

Words are like *Dragons*



A Collection of Writing

BY THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASSES
AT THE CENTAURI ARTS ACADEMY
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COVER ART BY ANNABEL

WORDS ARE LIKE
DRAGONS:

*they set the
world on fire.*



SHADOWS IN THE WATER

Vivian



She was almost done.

After 13 hours, she was almost done.

Everyone back home will be so proud of me, she thought as she took the luminescent orbs out of her sailboat and placed them in the water. Then she heard the noise. At first she thought it was just in her head, but she heard it again; this time it was closer. It sounded like people howling in pain, mixed with the cold cries of the wind.

The sound sent shivers down her spine.

Suddenly, the sky darkened and the water turned black. The orbs now gave off only a faint light. It was so cold. The sound came again and this time it was louder. Much, much louder. It sounded like it was inside of her, bouncing off the inside of her skull. Now it was a screech, a terrible ear bursting screech. She cupped her hands over her ears, but she still heard it all the same.

It's back, she whispered to herself. She could feel its presence. With every second it grew closer. The sounds got louder, the air got colder, and the orbs turned black.

She could feel it taking her. It fed on her energy; it took the life from her body. She tried to move but it had her. She tried to scream but nothing came out. She tried to breathe but her lungs had frozen.

It was too late.

Apologies

Leah



Dear Ms/r. [enter name here]

I'm sorry. Genuinely. My mind was elsewhere, in a different world. Did you know my sister had to go to the hospital yesterday? It was tragic and I don't know what I'll ever do. I should really get more time to write that paper. I began writing my research paper at about 5:30pm earlier today. I mean, yes, you told us to get started like... months ago, and it's not my fault I got carried away with... other... stuff. Anyways, I got so carried away writing my research paper that I didn't notice my mother had left a teacup on my desk. It's completely her fault, by the way. It had nothing to do with me. I was merely a victim of the hot liquid. But, the point is, I was caught up in the words that whisked away my conscience, distracted by the fluttering pages of my book - which I totally was not reading instead of writing the essay - that I drew my arms back and my elbow knocked over the mug.

I'm sorry. For real. I didn't expect the mug to tip in slow motion, the scalding liquid slowly beginning to pour all over the page. It began at one side and crept towards the other. Then time sped back up again and it just splashed everywhere. All over the place. Including my arm, which was promptly burned. If you had a heart, you'd probably feel so sorry for me because it. Hurt. I mean, you do have a heart, but like... it's not my fault my paper was ruined because my mother decided to put a full mug on my desk. Like, come on, who does that? But to be real, it. Was. Crazy. And in the process, my research paper was drenched.

I'm sorry. Honestly. The words began receding and everything on the paper, every precious word I wrote was soaked up by the hot water until there was nothing left. I was staring at a pretty blank sheet of paper after - what? Four or five hours? of - hard work.

I'm sorry. Truly. How will you ever forgive me?

Sincerely,

[enter name here]

p.s. Also I don't really care if it's 2022 and I typed out my paper online. May I have an extension?

STONE DRAGONS



Leah

A magnificent, sculpted dragon hovered over her, perched upon the pedestal, mouth open with a roar she could almost hear. Captivated, she slowly turned around, not wanting to take her eyes off the beautiful creature. When she got halfway down the hall, she turned, tearing her eyes away. Just before she was about to turn the corner, there was a slow cracking from behind her, and she froze. Her stomach dropped. She turned around just in time to see

the stone dragon come slowly to life...

She had only been at the academy for half a day. Apparently, half a day was all it took for statues to turn into... um... well... real, fire breathing, menacing... creatures. Curse whoever had forced a dress code onto them! How could she run away from the beast in many skirts and heels? She bit her lip before ditching the heels and sprinting down the corridor.

Logan would've thought this was fun. Logan would've laughed softly at the dragon and pet it and asked to ride it. But Autumn had no time to think about Logan. So she ran. And she was in no shape to do so. Her lungs burst and sweat made itself very apparent on her arms, her neck, her forehead. How unprincessy. Although at that moment she couldn't care less because there was a stone dragon chasing her. She could feel the heat of the flames, the thundering roar, each step shaking the halls as it chased after her. Its wings scratched against the walls, permanently damaging each tapestry, window and wall decoration, knocking over vases and gold antique stands. Autumn couldn't care less. Sure, it was beautiful but it was just screaming to be destroyed.

As a princess, Autumn rarely ran. She enjoyed the thrill, however it was definitely considered unroyal, especially if a guard caught her in nothing but trousers and an undershirt. Never had she run so frantically, though. And never had she run from a stone dragon. Despite the twisting halls – which no doubt would lead Autumn to a dead end, but it hadn't yet, and she didn't want to jinx it – the dragon still managed to keep each of its precious stone body parts intact. Even when she hurled herself around a particularly sharp corner and ran straight into a young boy.

"Whoa, are you oka—" The boy stopped in his tracks and stared at the towering beast that loomed over them. But there was something sly about his terrified face. Autumn couldn't quite place it.

Out of breath, Autumn stepped back, panting. "Help me," she begged, before she fell against the wall. And fainted.



A Painting for the Gods

Madeleine



My time was almost over. Would I finish in time? I gulped and glanced at the sandglass that stood on the table, the small grains of sand trickled down. I must finish soon, I thought to myself. I was sweating, I never sweat when I paint. But then again this was not a normal painting, this was a painting for the gods. Zeus had come down to earth only a few hours before. Little did I know that I determine the fate of the human race with a painting.

It was a normal Sunday morning. I was in my studio painting, when I heard it, the crash of thunder. Odd, I thought, there had been nothing but sunshine since the sun came up in the morning. Then I heard my door crash to the ground.

“I heard a painter lived in this house. Is this true?” a booming voice demanded.

“Y..yes, that is true,” I stammered.

I made my way downstairs. Then I saw him: it was Zeus. He had shrunken himself to appear more human-like but it was unmistakably him for the beard gave it away. His grey beard fizzed, small sparks flying everywhere. I fell to my knees.

“King of gods, Zeus. It is a great honor to have you in my humble domain. May I be of any assistance?” I said, trying my best to sound well mannered.

“Yes, that is the reason I have come. I need a painting for my wife Hera. It must be perfect in all ways. That is why I have come - because I hear you are the best painter in Greece” he said in his booming voice.

“I will do anything to please you, o king of gods, Zeus” I said, trying to sound like one of his many worshipers.

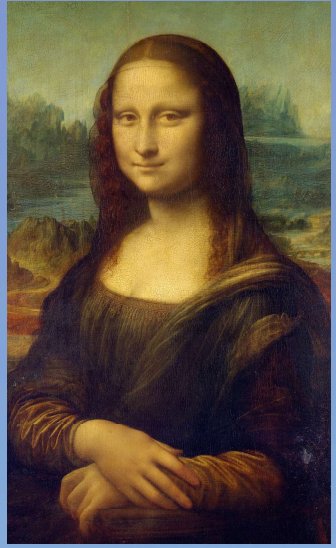
“Perfect. We will leave right this instant. All will be provided for you when we reach Mount Olympus.” He grabbed my arm and jumped into the sky. I have a phobia of heights so my eyes remain closed during our journey through the skies. When we land on a small patch of grass, I saw in front of me a small shed. Zeus walked towards the shed, and I followed. Inside I found a canvas, some paints and a picture of what I assume was Mount Olympus.

Zeus turned to me and said, “You have till all the sand in this hourglass runs out. If your painting is not satisfactory, or you run out of time, I will wipe the entire human race off the surface of this planet.”



That's No Mona Lisa

Annika



"Is it moving? I think it's moving," Lily said as she began pacing around.

