



Why We Write



The creative writing fragments, flash fiction pieces, poetry, short stories and rants contained in these pages were created by writers aged 9-17 attending the Creative Writing classes offered by Centauri Arts, between September 2023 and January 2024.

Cover by Abigail Meijerink, Digital Art Class

CENTAURI ARTS

Sleeping Giants

They sleep silently, except for the thumping of their hearts, which moves the earth and reverberates through our own. When their time is over, ours will be too. We are entwined inexorably by a promise that *we are breaking...*

“Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump...”

Maia’s heart pounded as she chased through the serpentine forest, around a mountain and over a crystal clear river. Like all giants, her heart dwarfed that of humans, and this matched her towering size as well as her capacity for kindness. But this was a double-edged sword because giant-folk like Maia could more easily be taken advantage of.

Maia came to the end of the forest, where she leaned against a mountain to rest. She shook her head gracefully, and her mantle of hair spread like a waterfall in wide arcs, cooling her off. All around her, other giants roamed in their own chosen places. Jack Frost and his clan of ice giants stayed to the north. Ember, Jack Frost’s fiery polar opposite, stayed clear of him and his ilk and chose to reside near the equator where it was her preferred temperature. Owing to Jack Frost and Ember’s long-simmering feud, all the other fire giants and frost giants stayed away from each other as well. Loam, an innocent and good-natured hunk of earth, carelessly stumbled all over the world. His earthy skin and clumsy demeanour set him apart from the others.



He was the only earth giant who actually walked on land, the other earth giants were deep under the crust in various unconscious forms. And Maia, who was a wanderer at heart and was happy to follow trails of forests through any land, was unique as well. Many of the giants had places to settle but Maia's home was wherever she happened to be. Below the surface of glistening lakes and vast oceans, water giants lurked, coming up frequently as waves. Above, the airborne giants soared and interlaced the clouds. The giants had all been roaming since time began, never stopping to rest. And now they were tired and wished to repose. Maia saw this in every giant's well-worn features.

The giants decided to hold a meeting to brainstorm ideas for how to relieve their tiredness.

"I think we must go to sleep," said Loam in a deep, gravelly voice that seemed to resonate from not only his cavernous mouth, but the numerous cracks that covered his turf-covered body.

"What is sleep?" asked a young water giant whose see-through skin twinkled mischievously in the setting sun.

"Sleep is when you close your eyes and rest for a long, long time," responded Loam carefully. The lumbering Earth Giant beamed, pleased with his wise explanation.

"The earth giant is right, we must sleep," agreed Ember, as she let loose a fiery yawn. The other giants nodded their consent, even Jack Frost, who tried to go against Ember in any way possible.

"What do you think, Maia?" Loam asked expectantly.

"I agree Loam, but to avoid sleeping forever we must all try to wake up in ten thousand years," replied Maia, breaking her pensive look.

The other giants agreed with the forest giant's comment and they withdrew from the council to seek out comfortable places to sleep. Jack Frost and his cold comrades submerged themselves in the icy waters of the north and south poles, where they became what humans call icebergs. Ember and the other fire Giants took up residence in Hawaiian tropical islands. In their volcano form they became known as the Ring of Fire and struck fear and awe in the hearts of many. The water spirits settled into flowing streams and meandering rivers, and the air spirits built pillowing nests in the clouds. Loam settled his massive bulk in an empty lake bed.

Maia hesitated and was the last giant to settle down. She took in her beautiful surroundings and decided to stay at her

mountain. Her waterfall hair flowed down the mountainside and joined the river below. The forest that sprouted from her shoulder and twined around her left thigh joined the woodland she had been chasing. Maia closed her eyes after one last glance and fell into a dreamless sleep.

It was that choice - to remain by her mountain - that decided her fate.

Maia was the first of the giants to awaken. For a brief yet anguished moment she could not see. After rubbing away the millennia of earth and plants plastering over her eyes, Maia was able to open them, and her surroundings slowly came into focus. The scene around her was exactly as it had been when she had fallen asleep: the same playful forest, familiar mountain and sparkling river that fed from her waterfall hair. She sighed in relief and watched the sunrise paint the sky in pinkish hues. However, in the distance something shone silver where a treeline *should* have been. Curious, she pulled herself from the earth and rose to her full, towering height. Maia squinted and she could make out an army of skyscrapers that was eating the corners of wilderness. Suddenly, she felt caged inside her green space, and she suffered the ache of being alone. Whatever alien land lay beyond the horizon, Maia knew that she did not belong. The statuesque giant was crestfallen; her familiar surroundings no longer provided comfort and instead only reminded her of what the horizon had once been. The wildernesses she fondly remembered were just will-o-the wisps. She slumped bitterly against the mountain and wondered where the other giants were.

Maia watched anxiously as a rusty truck rolled noisily through her forest, spewing plumes of noxious gas. A tiny man walked out of the truck, and with a few swift axe swings he felled a palm tree that had been standing for the better part of a century. Maia felt as if she were being cut down herself, and an agonising pang of loss welled up inside her as the tree crumpled to the ground with a dull and final thud. She turned her gaze from the fallen tree to the little man who had caused such sorrow, and something inside her snapped. Maia rose silently and her large eyes, wet with sorrow, met the man's ignorant visage. The man's jaw dropped in shock and with a surprisingly blood-curdling scream he rushed to his truck. Maia sighed, pained with the knowledge that nothing could make the tree whole, and nothing could heal her newly hurt heart.

As Maia ran haphazardly over the endless rows of towers and cubes, little people fled and screamed in terror. She felt guilty as she ruined home after home. Was what she was doing as hurtful as what the little man had done? Maia glanced at her reflection on the side of a shiny building. She saw herself through the lens of a human, and she saw a monster. Startled, she shook like a frightened child. But instead of being afraid of some unknown evil, she was scared of herself. Maia had thought she had known herself, but now she was having doubts. She called out for her fellow giants as the tiny people scurried beneath and all around her like an army of fire ants preparing to strike.

"I'm here," hollered a voice from the distance. Maia was drawn to the familiar gravelly rasp like moths to a flame. Ignoring the tiny people, she cut a path through several towns and a thick stand of trees before she came to the source. For a few moments there was utter silence and Maia wondered if she had walked in vain, but then the earth beside her began to creak and moan. An entire town shuddered and a root-tangled arm reached up from the bowels of the earth. It was followed by a gargantuan body and two giant stumps for legs.

"L-Loam is that you? What happened to you?" gasped Maia, goosebumps traversing the full length of her spine. The giant she had known for so long was barely recognizable. His skin was paved a dull grey. A city covered him. From his cracks, toxic fumes oozed. The little earth that remained was covered in crops that seemed to be eating away at his loamy skin. The only aspect that remained the same, besides the distinctive drawl, were those kind brown eyes. It was enough to remind Maia that, despite everything, Loam was still her old friend. They embraced and for an instant, time stood still.

All around them, the other giants began to rouse from their 10,000 year slumber. Like Loam, they emerged different than before, and Maia had a hard time recognizing them. The water giants were covered in discarded plastics and forgotten fishing nets, and underneath these trappings, their once see-through skin was cloudy with chemicals; the air giants were filthy and choking with factory fumes and car emissions; and Jack Frost and the other snow giants were melting away, piece by piece, with many missing entire limbs. Although the fire giants and Maia were relatively unscathed, they too were changed: Ember and many of her kind were dormant, and their fiery hair flickered on-and-off in an endless

tug-of-war, while Maia's own heart was playing its own tug of war. Were the tiny people monsters or were they?

In the end, the giants decided to hold a meeting in their old council spot to discuss what was to happen next. They plodded carefully back to Maia's patch of wilderness, afraid of hurting the tiny people that fled their thundering footsteps. But Ember in her fiery rage deliberately stomped on buildings as she walked.

"How did the humans harm *you*, Ember? Your dormancy has nothing to do with the little people!" said Jack Frost, who adored calling out Ember's faults.

"Well, I don't like what they did to everyone," hissed Ember.

"Ah, so Ember does care about others, how surprising!" Jack Frost retorted with a sly smirk. Ember glared at him and stomped on, ignoring the screams of the little people as they ran from her. At last, Maia reached her mountain and she sighed in relief; she hadn't harmed a single human on the way over. It wasn't that she cared so much about them, but that she didn't want to lower herself to the same level as the man who had cut down one of her kindred trees.

"Many aspects of our world have changed since we first fell asleep. There is nowhere to roam and very little space to be comfortable. Everywhere we go, we hurt tiny people. We do not belong anymore. We gathered here today to come up with possible solutions," Loam bellowed with a wide smile, exceedingly proud of his preamble. Maia smiled and thought to herself that some things always remain the same.

"Does that mean we have to go to sleep again?" asked a little fire giant who was on the brink of tears. His mother shushed him immediately.

"Well that's a possible solution, we could all fall asleep and surrender to this harsh world we have awoken to. Any more ideas?" inquired Loam seriously.

The little fire giant burst into hot lava tears, and his mother glared angrily at Loam.

"We should fight the humans and burn their homes. We will take back what's ours!" shrieked Ember.

"Is this land really ours anymore? It's morphed into something unrecognisable. And we ourselves are different and broken. If we fight the little people, we risk being hurt further, not just by them but on account of our own guilt for hurting others," moaned Jack Frost, caressing what remained of his melted arm.

“Alright, now that's two ideas: start a war against the tiny people or surrender and go back to sleep. Should we have a vote now or are there other suggestions?” ventured Loam.

“Well, perhaps we could leave and find somewhere new to roam?” said Maia nervously as she fiddled with a strand of her waterfall hair.

“Interesting, where would we go and how would we get there?” asked Loam kindly.

“Maybe we could...um,” stuttered Maia, the stars shining brightly overhead.

“Go on,” encouraged Loam.

