police are practically on us, their white suits flapping the wind of their speed. Taj's eyes are wet with tears. "Run." He whispers. I hesitate for only a moment before I take off.

I am not God

Fiona Bowen

I am not God

But there are nights when I feel I have to be

There are nights when the wrongness in my chest makes it impossible to breathe

And days when the screaming stretches endlessly

And that is when I feel that though I am not God... I must be

I must be greater than myself to put back my own soul

To snatch my mind from the clammy hands and dripping maw that will not hesitate to consume
me should

I get too close

I must pull strength from the black and for a moment I must be God

Because if I were to stay mortal in those moments...

I might not survive

The Talent Show

Kate Dastrup

"The talent show! It's today! Maybe I'll win this year! Oliver jumped out of bed running like a cheetah down the stairs and through the house.

"Morning, morning, morning Papa," he exclaimed as he grabbed his toast.

"Bye," he shouted and was about to walk out the door when his mother called him back in.

"Oliver you forgot to get dressed," she said and hurried him up the stairs.

"Oh! Right! Thank you Momma," he said and quickly got dressed in his favorite yellow shirt, and bleach pants. He grabbed his back pack and put on his black sneakers, and ran outside.

See, the thing with Oliver is that he becomes forgetful when he gets excited.

He ran to school and he ran to his friends.

"Guys! Can you believe it's talent show day?!" he exclaimed and clutched Kim's shoulders.

"Yes we do. You tell us all the time!" signed Kim.

"But still. Think I'm gonna win this year?! Last year, Kai won and this year, it's gonna be me!" he exclaimed with excitement evident in his voice.

They all laughed at him but in a friendly way. He shyly smiled at them. The bell rang soon after, signaling them all to go in.

Oliver ran to class something he always did. His short brown hair flowing behind from how fast he was going. He ran to his A1 class which was History. He was also excited because A1 is when the talent show starts.

He sat at his desk, and waited for class to start. Once it did he could not concentrate on what was going on.

And of course, she passed out a test and being the strict teacher she was, she said that if you don't finish before the talent show, you don't get to go.

Oliver knew he was gonna get this test done, since he gets it done early every time because he knows everything. But, as he looks at it, he realizes he doesn't know this one, because he wasn't paying any attention to her earlier.

He panicked. He really wanted to go to the talent show, but he couldn't go if his test wasn't done. He tried to think but couldn't.

Moments passed, and the lady over the intercom said the announcements . . .

[Ending #1]

"I used the pictures you sent me and said they were yours but you couldn't come so I was showing them to the judges . . . and you WON," Kim signed and looked away.

Oliver smiled from ear to ear. "Kim, you did that for me? Thank you Kim." Oliver grabbed Kim and jumped and spun with him. "Thank you."

[Ending #2]

Oliver sadly walked out of the class. He saw Kim signing with some kid with the medal. Oliver signed as he walked over.

"What'd I miss," Oliver sadly said.

"Nothing really," Kim signed. Kim went back to talk to the guy.

"Hey good photos, Oliver!"

"Yeah, they were amazing!"

"Whaaaaa," Oliver was confused.

"You may not have won but I did show your photos and people really liked them. You were one point off . . ." Kim rubbed his neck.

"Well, there's always next year. Thanks."

Kim smiled, and Oliver hugged him.

My Car

Nimaa Osman

Home is in my car. My car is where I spend most of my time, driving back and forth across the city. In my car is where I celebrate my victories. After having an interview for a new job then being told I got the job, I celebrate in my car. While driving home with the good news, I blast loud music down the roads. I pull my windows down to let the fresh air hit my face. I want others to join my joy so I dance and play the drums on the steering wheel. From time to time I play a really catchy tune that makes the other drivers dance, too.

My car is where I make big decisions. After driving back from a long stressful meeting about my performance at work, I think to myself "why don't they see how much I'm doing for them? I am really underappreciated here." I think to myself, "I really don't have to be doing this. I did just get a new job offer that I could take." I measure the pros and cons. "The new job does pay me more, but the other job gives me more hours."

In my car I come up with the best ideas. Have you ever pulled up to a gas station and realize how much of a hassle it is to pump your own gas? There have been many times where my gas was running low and I didn't have time to spare to go inside and pay for my gas, or to then come out and pump my gas and wait until it's done. I came up with the idea to have gas station helpers. You pull up to a pump and hand them your money and they go pay for the gas. Then they will put the gas in for you. You never have to leave your seat!

On rainy days, I love watching the rain fall and listening to sad music. I keep an extra coat in my car just in case it gets chilly. Driving slowly in my neighborhood as I approach my house, I park in the driveway and sit for a while. Taking a moment to just feel it all. Crack the window open just a bit to smell the rain's aroma. Shut my eyes and maybe even take a little nap. In my car is where I am away from everything. My car is my sanctuary.

I take good care of my car. I clean it when it's dirty. I change the oil when needed. I buy decoration to customize it to my preference. If you step into my car you'll know it is mine. My car is like no other car. No other car is like mine, because my car is my home. It's where I spend the most time.

Where Love Should Have Been

Alyssa Nielsen

No pictures on the wall,
A kitchen that reeks of Lysol,
Beds with only sheets,
Starched and unworn clothes,
Emptiness in a home,
Where love should have been.

"You are impossible to love."

"You are selfish."

The words come from warm mouths,
The Source: cold hearts.
Creating a hole in friends?
Where love should have been.

Names go first,
Then places and memories.
It happens slowly, painfully.
The face of a loved one,
Deteriorated.
Disease left a hole in our family,
Where love should have been.

His footsteps fade away,
Then a door slams behind him.
Tires screeching down the road
Destroys any hope I had for us.

He left,
Tearing a hole through me,
Where his love should have been.

*Thank you to Erik Allen for the line "Where love should have been"

Coffee Mate

Erik Allen

All sorts of shapes, they
Donuts I mean, can be Round
Spherical, Oblong
fried sugar dough to sink teeth
Sprinkles, frosted, filled, munch

Whatever Was Through That Portal

Maeve Remke

My father was too smart for his own good. When I was 3, he created a portal to another dimension. I remember him celebrating his victory as I gazed wonderingly at the glimmering portal. No bigger than a nickel, it held every color in our universe and every universe ever. The colors all streamed together to create a whizzing, magical portal of power. I remember my father saying "Don't you touch that Dottie, don't you dare." I remember how serious he sounded, knowing that he was dealing with something beyond his intelligence and skill. But what was I to do? At 3, seriousness meant nothing in my ears. And to me, power this colorful could be no more dangerous than a box of crayons.

I remember my hand darting out, as if I wanted to grab the portal. My father wasn't fast enough to block my hand, although it couldn't close over the hole in space and time anyways. However, my index finger had slipped through. In the matter of milliseconds, the portal had sputtered, popped, and died. My screams could have been heard from the

next state over, for along with the portal, my finger had disappeared.

I never really thought about what might have happened with my finger. I have always assumed that it was left in the colorful mass of a different universe. But now I wish I had wondered what had happened to the finger, worried a little more, even. Because now, 20 years later, whatever had gotten my finger came back for the rest of me.

On Our Way to Ohio

Zoe Madrid

On our way to Ohio, the wall is blue.
The boys in the back are annoying.

Why was the wall blue? No one knew.
I always liked blue, so nothing was new.

I love Dad and trips but I was tired.
Communication sagged, the wall was blue.

While Dad fixed the wall, a blue bird flew by.
It sang its sweet song and pushed the frustration away.

Zoe Madrid saw the pigeons on the wire
Doing their business, the blue wall.

The Ear Speaks to the Girl Who Had Too Many Ears

Kate Dastrup

My body pounded. How would an ear feel? This was daily. I wasn't sure if I would be able to take the pain anymore. Well, this was just the life of an ear.

My body pounded. I was angry. Couldn't my person see I was in pain? It was a migraine and it was staring at me. The reason was because they went to this stupid party! "Leave!!!" I wanted to shout, but couldn't since I am just an ear. Gah! Stupid loud noises. Stupid person. Stupid everything.

The Pulse

Emma Kerkman

Modern Elixir 104

"How close are we, Ansley?" a male voice asked from somewhere above me, the sound carrying down the hallway to where I crouched under the floor panels.

"Fairly," another male voice replied, the sound closer than it was a few seconds ago. "One more hall forward, down a ladder, and we'll be there."

They must be talking about the vaults, I realized, a mental map of the facility appearing in my mind's eye. But why would they go after the vaults now? Did they not know that the vaults were routinely emptied the second Thursday of every month?

Overhead, the rattle of their boots on the metal paneling suspended over the subfloor drew ever closer, and I hunched down lower in my cramped hiding place. Hopefully, they would walk right past me, and I'd be free to go on my merry way once they rounded the corner. Hopefully, in the wake of the recent explosions, nobody would notice the slim girl

with the burnt face slipping out through the hole in the rear fence.

Hopefully, thanks to those men and their timely distraction, today would be the last day I had to spend on Acryppo 1-A.

I held my breath as the clanging footsteps drew ever closer. *Ten feet, I estimated, screwing my eyes shut. Five feet. Three.*

And then they stopped.

"What's the matter?" the first voice asked, and a shadow fell over me as the tall figure stepped between me and the bare light overhead.