"Maybe it's one of those optical illusions," Emma suggested. "Like the Mona Lisa."

Lily sighed. "It's the Mona Lisa's eyes that move, not her whole body." Her eyes went wide. "And she certainly never got up and started chasing people," she said, staring up at the stone dragon as it started chasing them through the school courtyard.

"Maybe it just wants a friend?" Emma asked, out of breath.

Lily stopped quickly to rest her hands on her knees. "Who cares? Keep running!" They took shelter behind a dumpster. "Okay, lesson number one of NOT dying, don't stop to ask questions about the thing that's trying to kill you!"

Emma shrugged. "I thought maybe it was friendly."

Lily pointed to the dragon, who had begun torching the entire parking lot. "That doesn't look very friendly to me."

"Hey, come on now, don't be judgemental," said Emma. The dragon careened its neck around the corner of the building.

"Stop talking!" Lily whisper-shouted. The girls went silent as the dragon walked past them.

“Stop breathing so loud!” Emma whispered.

“That’s not me,” Lily replied. They turned to see that the dragon had circled back and was now staring them in the face.

“Eat her first!” Emma shouted.

“Hey!” Lily elbowed her.

“I play soccer, my tendons are probably all tough and chewy,” Emma added as a hand reached out from under the dumpster and yanked her out of sight.

“Emma?” Lily asked before the same hand grabbed her, pulling her into the darkness.



Moankissed at Midnight

Cameron



Liars. Bright lights. Exams. Quivering hands. The overwhelming urge to disappear forever.

These were the big five for Alisa. The first four would haunt her during the day, painning her in the form of burning tears. The last one, it took control of her. It shone in her face, inhaling the daylight from her soul and driving her insane until she wound up by the dock. It was almost midnight, and Alisa sat trembling on the wooden platform, legs swinging underneath the cold water surface. This was all too much, and she couldn't handle it. The pitch black should have been relieving – after all, it was what she found comfort in. It was the lack of overwhelming sensations, and the cradling feeling of being all alone. Still, at that very moment, all she wanted was that little bit of light. It would act as a spotlight, not one that would draw attention to her, but that would instead shine some light on her situation. Maybe, if the light was nice enough, it would consume the boiling stress and evil inside of her.

As time passed by and her heartbeat sped up, she began to fall into a panic. It became harder and harder to breath until she kicked with force against the current, pushing herself fully into the water. From knees to hips to neck to head, she was now fully submerged. Somehow ... it was exactly what she needed. Her anxious breathing quite literally came to a halt, and a cool gloss to the water wrapped around her like a hug.

The moment when she would have fainted, a bright moonlight faced her direction. She felt her body begin to rise as her watch began to vibrate, signaling that it was midnight. The light was soft and not at all scorching, and it gave her the validation she needed. Her body floated just above the water, with her legs crossed and her hands clasped tightly together. A tingling sensation ran through Alisa as she began to feel the lack of anxiety. All of the heavy, mind-consuming emotions left her body, and she felt so much lighter than before.

All of those sunkissed girls who always picked roses and ran through grassy fields had no idea what they were missing out on. Alisa was a moonkissed girl, and she loved it.



ANXIETY

Denneke

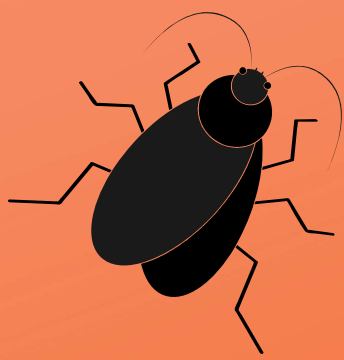
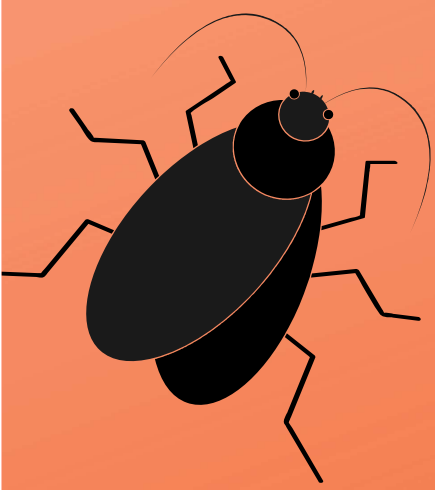
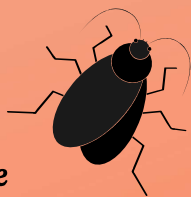
Places like these make me nervous. They feel dangerous and spiky, either too loud or too quiet. Too many people, but at the same time not enough, and almost always the wrong kinds. You have to be on edge in these places, always aware and always ready. Heighten your senses and raise your guard. Make note of every little sound, subtle shifts and step carefully through claustrophobic tunnels and fields of needles. Everyone is tense and the air is thick with tempers, simmering just beneath the surface. One wrong move could bring the end. This is no time to relax. Watch your back and travel in the dark spaces, just under everyone's radar. Be sure to check if they're occupied first though, you don't want trouble with the other dark creatures. Navigate, quickly yet cautiously, through the thin gaps and narrow passageways until you reach a safe bubble, one with no more spikes and welcome light. Safely in solitude, with the snacks you like and the music you listen to, fictional stories that fill your mind and a soft object to cuddle for comfort. Or, the arms of your people, the ones who will hold you close and watch out for you.

You are safe. You can rest now. You can sleep.

MANIPULATION

Denneke

***This person is a cockroach
A creepy crawly thing
They look like a butterfly
With the personality of a praying mantis
Laying lies like eggs
Planting them in the ears of the others
waiting to hatch into slimy maggots
wrapping around the brain like a centipede
Chewing and sucking and munching
carving out space until only an exoskeleton remains***



Saving a Fish From Drowning



Denneke

It's not my fault. If only the group had followed my original plan none of this would have happened. "I told you they live in water! they'll die if we take them out!" I shouted at my peers, pointing angrily at the overturned fishbowl surrounded by a puddle of water on the hardwood floor. The corpse of our dead class pet, Mr. Gills the Goldfish, lay there as well, still and gray, his eyes open but no longer gleaming with the spark of life they used to.

Our kindergarten teacher, Ms. Selena, came running. "What's going on over here?!" she demanded, then gasped when she spotted Mr. Gills. "What happened?" she cried. "Who is responsible for this atrocity?!"

"He is." I said, pointing my chubby, 5-year-old finger at the kid across from me. "He's responsible, he killed Mr. Gills!"

"No I didn't!" my classmate shouted back at me "He was in water. Things drown in water. I was only trying to help!"

"Oh dear," Ms. Selena said, shaking her head. "No no, that's not how that works. Mr. Gills is a fish. Fish need water to live."

"That's what I said," I repeated, stamping my foot in defiance.

the city in the heart of the universe

THE UNIVERSE, ACT I.