“Well, up in the stratosphere there has to be somewhere we can roam... Somewhere where we can belong, where there's enough space for us; maybe on a star or a new planet...” Maia mumbled softly, all the while staring up at the brilliant night sky.

“And how can we get there?” Loam prompted.

“I don't really know,” sighed Maia, blushing crimson like a field of roses in Spring.

“We could try to fly everyone away. There are many of us and we would be willing to try,” offered Ciela, the leader of the air giants. The other giants agreed with this idea at once, excited about the idea of flying to a new world.

By twilight the giants were ready to take their leave. One air giant was assigned to every flightless one, since there were many more air giants than there were any other giant kinds. Maia's giant was called Gale and he was kind and comforting. As she took his hand that felt like soft, fluffy clouds, she felt safe.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he began to rise, starting to pull her with him. All around her, the other giants were preparing to leave, and she saw sadness within them but also hope. The stars glimmered expectantly, lighting up the human buildings below with a bittersweet glow. Maia wondered who lived in them and what would happen to all the tiny people when she and her fellow giants left.

“Yes, I'm ready,” whispered Maia, focusing on Gale and the stars above. As Gale began to rise higher, Maia felt as light as air and finally free. She tentatively let go of her worries and embraced her new found freedom.

“Wait!” came an urgent but barely audible plea.

Reluctantly, Maia and Gale drifted back to earth. Maia's own weight was briefly heavy as Gale let go of her hand. How dare

someone delay their departure, after all the centuries of waiting? All the worries Maia had let go of when she had flown, settled in their old hiding spots. The giants searched for the owner of the voice but they found no one and decided to leave.

"I'm here!" called the tiny yet clear voice that appeared to come from below the giant's feet. Maia knelt down and spotted a human girl who stared up at them all, not in fear or amazement, but persistence. The other giants gathered around her and Ember sighed in exasperation.

"Don't go!" the girl cried, and the giants stared in astonishment.

"Why?" asked Jack Frost, his gaze fixing on his missing limb.

"Because we need you, all of you!" exclaimed the girl as she brushed a tear from her glistening eyes. Maia wondered how the tiny people needed her if they saw her as a monster.

"Without you we would die. We need icebergs and glaciers to create and maintain rivers and water bodies," continued the girl, and Jack Frost looked away in a shiver of shame. Maia reached a hand down and the girl hesitantly climbed onto it. Maia lifted the girl in her palm so that all the giants could see her. "We need air and trees to breathe, water to drink and volcanoes to create islands. We need earth to settle our homes. You regenerate these resources and our world will crumble if you leave," continued the girl as she stared at the giants.

"And why should we help you, when your kind has ruined the world we knew? Your kind thinks only of yourselves. Look at us for a second, look at what you have done to us. Jack Frost is melting away, naive Loam is slowly suffocating in the layers of filth you cover him with. The water giants are ensnared with garbage and the air giants are weakening. And even untouched Maia is losing trees. And me, well, seeing my friends hurting is taking its toll!" screamed Ember, lava spurting from her mouth and just missing the little girl. She fell back into Maia's hand and the Amazon giant cradled her fallen form. Jack Frost stared at Ember angrily, but he was secretly touched that she had mentioned him as a *friend*.

"We're better than this Ember, that's why. It's in our nature to help others. Why would we purposely kill the tiny people? If we did, we'd be better than them. We would hurt them just as much as they hurt us, and if we leave now then we'll always have regret." said

Maia, not knowing where the words came from. Why did she speak for the people who were hurting her?

"If we stay we will never have another chance to leave. We would be asleep and who knows what would happen in that time. Besides, the air giants are weakening. Some of them are losing the ability to fly as they are weighed down by pollution. It's now or never," replied Ember, and the air giants nodded their heads sadly.

"If we leave now we would spread the pollution because we ourselves carry it with us," remarked Loam as he looked down at his chest that was criss-crossed with countless cities and roads.

"Maybe this is still our home, even if it has its baggage. Perhaps our fate is to live for others," said Jack Frost as he looked around the earth with new eyes. The giants began to argue among themselves. Ember told everyone that they could potentially be hurt if they stayed, and many of the young giants burst into tears at her horrific description. Their parents began to scream at Ember to stop. Ultimately, Maia, Loam, Jack Frost and other like minded giants such as Gale persuaded the rest that they should remain.

"But they can't keep treating us like this," replied Maia as she gently nudged the little girl who lay motionless in her palm.

"Little girl, wake up," she whispered, and slowly the girl rose and stared at Maia gratefully.

"We have decided to stay," bellowed Loam.

"But you must promise to respect our sleeping forms," said Maia, and the little girl nodded.

"Take care of the waters, don't pollute us with fishing nets and your garbage. You're hurting us," said a water giant who leaned out from a river and looked straight into the girl's eyes. The water giant's eyes were empty voids that told stories of broken promises and false hopes. The girl nodded quickly and looked away from the water giant's eyes that haunted her with the consequences of forgotten promises.

"Reduce polluting us with factory fumes, you need us more than you know," spoke Ciela sadly.

"Save energy, we are slowly melting away and there are many things you can do," sighed Jack Frost.

"Give me some room to feel free. I am covered by your towers and endless crops. I am suffocating," said Loam as he wrung his hands as if to get rid of the pollution that engulfed him.

"Promise to protect my friends, or else," cut in Ember, giving the girl a menacing look. The girl gulped and nodded.

“And please, for every tree you cut down, plant a new one. Promise me to spread the word to the rest of your kind. Promise to take care of us as we take care of you.” concluded Maia. The girl looked around at the hopeful faces of the giants resigned to their fate.

“I promise to take care of you and I will try my best to spread the word,” said the girl slowly and thoughtfully, her voice vibrating with emotion. And with those small words the giants placed their worries and baggage in the girl. And finally they were free, because the giants could not lie and they did not comprehend that others do. They believed that girl infinitely, they had no doubt in her promise.

“Well, go on then, we are soon going to sleep,” said Maia as she gently placed the girl down. The girl scampered off and as promised she passed on her message. “I don't think we ever knew what her name was,” grunted Loam and the others shrugged their shoulders.

By now it was sunrise and graceful streaks of colour danced across the sky. It would be the giants' last sunrise and they savoured it instead of despising it. And then they lay down in their original resting places. Jack Frost reassured himself that his parts would be restored and he and his folk dived down in the icy waters of the north and south pole. Ember was resigned to whatever would come and placed herself at the head of the ring of fire with her fire giants. Loam rolled into his lake bed. The air and water giants drifted off to their respective spots. Maia lay against her mountain and her waterfall again joined the river. Her forest blended into the scenery. In the corner of her eye she saw a man cutting down one of her trees. But she dispelled the image from her head and settled down. Maia put her trust in the humans and she slept untethered and free, just as if she were flying once more. With the promise in mind they all closed their eyes.

The giants have been asleep now, for many years. You can still hear their hearts beating in rushing waterfalls, and grass rustling in the wind. In roaring waves and shuddering volcanic eruptions.

“Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump.”

They're with us even if you can't see them. But some of their heart beats are growing fainter as we break our word. And now it's up to us to decide what happens next.

Myah Rathi Litteljohn

COLONY

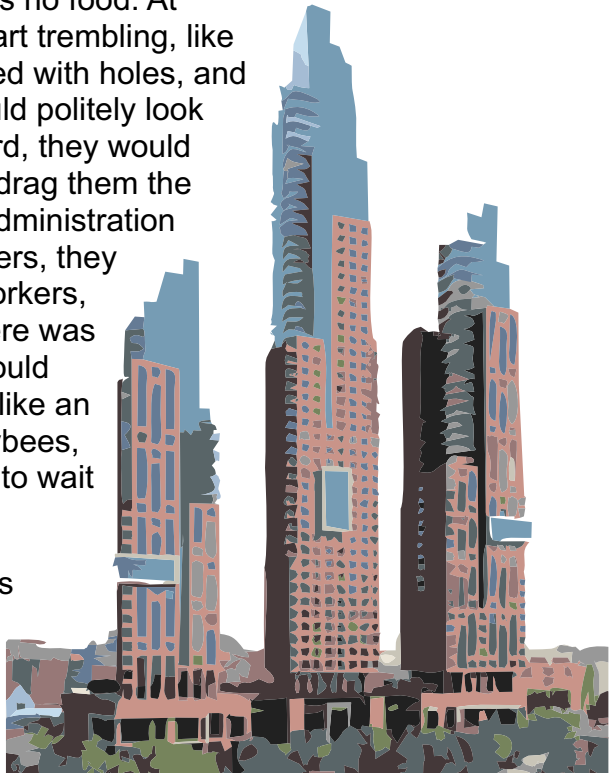
You were at work. You were waiting in a line. You had been waiting in a line for a very long time.

The administration was an eruption of a building, a pointed tower facing up with two others flanking it, melded together like a spearhead, a blank, cold, immovable spearhead of death, like some god had decided to drop their spear there, and the earth had risen to reclaim it and failed.

The building had death written over it, in the shadows spraying from it, painted on the walls, tucked in corners, glimmering brightly in the morning sun. There was a death here. There was a death here. And it was hungry.

The workers swarmed like honeybees to their queen, patient, unyielding, emotionless as they walked towards their hive, standing in lines for hours, sometimes even days, the midnight sun beating down on them. There was no food. At times, a worker would start trembling, like a sinking ship pockmarked with holes, and collapse. The others would politely look away. If there was a guard, they would pick up that worker, and drag them the kilometres towards the administration building. Unlike the workers, they did not eat. Unlike the workers, they did not dream. If there was no guard, the workers would step over the fallen one, like an ant surrounded by honeybees, and they would continue to wait in line.

The oldest workers had been waiting for years. No one knew what was in the administration building. No one knew what they



were working for, just that they were working. Their clothes had holes, and their hands were dirty. They had to be working for someone, and that someone was in the administration building, weren't they?