"I dunno," the other one replied, and I heard the sound of someone scratching at a bearded cheek. "The second needle went dead. It's pointing straight down now."

"I thought you said we had to go forward before we went down a level," the first voice replied, scowling.

"That's because I thought we had to. But something changed."

"Well, let me see it."

"You don't know anything about tri-level compasses," the second voice argued. "You're not going to miraculously figure out what's up with it."

"I don't care! Let me see it anyway."

The sound of rustling fabric reached my ears, followed shortly by the clank of a metal chain. I allowed myself to let out a slow breath, then draw in another one.

"Figure anything out?"

"No! Let me think for more than three seconds, then ask me that question," the first voice hissed, sounding near the end of his patience. "This is the down needle here, right?"

"Yes, and?"

"And it's still pointing down. The forward needle must've gone dead because we're standing right over the vault. Keep walking."

I allowed myself another careful exhale as they passed by and let my head fall back against

the cool metal beneath me. The sound of their arguing voices faded down the hallway along with the rattle of boots on metal paneling.

Once I was sure they were gone, I lifted the panel above my head from its setting and crawled out of the narrow space between the paneling and the actual floor. Lowering the panel back into place, I rose as quietly as I could and slowly began making my way down the hall in the opposite direction.

Who were those men? I wondered, peeking around the corner of an adjacent hallway. *Were they the ones responsible for the explosion in the hangar bay earlier?*

If they were, I definitely didn't want to run into them again. Those explosions were fairly heavy duty, uncontrolled and meant to destroy rather than simply disable something specific. People with that kind of reckless abandon could only be one of two things: invaders or pirates. And considering how the operations building was dead silent and almost completely empty at the moment, I could safely assume it was the latter.

As I rounded the next corner, I heard voices.

I jinxed myself, I thought forlornly as a pair

of men turned the corner one section down from me. Thankfully, they were looking down at something in the taller man's hands, so they hadn't noticed me yet. But in the sub-hallways of an asteroid mining operations building, there really isn't anywhere to hide except under the floor. And I didn't have time to pry up a section of paneling and hide beneath it like I did last time.

"Are you sure this thing isn't broken?" the taller man asked the shorter man, looking back at him with a frown. "Now the needle's stopped moving and its pointing straight ahead."

The shorter man looked up, saw me, looked back at his companion, did a double take, and looked back at me.

"Jules, look," he said, elbowing the taller man to get him to look up.

I drew in a sharp breath. I knew that face.

"What do you want here?" I called down the hall to them, silently thankful that my voice didn't waver.

"Gold," the taller one said, flashing me what I assumed was supposed to be a roguish grin.

"This is an iron mining facility," I replied. "You won't find any here."

"I was joking," he laughed, his grin growing wider. He held up the object in his hand—a small golden amulet with three ornate needles pointing directly at the floor—and let it dangle in the air. "This here is a tri-level compass. Like all compasses, it can be programmed to find objects that give off certain frequencies or energy fields."

"I'm not an idiot," I replied. "I know how those work."

The man's smile fell from his lips, and he wound the chain around his hand. "Well, my dear," he sighed, "I was promised this compass would lead me to a weapon hidden in an asteroid mine in the Acryppo Planetary System. But instead... it seems to have led me to *you*."

I dug my nails into my palms to stop my hands from shaking and drew a calming breath. "Then your compass must be broken, like you said."

Next to him, the shorter man shifted his coat off his hips, revealing a thick belt and an ornate cutlass dangling at his side. Definitely

pirates. "You don't seem very afraid of us, darling."

"Why should I be?" I asked. "You haven't done anything yet but waste my time."

The taller man let out a bark of laughter. "You've got spunk, I'll give you that," he said, glancing down at his companion, "but either you've been living under a rock your whole life, or you're just playing stupid, because there's nobody in the galaxy who hasn't heard of us."

And they were right; I *had* heard of them. But, worse, I'd heard of the things they'd done.

I clenched and unclenched my fists as he spoke. *What can I do? How can I get out of here?* They'd shoot me if I ran, but even though I was rusty, I could take them out if I caught them by surprise.

"You got me," I shrugged, sighing. "You're the infamous captain who flies the *Horizon Echo*, Julian Harvick," I said, pointing at the taller one, "and you're—"

"Ansley Gresham, first mate of the *Echo*, at your service," he said, dipping into a comic bow. "Now I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come with us, darlin'!"

"My name is Bishop," I supplied, scowling. "Noble Bishop. Not darlin', not 'dear', Noble."

"Noted," Gresham said, grinning. "Now come on, let's go before things get too interesting."

"Do you mind if I ask why?" I asked as Gresham walked down the hall towards me, preparing to take me by force.

"Because," Captain Harvick said, the dark glimmer in his eye visible from all the way down the hall, "this compass never lies, Miss Bishop, and I have little doubt it's pointing at you for a reason."

"This has to be a mistake," I said for what must've been the umpteenth time as Captain Harvick and Gresham led me out of the mine's operations building and into the hangar bay, the same place I'd heard explosions about an hour earlier. "I'm not a weapon. I'm just a mine worker."

"Well, you might have some untapped... *potential*, shall we say. You never know," Captain Harvick said, tightening his hold on my upper arm ever so slightly, as if he was afraid my potential weapon-ness involved

some sort of super strength. I wasn't about to tell him he was right—he *should* be afraid of me—but I wasn't about to struggle, either. If he wanted to take me aboard his ship and fly us off this horrible rock, I was all for it. My original escape plan got me out of the facility, but not off Acryppo 1-A.

Captain Harvick shot the access panel to the door in front of us with an energy rifle and pulled me through it. "And if I don't?" I asked, glancing down at his hand.

"Then consider my getting you off of this hell-hole a small act of kindness."

As soon as we rounded the corner, the sound of rifles loading reached my ears, and we came face-to-face with a blockade of white-helmeted soldiers staring down the barrels of their energy guns at us. Captain Harvick muttered something that sounded like a curse before releasing my arm and raising his hands above his head in surrender. Gresham followed suit and nudged me to do the same.

"We could've planned this better," Gresham sighed, cracking his neck as the armed soldiers walked slowly towards us.

"Agreed," Harvick muttered. "Do you want me to-?"

"No, no, I've got it. You might want to close your eyes, Miss Bishop."

As soon as he spoke, a piercing whistle tore through the room, followed shortly by a shockingly bright flash of light that nearly blinded me even through my closed eyelids. Opening my eyes once it passed, I saw all of the helmeted soldiers lying on the ground, unmoving. Captain Harvick and Gresham looked completely fine.

"What was that?" I asked, my voice sounding distant and distorted as I winced and wiggled my jaw to reduce the ringing in my ears.

"An extremely concentrated, single-use sonic boom," Gresham replied, pulling up his coat sleeve to reveal a smoking, empty canister launcher strapped to his wrist. "My signature weapon, as I'm sure you know. It's mostly harmless to people like us, but to people like them, well... you don't really want to imagine what kind of damage it can do."

Next to me, Harvick dusted himself off and shook his head. "Always one for theatrics, aren't you, Ansley? Anyway, we should hurry, before they send more."

Taking me by the upper arm again, though this time much gentler, Harvick led the two

of us down the remainder of the damaged hallway and into the hangar bay. The destruction that greeted me was astonishing, but I was given little time to take in the scorch marks stretching wall to ceiling, the handful of shattered hovercycles hanging from their storage units, and the bullet-hole-pocked walls before Harvick pulled me up the gangway to one of the most unusual ships I'd ever seen.

Round-nosed and bulbous, the *Horizon Echo* was a standard sized mid-range battlecruiser with integrated wings, making her look like a large flying arrowhead. A pair of ion boosters protruded from the undersides of her body, and at her rear rested her main engine, a subspace hyperdrive about four times taller than me. She wasn't a light-speed ship, but she was almost as fast as one.

As soon as the three of us climbed up the gangplank to what I could only assume was the spaceship's hold, a short woman standing on the other side of the platform pulled a lever in the side of the ship, and the gangplank folded up into the floor below us.

"I thought we were here for a weapon, not another one of your pet projects, Jules," she said, turning her icy blue eyes on me.

"She's both," Harvick said. "Noble, this is my Aunt, Irene. Irene, please be nice. Otherwise Miss Bishop here might melt your fingers off."

Irene raised an eyebrow. "You can do that?"

"No," I said, fiddling with the hem of my dusty shirt. "I can't. I can't do anything. I'm just a normal human, not whatever you seem to think I am."

Harvick clapped me on the shoulder hard enough to send a cloud of dust into the room and grinned. "The compass never lies. Now, time to get off of this depressingly grey rock, don't you think?"

As much as I tried to resist it, Harvick's grin was infectious. "I've been waiting a long time to say that," I replied, smiling over at him.

"Sorry I stole your line. Irene, can you take her to the infirmary and run a check-up? We wouldn't want any rogue trackers ruining our fun."

"Of course, Captain," she said, leaning back against the wall. "Try to keep her steady getting out of here, eh? Now that you know the right way in, there's no use playing pinball with the *Echo* on the way out."

Harvick saluted her as he walked away, Gresham following close behind.

As soon as they left, I turned to Irene. "You're his Aunt?"

