

We Write: a collection of works in progress from YPI
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Untitled

by Alex Chasin

He slammed into the locker, denting it. He wasn't so much worried about the shape the locker would be in, more about what his back would feel like in the morning.

"Where's my lunch money!" snarled Dick. His real name was Richard, but because of his treatment of anyone he met, most called him the Dick.

"It's not *your* lunch money, I told you! We've talked about this in the principal's office; if I bring it to school then it's mine to spend. Now get off me and let me get to second period." Mitchell attempted to shove Dick off him, pushing as hard as he could with his skinny arms. Dick snarled and smashed Mitchell into another locker, making sure the lock dug into his back.

"Have it your way." Dick dug into Mitchell's pocket, rooting around for the bills. Mitchell thrashed around. Dick said, "Whoa! What are you doing? I'm just taking what's mine. You carry it to school and then give it to me, remember?" Mitchell spat a curse at him, earning a slap and a scolding for his bad behavior. Dick smashed him into a locker one more time to insure good behavior, then hurried down the hall so he wouldn't be too late for class.

Mitchell heard the teacher reprimanding Dick for being late, but no real punishment was inflicted; his teacher, however, was sure to send a note home. A note about how he had been loitering in the halls, again. No one believed him about the bullying story, of course. All the kids Dick had stolen from were too scared to speak up, and Dick was an angel to all the teachers. The only trouble was when Mitchell had had him called to the principal's office, and Mitchell was the one who was punished, since the principle didn't believe his story and thought he was just being vindictive.

He limped into math class ten minutes later, after a bit of crying and feeling sorry for himself. Across the hall, Dick snickered as he heard Mitchell's algebra teacher yelling.

Mitchell walked slowly out of the school doors, the bell ringing in his ears. His parents would ask about the bruises that had developed over the day, although he might be able to keep them concealed if he used homework as an excuse to get to his room quickly.

Anger bubbled up inside him as he thought of how badly he was being mistreated. At this stage, self-pity was already done and gone, and hatred had grown in its place. Mitchell stopped and made a decision. Walking quickly back to the school, he slipped inside, saying he had forgotten his math textbook.

Charlie, the school janitor, waved at him as he walked into the science room. Mitchell quickly grabbed a small packet of dry ice, and then ran outside, brushing past Charlie. He made a stop at the gas station and bought a soda to soothe his nerves.

The door to his house open and shut silently as Mitchell snuck inside, trying to avoid detection by his over-alert parents. Mitchell opened the door, and slipped a small hand towel into the crack at the bottom, to mask light and sound. Carefully he negotiated the basement stairs; the third down was known to creak alarmingly, and the eighth had a small termite colony inside it. The second to last step suddenly shattered under his weight, scattering debris onto the ground, and making a loud sound reverberate through the basement. He froze, waiting for his parents or the dog to come investigate, but the towel had worked perfectly, and the door stayed shut.

Mitchell flipped a light switch and waited as the bulb warmed up, illuminating the chemicals stored behind a stack of toolboxes. He brought out the rolling table, moving the chemicals onto the bottom and rolling out another towel on the top tray. He unpacked his book bag, taking the dry ice and a few reinforced plastic bags from an inside pocket. He selected a bag and poured some dry ice into it, then snapped it shut and crossed to the freezer on the far wall. He slipped it in; making sure it was closed securely. Mitchell turned on the stove next to the freezer, and let it warm up.

He slipped a beaker out from under the tray and placed it on the now-warm stovetop. He poured several chemicals into it before adding a piece of dry ice, and watched the mixture bubble and froth. There was a sudden noise behind him, and he spun around. A cockroach the size of a small tennis ball scuffled at his foot, and he stamped down on it, crushing the shell and killing the creature inside, before spitting on it and wiping his shoe.