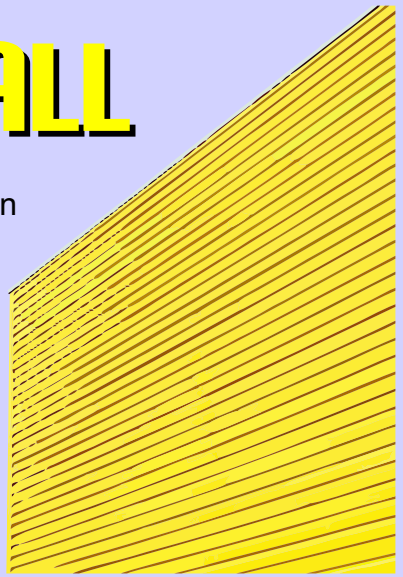
Sometimes they were left alone with the midnight sun, the one that made their vision darken to nothing, shapes emerging from the fog. The dead sun, you called it. Others called it the stolen sun. Either way, they were right, although you didn't know it then.

Juliet Loverro



CLARION CALL

There is a large, box-shaped structure in the clearing. This is strange for two reasons: Lorelei is the only one there, had only ever been the only person who would dare to wander around instead of sticking to a quiet little place to wait out the end. The second is that the structure is yellow, caution tape yellow, an inorganic 3D rectangle, practically begging Lorelei to investigate.



She does. She doesn't know why she approaches this caution-tape building, but she does. The structure is unusual close-up: what Lorelei had assumed was solid-yellow appeared more like a fencing, surrounding –protecting? -- a smaller, butter-coloured building, shabbily painted and worn down, as if abandoned for years.

Something that wasn't possible. Lorelei passed this way, only a few days ago, stepped across the creek that had once flowed through the clearing before, on her way to the small house she will briefly call home. The creek is still here, somewhere. She can only hear it, a strangled burble from close to the structure, the ground turned to mud and slippery under its boots.

It doesn't seem as though the building has formed naturally. More as though some giant, or a severely far-sighted god, has dropped their—not their house, maybe what could have passed as a chest, then left it, not even realizing it was gone until later.

Whatever the case, Lorelei does not feel particularly interested in it. The most annoying thing about it is that it blocks her shortcut through to her house. The brightly coloured warning sign of a fence is probably channelling the long-forgotten usage of electricity, and Lorelei also happens to not be interested in becoming barbecue.

Utilizing her self-preservation instinct is how she lived through the Resurrection –which wasn't really a resurrection at all, just invited more problems to a planet that was already boiling through its core, orbiting around a dead star for what must have been two thousand years. Or a million. Lorelei isn't familiar with the old standard measurements. She only ever needed to count to fifty, and that was only if she was bored.

The Resurrection was supposed to fix the old standard, and the dead star, and the planet boiling to its core. Now Lorelei has to grind Resurrectionist skeletons to dust, people who believed so wholly in their prophecy that they had died for it.

Give everyone a prophecy, SHE had said. Give everyone a prophecy. What's the worst that could happen?

And that is why Lorelei is now trudging her way through a swamp to her not-home, soaked in mud and bone dust, ignoring the offensively yellow building that has been coughed up from the ground, still slimy in places. Better to break her prophecy than live through it.

Better than Wini, anyway.

Not that Lorelei cares about her. She could go ahead and orbit a planet infested with parasites for all she cared. There is a reason why Lorelei is going around crushing skeletons, sipping at weak tea and trying to wash all the mud from her boots, and Winifred is dead, anyway, so it doesn't matter.

Probably. Or she is licking the boots of the Colony for more scraps. Again. Not something she cares about.

Lorelei tosses up a rude gesture at the building –why not? Isn't like it has a soul, anyway, and it's getting in the way –and turns around to go the long way around, through the steppes, thinking angry thoughts about dumb people and aggressively yellow buildings.

Unlike good neighbours, the stupidly yellow structure does not move away. It does not cease its terrible yellowness, or the burbling of the strangled creek. It has also decided to hiss, similar

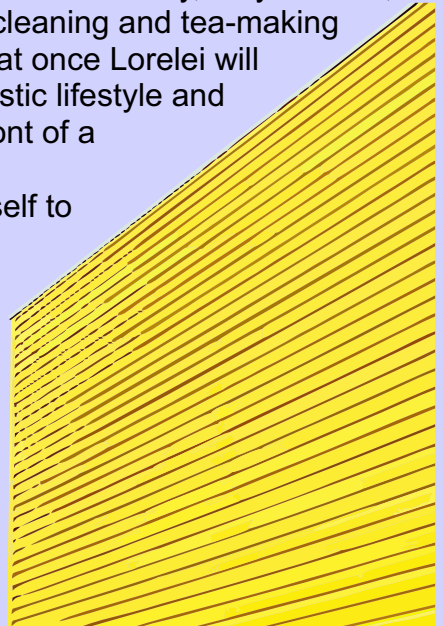
to water hitting hot metal, like it is going to explode. Maybe it is.

She wonders if she should do something about the building. Find dynamite, maybe? Dynamite has become like candy in the trails of the broken world, easy to find, supposed to stop the skeletons before everyone realized steel and stomping was much much better against reinforced bone and abandoned them. Evolution, probably. The skeletons, she means. These days, Lorelei doesn't have much trouble with them. They know to stay out of her way, like ants scuttling around a schoolyard, sticking to the corners so a stray footstep won't crush them flat. Of course, Lorelei could do much worse than crush them. She has made a habit of it for some time, the ways she can crush skeletons, and now it is just life, walking around from place to place, making tea or hot chocolate when she can, cleaning her boots of the muck and slime, ridding Resurrectionists of their distorted afterlife one corpse at a time.

Until the building. It always leads back to the building, doesn't it? The thing that was never there before, suddenly bursting to life and distorting the surroundings, fitting and not-fitting at the same time. A nuisance, a hassle, a danger, a warning, all packed in one with its violent yellow hue. Lorelei can't feign interest in her mundane lifestyle for much longer, because even though indifference guarantees survival, she has always been that slightest bit more interested than she should be. Someday, maybe soon, maybe not, the normalities of boot-cleaning and tea-making will be lost, slow, then fast, then all at once Lorelei will drop away from her simple survivalistic lifestyle and find herself, bored and itching, in front of a yellow building.

She won't be able to convince herself to walk away.

Juliet Loverro



Writing Fragment

I tried again and again to force the ignition in this putrid vehicle, trying to escape the mess that would surely ensue if I failed to do so.

With the help of a jimmy I'd fashioned out of a paperclip, I was finally able to force the truck to start, awakening the engine with a heavy roar. Looking through the rearview mirror, I saw him - the one with red marks on his all-white mask - usher the group towards my vehicle.

I had pictures of most of their faces at this point, hopefully enough to put each of them away.

I reached for my weapon, then hesitated, a Fed from the city with an itchy trigger finger wouldn't go down well with a county jury. I stepped on the gas pedal just as the first bullet flew by my left ear. Recklessly, I made my way along the dirt road that surrounded the complex, the sky above me covered by a thick tree canopy. *That must have helped them avoid law enforcement*, I thought to myself.

As I finally made it to a highway, I looked behind me. No one.

I must have lost them. Hardly surprising, as the members I'd observed weren't exactly in peak physical condition, and they were smart enough not to chase me by car at risk of drawing attention to themselves, and revealing their licence plates. I imagined that as I gathered my breath, they were frantically destroying any evidence of their presence. But it wouldn't be enough. It couldn't be.

My radio buzzed. "Hello? Sarah?"

I picked up the device from my waist. "I'm here."

"Did you get it?" the voice on the other end asked, the tone an uneasy mix of anxious and hopeful.

"Affirmative. I found them," I replied.

George



To Become A SOLDIER

I wake up, my long hair sprawled across my bed, blankets twisted, again. I ask myself if I want to get out of bed, I tell myself no, but begrudgingly start to sit up when I remember, today's my eighteenth birthday! I get out of bed, practically leaping. I walk over to my closet and take out the one practical outfit that I have been hand sewing the past month. I get ready with a spring in my step around the house. What am I getting ready for you ask? Today I turn 18 which means that I am finally old enough to join the army. I've always wanted to be in the army, to protect my friends and family from the raiders that come to our city every few years, as well as make enough money to help provide for my family.



As I'm leaving I hear my brother Myron say, "Are you really going to try and join the army?"

"Yes and I'm really not in the mood so you can just go away, yeah?"

When I arrive at the recruitment tent, I see a young man, barely older than me, looking like he wants to fall asleep. I walk over and state my name.

"Andromeda Diakos."

He says in a disinterested voice, "Hold on. Last name?"

"Diakos"

"First name?"

"Andromeda"

"Sorry but I can't let you join."

"But I'm 18!"

"Sorry, no girls."

"I have worked just as hard as those bozos over there!"

“Ma’am, do I need to call the guards?”

In a voice so disappointed I can barely recognise it, I reply, “No.”

After that, I could feel my hopes and dreams of ever being in the army slipping out of my grasp. As I walk away, I’m almost in tears when he whispers, “Wait, if you really want, I can let you in, but it’ll cost ya.”

I whisper back, “How much?”

“,000 dollars.”

5,000 dollars!? That’s a lot of money! It would take years to save up that much money!

In the distance I hear some people talking and I can’t help but listen in.

“I don’t know how the hell we’re supposed to find that magic vest for the emperor.”

“And in this amount of time?”

“But it is 8,000 dollars if we find it and bring it to him within a week, so we need to find it.”

“Yeah that’s true.”

I knew what I had to do, but I didn’t know where to start.

I was thinking, when I remembered that my mom told me a story about the tunic, but I couldn’t remember it. If I could figure it out, get the tunic, and bring it to the emperor, then I could use the money to get into the army.

I walk to my house, and look for my mom. When I spot her, I shout “Mom!”