"Maternal, and his mother was a whole two decades older than me," she replied, grinning. "We're more like siblings than anything else."

I glanced in the direction Harvick went before looking back at her. "And just how old is Captain Harvick?"

She shrugged and grinned a smile identical to his. "Ask him yourself, if you really want to know. But I will say this: he's a lot older than he looks."

Considering I'd been putting him in early twenties, I found it difficult to imagine how old he really was.

Irene beckoned for me to follow her as she walked down a different hallway and wound her way through the belly of the ship, leading me up and down so many narrow staircases I felt like I was in a whole new country by the time we reached our destination. "Go ahead and sit down," she said, pushing open the door to the infirmary, gesturing to a grungy cot in one corner of the room. I did as I was

told and watched her pull a strange mirror-like object from one of the cabinets.

"Why did you come for a weapon?" I asked as she wiped the disk down with antiseptic. "I mean, you're pirates, right? You have to have some sort of weaponry already, so what's so special about the thing you came here to find?"

Irene pressed the disk into my arm and stared at it intently, going silent for a few moments as if she was thinking over her reply. Looking up at me, she pushed a few strands of hair from her face and said, "It will help change the tide of the war."

I watched her rub the disk in small circles farther up my arm. "What war?"

"The war that's going on all around you, sweetheart."

"But, there *is* no war. At least, not in the Acryppo Planetary System."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. The war is everywhere, always. It's slowly going to destroy the lives of everyone in the known universe if someone doesn't stop it soon. And that's what we're here to do."

I chewed my lip and watched as she slid the disk to my elbow. "I assume you mean 'we' as in something bigger than the crew of the *Horizon Echo*."

"Good, you're starting to catch on," she said, moving the disc to my biceps. "Yes, I mean something bigger. Much bigger. Aha, found it," she muttered as the disk began to glow yellow. "This might hurt a little."

A painfully cool sensation bloomed across my skin from where the disk was pressed to my arm, and I winced as something moved deep in my flesh. When Irene pulled the disk away from my arm, a small, silver, pill-shaped object was stuck to the other side.

"Was that a tracker?" I asked as she set the disk aside and began bandaging my arm.

"Yeah. Nothing too unusual for an indentured worker like yourself. They chip you when they transfer you."

"I've never been transferred."

"Oh? Then how did you end up on that asteroid?"

"I was born on Acryppo 1-A," I said, pulling up

my sleeve to show her the tattooed numbers on my wrist. "And so were my parents."

Irene leaned back in her chair. "Sorry, kid," she said, looking me over slowly, taking in my threadbare clothes, my military-style haircut, and the burn scars crisscrossing the left side of my body. "I'm real sorry. Jules didn't take you from parents who are going to miss you, did he?"

"No," I sighed, crossing one leg over the other. "They died when I was little, in the same accident that gave me this." I gestured faintly to my scar and crossed my arms. "But that's not important. What *is* important is what you three are planning on doing with me."

Tucking the ends of the bandage in, Irene leaned away from me and fixed another icy glare on me. "I feel like there's a threat hiding in there somewhere."

"I didn't intend there to be one," I said, lying through my teeth. "Now please, tell me what you want with me."

Irene pushed her hair out of her eyes and sighed. "Well, I suppose it is only fair to give you some answers, especially if things turn out differently than we hoped. I'd better take

you to talk to the captain, though. He'll be able to explain things better than I can."

Rising from her stool, Irene stepped through the low doorway and climbed down a ladder at the end of the hallway. As I followed her through the ship's twisting innards, I did my best to construct a mental map of where each passage might lead and which places might be good places to hide. Force of habit.

"Captain, the new girl has some questions," Irene said, kicking open a large metal door at the end of a hallway and leading me to the bridge. In front of us, Captain Harvick glanced over his shoulder from where he sat at the captain's chair before turning back to the massive panoramic windshield before him.

"Can it wait? I'm a little busy trying not to drive the Echo nose-first into an asteroid," he said, hands clenching around the ship's steering module as a large rock glanced off the front of the ship.

"Great job you're doing on that," I muttered, and beside me, Irene let out a snort.

"I can answer any questions you might have," Gresham said, drawing my attention away from the expanse of space in front of me. He

had his feet propped up on the dashboard of the navigator's station, his compass in his hand. "My full attention isn't really needed right now."

"If you navigate me into the middle of a StemTech fleet, I'll skin you," Harvick grumbled from his perch, and Gresham laughed.

"I'll look forward to it, love. Now, what questions do you have?"

I looked between him and Harvick. "StemTech? What's StemTech?"

Behind me, I heard a clatter as Irene presumably knocked something over. "You've never heard of StemTech?" she asked incredulously, coming over to stand by Gresham.

"No," I said, "should I?"

"This is worse than I thought," Gresham sighed to himself. "Noble, have you ever heard of an EMIOP?"

"No." Gresham drew in a sharp breath and I winced. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No, not necessarily," he said, removing his feet from the dashboard. "StemTech is the

company that runs the universe. They control the government of their origin planet, Earth, dominate trade across the universe, and have total control over most planets' economies. They likely operate the place you grew up, the mine on Acryppo 1-A, too."

"What? How? How can one company run an entire universe?"

Irene pulled some of her platinum-blond hair away from her face, exposing the roots as well as a line of small round scars. "See those?" she asked, pointing to the scars. "They're from a device called an EMIOP, which stands for External Mental Impulse Operations Program. That's a fancy way of saying 'forced mind control!'" She let her hair fall back in her face.

"With the EMIOP, StemTech has been able to create a society of brainwashed people incapable of surviving without them."

"But how?"

"How much do you know about brains?"

"Not enough."

"Then let me explain a little. Your body functions because your brain sends out electrical pulses via your nervous system that

tells various organs what to do, right?"

"Right," I said.

"Well, the EMIOP is a piece of sophisticated technology that's fine-tuned enough to send its own electrical pulses to your brain, overriding what your brain wants and instead replacing those commands with ones of its own. This way, anyone who has control of an EMIOP can control you. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, a bit," I said, reaching for an empty chair and taking a seat, my back to the panoramic window. "But why? Why would someone create something as awful as that? And how could the rest of the people around them let them get away with it?"

"It didn't start out as a mind control device," Gresham said, leaning back in his chair. "It started as a medical device to help people suffering from tumors and strokes regain functionality in certain parts of their bodies. But, one thing led to another, and you know how people get when they have near unlimited power in their hands. Corrupt. Greedy. Selfish."

"And so a medical device slowly became

something else, and by the time people realized, it was too late," I finished for him, piecing things together for myself.

"Bingo," he said, shooting me finger guns and a smile.

"Actually, that's not exactly correct," Harvick piped up from behind me, causing all of us to turn and look at him. "Tell her about CMFP."

"Why don't you tell her? Add some of your insight into the conversation," Irene suggested, but Harvick shot her a look.

"Asteroids, remember?"

"Aww, bad at multitasking, are we?"

"That's not the point," he grumbled, drumming his fingers on the steering module. "But fine, I'll talk, if only to get you off my tail. The CMFP is the Coalition of Mental Freedom Preservation. We work for them. I'm... sort of their poster child, actually. Anyway, the CMFP is composed of a group of elusive yet influential people throughout the universe who are dedicated to liberating star systems of StemTech's control. The first step is freeing those controlled by the EMIOPs—getting them to a point where their minds are no

longer reliant on the EMIOP's electrical pulses in order to function normally. Once that's done, we can work on establishing new governments and trade between the liberated star systems. Then, finally, we can go after StemTech itself."

"So that's why you need me. The weapon, I mean," I said, piecing things together.

"Yeah," he replied, "that's why we need you. The weapon to end the war. So tell me, Noble, what exactly can you do?"

I chewed my lip and tucked one of my legs under me, shifting uncomfortably where I sat as all the eyes in the room turned to me. I wasn't completely *against* telling them my secret—definitely not after what they just told me, for sure—but I still had my doubts. I could still be walking into a trap, even though they claimed to be working for the good guys. I'd seen enough guards and overseers manipulate people into believing things at the refinery that I knew every good thing had a darker side to it. I'd only heard one side of the story so far, and considering how much new information I'd received in the last few minutes, it was obvious I had a lot to learn about the world outside of Acryppo 1-A.

So what were my options? I could agree to go along with whatever plan they had for me and see where it took me. I could always blast my way out of whatever corner they backed me in. I could take the ship now and save myself the trouble of having to do it later just in case. Or, I could demand they drop me off at the nearest port and forget any of this happened.

But would I really be able to live whatever underground life I might make for myself after knowing that there were people fighting against an evil that was all around me?

I could answer that already. No, no I would not.

"I'll help you," I said, "but on one condition."

"Shoot," Harvick said.

"We do things my way, and when it comes down to it, you don't ask any questions about my abilities or what I can do."

Harvick glanced at me long enough for me to see the skepticism in his eyes. "So you're not going to tell us what you can do until it comes time to do it?"

"No."

"And may I ask why not?"

"Because it would be safer for you if you didn't know. And safer for the Coalition. The less people who know, the less people who can tell the enemy."

"She's got a good point," Gresham piped up, and Irene nodded next to him. Harvick looked a little less convinced.