Mitchell consulted a list he had printed out the day before, and took the dry ice out of the refrigerator. He turned off the stove and swished the mixture inside the beaker around, looking at the color. Satisfied, he poured it into the bag holding the dry ice,

closed it, and put it back in the freezer. He quickly wheeled the chemicals back behind the toolboxes and rezipped his backpack, then sprinted up the stairs, slipping through the door.

“Mitchell?” He turned to see his mother standing in the kitchen doorway, looking concerned. “Where are those bruises on your face from? It looks like you’ve been slapped! Are the teachers abusing you?”

“No, mom, the teachers are fine. I just tripped on the stairs and fell down, because I couldn’t see over the books.” He shuffled his feet at the lie. *Anyone rational would have figured it out by now*, he thought. He had too many accidents, even for a teenager. Falling down stairs, walking into doorways, standing up too fast and falling backwards over his chair. It was obvious, but no one thought to look closer, seeing as he always had an excuse ready.

“Poor thing, you should be more careful about where you walk. They give you too many books to carry—it hurts your shoulders if you carry them all in a backpack.”

“Whatever you say, mom,” he replied, hurrying up to his room. His mother sighed as she thought about the little boy who had run around the house, laughing at everything he saw. Where had that little boy gone? Mitchell started on his homework, the perfect picture of a contented boy.

A loud ringing sounded next to his ear, jolting him out of sleep and into reality. Mitchell slapped the alarm clock, knocking it to the ground where it continued its angry buzzing. He groaned and sat up, rubbing his eyes before staggering out of bed and shutting off the alarm. Mitchell sat on the bed and shook his head from side to side, trying to clear the sleep before getting dressed. He chose his best clean clothes, slipping into a long-sleeved shirt and khaki pants.

The alarm clock went back onto the table next to his bed and he quickly tucked in the sheets. He grabbed the backpack lying ready on the floor and slipped the bag out from under his mattress – it had not been easy getting to sleep with a lump in the middle of his mattress. He descended the flight of stairs and walked into the kitchen, greeting his parents and picking up a box of cereal and some milk on his way to the table. He poured the cereal and added the milk, although the ratio was slightly off, and said, “Sunny day today, isn’t it?”

“Of course, honey. It’s nice to see that you’ve taken an interest in looking nice instead of wearing t-shirts and torn jeans,” replied his father over the morning paper.

“What’s happening in the world today?” asked Mitchell, pretending to be interested.

“How am I supposed to know? I’m reading the newspaper!” laughed his father, sipping a mug of coffee. Mitchell forced a smile, then put his bowl in the sink and walked outside to the bus.

Dick sat next to him, of course, boxing him into the corner. “I hope you brought my lunch money, squirt,” he snarled, curling his hand into a fist.

“Of course. Here’s your money, five dollars,” Mitchell replied, handing over a bill and smiling.

“Only five?” he growled. “I want ten tomorrow, got it?”

“Yes sir, ten dollars tomorrow,” Mitchell replied, bobbing his head.

“Sir... I like that. Just keep up this attitude and we can get through the rest of the year without any major problems.” Dick grinned and patted Mitchell on the back, the force of the blows sending him face first into the seat in front of him. Dick moved off to collect from his other victims, hoping to get enough for one of the new mega cookies the principal had seen fit to buy.

Mitchell thought about the mega cookies, mostly because he didn’t want to think about what was in his backpack. They were gigantic circles of dough and chocolate chips, nearly six inches in diameter, and about an inch tall. There were rumors of M&Ms in some of them, although a few hoped for Skittles. His musing was interrupted by the shout of the bus driver, “Last stop, everyone off!” It was widely believed the driver used to be a conductor on a train, due to the way he kicked people off the bus.

They were all different, bus drivers. Some would scream and rant until you ran off; some would be sweet and give candy before banging their heads into the steering wheel in frustration. The majority were just silent, ignoring the ruckus behind them.