“Yes honey?”

“Can you tell me a story?”

“Sure, let me think of one to tell you...”

“I have one in mind. The one about Sororah’s tunic of immortality.”

“Do you remember that one?”

“Yeah. There once was a girl named Sororah. She was just an average citizen of Athens but one day she was walking home from the market when Elias, the son of Clotho, saw her in the street and decided to talk to her. They fell in love, got married, and eventually had a daughter. Because Elias was the son of a goddess, he was immortal, but she was not. Elias’s mother made Sororah a tunic that would make her immortal so that they could live in peace forever. They lived happily for many years until one night someone came into their bedroom and murdered Sororah

while she was getting dressed and had her tunic off. Elias was devastated, and was said to have died of a broken heart. It is said that before he died he hid the tunic in one of Clotho's temples. He only told one person where he hid it, their daughter Evangeline. The knowledge of where he hid the tunic was passed down through Evangeline's family."

"Where does her descendant live now?"

"Umm...I think it was just north of Lake Evinos. If you need a map there's one downstairs."

"Ok."

I rush downstairs and find the village on a map. I pack a small bag and go to bed.

The next morning I wake up and get ready. I head towards the door and set out for the village.

I arrive in the village and ask around about the tunic and most people know nothing until an older man says that he doesn't know where to find it but his wife does. He takes me to his hut. The woman calls her daughter over.

"Danae!"

She walks into the room, looks me up and down with a strange look on her face that I hadn't seen before, and turns to her mom.

"Yea mom?"

"This is..."

"Andromeda. Nice to meet you."

"Danae. Nice to meet you too."

"Andromeda is trying to find the tunic of immortality. I would go but I'm too old now. Instead of going myself, I'm sending you to go with her."

Danae's face lights up.

"The way there has been ingrained in my brain so many times I could get there in my sleep but I've never actually been there myself!" Danae looks over at the window. "It's getting late. Maybe Andromeda should stay the night and then we'll leave in the morning. She can stay in my room."

"Sure. I'm making Kofta tonight so I'll make a little extra."

"Ok"

Danae gestures me into her room. "So where are you from, Andromeda?"

"A little village just inland of the west coast. I would say and

you but we're already here." Danae and I chuckle a bit.

"My mom says I have to get married to this guy. I don't even know his name and I'm supposed to marry him in just over a month. All I really want is to go on adventures and live my days out in some faraway land."

"Back home my mom thinks I should marry rich and early but I don't think I want to."

I point to the pendant on her neck

"What does that say?"

"Oh this? It says "stronger together" It's a family heirloom. I inherited it from my mom last year."

"That's really sweet"

"It is."

She nods her head to the comb in my hair, "What about the comb in your hair?"

"My mother made it when I was little. It's in the shape of a bird because nothing could get in my way. No matter what I would always fly high. Even if she was the only one who thought so...that is after my brother was taken."

"Oh. That sounds very bittersweet. I hope one day I find someone who will lift me up like that."

Danae's mother calls from the other room, "Supper's ready!"

"Ok mom, we're coming!"

We walk over and sit down. Danae sits down across from me.

"Dig in!" Danae's mom proclaims.

I lift my fork to my mouth in anticipation. I get a small taste on the tip of my tongue and remember how much I love Kofta. I shove it in my mouth and it's divine. I feel the flavours perfectly mix together and make me forget about all of my problems for a moment. All of a sudden, I realize I've finished my food. Danae's Mother says "I guess you liked it?"

"Yea haha"

"I made a bit too much extra. Want some more?"

"Yes please"

"See, she says please."

Sounding annoyed, Danae says,

"Mom it was one time"

"And that's one too many."

Danae's dad cuts in.

"It's getting late. You two should get to bed. Danae, why

don't you show Andromeda to the bathroom.”

“Ok dad.”

Danae shows me to the bathroom, and I get ready, and settle into bed. It takes me a bit longer than usual, but eventually I fall asleep.

In the morning I wake up to the sound of whispers.

“Andromeda. Andromeda! Wake up!”

I groan, not yet having the energy to get up, but after about 5 minutes the morning fog in my brain clears and I get up. The morning is a rush but by about 8 am we're off.

I ask Danae “So where do we go?”

“This way. The temple's not too far. About half a day's walk from here.”

“Ok. I guess we better get going.”

We walk in silence for a moment, but the silence is quickly broken.

“So what happened to your brother?”

I think back to that dreadful day and shed a tear.

“When I was younger, My brother Adonis was like a best friend to me. He would always help me up if I fell down, share his desserts with me, and made me feel appreciated. Me, My siblings, and our friends would play for hours whenever we had time. When I was about eight, I remember playing tag with my 3 brothers Eustace, Myron, and Adonis, and some of our friends in the courtyard. All of a sudden we hear screams. We all ran to the back door to the house and saw what was in our minds a “scary man” at the front door, but it was really just a raider. He was trying to come in and take everything but my mom and dad were standing with some of dad's spears between him and our house. Suddenly his eyes snap to us. The man says to my parents. “Maybe you'll be more cooperative if we take something you love.” My mom cries out, “No! We'll let you have it!” The man replies, “You know what? Too late.” He comes around to the back and screams at us. We all scream in terror and he comes up to me. Adonis jumps in the way and says to the man, “Don't you hurt her! I'm not scared of you old man!” The man replies, “Ok. I won't take her. I'll take you instead.” I scream no but he grabs Adonis and puts him over his shoulder. Adonis screams and kicks at the man but it's no use. He throws Adonis in his cart and my parents run after them but the cart is already moving too fast. We searched and searched for the next 2 years, but we came across dead end after dead end and figured he was gone.”

Danae looks at me with sympathy and gives me a warm hug. Suddenly I hear a rickety buzzing sound. I look behind me and it's a cheap and beat up horse drawn cart roaring toward us. They just barely stop in time to not hit us. There's a bunch of guys inside laughing. One guy says to the group, "Well look what we have here."

They all chuckle and he turns to me.

"What's that in your hair? I want it." I snap back at him

"Well you can't have it it's mine"

"How about that necklace?"

Danae flips him off.

"Ooh feisty one. Then I'll just have to take it. Boys, grab them."

A bunch of guys hop off the truck. The first one throws a punch at me and I just barely dodge it, but not before smelling the faint smell of sweat. After that, me and Danae work together to pick them off one by one until one of them throws a rock at Danae so in the heat of the moment I jump in front of Danae and black out.

I wake up, and look around. I see Danae. Her face has turned pale. She looks worried. I sit up and whisper in her ear, "It's gonna be ok. We're gonna get out of this. I'll be right here with you the whole time. Ok?"

She mutters back in a still worried voice, "Ok. I trust you." The leader gestures to two of his buddies to come over. One of them grabs Danae's arm and she winces. He ignores her and starts walking her to the group of buildings that I assume is their base of operations. Seconds later, the other one grips my arm and I wince as well. Again, he ignores me and brings me towards Danae. He wacks my back with his hand.

"Go faster!"

I speed up and catch up to Danae. Danae starts talking, but all I can hear is "Hey are y-" before the soldier holding her arm cuts her off.

"Quiet!" he hisses.

I imagine she was trying to ask if I was ok, and so I nod my head subtly enough that the soldiers don't notice, but enough that she does. Even though it's only about a minute of walking, it feels like an hour in the blazing sun with these ruthlessly loud and obnoxious raiders breathing down our necks.

We finally reach the holding cells, and are each thrown into adjacent cells. When they shut the doors, it sounds like gunshots.

They lock the doors and all but one man leaves to do something else. The man who stayed behind sits down at a small desk, keys in hand.

After sitting and watching Danae and I talk through the bars for hours, the man leaves for a few minutes, and comes back with some food for us. He slams the food through the holes in our doors, says, "Here's your dinner." and sits back down. We each bring our dishes to the beds we moved to be right beside each other, save for the bars. We sit in silence for a few minutes while we finish our food. Danae turns to me and asks, "What do you think is gonna happen to us?"

I think for a moment, not knowing if I should say what I really think, or if I should be optimistic so as not to alarm her. I reply hesitantly, "I don't know. We're probably going to be traded in some way."

Danae leans her head on my shoulder through the bars and says "If we are, hopefully we'll be traded together."

I lean my head on hers and whisper "I hope so too."

After the journey we've had so far, we are both exhausted and fall asleep on either side of the bars.

In the morning, we are woken up at the crack of dawn by a young man banging on the doors of the cells. The man who was watching us last night is gone.

"Get up everyone!! It's time for breakfast!"

He slides trays with some disgusting porridge, some water, and some bitter bananas. As he passes my cell to give me my food I get the subtle feeling that I recognise him. I try really hard to remember where I know him from, when all of a sudden, it clicks.

That's my long lost brother Adonis.

"..Adonis?"

He stops dead in his tracks

"What did you just say?"

"Adonis?"

He raises his voice.

"Who are you! How do you know my name?!"

"I...I think you're my brother."

His face morphs from a look of anger to a look of hope.

"..Andromeda?"

I nod my head and he starts to tear up. He quickly unlocks the door and swoops me into a hug so tight I can barely breathe.

It's been 10 years since he was taken by the raiders. He looks so different now, but at the same time still the little boy who protected me so fiercely all those years ago and I start to tear up as well. At first I was startled by how tightly he hugged me, but then I felt a sudden wave of hope for what's to come, overwhelming joy that my brother is still alive and well, and sadness as I realize how much I missed him all those years. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze as tight as I can. I revel in his warm embrace that I haven't felt since I was eight years old. I hold on as tight as I can for as long as I can, ever so slightly afraid that if I let go, I will lose him again. I pull away, tears pooling in my eyes and try to grasp how happy I am to see him again. I look into his eyes and say, "I've missed you so much!"

He takes a second to gather himself and says, "I'm so happy to see you again!"