"The last people who knew died shortly after knowing," I continued, catching the captain's gaze. "In the same accident that gave me these scars. So if you really want to know, I'll tell you, but if I were you, I wouldn't take any chances."

Harvick's sour expression morphed into neutral acceptance, and he nodded decisively. "I guess that settles it, then. Welcome to the team, Noble Bishop."

"Thanks. Now, would you mind telling me where we're going?"

"The Gliese 667C star system. We've got some very important people waiting there to see what kind of weapon we're bringing back. Now buckle up. Things are going to get a little bumpy."

Seven Years Later

The backup computers were situated three floors down from the main control room, in the core of the planet, protected by walls of carbon-reinforced steel three feet thick. The doors were electronic and the locks were encrypted with four levels of security. But that wasn't enough to stop me. I had a job to do, and I'd be damned if a big hunk of metal and a door would keep me from doing it.

All the lost battles, all the casualties, all the mistakes I'd made these last seven years... if I couldn't do this, they would all be for nothing.

This is for you, Captain, I thought, my fingers closing around the door handle, melting it to white-hot slag in an instant. Pushing the giant metal hatch out of my way, I ignored the red lights flashing overhead, warning me that the facility had been breached and was close to losing all oxygen in a matter of minutes, and crossed the room to the main control panel. Next to a long row of blinking lights, I found a large red lever marked *Emergency EMIOP System Shut-Down*.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," someone said from behind me as I placed my hand on the

lever, and I turned to see an old woman in a silver suit leaning on the doorframe.

"If it isn't Lake Parker, founder of StemTech and inventor of the EMIOP," I said, reaching down one hand to grasp the hilt of my gun. A brief look of surprise crossed her face and I grinned. "That's right, I know who you are. We all do."

"Well, I'm not surprised," she said, smiling a charmingly disarming smile. "I *am* quite famous around these parts. And, given that scar and that cyborg arm, you must be Noble Bishop, the Coalition's trigger-happy plaything. Your reputation precedes you."

"As does yours," I said. "Now, I would really rather avoid shooting you, Dr. Parker, so if you could let me finish my job, I'd be glad to chat afterwards."

As I began to pull down the lever, a sizzling sphere of compressed energy whizzed past my hand, singeing my fingertips as it shored the lever from the console.

"I can't let you do that," Lake said from behind me, and I turned to see her pointing a smoking blaster in my direction. "If you shut down this system, three *trillion* people are going to die, Noble. Their brains can't function

without the pulses from the EMIOP anymore. If you pull that lever, they will all die within a matter of minutes. Entire colonies, entire civilizations, entire races, entire *planets*... they will all be wiped out in an instant because of you."

I dropped the severed lever on the ground with a clang and unholstered my gun. "Believe me, I know exactly what pulling that lever would've done," I replied. "Put down the gun, Parker. Don't make me add another corpse to the body count."

Lake tightened her grip on her gun and kept it trained on me, her hands perfectly still, aim true. I got the disconcerting sense that she'd done this before.

"You weren't really going to do it, were you?" she asked, a note of vulnerability in her tone, as if she was just now reconsidering how much she actually knew about me.

I glanced at the gun in her hand and concentrated on it long enough to make the barrel melt into a puddle at her feet. "I was."

Lake's silver eyes darkened and she shot me a look of pure loathing, throwing the now-useless gun to the floor. "You would kill all

those innocent people just to fulfil the goals of your misguided, backwards, barbaric cult of a Coalition?" she snapped, looking as if she wanted to murder me with nothing but her bare hands. "You were really going to murder three trillion people in cold blood?"

Yes. Yes, *I would, I thought*, swallowing as I met her steely gaze.

I hated that it came down to this, in the end. A rush-job of an infiltration, relying mostly on surprise and sheer force of numbers to get anything accomplished. It was a major sacrifice on both sides—especially for the Coalition, which was already depleted to begin with. Every ship we had was out there today—even the *Horizon Echo*, even as battered and broken as she was—fighting until her last breath.

We had no other choice, though. We were out of time.

For seven long years, I'd fought alongside the Coalition, but every battle lost was another shove in the wrong direction, another step further away from our goal. And, after a while—lost battle after lost battle—we knew it was only a matter of time before the

Coalition fell completely.

They left the choice up to me. Do we sacrifice everything in one last push, or do we give in and roll over, baring our throats to the monster governing the universe?

I couldn't afford to think about the people I would be killing if I pulled that lever. I knew what I was doing was cruel, and ruthless, and far from the end-all I envisioned when I first joined the Coalition. But I also knew I had one shot—one—to change the fate of the universe. And if this was the price we had to pay to liberate countless solar systems from Stem-Tech, to give the next generation of people a chance to live lives free from their enslavement, then so be it.

"I would," I replied, looking away from her, unable to face her reaction. "And I still will, by hand, one at a time, if that's what it takes to stop the EMIOP."

I hated myself for saying those words. I hated that it had come down to this. But most of all, I hated that they were true.

It was time for this to end.

"You're a monster, Noble Bishop," Lake Parker said.

As the warning lights whined softly overhead, I laughed. I laughed because she was right. I laughed because it was ironic, hearing those words from her.

"You would know," I replied. "You made me."

The room fell into silence.

"How do you mean?" Lake asked, finally finding her voice.

"Tim Kethel, your partner in the early stages of the EMIOP project," I began, ignoring her look of confusion. "Ra'Kesh Klisthl, elected ruler of the Sslyth people. Commander Logan Corville, leader of the CMFP. Adam Hopefield, head engineer of the CMFP. Lucille Marketh, second lieutenant to the CMFP. Gabin Test, CMFP Special OPS. Captain Ramira Morburry of the *Jade Runner*. Captain Julian Harvick, previous captain of the *Horizon Echo*, and his aunt, Irene Abernathy. The list goes on and on," I said, loading the chamber of my gun. "Tell me, Dr. Parker: what do all these people have in common?"

"I don't know," she replied, coolly. "I've never heard of most of them."

I choked back a mouthful of bile and spat out, "They are all *dead*."

Lake crossed her arms over her chest, staring at the wavering chamber of my gun. "They're just people," she said, completely apathetic. "People live, people work, people die. It's the natural order of things, no matter how important or young they may be."

I slammed a smoking hand down on the console, leaving a charred handprint behind. "They are all dead because of *you!*" I shouted, sneering at her. Her eyes went wide, but I wasn't about to stop my angry tirade. "Without *you*, without the EMIOp, every single one of them would still be alive and breathing. They were my *friends*, Dr. Parker," I hissed. "*My family.*"

"And every day, for the last seven years, I've worked alongside them, gotten to know them, learned to *love* them, and to what end? To watch them die because of a stray bullet, or an exploding ship, or because a swarm of brainwashed, EMIOp-controlled *slaves* attacked an unarmed freighter carrying supplies for the wounded people from the planets we've liberated?" I howled, seven years of bottled-up rage escaping me in an instant. "And you know what? I'm tired of it. I'm tired of losing. I'm tired of losing people, I'm tired of losing battles, and I'm tired of

losing this war. And I know the rest of the world feels the same."

Pointing my gun at the floor, I raised my hand above the console and looked her dead in the eyes. "Giving people over to the EMIOp is like watching them die," I said. "Why? Because even if their bodies are still moving and doing your dirty work, their minds—the things that made them who they were—are gone. They've been replaced with a computer-controlled consciousness. They become puppets, slaves, to your system. So destroying this computer won't be killing anybody, actually. Why? Because, as far as everyone who cares about those people are concerned, they're already long dead."

With that, I plunged my molten hand into the console, and the world erupted into a white fire burning so hot that, in that moment, the world as we know it ceased to exist.

I won't bother to explain what happens after. Why? Because I'm sure you can already guess it. History is a series of repeating events, rarely varying, never changing. So while this event—this great catastrophe—may be written in today's history books as something monumental, I'm sure something even bigger

than this will happen a few thousand years from now, and the names of Julian Harvick, Ansley Gresham, and Irene Abernathy will be forgotten. Just like the EMIOP, the Machine that Enslaved a Thousand Planets, and just like me, Noble Bishop, the Girl who Destroyed the World.

The End.

Puppet

Jacob Stevenson

Do you remember, it?
Sitting up there in the attic?
You left him there to sit.
Do you remember, him?
Your present from your parents.
Your old friend Pitt.
Do you remember, me?
Sitting up here, in the attic.

The Art of Translating

Zoe Madrid

Ya estabamos llegando a Beaverton, Oregon. Todos estabamos listo para salir del auto y Esteban estaba mas pesado de costumbre.

"!Tengo que ir al bano!"

"Lo siento Esteban no hay banos por aca. Estamos en medio de la nada," Mama respondio. "?Podemos ir afuera en el bosque, si quieres?"

"!Si! !si!, !si!, por favor." --

(suspiro) "Si Mama."

"Lo siento Zoe!" dice carinosamente.

"No te preocupas Esteban."

Caminamos a un arbusto y mire por otro lado. Cuando Esteban termino Zoe dio jabon anti-bacteria a su hermano. El limpio sus manos y Zoe empezo a caminar hasta el auto cuando Esteban grito --

"Zoe. Zoe, ! hay un hongo gigante!"

"Vamanos al auto."