Juno

here you are:

your buildings, climbing on the base of the mountains, some as high as they dare to go.

it's not personal, it's just the mountain is the mountain
and you're already barricaded between it and the river,
the dam,

the lake turned valley.

this used to be a lake, before there was a city,
before anyone dared to go up here,
when the world was ripe for you.

it's springtime.

i've never seen you in the springtime.

i thought that was an interesting fact.

the sunrise, your sunrise, is arriving,
turning the sky a shade off of charcoal.

it's a long time before i see the sun.

i've seen the sun rise before,

i've slept through it every morning

in the spring

in the summer

in the fall.

next to the river:

the smell of earth,

cleaner water,

cleaner air than i thought possible.

here:

the sound of flooding, of water repeatedly flowing over the
same rocks that has been here after the city,
since the city,
before the city.

after?

well the sky has turned gold and pink,

a sunrise that has happened before and during and after
again and again

in an ending loop.

my science teacher told us that the sun has lived billions of years
before us,

and will live billions of years after us,

until it extinguishes,

going supernova.

the ground under my feet seems solid enough

to hold the weight of it.

i know it's gotten here through the push

and pull

of the continental drifts,

a plate colliding that brought up the mountain before me.

my mouth tastes stale,

like stardust

or pennies

or nothing.

simply nothing.

maybe that's just it.

the sun washes over the land,

golden hour,

20 degrees at its peak,

bright blue sky once again washing away

the dark hold of the night.
sunrise means warmth,
safety,
that's what the ancient egyptians believed,
thought that the sun would go over the edge of the horizon
and underground,
before renewing itself
to once again wash the land in gold.
they would come out under their blankets,
unlock their doors,
embrace the sun again and again.

here,
watching the sun,
i think i could understand what they mean,
why they believed the sun fights against darkness,
why the sun comes back again.
i could understand why they would think so
i think i understand now
why they would welcome the sun.
it's not theirs,
never theirs,
but they could believe in that moment,
that it was.
i watch the sun rise,
stardust in my mouth,
water hitting the same century old rock behind me,
the breeze of the wind tickling my skin,
carrying with it the scent of the fresh earth from the storm.
i let go of the darkness for a while,
long enough
to think,
in this moment,
that this sunrise
in the heat death of the universe
is mine

ANDROIDS DON'T DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP

Juno

The world is lovely, sprinkled with lights like stardust. Skyscrapers rise like blisters, factories ooze dark, stringy pus onto the earth's bleeding, broken, body. Somewhere in North America, a bomb goes off, leaving a charred burn on its skin.

We no longer have to look at each other to speak. Ages are unpredictable, so many people reconstructing their faces, their bodies, in a desperate attempt to suspend the clock that ticks and ticks. We trade flesh for cold constructs of metal, trade eyes for coal, our voiceboxes for mechanical shrieks, or the distant, impersonal string of code on a screen.

The first thing to go in this world was joy. The next was despair.

The corporations with their greedy claws, were the first to weaponize this technology, turn it into something that reduces humans into mythology. Now, we close our eyes and open our faces, pushing a switch of fuel and light.

Each life has a routine that is set out for them, from the moment they are created, not born, never born, one that they will follow until they rust and crumble. Who cares about destiny? It is a thing of the past.

Free will is a myth of Amazon, food a lie from Uber Eats, transportation sent shrieking and tumbling down into a pit of Toyota. Each second the world gains information about the crumbling structure of politics that fell from its own scheme, millions of automations melted in nuclear warfare. This information goes round and round, blank eyes regarding blank words, like flies buzzing in jars, everything going nowhere.

The Earth is a toxic waste, distant planets with cold dead stars left unturned; meanwhile corporate greed claims its crown.

MESSAGES

Denneke & Juno

Tater [9:08 p.m.]

You guys good?

SNATCH [9:10 p.m.]

Almost at the rendezvous point.

Tater [9:11 p.m.]

Good. Me and B have been here forever.

Hallow [9:13 p.m.]

What do you mean!? You guys aren't at your stations!?!

Tater [9:14 p.m.]

Sh!t. I knew we shouldn't have brought B along. They told me that was where we should go. I'll be there soon.

Hallow [9:14 p.m.]

You @\$\$holes better be! We need everyone in place for this to work. Artemi5, where are you?

Artemi5 [9:15 p.m.]

I checked the whole perimeter. If Tater and B aren't here soon we're going to lose our chance.

SNATCH [9:16 p.m.]

I see the police. What should we do, Hallow?

Hallow [9:17 p.m.]

Call it off. Better safe than sorry.

A LETTER WITH A RED EMBLEM

Kate

Gazing out of the apartment window, Evelyn was bored on a Tuesday morning, having absolutely nothing to do.

To rephrase that, there were about 8 undone chores consisting of laundry and washing dishes around the flat to do, yet none of them felt appealing enough to want to do.

Her schedule was empty, she'd checked that about 5 times already. The view in her bedroom she was absentmindedly staring out of was displaying a small little narrow pathway with shops left and right; which would normally have people, mostly tourists bustling about and enjoying the atmosphere.

Unfortunately it was raining quite heavily that particular day, which resulted in nobody being outside, maybe a newspaper being moved around by the wind at most.

The most enticing thing was Evelyn watching the raindrops race down to the bottom of her cottage styled window. Currently, there were about three races going on, the one in the middle being the closest to finishing. She'd been observing this race for the past 3 hours, somehow.

Her sage green eyes watched the raindrops race down with such interest that no sane person would, she watched the left raindrop get closer to finishing, so close.

It got closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer...

When a man running in the rain with a blue messenger bag above his head to try and dull the rain's consistent downpour was caught in her peripheral vision.

Allow me to rephrase this, there was nothing listed in her calendar; but there was a certain event she looked forward to. It just couldn't be listed in time. It was timeless, you could say.

On random days, she would get a letter from an unknown man, sealed with burgundy wax and an intricate emblem. She would reply to these very formal letters practically as soon as a poor pen could reach her sight, and would send it back off with hopes of a swift return.

She didn't know the sender's name, nor did he know her own. It was the only form of contact she had with others that weren't co workers or relatives; when she sees the signature wax seal on a letter slid in her door's mail slot, she'd smile a bit.

These unknown letters had been arriving since the beginning of the year, and around fifteen different letters would show up every month. Their 'conversations', as one would put it, comprise of the normal greetings you would expect, and in a fine ink pen would have a small topic consisting of only up to 200 words.

As she moved to the living room of the medium sized apartment, she waited for the rusted hinges of the mail slot to creak in its usual fashion to notify her of the letter's arrival.

She sat on the floor cross legged, with her hands picking away at her cuticles to distract her mind. The dark coffee-coloured wooden boards under her groaned in the sudden shift in weight. The sight of a fully grown woman sitting on the floor like a child at a daycare was uncanny; to say the least.

Any observer would say it was foolish and ignorant of her to be in contact with this stranger she barely knew anything about, and she would've agreed— yet this itching feeling at the back of her head told her to pursue this connection she had with the unknown confidante. There were footsteps at the end of the hall, slowly making their way over to her small abode. Looking up, she waited in anticipation for the letter.

The mail slot opened a little bit, showing the light from inside the hallway its way into her dull apartment. A small letter with the signature emblem sitting on the seal, gingerly slid into the mail slot and fell onto the aged floorboards.

She picked up the letter with such care as if it was a delicate feather, and flipped it over to see the same address written with the same

elegant cursive writing she'd grown so familiar with.

Strange thing was that when she put the address in any search engine, it would plainly put a 'LOCATION NOT FOUND' on her laptop screen. Yet when she would slide in her response letter into a mailbox, it would always seem to reach the man. She decided to leave the manner alone, and just accept it as a fact rather than constantly worry.

She put one of her hands down on the ground to help her up and started walking over to the small dark beige coffee table she called her 'dining table' and sat down on the accompanied chair with a ripped up cloth seat.

Feeling the wax emblem and all the edges of it, she opened the letter carefully. Taking out the paper, she set down the envelope and opened the paper from its folded shape. She read the gracefully yet carefully written cursive with such intent it seemed as if her life depended on it.

'Dear friend,

The downpour today has dampened my own mood. A shame, I planned on visiting a local flower shop and buying a lovely bouquet of black roses— but I cannot find my umbrella. It would be a shame to get my clothes wet for a simple outing, so I'll sadly need to wait for this weather to pass. Black roses symbolize death, a good friend once told me. It's fitting for a day such as this. Enough about me though, _____?'