He puts his hands on my shoulders and says, his eyes still shiny, "My little girl's all grown up! I missed you so much!"

I pull his hands off my shoulders and ask him, "What happened?"

"Well first off, I'm a raider now."

I give him a confused look, not sure how I feel about that, and he elaborates.

"When they first took me, they took me here, to these cells. I stayed here for a few days, and they were going to kill me. In an effort to avoid that fate, I convinced them that I could work for them instead. They then transferred me to a nearby mine to work. I worked very hard to try to win their favor, and it worked. They slowly moved me higher and higher up the ladder. They took me when I was 10, and by the time I was 16 I helped in my first raid. At that time my job was just to organize the things they took in the carts. Now, at 20, my job is to drive the cart to the towns."

"Why did you keep working for them?"

"When I first started working for them I was afraid they might kill me, and later when I got to a position where they actually valued me, they were paying me a decent salary, decent living conditions, and I was only 10 when they took me, and was blindfolded on the way there and therefore had no idea how to get back home so I just stayed."

"That sounds really hard, I'm sorry. I wish I could have been there for you all those years."

"It's ok. It wasn't your fault. I made it on my own anyway."

“What do we do now?”

“We should probably get you out of here. Follow me.”

“Us.”

“Huh?”

“I came here with my uh...friend.” I look back at Danae and she gives a nod of approval

“Do you remember the story of Sororahs tunic of immortality?”

“Yea I think so.”

“Well I'm trying to find it and Danae is leading me to the temple.”

“Sounds good.”

Adonis unlocks the door to Danae's cell and she walks out.

“Nice to get out of that cell.” Danae remarks.

“Yea.” I chuckle a little.

Adonis turns to me and Danae

“So here's the plan. I'm going to blindfold you, and then I'm going to lead you to the parking lot and you're going to get in the car. I'm going to drive the car out of the main entrance, and I'm going to tell them that I'm moving you to the mine alright? Danae, where is the temple?”

Danae says to Adonis, ““What is the nearest town?”

“Cyres.”

“The temple is about 50 Kilometers north of here.”

“Ok. I'm gonna go get some blindfolds so this can be believable. Get back in your cells and close the door, but don't lock it. Just in case.”

We do as he says, and Adonis gets the blindfolds. He hands us the blindfolds, and we put them on. He leads us to the parking lot and helps us into a cart. He drives to the exit and stops at the gates. I can hear a man coming up to Adonis.

“State your business.”

“Boss said to transfer them to the mines.”

“O...k.”

His voice sounds sceptical, but he lets us through anyway.

After we get far enough away from the base, Adonis says we can take our blindfolds off, and we do. Around me I see mostly desert, but some plants. I see little desert lizards scurrying along the warm sand. I see birds flying above me. I hear the quiet buzzing of the cart, and notice the earthy smell of the sand. We drive over a sand dune and for a moment I can feel the wind on my

face as we soar through the air. The weightless feeling is interrupted by the sudden jolt of hitting the ground. As we land I get sand in my mouth and I spit it out. After about an hour of driving, we make it to the Temple of the Fates. I step out of the car and stretch my arms out.

On the drive here Danae, Adonis, and I were chatting the whole time. We discussed many things and really started to get to know each other. I was reminded over and over why I was such good friends with Adonis when I was younger. Even though he's been through a lot, he's still got that beaming smile, and his boyish humour. I can't help but smile wide. We're still chatting a little as we walk towards the stairs but as soon as Danae walks on the first step, she goes quiet. The whole atmosphere changes. Adonis notices as well and asks her in a concerned voice, "You ok? You seem awfully quiet now."

"Yea, I'm doing just fine."

We continue up the steps and enter the temple. Danae leads us through the temple. As we pass a room I notice a shimmering chainmail shirt sitting on a mannequin, but I ignore it and continue following Danae. We pass many rooms with many treasures from many different fables.

In the corner of my eye I notice a shadow flash across the hallway to my left. I assume that I am imagining it and ignore it.

We pass a room with a bejewelled mirror and I catch a glimpse of Danae's face. Her pupils have contracted to the size of a pinhead. I ignore it as well, but start to wonder if I should be. Danae speeds up and leads us into an empty but larger room. She then disappears down a hallway leading out of the room. I go to follow her, but the path has disappeared as well. I catch another glimpse in the corner of my eye of a shadow figure flashing across the room. I turn to where I saw it but then see it in the corner of my other eye, and turn, and see it again, and turn. I seem to turn in every direction until it stops in front of me.

It comes out of the shadows and it's Danae. I freeze in shock and confusion when she disappears. I turn around and she's right in front of me.

"Hello Andromeda."

I look over my shoulder and am relieved to see that the exit is still behind me, and I start backing up.

"Oh you thought you could trust me? How cute. Did you ever stop to think about why no one has ever found the tunic when

there's a guide that takes you right there? Have you ever stopped to think about anything? Of course not, because you're just a stupid, greedy little human. And that will be the death of you."

I start backing up a little faster, and then I just run. I run as fast as I can and make my way back through the temple to where I think I saw the tunic. I rush into the room and throw on the tunic. I stop for a second, hurt, and confused, and angry that I let myself trust Danae. I turn around and sprint back the way I came, but it's different. I can feel Danae messing with my head and I can tell that I'm lost, but I just keep running. I stop to catch my breath for a second, and I hear Danae laughing at me. I keep running, trying to hold my tears back. I feel so angry at Danae for betraying me but so much more angry at myself for trusting her. For being so weak. So needy for a friend or someone to share my time with. I hear her voice in my head.

"Aww are you crying? I would say I'm surprised but I'm not really."

I yell out, still holding back tears.

"Please Danae! Stop this and snap out of it! Please!"

You're so weak. So dependent on others that you needed someone to escort you here. And now that you're here, all you do is be selfish. You didn't even think about what happened to your brother. Well I can tell you one thing, you'll be seeing him soon."

As I'm running, the ground snaps open under my feet and I plummet. When I land on the floor below, I'm knocked out. When I wake up, I'm tied to the wall of a room with my brother. He's still asleep, so I wake him up. He slowly opens his eyes and looks at me.

"What...happened? Where...are we?"

"I don't know either. I just woke up here. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I remember being in a big room, and then I saw Danae walking towards you and taunting you. You ran, and I knew I had to keep Danae busy so you could get wherever you were going. I yelled at her, and she fought me. I fought hard, but in the end she won. That's the last thing I remember. What about you?"

"When we were walking through the halls of the temple, we passed the room that had the tunic in it, and I saw it in there, but I trusted Danae to lead us to the right place, so I ignored it. After Danae's taunting speech, I realized that that really was the tunic, and Danae was just leading us to the wrong place. Then I ran. I ran

towards the tunic, and put it on. That's what I'm wearing now. I ran back towards where you were, but the walls started to move. I started to cry a little, and then she taunted me again. Then the floor opened up and I fell. Next thing I know I'm here. I can't believe I trusted her."

"Look at me."

I turn to look at him, trying not to cry.

"It's not your fault. She tricked you, took advantage of you. You shouldn't feel bad for trusting someone who appears as kind and friendly as her. You are not defined by your mistakes or failures, but by your actions. And on the topic of actions, what are we going to do now?"

I think for a moment, and make a plan.

"Were only tied up with rope, and were sitting on stone benches. If we rub the rope on the edge, we can break free eventually."

There's a door in front of us, and I keep my eye on it as I rub the rope holding my hands together on the edge of the bench.

Danae walks through the doorway.

"Leaving already? How sad. Well if you're not going to die nicely, then we'll have to speed this up."

The walls are set ablaze. Our restraints disappear, and Adonis and I look at each other with a combination of fear and confusion. We get up, and Danae charges at me. I swiftly dodge her. She appears in front of me with two weapons in her hand.

"If I have to do this myself, I might as well make it interesting. Take these weapons."

In one hand is a bedazzled dagger, and in the other is a spear. I take the spear, and Adonis takes the dagger. We each look at each other in suspense. Each anticipating what the first strike of the fight will be, and who it will come from.

The answer to that question, is a stab at Danae from Adonis. He launches forward at Danae, but he's not fast enough. Danae disappears and reappears behind me, and pushes me, nearly to the ground. I stand up and she appears on the other side of me. She pushes me back, but I catch myself, and I thrust my spear forward. She keeps pushing me, and I keep trying to block her, and failing, and then retaliating with my spear, missing again and again because I'm holding back, not wanting to hurt her. She then throws a punch at Adonis, bashing his head against the wall and knocking him out. I feel a flare of anger inside me. I thrust my

spear out and stab her in the wrist, but it heals in seconds. We enter a quick dance of attack, block, and retaliate, each sustaining minor injuries and a deep scratch to my shoulder. This goes on until she's charging at me, and I flip my spear, raise it above my head, and hit her in the chest with the back of my spear. Pushing her into the fire behind her. I see a spirit rising out of her and she closes her eyes, falling unconscious.

I quickly grab her arm and pull her out of the fire. I lay her down on the ground. I rip off a piece of my shirt and wrap it tightly around Adonis's head. I may not have been allowed to train for the army, but I was certainly trained in healing. I pace anxiously back and forth waiting for them to wake up. I'm sitting on the floor when I hear Danae gasp.

"Andromeda."

"Oh...you're awake"

I am a little scared of what she's going to say next, not sure if she really was deceiving me the whole time.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"What do you mean? You attacked me. You taunted me. How could that have been an accident?"

"I think I was possessed. It was like...I was doing and saying all those things, but it wasn't me who was doing it. I'm sorry."

I try to stay mad at her, but I can't. I turn around and say:
"I'm glad you're not that monster. I forgive you."

We leave the temple, and head to Danae's village to drop her off. When we get there I give Danae a hug.

"Thanks for an adventure. Enjoy your life. Maybe we'll see each other again. Goodbye."