"No inventes Esteban!"

En ese momento Zoe se dio vuelta y vio el hongo gigantesco.

Zoe se apresuro, agarro a Esteban antes de que el hongo les agarro.

"AHHHHHHHHH!"

"No tocas a mi Zoe," dice Esteban. Y el hongo los comio!

One day we were just about to Beaverton, Oregon. Everyone was ready to get out of the car, and Esteban was as annoying as ever.

"I got to go potty!"

"Sorry Esteban, there aren't any bathrooms here. We are in the middle of the forest. You can go outside if you'd like?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Please!"

(Sigh). "Si Mama."

"Sorry Zoe," Esteban said nicely.

"Don't worry about it," Zoe said.

We walked up to a bush and Zoe looked away. When Esteban was done she gave her hand-sanitizer to him. He cleaned his hands and Zoe started walking back to the car when Esteban yelled.

"Zoe. ZOE. There's a giant mushroom!"

"Don't lie. Let's get to the car."

"I'm not lying."

In that moment, Zoe turned around and saw the huge mushroom. Zoe quickly picked up Esteban before the giant mushroom captured them.

"AHHHHHHHHH!,"

Esteban struggled to get out of the mushroom's grasp.

"DON'T touch my Zoe," Esteban bravely said, right before the mushroom devoured them whole.

The Mask of Words

Erik Allen

These damn typewriters
Could never do the job
I try to write, and Create
The typewriters are too cold
I poured my Heart and Soul into these Works
My dear,
Instead of into you,
Where my Love should have been

It's been years now,
Do you remember me?
The one
Behind the Mask
of Words

This memory of you
of when we were young
has never left me
This memory of you
Keeps me Loving you

MatchDay

Jo Hogan

Every six year old gets one; the ultimate birthday present for the last four generations. I mean, *best birthday present ever* is one of those in the eye of the beholder kind of deals. However, I don't know a six year old who isn't excited to be *finally* getting his implanted.

It's a momentous event. Families throw gigantic parties often lasting several days; a countdown to the big day. Hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on the grand reveal. Receiving the actual MatchDay is often a bigger deal than when one meets their Soul Mate. I've never quite understood the whole thing, then again, it's probably because I never got my expensive coming of age party.

I was the middle child of seven; a party wasn't feasible, even if I had wanted one. Rather, my mom kept me home from my first grade class long enough to get the digital watch implanted and had me back before first recess.

I had three older brothers with MatchDays already placed; the day didn't feel at all

exciting. Actually, it was almost anti-climactic in the lack of celebration. Nevertheless, I was the first in my class to get mine. Only bonus I've ever found of being the oldest in the class. It didn't take long before the glamour wore off. Before the end of the day, I was doing everything within my power to keep it covered.

By the end of the year, I loathed it. Mischa, my first crush, his said 10 years. My best friend, Boston, 12 years. Alex, the creepy dude no one liked would meet his before he turned 21.

My brothers all had numbers less than 10; the longest time being 9 years, 3 months, and 18 days. The shortest being 2 years, 11 months, and 29 days; he met his Soul Mate the first day of fourth grade. We moved that summer and most of the boys met their Soul Mate that first day of school.

Me, on the other hand? The kid who had to get his placed first in the class? The same kid who didn't particularly want one to begin

with? Yes, the blasphemy, I know. I got: 32 years, 11 months, 30 days, 16 hours, and 20 seconds. For the record, that's the day before I turn 39; one hour before to be exact.

I've only met one other person who had as much time as I did. Her name is Kara; I met her in graduate school and her time was three days shorter than mine. I haven't spoken to her in years, but the rumor mill says she met her Soul Mate last spring. A lovely man, so says my best friend, who still talks to people on a regular basis.

Everyone else I've ever come in contact with seems to linger in the 24 years or lower range; most commonly, people meet their Soul Mate in high school. Considering how much I have changed as a human over the span of two decades, I can't imagine having met my Soul Mate that young. Nevertheless, it happens quite commonly. My oldest niece met hers last week and she's only 13.

But really, who am I to knock it? MatchDay came out in my great-great-grandparents' generation; it had been unreliable and a bit spotty on figuring out the whole unknown death time frame problem. A hundred years later, they have scientific proof backing the

titanium band attached to the left wrist exactly six years after being born. It, indeed, without fail tells the wearer when they'll meet their Soul Mate down to the very second.

As with all the other truths out there; the scientific facts of the world, we have the stories that can never quite be proven wrong. The Big Foots and Loch Ness Monsters of MatchDay. The kid who's watch counted down to him meeting a sandwich. The girl who met her best friend rather than a Soul Mate.

Much the same as finding Big Foot roaming Southern California, one never actually finds the sandwich boy or the best friend girl. MatchDay has been designed too well. People simply meet their Soul Mate; the other half they are destined to spend their lives with. The one person they can't possibly live without.

At six I don't think I really understood the responsibility of this. The ever present burden of knowing just how long one has left. While not really quite the same, I always seemed to liken the watch to knowing my time of death. In theory it's beautiful. In practice, each of us panic. Would I get in the next big ticket item before I meet them?

Them. The ever elusive person I would meet and spend the rest of my life waking up next to. I spent countless hours imagining what they would be like. Would they like football and Sundays with my oldest brother's family? Or would it be walks in the park and Tuesday night movies? Their hair, I always imagined had to be black, I was sure of it. And blue eyes; a stark contrast to the hair color.

I met Maddie when I was 21. She was an exact replica of everything I had ever imagined my dream love to be. After a week I thought it was love. The only problem, my clock was still pushing closer to two decades.

People don't date anymore, there's no need for it. We aren't trying out people, second guessing if this person is the best possible option. No, we wait for the clock to expire. Preferring science to emotional guessing. Maddie and I knew eventually we'd go our separate ways. Her *MatchDay* gave us three glorious years.

When she met him we were at dinner. We were trying out a new restaurant because she didn't want to meet someone from our favorite pub. He was the waiter, who shaky from anticipation, spilled hot soup down the front of her.

Now, seventeen years later I wait perched on a bar stool in the middle of a crowded college bar. It's Maddie's favorite place to go on Friday nights; she enjoys watching the college kids awkwardly meet their Soul Mates. I'm not exactly sure why I agreed to go out with her in the first place; I hate crowds almost as much as I hate college students binge drinking. I would much rather be at home in bed; my Soul Mate can find me there. Instead, I glare at Maddie as I take another pull from my bottle of beer. Another thing to add to the list of dislikes; cheap beer from the local pub. Apparently it's too much to ask for good beer when slumming it at the college bar.

She smiles sweetly; swirling her cheap red wine like the sophisticated upper class girl she is. She knows why I'm overly grumpy. I've been this way all week. I hate meeting new people and the pressure is getting to me.

She squeezes my hand reassuringly. Maddie knows the distracted, jittery feeling. She's been in my shoes. She's happy with her love, just like every other person on this planet. *MatchDay* is never wrong.

MatchDay is never wrong. Both horribly daunting and fascinating at the same time. Twelve years working for the company and

I know how it works. No, seriously. As a lead engineer, I know how it works. I spend the majority of my life trying to fix the kinks. Kinks that are nearly non-existent at this point. One in a billion mishaps. Is it possible mine could be the one?

Deep breath. Now is not the time to panic.

Oh, I am so panicking.

Maddie chuckles; her fingers lacing through mine in a show of support. I was far too cruel to her when it was her turn. When I find my voice again, I'm going to apologize to her. Though at this rate, that may never happen. I may die first.

The watch buzzes; notifying me of the final minute. I don't need any warnings. I'm far too aware of the situation at hand. How do people survive this? Death sounds much more pleasant than getting to the end of the next 60 seconds.

59. I'm absolutely positive I've lost all feeling in my fingers. And to be honest that's the least of my worries right now.

48. Maddie giggles softly at my panic stricken

face. Considering she was three times worse I feel she needs to shut her trap, before I do it for her.

42. Taking it out on Maddie is not the solution. Calm down. There is no need to be so ridiculous.

37. Don't puke. Please don't puke.

26. Looking at my watch, I know everything changes in a measly 24... now 20 seconds. My heart pounds hard and I'm positive everyone in the ridiculously loud bar can hear it. How does the world survive with this kind of pressure?

The story goes that my great, great Grandma Jane met my great, great Grandpa Ethan the old fashioned way. She didn't know if they were soul mates; all she knew for certain was that she'd found true love. I've often wondered what it would be like if we went back to those days.

Would we find true love? Would we find our match? Our Soul Mate? What would it be like finding my Soul Mate on my own? How would we survive? Hell. Do we even know what true love is?

Statistics show a dramatic increase in the likelihood of Maddie-esk meetings, compared to the information given from past generations. Yet, divorces are nearly nonexistent these days. People are genuinely happy with their Soul Mate even if we all look like a bunch of bumbling klutzes when we first meet them.

15 seconds. My breath catches. A kid knocks over a pitcher of beer next to our table. I didn't realize college kids looked so young these days. Seriously, they look twelve.

13. The band finishes a song and probably the set for night. I can hear laughter across the room; a low male timbre carrying above the rest of the conversations.

11. But where are they? What if they don't come? Chill. Dude. That doesn't happen. I know it doesn't happen. I do the research on this. I know it doesn't happen.