Mitchell jogged into the school, smiling much more than usual and greeting everyone he passed. The popular sect glanced after him questioningly, wondering what the sudden change in attitude was about. He reached his locker, opened it, and was met

by a shower of loose papers he had been too lazy to put away properly. He grabbed his English book and, still wearing the bulging backpack, walked quickly down the hall.

Entering the classroom, he took a seat right next to Dick, and grinned at him as the bell went off. Dick nodded at him, and then turned his attention to the teacher.

“Alright, class, shake your heads or jump up and down, I won’t have sleepiness in my class!” She roared. “Mitchell, why are you still wearing your backpack?”

Mitchell stood up slowly and unzipped the backpack, bringing a lighter out of his pocket. He lit it and dropped it into the backpack without preamble.

The explosion blew out all the windows in the room, hurling the students back into the walls. Shards of shattered glass flew around the room, slicing books to ribbons. The floor tiles were ripped from the ground, flying up to strike the ceiling and disintegrating. Mitchell and Dick were tossed into a corner, with Dick knocked out under Mitchell. Mitchell slowly stood up, looking at the center of the classroom.

Instead of the expected crater and his being looking down from above, he saw a gaping black hole, blocking his view of the other side of the classroom. As he watched it expanded, pulling desks and chairs into it. Every time something went in, there was a flash of light, as if it had combusted. Suddenly seized by a strong desire to get away from the void, he leaped out the window and ran as fast as he could for the street.

The void, however, seemed to grow faster as it got bigger. Soon it was gaining on him, lapping at his heels like an ocean. It had completely consumed the school, and was rapidly spreading outwards. Mitchell spied an ice cream truck turning the corner in front of him, cranking out the silly music. He made a dash for the bumper, smacking his head on the back doors of the truck before gaining a strong handhold. Even so, his body was dragged along the asphalt.

He was making headway, though. The void of darkness was getting farther away, since the driver seemed to have noticed and was flooring the ignition. Mitchell seized one of the handles and pulled himself up, desperately trying to heave himself onto the roof of the car.

The void suddenly reached the back of the car and seemed to grip one of the back wheels. The vehicle stopped very suddenly, hurling Mitchell off and onto the hard

asphalt. He watched as the truck was completely consumed, and then the void touched him, and all he saw was blackness.

* * * * *

He awoke to a strange buzzing sound, as if a honeybee had grown to the size of a cat and was purring on his stomach. Mitchell groggily opened his eyes, and shut them again just as fast, terrified of what he saw. Standing above him seemed to be a lion, but he couldn't be sure, because of the human face.

“Oh good, I think it's awake!” exclaimed the creature. It quickly kicked him in the side, seeing that he was pretending to be asleep. A strangled “Oof” came from the boy as he rolled over, seeking respite from the ungentle treatment he was receiving. “Stand up, it's not like that should have hurt!” The lion considered for a moment, and then said, “Actually it might have, since I've never seen your like, and I don't know your bone structure.” *Oh, great*, thought Mitchell. *I'm talking to a lion scientist*. The lion started jabbing him in different places and asking, “Did that hurt? No? How about that? Here? Oops, that was your rib, sorry!”

“Poog, stop poking the poor thing, you can dissect him later!” said a new voice. Another lion came into view, pushing the first away. “He's the third we've had, and the first two died because you did something to their spleens before I got here. Don't try doing it again; we need a specimen to study.” *Study?* Mitchell thought. *I don't want to be studied, that might hurt!* He was interrupted by the return of the buzzing sound, as a large, furry creature came bounding into view, buzzing madly. *This is going to be a long day*, he thought.

Mitchell stood before a gathering of the lion-like creatures, which he now knew were called Teshians. The small creature that buzzed was a bee, spelled like the human variety, but it looked like a cross between a bee and a cat. Apparently, he was here because they were deciding what to do with him. He was at least grateful that they hadn't locked him up and dissected him, which the humans surely would have done if they have found a Teshian.