"Thanks to you too. I had fun. Enjoy your life too. Hopefully we'll meet again."

Danae goes into her house, and I start to walk away with my brother. I keep walking, my heart feeling a little empty. I start to hear heavy footsteps pounding on the ground behind me.

"Andromeda!"

My heart can't help leaping a little bit. I whip my head around and see Danae running towards me. She slows down so as not to ram into me, and puts her hands on her knees, panting.

"I want to come with you." She stands up, and continues.
"I've decided that if I stay here, it will just keep being the same old

boring stuff. I want to go on more adventures with you. If that's okay with you."She awkwardly brushes some hair from her face, and looks at me with anticipation.

"Uh-sure. I mean of course. That would be really nice."

We spend the walk back talking and talking. I tell her about my family, and she tells me more about hers. When we get back to my house, we are all finally reunited, plus one member. I trade the tunic for a spot in the army, and am truly content. I achieved my nearly lifelong dream, I am reunited with my brother, and I have someone who truly loves me, and I love her back.

Ariana



Fragment

It's Saturday morning, and I'm midway through my shift when I sense it. Lurking behind corners, skulking around produce aisles, peering through shelves of non-perishables. Waiting just for me. I can feel its cool breath lingering in the air, leaving traces of cigar smoke and old perfume swirling around like ashes in the wind. Burning my lungs, my eyes, my hands. An inky presence with haunted eyes and a shrouded veil that exudes regret. I walk quicker, looping around the outdoor equipment section and hiding behind stacks of charcoal, my mind like a rabid dog, insane with the prospect of escaping but drained with the knowledge of the impossible. I know all too well it's futile, this is something I'll never be able to outrun, this presence is one that shadows my entire life, evilly mocking my every decision, every choice, gloating on the fact that no matter how many times I forget I will always return. Return to this fatal, all encompassing, infinite force. I stop in the middle of the appliance section, my hands quivering, with fear - or anticipation I'm not sure, probably both. I turn around, wave and say "Hindsight, it's good to see you again."

Isadora

Silent Dancers

Bubbles rise up
Like hot air balloons
Float, flutter, fall, and fly
So flimsy yet airborne
Why not me?
Tangible pockets of solitude
Warbling dancers
Performing for an audience of ripples and waves
Hearing the rush and roar of the ocean's applause
It must feel nice
But only for so long
The trembling bubbles reach the surface
And the dance is done
Curtains drawn
Spotlight off
This is my catharsis

Isadora



HACKED!

One stormy morning I got into my car half soaked. I crossed at least two red lights to get to work on time.

My boss called my name as soon as I entered my work building. I work in a cyber security company.

"How's life been?" my boss asked.

"Great, I just had to spend time with my dad".

"Ah, I heard he just got into the retirement home?"

"Yeah" I said eager to get the work done.

I entered my office: a big room with a desk in the middle, matte black walls on both sides with bookshelves mounted on and a glass wall behind my desk showing all of downtown Toronto. This beautiful view was an improvement on my last office, a tiny stall with a small desk and no leg space.

I slid the key into my office door. It responded with a satisfying click.

I entered the room and hung my coat on the rack in the corner and set my things on the desk. I loved to be organised. Nothing in my office was ever out of place. I turned around and walked to the big glass wall behind my desk and watched Toronto through the gloom. The rain was falling fast, the lightning struck and thunder boomed angrily.

It was so peaceful. My office was so high you couldn't hear the loud honks of the cars and the sirens from police cars and ambulances racing to attend to the troubles of the city. I turned around and sat on my chair and opened my computer and typed my password in.

YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED

“My files! They’re out of place!” I said, I was confused. My files were always kept in an order, a strict order that was never disturbed, EVER. You see, my job isn’t a job that you mess up in. When you mess up there are consequences and so order is of critical importance.

I opened up my code page where I test and operate advanced software security and when I entered, there were flashes of different pages. I couldn’t make out anything. The images were flashes with plans from machines and codes and flashes of bright colours.

Suddenly the flashes stopped and on a black screen in big green font in the middle of the screen, I read: “THE HACKER” out loud.

“Whoa,” I said. All of my information was gone, the important information, my codes. “How did this happen?” I said to myself. I panicked.

Rumaisa

YOU HAVE BEEN HACKED

Snake in a Pickle

Lazily, I stretched out on my rock. The warm glow of my heat lamp almost perfectly replicated the sun as it sank into my scales. Visitors passed by, a glittering blur out of the corner of my eye. Occasionally they stopped, gazing at me through the glass wall of my home. They lingered, pointing and chattering. I tilted my head towards them, and slowly opened my jaw in a theatrical yawn. A ripple of excitement spread through my audience. They snapped pictures, cooing at my magnificent teeth, the glint of malice in my eyes. I settled back in place, chuckling to myself. That one always got a rise.

As the crowd moved on, one little girl lingered behind. My sunbathing rock, situated halfway up the wall of my home, was so far above her that she had to crane her neck to see me. Her eyes were wide with wonder as she stared at me through the glass, her little fingers pressed against it. I wondered briefly what it would be like to have feet before slowly closing my eyes again. I let out a breath, sinking deeper into my relaxation. I shifted and suddenly my tail smacked cold water.

My eyes shot open as I wriggled for balance. I'd fallen off my rock ledge, the back half of my body dangled over it, partially submerged in the pool of water below. The muscles of my underbelly rippled, trying to find a grip on the rock. My tail writhed helplessly, curling and flailing, but only succeeded in splashing me with more water.

My earlier warmth was forgotten as my singular focus became fighting to stay on dry land. Finally, my tail wiggled itself onto a small lip in the



stone. It was hard work, more exercise than I was used to, but after what seemed like hours of struggling, I pulled my body back up on the rock.

My relief was short-lived, however. In my haste to escape the fall, I slithered to the clump of foliage at the other end of my home. My graceful, majestic body was so long, that my back end still rested on the sunbathing rock. Unfortunately, I didn't realize that until it was too late, and as I moved forward again, my tail fell off the rock and came crashing down to land. A better fate than the water I suppose, but still unpleasant. It was easier to save myself from this plight than the former, but my double fall had certainly taken its toll on my ego.

The embarrassing spectacle had drawn quite a crowd, laughing and recording videos. I decided that staying under the bush longer wouldn't be such a bad idea after all.

Deaneka-Anna



BUILDING A BEEHIVE

Slowly, I bent toward the forest floor. My old knees creaked. The soft grass below me brushed my foot, through a hole in my tattered shoes. I wouldn't throw them out soon though. My last gift from a friend, long gone. Reaching forward, my noble fingers quivering, I clasped the large honeycomb between my hands. The bees swarmed above me. Buzzing anxiously, they flew in chaotic circles. Some even landed on me, crawling over my wrinkled skin, or the roughly woven fabric of my shirt. I understood their tension.

With great effort, I pulled myself upright. Spilled honey stretched in sticky tendrils. Bodies of the fallen scattered the ground where the honeycomb once lay. The unfortunate souls who could not escape their falling city. In the wake of the storm last night, many homes had been destroyed. Fallen branches. Broken nests. Flooded burrows.

Another bee landed on my ear, crawling across its pointed tip. I could hear her weeping.

"Come, my friends," I croaked, "many were lost today."

Deaneka-Anna



Reflections of a Misguided Angel



Peonies.

Nora held the bouquet in her hand, letting each petal caress her fingertips. Only minutes had passed since she walked through Heaven's gates, but she was already attempting to settle into her new forever home. As she began to pace through the central gardens, the voice in the back of her mind told her to take it all in. It told her to find solace in the peony bouquet's sweet aroma, the gentle winds running through her hair, the way *Blue Banisters* echoed through her headphones as she took a sip of Earl Grey. Before long, it dawned on Nora that an experience in Heaven encompassed what she had always wanted: a peaceful, quiet lifestyle over which she had complete control. A chance to preserve her energy and always present her best self.

No matter how thoroughly she had envisioned it, however, her own heart's desires had not been taken into account. Nora spent her whole life in her mind: always thinking, perceiving, observing, worrying, questioning, imagining, reflecting. It was all she knew. To think that her heart had only wanted human connection - the very thing her mind was afraid of - made Nora question her life's worth altogether. Ultimately, it was loneliness that first brought her to be this way. It was the continuous ceasing of every friendship she built that made her invest time in writing as opposed to more sociable behaviours. At the time, it made total sense:

why should she risk having her words shared and twisted when she could write them in a diary, preserving their original angst and passion?

Why should she risk having her heart broken when she was perfectly fine at doing that herself? Every one of her strange, seclusive habits was in an effort to protect herself.

If only she could have realised that her *own* intentions



were far darker than those around her, she might have listened to Stella's consolations the night before. She might have arrived through the entry doors of Heaven with a sense of peace instead of guilt. Even the most twisted of fairytales did not end in torture, proving that the path Nora was headed down should have been re-evaluated. However, it was not, and by what Nora could recall, an unfortunate series of events had left her standing unsteadily in front of a raging fire.

“Are you considering running in there?” Stella had gasped, pulling Nora backwards until the two of them ended in a heap in the ground. “Nora, talk to me. You were dangerously close to that building.”

“I...” Nora trailed off, searching her face for any signs of disloyalty. Normally she would be reluctant to interact at all, but something in her heart ached for her to tell Stella the truth. “I was debating whether it should be me or your letter to be thrown in there. Something had to be destroyed, and I was beginning to feel like my heart was the safest bet. I can't have a beating heart right now, Stella. I can't allow myself to feel. I can't let your apology letter derail our lives. You have no idea what any relationship with me would cause, and I can never let you know.”

“Nora,” Stella sighed, grasping onto Nora's hand and squeezing it tight. “Your caring heart is your best quality. Whatever is weighing it down, you can tell me. No disaster is strong enough to turn me against you, I can promise you that.” Tears began to well in Nora's eyes as she pulled away her hand, using it to push against the ground and stand up.