10. A hard thump; an elbow to the back startles me. I jump, swiveling around, glaring at Maddie.

9. She giggles; her cup lingering on her bottom lip.

8. "Sorry, Mate." It's low; gravelly and oddly seductive. A chill runs down my spine at the sound. What the hell?

6. "Elijah," the man says sitting down at our table.

5. I shoot an annoyed glare at Maddie. I'm five seconds away from a full blown anxiety attack and jerk face is trying to hit on my married best friend.

4. She shrugs a shoulder nonchalantly. Squeezing my fingers one last time, before she lets go of my hand. Time has slowed down. Every second seeming to last decades.

3. I turn slowly as if I have all eternity on my side rather than mere seconds.

2. I'm terrified to look up; terrified to tell him to bugger off.

1. Oh heaven help me. This is actually happening right now. I'm gonna puke.

0. I make eye contact with him. My watch buzzing its final breath.

Dark brown eyes stare back at me. He runs a hand across his blond beard, giving me a tentative smile.

"Well, damn," he says and I can't stop the burst of laughter.

He joins me, soft and nervous at first. I don't notice when Maddie gets up. It's not until he's scooting into the chair she left that I even realize she's gone. I reach a hand out; his fingers finding mine and I breathe a sigh of relief.

MatchDay never gets it wrong. I'd be a fool to think it would be anything other than the perfect match.

"Zion," I choke out. "I'm Zion."

Google Translations: “n’x” is Japanese for “Turtle”

Kate Dastrup

Miles couldn't speak.

He really wanted to, but after the death of his mother, he became mute. Of course he would get teased for it, but he just tried to ignore them. After all, he didn't really have the choice to tell them to stop.

He walked around school, tuning out the rude taunts or the quiet whispers with his music. He was listening to Sam Smith's "Too Good at Goodbyes". He was tempted to sing along with the lyrics, but he didn't. He stayed silent, and walked to his locker.

As he opened his locker, something came out of it. He picked up the note, expecting to see a mean one, but only got some *scribbles*.

“n’x”—The note.

He shrugged and put it in his backpack and went home.

Once home, he did his homework, got a snack, texted his best friend, and got ready for bed. That was the daily.

Before he went to bed, he remembered the note. He got his backpack and got it out. He searched “n’x” up on his phone and saw it was Japanese for “Turtle”. Oh, how he loved Turtles. He tried to say it, but didn't. He clicked the speaker to hear what it sounded like in Japanese. “Kame” the screen said. He didn't even try.

As he was about to fall asleep, he let out a tiny “*kame*”.

A Head, A Ghost, and a Very Long Day

Logan Rusho

"I'm telling you—the guy was a complete stranger, just walked up and gave me the bag," Maximillion muttered. He was perched on Lorenzo's counter, his arms crossed in a sulk. Lo sighed.

"And you took it... why?" Lo had acted as an older sibling for Max for most of their childhood and teen years, and that obviously hadn't changed.

"I dunno, I was curious."

"Dammit, Max." Lo plopped down in a chair, next to the table the mysterious brown sack was on. They reached out a hand and brushed their fingertips along the edge of the sack. "It feels wet."

Max slid off the counter and joined Lo. He had much less caution, pushing against the side of the bag and nearly falling over when it made a squishing noise.

"Ewww." Lo snorted.

"That's your own fault. Do you want to see what's in it?" Max crinkled his nose before tentatively opening the top of the bag, peering in, and screaming.

"MOTHER OF—" He scrambled backwards, knocking over his chair and backing into the cupboard. Lo watched Max for a second, before risking a glance into the bag.

The closed eyes and livid flesh of a disembodied head greeted them. Lo blinked a few times before slowly closing the bag and leaning back.

"Well, shit, that complicates things."

"Is that all you can say?" Max sounded ill, and when Lo looked back at him, he looked quite ashen.

"Max, you just took a bag from a random person who handed it to you, and it just so happened to hold a human head." Lo rubbed their forehead tiredly. "This day just can't get any worse, can it?"

Lo leaned their elbows on the table and cradled their head. Max was still pressed against the cupboards, but slightly less grey.

The window shattered and Lo toppled over, blood hitting the wall and trailing down as Max screamed. More bullets embedded themselves in the wall, and Max fainted.

It was the beeping that first woke him, a high pitched and repetitive noise. He could faintly hear voices, and the grew clearer along with the incessant beeping.

“—He was unconscious when I found him.” Max’s head swam in and out of consciousness, the room slowly coming into focus. He was in what he presumed to be a hospital room, white ceiling and a heart monitor tucked next to him. He turned his head slightly and saw blue curtains pulled flush against the wall.

“Is Lo here?” Max’s voice was rough from disuse, and he had apparently startled the doctor and one of Lo’s neighbours, because they jumped and turned to look at him.

“Lo?”

“Lorenzo? My best friend? They were in the flat with me?” Max paled as a thought occurred

to him. “Did they survive? Oh god, tell me they survived.” The doctor and Lo’s neighbor exchanged looks, and Max thought he might be sick.

“There was a body identified with you, but...” Max scrubbed at his face. “They didn’t make it, did they?”

“The paramedics tried their best...”

Max wasn’t listening anymore, he was focused on the mist behind the doctor that was solidifying into... Lo?

Well shit, now he was seeing things.

Lo glanced around the room, before holding a finger to their lips on a shushing motion. Max schooled his face, trying to focus on the doctor while Lo was doing stupid shit in the background.

“... And she—”

“Who?”

“The body at the scene?”

“Oh, no no no, Lo’s not a she. Lo’s a they.” Max murmured, still watching as Lo poked at their neighbours head, grinning broadly when their

hand passed all the way through her head.
Max smiled slightly.

"Excuse me?" The doctor sounded truly perplexed, and Max made himself focus on him.

"Lo's nonbinary? It's not that hard to understand." Max tilted his head, wincing as he realised there were glass cuts all the way down his neck and chest. That'd be why he was still here, after all.

"Your friend is dead..."

"And I'm still gonna respect their decisions. What about that is so hard to understand?" Lo had started messing with the doctor, putting their hand through his chest and giggling.

"I'm sorry, but nonbinary isn't a—"

"Oh for god's sake, I thought you were a doctor, not a pastor." Max let the frustration at the man's ignorant comments colour his voice. The doctor's hackles obviously raised, and he looked on the verge of telling Max off. "For goodness sake, will you just let me sign out of this hospital?" The doctor's open mouth shut with an angry snap, and Lo made fake spooked faces.

"Fine."

After a ridiculously long amount of time spent doing paperwork, Max was very gently booted out the door and back into the world.

"Lo, I swear to god if I'm imagining you as a ghost..." He trailed off meaningfully, turning to glare at the being floating next to him.

"Nah, I'm a spooky ghost. How cool is that?" Lo grinned widely at their companion. Max sighed, but he was fighting off a grin as he started off down the sidewalk.

"You're a pestiferous brat, y'know that?" Lo pumped their fist in mocking triumph, grinning at Max.

"You know it. And now I can be even more of a pest, 'cause I can float through walls." Lo spun in the air, obviously enjoying their new-found powers of flotation. Max mock groaned, glaring at his spooky companion.

"Can't wait for that adventure." Max faked a sigh, but he was still smiling. Lo snorted, but held an arm across Max's chest.

"Watch out, there's a car coming." Max glanced down the road, not seeing any cars. When

he looked back at his friend, he noticed Lo wasn't looking at the road, but their brow was furrowed instead, and they were peering into the distance.

"Lo? What're you—" A blue mazda zoomed down the street, leaves blowing across the sidewalk. Lo blinked twice and lowered their arm, Max looking at them in amazement. "How the hell did you see that coming?"

"I... don't actually know?" Lo looked puzzled, before grinning widely. "That's hella badass, I can see the future!"

"Oh no, you're never gonna shut up about that, are you?"

"Nope," Lo said cheerfully, as the pair continued down the sidewalk.

Max got home just as the sun set, unlocking the door with the bright orange light in his eyes. He pushed open his door, trying to keep an impending cat from running out the door, but Mochi never came running.

"Mochi? Are you sleeping?" Max called softly, closing the door behind him. He could hear a faint meowing, but no patter of feet. Lo was floating behind him, seemingly almost timid. "Mochi?"

Something large and dark rushed down the hall in front of him, and Max screamed. He scrambled backwards, shoving himself into a corner. Hands closed around his neck and pressed him against the wall, leaving Max gasping for breath.

"You must somehow find it before the others do."

"F-find what?" Max managed to squeak out.

"The rest of the body," The hands tightened around Max's neck, before dropping him to the ground. His vision went hazy as the figure receded into the shadows.

"Max? Max, are you alright?" Lo's voice was faint, and Max blacked out.

He woke up on his floor, Mochi sniffing at his face and Lo hovering anxiously.

"Oh thank god, you're not dead."

"You are."

"Oh, shush. We have a quest!"

"I don't want a quest, though!"

"Yeah you do."

"Piss off, Lo."

"Never."

"Damn," Max muttered as he pushed himself into a sitting position. Everything ached. He held out a hand, and Mochi made little pleased noises when he petted her.

"I can't wait to go on a quest!"