Evelyn was confused— he'd never crossed out a single word before. She leaned back onto the backrest of the chair out of habit. She read the next words very carefully.

'Ah, that was my mistake. I was going to ask how you were. Please excuse that error.

I already know what you've done today.'

Not expecting that answer, she looked around her apartment frantically, searching for cameras or anything that would've been watching her. After examining her surroundings, she read on in the letter for an explanation.

'For you see, i've been watching you since the break of dawn. It's quite difficult to just resist the urge to watch your every move. After all, the option is just there. Why would I not take it?

You, Evelyn Parks, have been living in my own apartment for quite some time. Despite the passing of time, I still see that apartment as my own. Even if you technically own it according to everyone else's standards, you being in that very space irritates me to the last atom in my body.

I've noticed that every time you open one of my letters, you sit down on a chair and lean back onto the backrest. To my understanding, that is still my own chair. I remember even the day I bought it in a local furnishing shop. The seller had blonde hair and green eyes much similar to your own.

If I have not made my intentions clear yet, I apologise.

I wish for you to know that for every moment you are in the 5th apartment on the 16th floor of that block, you are to be an object of my experimentation. If I can so easily get you to wait for a simple letter like a dog waiting for its owner, I can surely experiment with you in much more drastic ways.

For the sake of this experiment, watch your back. Please note that a bouquet of black roses will make way to your doorstep soon.'

If that wasn't a wake up call, she didn't know what it was. Evelyn learned something very valuable from those 385 words;

this home was haunted.



THE DRAGON

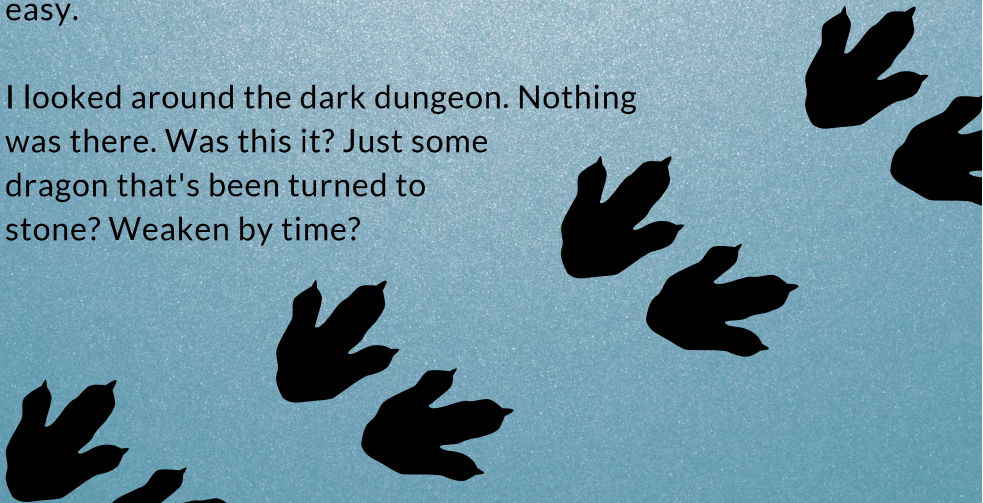
Chelsea

The stone dragon slowly came to life and I just stood there, just as frozen in place as it was moments ago. I felt the room heat up with every twitch of the dragon. The once gray and lifeless creature slowly turned red and through the blood red scales I could see an orange liquid inside its stomach. In turn, mine dropped; the dragon statue I was sent to smash to bits was about to cook me in my own castle. What would they think? The princess dying because of a stone statue that came to life, decades before its curse ended.

What would my mother think? She wouldn't be proud, she would hate having everyone remember me like this. I will not let this be my people's memory of me.

I slowly stepped toward the changing dragon and let my sword crash against the softening stone. A bright yellow liquid sprayed me and I marveled at the sight of the half stone dragon shriveling up inside the remaining stone. It couldn't be that easy.

I looked around the dark dungeon. Nothing was there. Was this it? Just some dragon that's been turned to stone? Weaken by time?



I wiped the shimmering gold liquid off me and walked towards the exit of the dungeon, surprised as to why I even came down here. I basically just destroyed a statue, not even a dragon.

As I got closer to the door leading me back into the castle, I heard a rumbling and turned around to see a larger dragon fall from the ceiling, landing on top of the crumbling statue. It stared at me and I felt the room heating quickly. My blood was rushing and I panicked. How would I get out?

I pushed my fears aside and stepped forward, preparing to fight off this beast.

My father did it, so can I.

I ran towards the dragon as it opened its mouth



I'm so Sorry

My

To: Principal Hall

From: Erica Larsen

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have spoken to you that way. It was incredibly disrespectful of me. I will going forwards trying my absolute best to improve. I will only speak to you with respect and in a calm manner. No more yelling, no more arguing, no more attitude. I will refrain from entering the office, throwing my hands in the air, yelling about how it's ridiculous that you call me down and won't tell me why. I will not insult you by calling you buddy in a mocking fashion, based upon the fact that you sometimes act like a child, as well as your resemblance to my second grader brother. I will not tell you that I'm impressed by your use of manipulative tactics to get me to do what you want. I will not insist that this school isn't nearly as welcoming as you think it is. I will not insinuate that you don't pay attention to your students. I will not paint a compelling piece of art on the outside of the school without your permission. I will not "vandalize" school property although it made the school look ten times less like a hideous shoe box. I will not insist that I didn't do something only to calmly admit that I did with pride. I will not be a thorn in your side or a pain in your back. I will, however, continue to be me and for the most part act as I please. I will simply censor myself in your presence. I hope you accept my humble admission of guilt and apology.

Sincerely,

Erica Larsen

DRAGON HUNTER

My

The stone dragon slowly came to life.

I don't know what I was expecting but not this, not tonight. I'm not ready. It crept closer and closer, slowly stepping towards me. It stared deep into my eyes as if it was looking through to my soul. I could smell the smoke of its fire.

My body stood rigid, just as it had before, the first and only time I had been asked to fight. I was raised by dragon hunters, I come from dragon hunters. It's in my blood, literally. I'm bloodmarked, sworn in as a dragon hunter before I could speak.

I felt the hot air of its breath on my head. It leaned over me, looking down on me, reminding me of my last fight. I tried, I really did.

The second it came close I froze. I willed my body to move, to fight or to run. It didn't matter anymore. Not as it was spouting flames, forming a fiery circle around me. It trapped me, stood over me, the smell of smoke so potent on its breath I swore I would pass out. Luckily, they never let you go on your first hunt alone. Now, it was just me. There was no way out, no one to call. I had to fight. I had to do it all on my own.

The Secrets of the City of Grey

Lily-Anne

Oscar walked slowly through the halls of the abandoned building. Faint sobs were somehow crying faintly at every door- some sort of suffering had occurred here.

He knew there was something wrong with the City of Grey. This building was the one thing to prove it. He slowly made his way through the long, winding, narrow halls of cobblestone, pausing to hear the words the ghosts sang.

“Leave! Leave! Can’t stay-” one ghost cried loudly, before abruptly cutting off. Someone did not have a good time here. Oscar continued down the halls, looking for the Treasure Room. It was a tall wooden sign that alerted him: Treasure Room, it said in red writing.

Another spirit whined.

“That- that isn’t true! You didn’t! Wait.. How could you?!” it screeched, before, like the first one, cutting off. Eek, not good, thought Oscar warily, scanning the halls of the Treasure Room. Legend had it that the one who opened the chest found the thing they desired most - and what Oscar desired most was the truth. What happened here? And why did someone do it? What he wanted was like a replay- it didn’t matter how or what it looked like. He didn’t care about that.