“You don't get it. You don't get it at all. I'm your guardian angel, Stella,” Nora declared, running forward endlessly until her figure became imperceptible. Stella was left to watch in heartache as each flame consumed her, each spark of light in her eyes fading into an abyss. The sound of her own heart breaking into a million pieces was enough to drown out Nora's whisperings

that had been planted into her mind.

I care about you more than you know. This was not meant to be an act of betrayal.

I am under someone else's control, and I did not want to get in the way of your spot in Heaven.

Because of these confessions I have embedded in your mind, you will soon be sent to the afterlife. I still thought it was a better scenario than having you live the rest of your life in hesitation.

No matter how many pits of fire you are thrown into or how many threats you receive, know that I will save you. I will save both of us.

Soon, when we have all of the time in the world, I will explain everything to you. You will understand why I was planted back onto Earth to watch over and manipulate you face-to-face.

You will soon hear the reflections of a misguided angel.

Cameron Green



You're Dragging Me

DOWN

It's Saturday morning, and I'm midway through my shift when I see *it*.

“Oh, hey, hey, sorry, but umm... first time in a building like this, and I'm not too sure on what to do! Could you let me in? I need to visit a friend of mine! Her name is a... uhh... Mrs. Smith?”

That man I see in the security camera... is dissolving himself. I push my glasses up my nose to see him more clearly, and I see a man in a green bucket hat and a black windbreaker waving to me with an anxious smile.

Focussing on whatever he is... I realise that nothing is actually dissolving. He's using his arms to try and keep himself together— what I'm seeing through this old and dingy security camera is a man who is *oozing*. His ghostly pale skin is dripping, slowly... and he is trying to pat himself together.

“... hello? A-are you on your lunch break or something?...”

He rams his pinky finger down onto the 'SECURITY' button over and over, making that familiar yet annoying noise blare through my small office over and over. I flick the switch in front of the microphone to respond to him, yet nothing leaves my



mouth. I just... *stare*, like a child learning that the sun would explode in millions of years for the first time. I'm dumbfounded, I'm shocked, and I'm sure that prescription glasses that are 0.5 blurrier than needed combined with decades old apartment security systems doesn't equal... melting residents.

"We have 31 different 'Mrs. Smith's' in our records," I reply curtly, sitting back up straight as I try to regain my composure.

"Oh! Okay... so, she has brown hair, brown eyes... uhhhh... says 'yello!' when she greets people, but not in the normal way, and says the colour 'yellow' instead..."

The switch is still flipped, pointing towards the stem of the microphone. Right now, all he's describing is a majority of our 'Smiths.' I drag my finger over the book of residents, playing a mental game of 'Guess Who' with what seemed to be a living and melting ghost.

He just laughs awkwardly and smiles back up at the camera, bringing his left kneecap back into place as it tries to spill all over the floor. I assume he can hear the silent static, so he taps his pinky against his lip and makes an angered hum.

"Ehhhhhh... she might have a husband? Maybe? I'm not too sure about it? But I think his name would be Mr. Smith, if she did have one!"

That's more than he knew about actually entering apartments. I'm quiet, and he matches it. He bites down on his nail, then taps his foot against the carpet. I clear my throat, and he straightens out his back before responding.

"... sorry."

"It's okay."

I lied. It's really not okay. Right now, I should be grabbing my walkie talkie and telling my coworkers to apprehend the man who is melting off his chin and right eyeball in the entryway, but I can't. Even with it hooked onto my belt, waiting patiently to be used for something other than yelling at my coworkers to get back to work when I see them slacking off on camera during their shifts.

“Thanks! I'm not really in the uhhh... *loop*, of how things work here in apartment complexes, so please be patient with me, madam!”

He looks around, tilting his head like a pigeon at the bright street off camera, just showing off how absolutely desolate the rest of the entryway is. Everything seemed more and more borderline crazy the longer that *thing* kept standing there with tensed up shoulders, and the camera kept on that frame for fifteen straight seconds.

“They can afford a pool, but not a new security camera?...”

Knocking against the monitor with an aggravated fist, I wait for it to catch up with real time once more. Surprisingly, he isn't gone, it wasn't a hallucination I had, and his inner thighs along with half of his midriff is dripping down. There's no bone showing up as it melts off, it's staining the carpet along with him— like putty getting ready to ruin an entire afternoon because of how hard it is to clean up. He turns back to the security camera with a smile and a terrified laugh, the same one that I would see grandparents have when they dropped their cilantro and tomatoes all over the floor awkwardly while the noise of the sliding doors unlocking reaches their withering ears.

“Ah! Okay, my apologies, I just uh... hahahah...”

God, that was sad.

“... is there... *another* way I could get in?”

I'm still so lost on why this melty, inconspicuous man needs to get into some shabby little apartment complex to talk to some random, shabby Mrs. Smith. Is it really worth potentially getting a criminal record just for this? What could that... freak or blessing of nature need with an ordinary person?

“Either become a tenant or get a job here as a janitor.”

“I'll do just that, then!”

He looks like a child on Christmas, giddy and even clapping his hands together happily. I wish I was having a hallucination now, as I keep watching the feed of a man who just clapped the skin off of his left pinkie on accident and looked even more disgusted than I did when he realised it. Sliding the skin back onto the fleshy interior with a shudder, he lets a warm breath try to mend it all together. Slotting it back in place, he looked back up at me and back towards the speaker holes in the apartment buzzer in overwhelming joy.

“How do I get a job as a janitor here?”

“Have experience.”

“How do I get experience?”

“By getting a job as a janitor.”

Rude, yes, I'm aware, but it's equally as true as it is uncomfortable and an unsettling thought that I may have a coworker that made half of the mess around the hallways that he was to be cleaning up.

We aren't even hiring new janitors.

“... that seems a bit contradictory, no? Or... or was that a joke that you just made?”

I flick off the switch held between my pinkie and ring finger, and he makes a quick jump as he hears the static silence cut out abruptly from his oozing ears. He makes a painful, forced laugh, making me tense up my jaw.

I don't know if he even deserves to be reported to the police— or if he even *knows* what a police station looks like. Would the police start questioning me on how I know a *melting man*? Considering that he doesn't know that he can't waltz into an apartment building and gets scared when someone is *speaking* to him, would he even be able to stand a police interrogation?

But then again, I'm a security guard who is failing to guard the one thing she's meant to.

“So... that's all of the options? I can't get in? I have to... leave?”

He looks like a heartbroken puppy, staring into the camera and fiddling with the zipper of his jacket. I lean the switch forward, hyping it up to point back at the microphone stem, watching his face have that small glimmer of hope once he hears that crinkle of static once more.

“Yes. I will have to ask you to leave.”

“Awh...”

Pouting and staring down at the zipper in disappointment, the man's face drops. He promptly sticks it back on, heading towards the exit off camera.

A sigh weasels out of my lips, and I drag the switch back. Letting the man out into what I can only assume is the 'wild' for him, means he isn't any of my business. For all the police will know, I'm not associated at all with him; he wandered in on my 'lunch break,' wandered out, then probably melted in front of a crowd of people.

That is, until he starts banging against the door.

“... what is it now?”

I change the view, looking through the camera that displayed the polished walls of the lobby, hallways, elevators, before getting to the alternative view of the entryway.

“There's no way opening a door is hard...”

The door is very hard to open; mainly because his hands are melting off every time he touches the door handles. Using my index finger to kick the switch on once more, I groan into my sealed lips before speaking to him once again.

“Sir, use the hand motion detector to your left.”

He fumbles his handless arm over to the motion detector, looking back up at the previous camera as it didn't detect a severed arm as an actual hand.

“... just wait there.”

Slamming the switch back with a frown, I storm out of my office and head to the elevator to get him out of the building as soon as possible.

Through the monitor, a woman storms through the elevator and into the entryway. Her conviction-filled stride comes to a halt once she's met with a normal and empty room— only fake plants and a stainless door meeting her there.

“... there's no way he managed to open it without like... I don't know, melting onto the carpet or crying in a corner for 10 minutes straight...”

The voice of the woman crackles through the shoddy security system as she inspects every brick in the wall, every tile on the floor with suspicion.

Touching the door handle and ramming her hands back and forth, she looks it up and down; sizing it up as it denies her exit. A shout comes from her, hiding whatever fright to her chest and looking up at the security camera in the entryway— then back at the camera that currently displays her predicament.

Slowly shifting her weight from side to side, the woman starts shaking her hand violently— releasing it from the clenched fist position to wave it around, screaming wildly and panicking as if it is on fire.

“Why is my hand melting?!”

—Kate



THE STORM



Plink!

Plink!

Plink!

The first drops of this unexpected rain fall as I'm almost home, and I switch from a walk to a light jog. The rain picks up pace, my hair and clothes sticking to my body, weighing me down. Then out of nowhere I hear a deafening BOOM that seems to resonate through me. Then, CRACK as a bright streak of white lightning cuts the sky in two, sitting there for a split second before disappearing back into the sky. The rain soon becomes torrential, as if it were screaming, yelling for help for someone, anyone. Not soon after, the trees join in the rain's desperate calls, swaying and creaking in the wind, letting out a sad song of their own. The thunder continues like a constant drumming resonating through my head as lightning lights up the sky. I'm finally home. I reach from the door knob and turn it and throw myself inside, I close the door and lean my back against it, I sigh. Then just as fast as it had started, it finishes, the booms and cracks ceasing to break the sky as it returns to its peaceful state once more. The constant sound of the rain stops, leaving only the last few drops.

Plink!

Plink!

Plink...

Madeleine

The Cursed Blade

Sinking sludge swirled around me as I aimlessly struggled, the earth encasing me with mud and dirt. The marsh swallowed me up to my chest as adhesive as wet cement. It clung to my shirt, thick and heavy. I tried to kick my legs, I swam my arms around the surface but it was hopeless. The marsh was up to my neck now.