"Of course you can't."

"Oh, shush, you're just mad because you can't float."

"Lo. Shush."

"If I must."

Lo vanished from sight, a massive shit-eating grin covering their face. Max heaved himself to his feet, attempting to not trip over the furry mass wound around his legs.

"Mochi, shoo," Max made vague waving motions at his cat, but only managed to make her trill at him louder.

"She won't leave."

"Lo, I told you..."

"Fight me, Max."

"Gladly."

"Rude."

Max glared at the otherworldly entity pouting at him. "You're such a shit, Lo."

"So you've told me," They said cheerfully, floating to pet the fat cat purring at them.

"Who's a good kitty, hmm?"

"Oh my God, you love that cat more than you love me," Max whined over his shoulder as he went into his small kitchen.

"Soooo?"

"Twat."

Max stretched his back, his bones complaining after the extended period of time on the ground. He wasn't real pleased, either. Peering out the window above his sink, he let out a low groan.

"Lo, how long was I out for?" "I dunno, a few hours?"

"God—it's dawn, Lo. That's more than a few hours."

"Woops," Lo said. They floated through the wall right next to the door (because they could)

and looked out the window as well. "Well, Shit."

"And I say being shot at is a good reason for missing work?"

"Probably," Lo shrugged helplessly. "You know my workplace does things differently than the McDonalds you work at."

"Yeah, because you actually have a decent job," Max plucked his phone out of his pocket, wincing at the new crack on the corner, before browsing for a number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, this is Max."

"Why aren't you at work?" Max cringed at the disapproving tone. "Um, I just got out of the hospital because—"

"Max, if you really wanted this job, you'd actually work for it. You're—"

"I can explain—"

"—Fired."

Max stood in his kitchen with the buzzing phone pressed to his head for a while after his manager had abruptly hung up. Lo was floating just above his counter, much like he

was the other day, and they blinked before shrugging again.

"Not as bad as it could've been?"

"Lo, I think being fired is as bad as it could've gone."

"More time for questing," Lo said, pursing their lips in a vaguely suggestive manner. "Damn you. I don't think searching for a body counts as questing, actually"

"Questing."

"Ugh."

Lo grinned cheekily. Max glared before starting to prepare coffee for himself, and put the kettle out for Lo. And then stopped, put the kettle back, and laughed at himself.

"You're dead, I'm probably hallucinating you, and I just realised you can't drink tea anymore."

Lo looked stricken.

"I can't drink tea?"

"You're a fucking ghost, no you can't drink tea!"

"Fuck," Lo swore quietly.

"And how on earth do you propose we find a body?"

"Google maps?" Max rubbed his forehead tiredly.

"No, Lo. That's not how you find bodies."

"I don't see you having a better idea."

"Can't you just like? Summon the ghost of whoever's body we're looking for?"

"Oh yeah, because I just happen to have a rulebook on ghosting. I have no idea, Max."

"Well then try it, it's not like we have a ton to lose."

Lo stuck their tongue out before furrowing their brow in concentration. They waved their hands out after a while, shooting a Look to Max.

"Nothing."

"Worth a shot, anyway."

"I guess."

While the two were bickering, they hadn't noticed the faint glow in the center of the room until it became blindingly bright and

brought roaring winds along with it.

"You called?"

Lo and Max stared at the glowing ghost in front of them. He was tall, roguishly handsome, and holding his head in his arms like a basketball.

"Told ya, Lo." Max muttered out of the side of his mouth, his gaze still focused on the man in front of them.

"Did you need something from me?" The ghost seemed to be growing impatient, tapping his fingers on the side of his head.

"Um, yeah, apparently we need to find your body."

"Great." The ghost muttered. "Dumped in a river not too far from here. Have fun." He promptly vanished, leaving Max and Lo in stunned silence.

"That was so awesome," Lo whispered.

"*Damn right.*"

"To google maps we go, fellow quester," Lo chirped happily, after they had continued staring at the spot the ghost was for a while.

Max chuckled slightly and followed Lo to his laptop. Lo wiggled their fingers mockingly, and opened the sticker encrusted beast that was Maximillion's chromebook. He'd had it for years, and it showed. From the sheer amount of stickers, to the cracks in the casing that were hastily stickered back together, and then the tediously slow startup time, it all reeked of aging mechanics.

Max groaned quietly when he heard a loud banging on his door, accompanied with "Police, open up!"

"Lo, I'm just gonna-" Max waved off towards the door, while Lo just nodded absently and continued typing. Max rubbed his temples before opening the door. "Officers."

"Are you Maxmillian Lee?"

"Yeah, I am. May I help you?"

"We just want to ask you a few questions." Max sighed deeply before letting the two officers in, leading them past his office(where his computer was still typing itself) into his small lounge.

"What do you want to know?"

"You were at your friend's house, and then you were shot at. Do you know why that happened?"

"Not really."

The man pursed his lips and hummed, before writing a note in the small pad of paper he had.

"Are you sure about that?" Max sighed heavily.

"Yes, I am."

"What were you doing the day of the incident?"

"Going to my classes, just like usual."

"And?"

"And nothing?"

The policeman nodded. Max watched as he kept scribbling on his pad, jumping once again when he heard someone pounding on his door.

"Police, we have some questions for you." Max quickly glanced back at his couch, eyes wide, but the two policemen were fading out of existence, one of them shooting him a cheeky wink and slight wave. Max drew in a sharp breath, trying to shake off the weird incident.

He glanced into the small office as he passed by once more, and watched as a pen scribbled notes on a pad of paper. The computer sat in front of what Max hoped was merely an invisible Lo, and he shook his head once more.

"Yes, hello. May I help you?"

Max rubbed at his brows heavily. The police had been there far longer than the ghost ones, with considerably less vanishing. Max was exhausted by the time they had bid him good day and left.

"Max, I think I found the—"

"Nope. Don't care. I'm going to bed," Max grumbled at the overly-excited ghost in front of him. Lo pouted.

"Aren't you excited?"

"No. Sleepy times."

Max nearly slammed the door to his bedroom on the ghost, shoving his shoes off with his toes and collapsing into his bed with a grateful sigh. He could hear Lo grumbling loudly as they floated away, but he didn't really care at that particular moment in time.

Max slept fitfully, woken more than once by Lo being an annoying shit and flickering the lights on and off, just to laugh at him and float away. The next morning, Max glared at the ghost with as much venom as he could possibly muster while making his coffee.

"Can I use salt to just keep you out of my bedroom for one night?"

"Probably not."

"Dammit." Lo grinned at their companion.

"Oh shush, we get to go find a body today. How cool, right?"

"No. Not cool. I don't want to find a body. Thanks. I want sleep. But I don't get that, because a certain someone was being a twat all. Goddamn. Night." Lo grumbled before turning back to their notes.

"Well, I'm sorry I got bored. You don't have to be a total wet blanket about it."

"Fuck you, Lo."

"No, thanks. You know I don't really go for dudes." Max let out a rueful chuckle.

"Thank god."

Lo lead Max to the rather filthy river about seven blocks from his house. They were hyper the entire way, while Max cringed at the sunlight and sipped at his extra-dark coffee.

"Maximillion. Don't you give me that look."

Lo pouted at their friend, who was looking decidedly unamused. "We're finding a body, for some reason, and I managed to get Mike—"

"Who the fuck is Mike?"

"The murdered dude."

"Great. So you talked to him, and?"

"And I think I know why we're looking for his body." Lo looked insufferably proud. Max sighed into his travel mug.

"And why is that?"

"He swallowed a bunch of really valuable stuff, and the person who attacked you was the one who murdered him. For the gold shit in his stomach."

"Gross."

"Oh well."

Lo was far too cheerful for this kind of situation, Max thought. He put his travel mug at the top of the metal stairs leading down to the bank of the river, and waited while Lo floated through the river—occasionally bringing back weird trinkets from the bottom—and then helped lug a tarp through the sluggishly moving waters to bundle up the slightly decomposed body.

"It's all purple, is it supposed to be purple?"

"Yes, Max, the body is supposed to be purple. It's the lividity. All his blood turned into a jello-y thing."

"That's disgusting."

"I think you mean *fascinating*."

"I really don't think I do, actually." Max wrinkled his nose at the smell of the body, once they chucked it on the edge of the river.

Lo chuckled. They were stood there on the edge of the river before the man from the night before slipped a knife under Max's chin and pulled him upright.

"I'm so glad you found the body, Max." The voice, sultry sweet, muttered in his ear. Max

paled and gulped, the sharp sting of the knife on his flesh making him tremble. Lo had vanished from sight, and Max prayed to every god he knew of when he felt the blade being slowly pushed away from his throat.

Max was tugged away, just a very familiar bright light and gusting wind alerted him to the arrival of none other than Mike.

Mike immediately helped in apprehending the man, who was struggling against Lo's grasp. Mike's head drifted behind him as he clutched the man's hands behind his back and Lo wrestled the knife out of his hand and chucked it in the river.

The man's eyes widened when Mike's disembodied head glided to stare him dead in the eye. "I want to be there when you get what's coming to you." Mike smiled humorlessly. "And I rather think I will." Lo floated back, to stand next to Max, while Mike pulled the struggling man deep into the river.