Suddenly, a large wooden chest blocked his way. His heart thrashing wildly, he placed his clammy palms on it and slowly lifted the lid. A burst of white light shone from it, dancing across the ceiling. Oscar raised an eyebrow as he saw shards of glass laying there, being ANNOYINGLY UNUSEFUL. It was just a BORING container of BROKEN GLASS. GREAT. That was JUST WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR. Oscar, being a perfectionist, placed two of the glass shards together with a bored expression. Suddenly, a faint flicker of movement arose from it,

a flash of peach, a trickle of blue. Oscar gasped, dropping them on the floor near him where he was crouching gingerly. He grinned hopefully and placed another piece together, and another, and another. Colors from all over the spectrum combined, eventually forming.. A young man, wielding a gun. Suddenly, the glass picture rose into the air and multiplied in size, starting to move.

“O-Oliver,” a woman hiding behind a barrel whimpered. “You wouldn’t do this. Why- why would you kill us? How could you kill us?” The man, Oliver, barked a dry laugh. Oliver was tall and slender, with black hair and brown eyes. He wore a thin suit with frivolous red curls where his tie would be. He sneered, a thick cigar in his mouth.

“To answer your first question, I hate you and all of the Rebellion. They fight against the one thing that made me RICH!” he ended with an angry bellow. “Clearly, the queen’s laws keep me that way, but, oh no, a Rebellion HAD to show up. It HAD to fight against that. And to answer your second question, Rose,” he looked at the woman- a short woman with tall, curly brown hair and gentle blue eyes, rosy cheeks and a curled pink dress. “I summoned the Great Black. He’s nearly here!” something flashed before Roses’ eyes. A horror long built up, loosened like a mighty hound loose of its leash.

“The Great Black? The king of demons?” she asked in a horrified voice, putting her light pink lace gloves before her eyes to stop her from letting out a sob. “That- that isn’t true! You didn’t! Wait- how could you?” the same voice echoed in horror. Oliver nearly spit out his cigar in laughter.

“Easy. Black, over here.”

Suddenly, the most horrifying thing Oscar could imagine showed up on the glass. A large black creature much like a hound, but the size of a car. Black eyes, pointed horns. Blood staining every sharp surface on its body. Scaly points running along its spine. A sharp triangle at the end of its tail. It screeched a bitter laugh, lunging and pinning Rose down. Rose screamed in horror, and Oscar shielded his eyes.

He knew from a loud spurt and the gasp for air that Rose was dead.

When Oscar opened his eyes again, the demon had slunk out of the room. More screams, spurts and gasps followed. Everyone in this building had died because of a selfish man's selfish purposes. Some- no, most - didn't even know Oliver. Oscar sighed to get the dark feeling out from deep in his stomach, feeling lighter. Until he saw the message on the wall. When he read it, his heart hammered and his palms were slick with sweat. He gasped for breath.

You're next, little boy, read the message, dripping red. Ah. Oliver was a clever man. He had the idea to summon me each time someone seeks their desires here. Too bad.. It was only then when Oscar realized someone was writing the words right now. The writing paused, unsure or grieving or confused. *Too bad he wasn't clever at one point. No one is dumb enough to trick me- well, try to trick me. Ha. Tried to get rid of me. That idiot. Now, boy, everyone in the heritage of the Rebellion is in grave danger. That means you, your little friend Anna, and your mother.* The writing paused again.

Oscar grabbed a nearby piece of chalk lying on the table by a blackboard and wrote underneath the message.

How am I in the Rebellion heritage? And what does Anna have to do with this? How do you know her- or at least her name?

The writing poked a dot with red, as if saying something, but stopping. Eventually, the thing wrote again.

Oh, I forgot to mention two things, the writing said in a voice that somehow Oscar knew was charming.

Oscar's heart started to thud. He thought he knew it.. Please don't be right.. his mind begged, desperately. *First, I'm the Black. Don't look at me like a devil- I'm a demon for your information. I know Anna from your memory. Yes, I read minds. And you, my friend, are Rose's grandson.*

A FEELING NEVER FORGOTTEN, NOT EVEN BY A DRAGON



Amalyn

The feeling encased me, weighing me down like a thousand pounds of rock. I want to lie down, resting my head against the cool marble supporting my tall, strong legs. My expression stuck in a cruel one that no pathetic twig of a human would want to come near. I wanted to expand my wings into their mighty, powerful true form, but they were too stiff. The title plated in gold read the same thing it did every year, with the occasional sticker with disgusting pictures or unreadable words. The feeling came back again, wandering into my mind like a girl wandering into a forest, lost in memory but still clutching on, barely, just enough to keep the feeling close to heart. Longing. Not knowing what to be longing for, just longing, maybe for the feeling to end, or for the ice or stone to thaw.

Suddenly, something among the many people who paused to take pictures with the pathetic, longing silhouette of what remained of me, caught my eye.

A girl, feeding the ducks.

Her sparkling, amber eyes shone, standing out among the boring blue, brown, green and black eyes on everybody else's faces. She threw crumbs to the ducks who swarmed around her, pecking her stubby legs for more. The girl had the prettiest red hair that swayed in the wind like a fire, constantly dancing, painting different pictures, each unique in its own way, almost as if it wanted to be fed more wood. She turned around, revealing a bright emerald amulet encased in a golden chain. The longing feeling shattered, now replaced with hate. What of, though?

Suddenly, as if the ground collapsed beneath her, she tripped. It

wasn't a normal fall, more like someone had pushed her. Landing hard on her stomach, tears bubbled up as what seemed to be her mother wrapped her arms around the girl. The amulet had broken into a million glass shards, like sea glass. People say weird things: take sea glass for example. They say it's a mermaid's tears. Now, a new thought puzzled me. Could those glass shards possibly be my tears? Repeating the word 'sea' eased me, feelings of hate melting away.

All of a sudden, a swirling sea-blue mist came hurling out of the amulet, a face of hatred plastered to the tip, a face I recognized: my face! It flew up into the air, bystanders looked on in awe and confusion. It turned around as if it was looking for something, then it came plummeting down towards me. I felt like I sucked in smoke, so much smoke it was hard to breathe for a second.

The stiffness I had felt for so many years sizzled away, as if thrown into a fire. I was free! I lifted my aching leg, causing a cracking sound from below me. I didn't bother to look, running around never felt so good. All of the humans ran away, screaming with fear, some of them fiddling with black boxes they used to take pictures of me.

A powerful feeling suddenly came climbing into my heart, clinging on to the very bottom, the feeling of being lonely. I hated that feeling, though I often felt it, more than I liked to admit. I paused, taking in my surroundings. Though I had seen them for what felt like a thousand centuries, I had never seen them when I felt like this. I scanned the horizon. There was a fountain to my right, clear water bursted out of pipes that came from a baby angel's horn. To my left were more trees surrounding a small field, a couple of benches sprinkled here and there. In front of me was a children's playground, consisting of one big structure which had multiple entrances and exits. There was a slide, a rock-climbing wall, a winding staircase, a fire pole and a metal bar with places to put your hands and feet, but there were no humans in sight. The lonely feeling overcame me again and I felt my shoulders slump.

I ran as if it were going to brush the feeling away. I didn't care which direction I was running in, as long as the feeling evaporated. Could I throw it in a fire, like my stiffness?

I crunched everything beneath me. Shards of wood from a bench sliced my foot, but I didn't mind. I ran until I reached a tall building, too tall for me to jump over. I stopped, leaning my sore back against the strong pillar. My scales shone in the sunlight.