A man with black armour astride a black stallion stood above me, observing me struggle. He laughed mirthlessly, dark smoke rolling off his armour and creating a cape of darkness around him. I kicked one more time and the slit swallowed me whole.

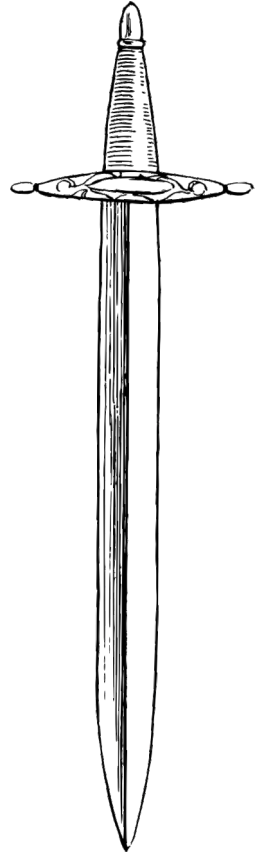
I was hurtling through the air, a vortex of ice and wind below. I screamed, petrified, my head throbbing. Skeletons swirled around me, constructed out of wisps of wind. Reaching their fingers towards me they moaned, "We are imprisoned in our own thoughts. Soon you will join us, foolish child."

"That sounds like a you problem," I responded with a horror-struck whimper.

Apparently these skeletons didn't appreciate my sense of humour. They roared in fury and threw themselves on me. You would presume that skeletal figures generating out of a raging storm would pass right through me, right? Incorrect. Hands fastening onto my wrists, adjusting to get a tighter grip.

Tumbling through the air I glanced down to find myself nearing a miniature hurricane as shards of ice as sharp as knives hurtled towards me. But the draughty cyclone was morphing itself. Creating one large skeletal hand about to crush me flat as a pancake.

Remembering those vague safety PE lessons, I curled myself into a tight ball, bracing myself for smashdown. Yet it never



came. An odd sensation filled my chest and my stomach lurched. My eyes peeked over my knees, my nose still burrowed underneath them.

“Wo-oah!” I exclaimed. Underneath me, solid as anything, was the ground. Crusty, dusty, musty ground. My mouth hung open, the striking beauty of my surroundings difficult to take in. The walls, the columns holding the ancient building up were covered with engravings in Sanskrit. Yet Egyptian papyrus were stacked on rusty metal shelves and Norse Viking armour rested on walls.

Mesmerised by my surroundings and practically inhaling the enchantments I noticed more artefacts from different eras. I saw statues of all twelve Olympian gods and goddesses, with Roman toga's strewn across the floor. Mayan masks, feathers and plumes hung on fixtures.

I was practically swimming in history. All the greatest eras in one.

But in the corner stood a rigid figure. It was leaning against one of the shelves, so still for a moment I thought it was a mummy. Fascinated, I stepped forwards, reaching my finger out. Looking back on the particular occasion I know that this was by far the stupidest thing I had ever done and I've done a lot of stupid things.

Light peered through the tiny slits of glass on the ceiling, bars of shining metal stood upon them. That's when I started getting suspicious. When I looked back around the room it seemed more like a prison than a museum. More like it was designed to keep someone in than out. There was blood splattered across the masks and as I observed, still walking, I tripped over a sleek Roman toga and screamed as the bones of a human *skeleton* crunched under my feet.

My face whipping side to side, I tumbled into the jammed corner, falling into a stiff, cold body, banging roughly into a shelf. Thick clots of blood dripped onto my head, staining the crumbling, ashy floor. Falling onto my knees, I heard a faint humming sound behind me. A minute passed . . . two . . . three. A final click like gears snapping into place echoed across the walls and the whirring came to a stop.

Yet I barely noticed. My head throbbed, my mind was clouded with overwhelming pain, halting my senses. A rough, fleshy hand grazed a point of neck and the figure whispered, “It's okay.”

It had started. My mind



cleared, though I wish it had stayed fogged. Pain turned to fear and then to wrath, the emotions raw. The fist around my neck tightened and I bellowed out. The thing behind me made me furious, its aura twisting and sharpening my mind like a dagger. I grabbed a corroded Norwegian axe and swung it behind me. A guttural cry responded, echoing across the walls as I sprang to my feet, a renewed surge of energy coursing through my veins.

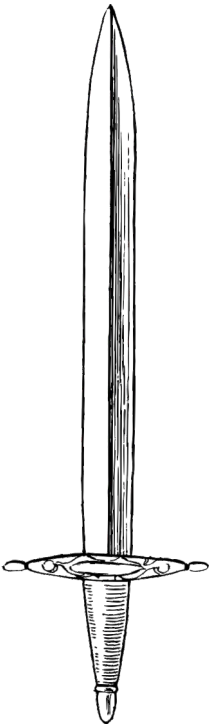
Desperately I grabbed a rusted javelin and clutching it in my sweaty palm, I braced myself for attack. However the burst of strength evaporated as quick as it came. My knees buckled as I tried to keep myself upright. Grinding my teeth I remained alert, eyes refusing to droop. A scratchy hiss sounded while creeping fingers clasped around my mouth and neck, clogging my wind-pipe. The javelin clattered as it hit the stone floor, but my attention was elsewhere.

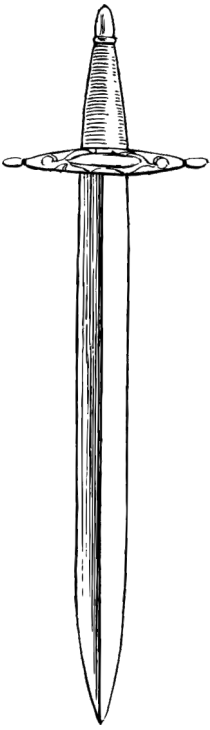
My lungs begged for air, instinct took over and I flung my elbow behind me. Wheezing, I inhaled as the grip loosened. Falling onto my hands and knees with no time to spare, I pushed myself back to my feet and took off down the corridor which seemingly lengthened with each step I took. I ran, forcing each leg in front of the other until my muscles ached and my lungs screamed for air.

But despite this I remained resilient, the thumping behind me alerting me of the fact I am being followed. I didn't pay much attention to the fact that my surroundings were evolving as well. Soon the smooth stone walls narrowed and darkened, appearing more natural. The jagged uneven walls made it known that the tunnel was not man made. No glass slits remained on the roof of this cave and soon I was enveloped in the darkness, my senses on fire, alert to every movement within my reach.

I could no longer make out any thuds or clanking of armour so I slowed my pace to a walk. How long had I been running? This *place* was unusually disorienting. It felt as if I scarcely ran more than a handful of minutes, though it also seemed as though centuries had passed.

Ignoring the plummeting feeling in my stomach, I trudged forward, hopelessly lost, my head throbbing. My legs willed me forward





although I was clueless as to where I was headed and trying to refrain from banging against the side of the tunnel.

There. In the distance I saw a dot of white. Light! Perhaps it was merely a window but surely it would offer an escape from this wretched cave. I broke into a sprint but the further I ran the smaller the dot seemed to appear. Eventually I reached the beam of sunlight, however it was the smallest sliver of a crack in the rocky ceiling. The fissure was scarcely wide enough for a rat to wriggle through.

Standing beneath the crevice I huffed in agitation, kicking the walls of the cavern. Regret filled me as pain flooded through my foot. But this only fueled my frustration. Falling to my knees I let out a soft sob, my built up emotions escaping my chest. Where was I?

Swiftly I felt the dirt shift beneath me, however I had not moved an inch. My hands were no longer grimy with scum and filth as the bottom of the tunnel filled with a thin liquid. I lift my hands, the light illuminating my arms. The liquid was such a violent shade of red I shivered looking at it. I was so startled by the blood on my hands I hadn't realised that the tunnel was slowly filling with more of it, up to my ankles in less than thirty seconds. A strange sound echoed through the tunnel. Like metal being unsheathed. Whipping my head back and forth, nothing seemed out of place in my surroundings.

The liquid was nearing my knees now and paranoia latched itself onto me, the troublesome thoughts clouding my judgement as I contemplated how to get out of this situation. The blood showed no sign of stopping soon. My heart was pounding as my stomach leaped into my throat. Staying calm in fatal situations was crucial. So naturally I turned on my heel and bolted, screaming. In my defence there was some logic behind it. Perhaps if I retraced my steps I would undo the damage done. The idea seemed more ridiculous the more I thought about it.

"Ughf," I choke as my back slammed against rock, knocking the wind out of my lungs. I gasped, my chest tight, exhaling in shallow, ragged breaths. Whatever attacked me next was a

strategist. When I was most vulnerable, heaving from the rush, it lunged, smacking me straight back into the wall. Whoever this person was they moved quickly for somebody wading through waist-high blood. I desperately pushed against the weight of the blood, shuffling away from my attacker.

“Woosh...” In a flash, a clammy hand pushed my head forward, submerging me in the blood.

I thrashed, desperate to get out, disgusted. The hand pushing my neck let go and I resurfaced, gasping for air. I scanned my surroundings, narrowing down on a wicked looking dagger glistening in the darkness. Something lurched and hurtled towards me with alarming speed. Then the world went black.

I awoke, trembling, drenched in cold sweat. I raised my hands to where the knife in my dream had impaled me. My fingers came back wet, glistening with blood.

This was not a dream. It was a sign. I thought then that I was a child with a vivid imagination and bad nightmares. But once you get a warning like this, it's the beginning. When you get sucked in a reality like this one there is no getting out. Your fate is sealed.

You, dear reader, are probably confused right now. Let me back-track.

My name is Jason Armstrong. And up until thirteen hours ago, I thought I was a regular boy.

(END OF CHAPTER ONE)

Adya Bhartia