The bubbles stopped after a few minutes, and both Lo and Max stood in stunned silence.

"No more quests." Max eventually said turning to look his friend dead in the eye. (pun intended)

"Damn."

The Boy Who Couldn't Say "Turtle"

Zoe Madrid

"If I say what it is, will it bite?"

"Yes dear. Please don't say it, just hold the small animal in your hand and don't say the word ... t... u...r...t...l...e, and you'll be fine."

It was in his hand it seemed harmless.

"Awwww what a cute turtle."

He woke up in a hospital bed, not able to remember what had happened after he finished his sentence. He lifted his arm.

"Where is my hand?!"

Platonic Love

Alyssa Nielsen

In your eyes,
I see something there.
I look into the blue and
I'm met with care,
Not anger
Or even fear.
Our platonic love runs deep,
If we're measuring time—6 years.
But the experiences,
Things I've shared,
That talk in your car,
While the song "Whiplash" blared.
I've been able to share so much strife,
Its feels like I've known you for life.

KATE AND ZOE, ARIGATO

Jim Blakesley

Kate Dastrup's music is playing. She likes the sound of the ocean but
not the water and *things* residing there, still
Out of the depths afternoon stories roll off her pencil in waves the color of
sky and life, full of empathy and her dolphin laugh.

Glendale Library, Room One. The long yellow table cannot sit still under
the spell of Zoe Madrid's whimsical tales,
Giant mushrooms, loving sprites, moonbeams, family and life, spilling over
onto every page, so full of smiles and hugs, *sonrisas y abrazos*.

You Can Be Queen Again

Zoe Madrid

Modern Elixir 146

Zoey, happy, runs up to the bulletin board ready to see her name on the list for the school play. A healing song, *una sanacion*, kept looping through her head, "You can be Queen again." Filled with excitement and hope she scans the list at the speed of light—her hazel eyes glistening and ... nothing.

"Every year this curse haunts me Connor!" Zoey says, not surprisingly disappointed.

"It's not a curse. They just don't see your potential! Yet." Connor sighed.

"EVERY YEAR!"

Although sometimes he was sad and teary, he could also be the happiest person you've ever met. He has an amazing smile and such blonde hair, short and slim body, and, always, seems to make her happy.

"Wait, there will be second auditions in two weeks!"

"Really. How do you know?"

"I am part of the Student Committee. I know everything."

"Yaaaaaaa," says Zoey sarcastically. "Thanks. You are an awesome friend," she said sincerely.

"There is your chance."

RINNNNG!! The fourth period bell.

"I'll walk with you to your house to give you the details and help you practice."

"Okay. See you, bye."

"Byeee."

When the final bell rang Zoey went to gather her things from her locker when Connor came strolling along.

"You ready to go?"

"Yeah. Just let me grab my textbooks."

"Okay," he said patiently.

When she was done and had everything in her

backpack they started walking out the door. Connor handed Zoey a pack of paper, three pages, neatly packed together with a purple paper clip.

"This is where you have all of the information — audition dates, lines to practice, what form of play, rehearsals, opening nights, characters ... everything you need."

"Oh my gosh thank you," she said with stars in her eyes.

"No prob. Now, let's get to your house, read it, see which character you like, choose your lines and get to practicing," Connor exclaimed with excitement.

"Yeah," Zoey says as they do their special handshake.

The rest of the day was spent practicing, laughing, singing and jamming out to their favorite music. Connor left. She had one hope she was desperate for. The next week had been the same. Practicing every day except Sunday and Saturday, switching between her house to his, and she had really been perfecting her act. You could feel when she spoke and sang for her character. She felt, breathed and lived the character.

After her performance her teacher, Miss Moore, told her ... "good job"

Connor and Zoey had a tiny celebration at her house.

The next day when Zoey checked the bulletin board to see her name ...her name it wasn't there. She almost broke down crying but didn't want the other students to see her cry. She had a huge lump stuck in her throat. Her eyes teared up. Connor saw how upset she was and gave her a hug.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not okay!" he said as he grabbed her hand and dragged her to the theater teacher and talked to her. "She did everything you told her to. She practiced, practically perfected her act. She was the best out of everyone!" Connor lashed out. The teacher didn't care and was offended.

Zoey made her way home. She was disappointed. Made her way into the parlor and sat down at the piano. She played and sang "You can be Queen again," and when her mother called the family to dinner, she was hungry.

"Thank you Connor so much, you are the best."

After Connor went home and Zoey went to sleep.

On Monday Zoey with the most confidence she had ever had walked up to the bulletin board with Connor and ...

Her name ... it wasn't there ... she almost broke down crying but didn't want the other students to see her cry. She had a huge lump stuck in her throat, her eyes teared up. Connor saw how upset she was and gave her a hug.

"I...It's okay. I'm sorry."

"It's not okay," he said as he grabbed her hand and dragged her to the theater teacher and talked to her.

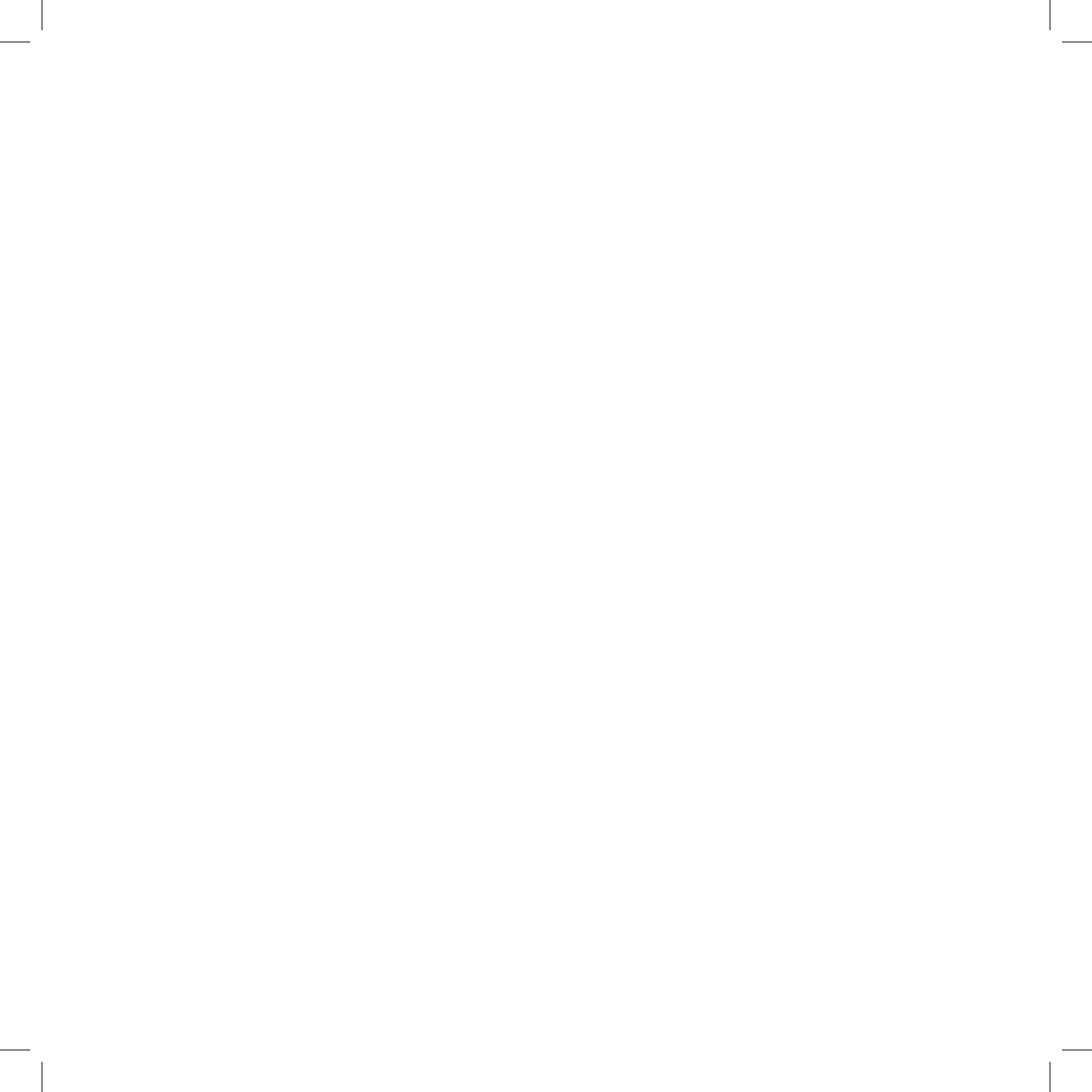
"She did everything you told her to. She practiced, practically perfected her act. She was the best out of everyone," Connor blurted out.

The teacher didn't care and was a bit offended.

"I'm sorry there is nothing I can do all the spots are filled. Try again next year."

Zoey and Connor went back to her house. Zoey's Mom was very upset and comforted

her and thanked Connor. Then Zoey—out of nowhere—walked up to the piano and played a beautiful healing song—*una sanacion*—"You can be a Queen Again". She sang the words trapped in her heart, "*Count your blessings, not your flaws.*"



*Thank you to all of the volunteers,
parents and guardians who supported
their teen writers this year.*