All of a sudden, Something poked me, something small, innocent and what i'd describe as a nuisance.

I peeled open one beady red eye and peeked down. The same girl stood there, carrying the now broken brooch.

"Excuse me?" she said in a mouse-like voice.

I didn't reply. I didn't know how to. Words got caught in my throat like a net had been put there.

"I'd like to help," the girl explained. I sensed her fear, it was raw, and constantly increasing. I nodded my head slowly.

"Great." The girl showed her teeth. I hated it when humans did that. An unpleasant aroma surrounded them, like armor, only stronger.

"Do you remember anything? If you were...anything before you turned to, y'know, stone?" The girl played with her words, constantly stumbling over them. I closed my eyes, leaned my head against the building I was propped up upon and thought.

It came back to me, like a flash flood, unprepared and sudden.

I opened my eyes again and darted forward. This time running felt better than the other time.

I recognized this new feeling, hope.

Hope to forget about that longing feeling.

That longing for home.

My sensitive, pointy ears picked up tiny thuds and I turned around. The girl was following me, determination plastered on her round face. Her necklace was dangling off her fingers. I skidded to a stop, up-rooting a small tree and making a massive trench in the soft dirt that was blanketed with grass.

A small pond stood before us. It was clear yet seemed

bottomless. An occasional Koi fish with beautiful patterns would swish by, elegantly waving its tail.

"Here?" the girl asked, dipping her finger in the lake's warm, crystal clear waters. I nodded again. She smiled.

"Mom used to bring me here." A sad expression glazed her eyes. I felt a strange emotion. Empathy. It was a long, long time since I had felt such a thing.

I remembered a warm embrace, being cuddled in love.

I shook my head. The longer I waited, the more I'd want to stay here, though I knew I couldn't.

I needed to get home.

I submerged myself in the warm water and the feeling of the warm embrace came oozing back to me. The last thing I heard was the familiar voice of the girl. I could sense a smile on her face as she cried, "Good luck!"

I smiled, a wide toothy grin before disappearing into the embrace.



A Wonderful Thing Called Nature

Amalyn

When I see blooming flowers
The cute panda bear towers.
Sometimes crisp golden leaves fall fast
While pouring rain leaves puddles vast.
Unique beige seashells scatter far
Moonshine bursts from exploding stars.
Sky stretching further than eye can see
Immense seas surround me.
Soft sand against my toes,
Smelling the beautiful red rose.
Meadows wet with dew
The strong north wind blew.
Sun starts to set,
Dark skies let go of regret.
Stars sprinkle up above
The warmth holds me like a glove.
Full moon like a pearl,
Constellations in the darkness swirl.
Nature makes spirits rise
As the blue bird flies
In this peace my heart shines bright,
Telling me it's time to leave tonight.



Transcript of Recorded Interview with Georgia Radcliffe

Lucy

POLICE: All right, we're tape-recording. The date is February 11, 2017. The time is 15:02. My name is Officer James Wright and I'm based at the Haling Cove Police Station with the San Francisco Police Department. I am joined by my colleague, Officer Rebecca Fitz. We are interviewing Georgia Radcliffe regarding her involvement in the missing person's case of Eleanora Charleton. For the record, Georgia, could you please confirm your full name, birthday, and age?

GEORGIA: Um, my name is Georgia Radcliffe, I was born on July 2, and I'm 17 years old.

P: Now, according to our research, you are very close with our missing person, Eleanora.

GR: Yeah. She's my best friend. Um, we call her Nora.

P: Okay. Do you have many friends aside from her?

GR: Yes. Um, we're both friends with some other kids from school. We all attend Haling Cove High, or HCH.

P: Yes, Liv Thomas, Zach McCall, Sydney Williams, and Callum Turner?

GR: How do you know that?

P: We've already interviewed them. Did you all meet at school?

GR: Yes.

P: If you don't mind me asking, what were their... opinions on Nora?

GR: Pardon me?

P: It's just a standard question to get to know the situation.

GR: Zach, Liv, Sydney, Cal, and I were all friends before we met Nora. She moved to Haling Cove about four years ago from Seattle. She kind of just clicked with us. Everyone loves her. She's the kind of person who's kind of impossible not to love. She's... she's irresistible. It doesn't matter to us that she joined our group later. She's one of us.

P: I understand. Now, Georgia, where were you on Saturday night, January 30?

GR: Um, the whole gang and I went out. Do you need the times?

P: Sure.

GR: Well, Liv picked everyone up at around 8:30. It was Sydney's birthday, so we were all celebrating. We went to karaoke and drinks and drove around town. Then, we drove to Cal's house and hung out. We got there at around 10:00. We gave Sydney her presents, watched horror movies, played video games, and ate junk food. Teenager stuff. We were all there, the whole gang. But then, Nora got tired and wanted to head home. She always got tired early. She left at around 10:15 - Zach left with her to make sure she got home okay. They walked to her house. He came back a lot later, at around 11:05.

P: Does Nora live far away? Is it a far distance to walk?

GR: Not really. Barely ten minutes.

P: So, it should have taken him around 20 minutes to drop her off and come back, which means he should have come back at around 10:35. Instead, he returned at 11:05. So Zach was away with Nora for approximately half an hour?

GR: Well, yeah, but he didn't do anything to her.

P: If you don't mind me asking, how do you know that?

GR: Uh, I'm not sure I should say.

P: Anything you say could help us find your friend. We're searching and asking around, but any inside information about the night she went missing would be extremely beneficial.

GR: I really can't see how it'll help.

P: Anything could help,

GR: *SIGHS* Okay. Nora and Zach went out last year, for a while. It was pretty serious, but then they just broke up and no one knows why; they won't tell anyone. But we all know they still like each other. I think he stayed long to apologize or explain something or talk it through. He wouldn't tell us what happened, but he seemed a lot happier when he came back.

P: Okay. What did you do after she left?

GR: We watched horror movies and had way too much junk food

P: When did you and everybody else leave?

GR: Zach left at around 12:50. He lives on the same street, so he didn't need a ride. Sydney stayed the night in the spare room. She doesn't have a car and she's afraid of walking alone at night. Liv and I drove home together. It was her car, so she dropped me off and then drove back to her place.

P: Okay. What happened in the morning?.

GR: I woke up at around 9:30, maybe 10. I went to the kitchen to make breakfast, and I saw my phone laying on the couch. I picked it up and saw a ton of texts from Nora's family. That was when I found out that she never came home that night.

P: Okay. What happened next?

GR: I called everyone and we agreed to get dressed and meet up at Zach's house to plan what we'd do next. I got there at around 10:40. Everyone was there except Sydney and Cal. They came a few minutes later, maybe 11:00. While we waited, we called Nora's parents. We comforted them, talked to them, stuff like that.

P: Do you know why they were late?

GR: No. They didn't tell us. They just arrived and asked what the game plan was.

P: What happened next?

GR: Well... I don't want to say 'interrogate' but we asked Zach some questions about when he walked Nora home the night before.

P: What questions did you ask?

GR: The kind of stuff you'd ask if you were in the same situation. If he walked her the whole way home, if he saw her enter the house, if he went in with her, if she got any calls or texts.

P: What did he say?

GR: He said that he did walk with her the whole way home, he did see her enter the house, he did go in with her, and she got no calls or texts.

P: Did he say why he went in with her?

GR: He told us he just wanted to make sure she got in okay.

P: All right. What was the game plan?

GR: Everyone wanted to act right away, but we knew we had to wait a while before jumping to conclusions. We spent the day there, watching tv but not talking. We were too worried. We all went home for the night and met up again the next day. We decided to wait until noon for good measure, but then we printed out missing posters and stuck them all around town. We went door-to-door, asking if anyone had seen her. We told the cops and we spent every day until now doing search parties and trying to reach her. We went to her house to comfort her family, but then her parents told us something.

P: What did they tell you?

GR: Her phone was still there, and so were all her clothes and belongings. Even her car. She hadn't taken anything with her. If she was running off or staying elsewhere, she was unprepared, and Nora was nothing if not prepared.

P: Okay. If you don't mind, could we see your phone? We're just going to look at the call log and your messages between you and Nora.

GR: Uh, okay. Here.

P: She stopped texting you the day she disappeared.

GR: Yeah. She had a day trip for Model UN that day, and her phone was off.

P: And you've texted her a lot since then. Looks like just questions about where she went and begging her to come home.

P: Okay, call log... according to your call log, you called her... 102 times. You must have been worried

GR: I was - what are you doing?

P: Hm?

GR: I can see you scrolling.

P: I'm still in the call log, I'm just scrolling down to see when you first called her.

GR: Listen, I have to be home soon, so can we wrap this up?

P: Of course. Let me just -

GR: What? What is it?

P: A little less than halfway through your calls to Nora, you have a call from an unknown number.

GR: Uh, I do?

P: Yeah.

GR: ... Oh yeah! I, uh, got a call from a tele-marketer. They wanted to, um, c-clean my gutters.

P: Hm. Okay. Here's your phone back. Thanks for your help today, Georgia.

G: Anytime. Please keep us updated on any clues or leads or search parties.

P: Of course. We'll see you and your friends soon. I'm ending the interview here. It is now 15:18, and I am stopping the tape.

A DANCE WITH DEATH

Lucy

The ballroom was exquisite, shining and beautiful. Just like she knew it would be. She had dreamed of the day she would come here since she could remember. She spun, seeing everything in sight, taking in all the room's splendor.

And then she saw him.

Standing right there, waiting for her, like he promised he would.

She looked at Death.

Death looked at her.

"You're early." Death finally said.

"Don't say a word. Just dance with me."

His hands, though cold and dangerous, held her with care as they spun around the ballroom. The room was dark and cold, and everything held an air of menace and danger.

That only made her love it more.

Death's eyes were windows into the souls of those he had taken, and yet she found them more perfect than anything she had ever seen. He spun her out, her long and extravagant dress twirling out around her before he brought her back to him, as if mere seconds away from her was still too much. Her breathing was shallow and careful, scared to break the moment these two souls had fallen into.

Her parents had always told her stories of Heaven. Of how it was the most glorious place in the universe. Of how everything there was pure and infinite. Of how anything she went through would be worth it to end up there. And of how, if she was good and true, she would go there someday and stay there for all eternity. To most people, that would sound like the best thing

that could ever happen to them.

To her, it sounded like pure and complete horror.

Her life was devoted to being the most dreadful and repulsive soul in the world, so maybe one day, she would be welcomed into Hell by Death himself, inviting her into his kingdom with open arms.

A fallen angels' chorus rang out around them, the sounds of despair ringing out from the spirits he had stolen. To her, it was the most beautiful song that had ever graced her ears.

They danced together, two people too entranced by each other to worry about the fallout of what they were doing. All her life, this was all she had wanted. And now that she had it, she was going to hold on with both hands.

She could feel it, ever since they had first touched. That slow burn, every time Death looked her in the eyes. The gentle ripping sensation of her soul falling away from her and into his hands. He was taking it for himself, and she let him. She bared her soul to his cold yet endearing gaze, allowing him to take and treasure it for all of eternity.

And then, Death spun her out, and his hands fell away, releasing her. She felt a sudden tear, deep in her chest, somewhere behind her ribcage, and then her soul was wrenched out of her.

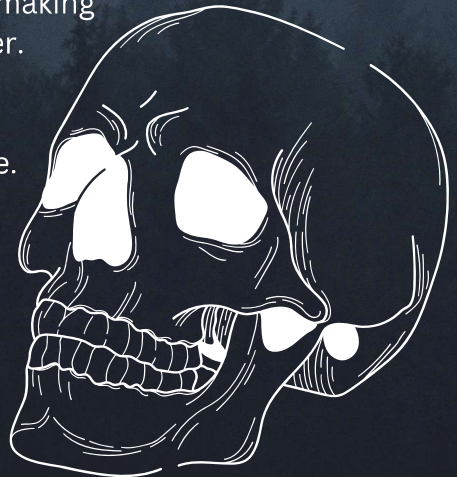
Death took it, spun it, and hid it somewhere in the ballroom, too quick for her to ever notice. And she was finally empty, the absence of her burdening soul making her feel a thousand times lighter.

She smiled at Death.

Death smiled at her.

The room fell into divine silence.

And just like that, they were strangers again.



"Only the strong can belong."

Cressida Cowell (author of *How to Train Your Dragon*)
Denneke

I sprint across the yard, my eyes streaming and my heart pounding in my chest. *How could they do this? Don't they love me the same as the others?* I think to myself, but I know the answer. It is because I am the weakest of my siblings. As I approach the cliff I spread my brown, speckled wings behind me. launching off the edge, I steadily beat them until I am high enough to catch a wind current that will carry me far away from this place. The clouds are thick above me and I can tell there will be rain soon, heavy rain. I shouldn't stay in the sky for long. I need to find shelter. I look back at the house behind me, so small now I can barely see it. Back down in that house are my sisters and my parents. They don't yet know I am gone and I can't predict how they'll react when they find out.



I look at the vast sea far below me and swoop down in a dive, spreading my wings at just the right moment so I don't hit the water, then glide along just above its surface. The salty sea spray hits my face, stinging my watery eyes. As I race along I remember what I overheard my parents saying just before I left. "Our son, that's who. He's the weakest of the three. He's the one who will have to go."

A CONSEQUENTIAL DRESS FITTING

Shelly

*A pink, tight, silky dress, to be made smaller for the young girl and lace to cover her bosoms. Less cleavage, the mother had said, she can't look like a wh*re at her cousin's wedding. Vienna had merely nodded, watching the girl stand uncomfortably in the dress, the mother pulling the fabric tighter. She'll lose it, she said, motioning to her, it's needed for next week Sunday. Vienna had only nodded, watching a situation she'd witnessed so many times play out again and again. They left her with a deposit, a needle and a thread—unaware of how many times she'd stabbed her finger out of mere frustration, not being able to do anything. She went through this process more than once a week. Young girls, mothers, a mission of a diet to look 'better' in a dress, and Vienna only nodded and complied, drawing more and more blood out of her finger each time until it grew white and went nearly numb. It all felt so deserving. She couldn't say a word—or perhaps she could, and simply just couldn't bring herself to in such a world.*

The table that had once been white now stood filled with colour, needles stabbed down into the afore painted wood and a few chairs encircling it, usually tucked in neatly. There are drawers, filled with her earnings and different supplies. Countless needle sizes and the whole rainbow and more of thread— a small strawberry-shaped cushion with pins with white, red and green circles on it, having been a gift for a

holiday years before. The small room feels big, just herself and the pink silk dress that day.

It hadn't always been so lonesome. She'd once worked with a team of ladies in seamstressing for an important company. She'd been a top employee, friends with everyone and had fallen for a coworker of hers. As a friend, of course. Her name had been Giselle, she was a radiant beauty with a soft smile that had taken the air out of Vienna. They'd work late nights together, chat over food bought from the street vendors of New York City and discuss every last detail of their thoughts. One night had evoked something, as Giselle professed to liking women and Vienna had been baffled. She shook her head, picked up her food as Giselle confessed that it was her she loved. Vienna had told her no, and grew to feel uncomfortable— so uncomfortable she'd left such company and started her own business, and all those friends slowly disconnected with her until there were none remaining. Vienna realized later on that she had liked Giselle too.

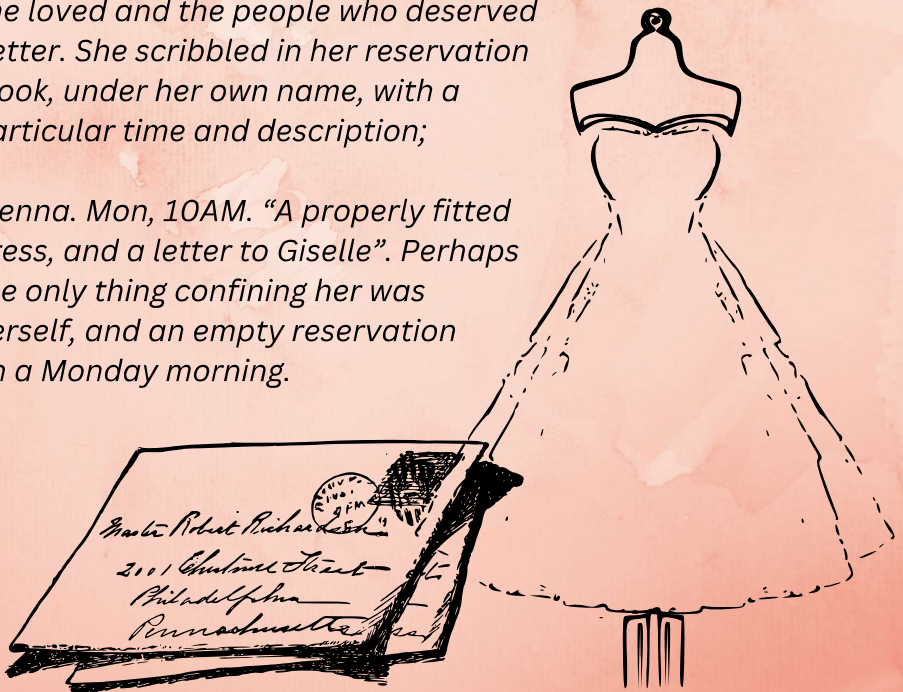
She'd dreamt of her own place for long, but this wasn't what she'd fantasized it'd be. As a CD of Mariah Carey's newest album played, she was yearning to be back with everyone else. Working alongside them, talking about their newest designs and the wish to be able to submit them somewhere. Though, the company had fallen 3 years before, filing for bankruptcy before closing down for good. Vienna didn't know where she'd ever find them again, and couldn't muster the courage to send them a letter in the mail— not even one to apologize to Giselle for being as blind as can be. She wished to, though, she hoped that at least that mattered enough.

A pound was heard at her door. A mother, a young girl and a bag with their requests. Vienna let them in once she'd bandaged her finger again, listening as the mother explained. It was all the same, though this time it was a yellow, black

and white checkered dress. Tighter, the mother asked, and a new zipper, going on to explain that it was cheap and had broken quite easily after purchasing. Vienna wondered why they were here if it was a cheap dress, perhaps an occasion of sorts. A theme that required it? She nodded, the girl getting into the dress and standing in front of the mirror, fear in her eyes as Vienna put in the pins to close it tighter. You look great, her mother said, the corner of the girl's lips curled upwards and nodded in agreement, though her eyes disagreed heavily. Vienna nodded, having put in all the pins she needed, requesting to know when it was for. For the next day, which had Vienna quite...frazzled, to say the least. She nodded, marking it down. They'd be able to pick it up the following day, a Monday. A deposit, and they left.

A small, one woman show. She couldn't witness it all on her own anymore. It was not worth it to hold back from the ones she loved and the people who deserved better. She scribbled in her reservation book, under her own name, with a particular time and description;

Vienna. Mon, 10AM. "A properly fitted dress, and a letter to Giselle". Perhaps the only thing confining her was herself, and an empty reservation on a Monday morning.



sadness

Chiara

The hammock swung back and forth in a rhythmic pattern, making the stars look like streaks across the sky. She would try to count them, but always lost her place and had to restart, on account of both the lull of the swing and counting the same star twice. Really, she needed something to do. Something to distract herself with. She was hiding in plain sight in the hammock, which was just outside the soft glow of her cottage. She wasn't ready to address it. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to.

Maybe, she thought, *I'll stay here. Forever. They'll leave without me. I probably wouldn't even have to hide for them to do that.*

She tried to think of what was happening before, but the memories would come up foggy, as they always did. She tried once again, picturing the little things. The cards sprawled across the table. The glow of the television on her father's face. The lively jazz that flitted in and out of the room and onto the porch.

The porch. Where she was sitting. Where he was sitting. Where they both were. She tried to think of their voices. His scratchy tone and the way he enunciated certain words, like *Paris* or *embarrassing*. Hers, the way it bubbled when she laughed and went soft when she would ask the gentler questions. She tried to think of what they were talking about before. It was most likely one of their usual debates; if the dress was gold or blue, Yanny or Laurel, Marvel or DC. It would always be them two, the two of them laughing or screeching at each other. She would always just listen, with

content so big it loomed in her chest and kept her warm. It was gone now. She was cold. And alone.

She wished she'd known. She wished she'd done something better.

She sat up, and tried to peer at the porch to see if the two were still there. If the aftermath had disturbed their peace or not. She couldn't see, and wondered if they'd gone inside. She sighed and went to lay back down. To be left alone with just her and the trees and the stars. They were always there, after all. They never seemed to care. But not before she saw it, moving through the darkness.

She sighed. There was her answer as to why the summer heat had suddenly grown cold.

"No," she called out to the shadow. She looked over her shoulder briefly to see if any other stranger was around to see. Thankfully, there was no one. "Please go away," she cried, the coldness intensifying. "Please leave me alone."

The voice was familiar as it crept up beside her. She closed her eyes tight, trying to will it away, but it was no use. She could feel the hand around her shoulder. "Are you not excited to see me?" it asked.

"No," she said. "I don't want you here. I never did."

"Darling, don't be like that."

"Well, how else can I be? You've ruined this night already. You don't need to pay me a visit whenever it happens." Though this wasn't the whole of the truth. She was waiting for it to show up, to come and comfort her when there was no one else. She breathed in the black of its soul. It felt like home.

"How did you do it this time?" it asked. "How did you push them away?"

She shuddered away from it, though when she did, it reached up and stroked her cheek, its cold hand drawing circles on her skin. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You never do."

"Then leave me alone." Her eyes were clogged with the cloudy vision of tears. Her sadness suddenly became

overwhelming, and she could feel a sob building up in her chest.

“Please,” she said again, “Just leave.”

“You have no one else,” it reminded her softly. “I am the only one.”

It stretched its shadowy arms over her shoulders, and pulled her in close. She didn't have enough energy in her to resist any further. “I am the only one,” it repeated, voice barely a whisper. And she began to cry, great heaving sobs and rivers of tears pouring down her face, staining her pink cheeks with inks of black.

When she finally managed to take control over her sobs, she wiped her tears, and saw that it had never moved from its position of comfort. She turned to it, trying to choke out her words. “I don't understand,” she said. The question usually clawed at her, though she never spoke it aloud. “Why me?”

“My darling,” her Sadness whispered. It rose gracefully from the hammock, towering over her as she managed to face it. She stared it down, the first time in years. “I told you before. I am the only one.”