“We should just set him loose in the jungle and let him fare as he will,” commented one of the senior council members. “If we keep him here we will have to

feed and bathe him, and supplies are low this year from the drought.” Several Teshians nodded their agreement at this. Poog stood up and declared,

“We don’t have to bathe him, and we can simply feed him enough to keep him alive. However, I propose that we don’t have to feed him at all, for I can simply dissect him. He probably won’t require food after that!” He let out a bellowing laugh. When no one seemed to share his mirth, he coughed and sat back down, sighing.

“You present an interesting problem, human,” said another council member, addressing Mitchell directly. “The first thing we should do, I think, is determine how you came to be here, because you are most certainly not of this world.” The majority of the council nodded their assent, and Mitchell stood up.

“I came here accidentally.” He sat down. The assembled council murmured about this.

The council member who had spoken first asked, “What do you mean, ‘accidentally’? You fell asleep and woke up here? You hit your head?” Mitchell stood back up.

“I think I accidentally opened a rift to this world.” He sat down again. The Teshian sighed and motioned for him to leave the room. Mitchell, never being a good follower of rules, pressed his ear against the wooden door. He heard only snatches of conversation, but it was enough to get the meaning.

“Too young . . . weak . . . give dogs Agreed?” Mitchell swore and leaped away, sprinting at the building’s door. However, the council had already voted, and the door swung shut. Three doors, sunken into the floor, opened, and from inside the loud baying of hounds could be heard.

Mitchell immediately tried to close the trapdoors, but they had rusted over a long period in humid climates. It was a wonder they had even opened to let the dogs out. Speaking of dogs, they were getting closer. He searched around for a weapon, and spied two crossed machetes set in a crest above the door. He snatched a chair from the wall opposite and shoved it against the wall, leaping onto the seat. Unfortunately, it was an old chair, and he crashed into the floor, his left ankle giving out under him. He climbed up more gingerly and pulled a sword from the crest, before turning to see a dog not a foot away. He sliced at the air to keep it at bay, while others

came up from the holes in the floor. There were six of the slaving beasts, all trying to get through his defenses and have him for lunch. One bit him on the leg, and he made a wild cut at it, severing a vein in the neck. The dog fell backwards, out of the fight.

He quickly sliced the air in front of him, cutting a larger mouth for one of the dogs. The other dogs quickly attacked the fallen dogs, ripping them apart.

There was a muffled curse, and the dog trainer appeared from the trapdoor. “Damn it!” he yelled. “Those were my best dogs! I trained them for a year, and you just killed two of them!” He brandished a horsewhip, obviously incensed about the loss of his precious dogs. Mitchell sighed and touched the sword to the trainer’s throat. Apparently, the loss of his dogs and a threat to his life was too much for him, because he fainted dead away, hitting the ground with a thump and sliding into one of the holes. Mitchell beat the door to splinters with the machete, and then limped out into the jungle.

Mitchell sliced another vine from in front of him, clearing the underbrush so he could advance. Sweat dripped off him in rivulets, staining his clothes. Mitchell had been moving for hours, but it felt like he had hardly made any progress, due to the thick jungle blocking his way. He had been attacked by a tiger a while back; not one of the human faced lions, but an almost-normal jungle tiger. The only difference between the tigers of this world and the tigers of Earth were that these had six legs, and used them to good effect. It had leapt for his throat as he tried to hack down a small tree blocking his path, seeking a quick kill. He had managed to knock it away and kill it, but not before it cut his left ankle, the one still tender from his fall at the Council.

“I knew I shouldn’t have trusted that website! They didn’t copyright anything; I should have known that it was too good to be true.” He continued to hack at the underbrush in his way, trying to make slightly faster progress in case someone was coming after him.

There was a rustle behind him, and a furry paw suddenly whipped out and across his mouth, gagging him. He was yanked backwards into the brush by the paw, and a second later, another Teshian crept down the path he had made. When it saw the path ended abruptly, with only a dead tiger on the ground, he muttered something about tigers hunting in packs, and jogged back down the path towards his home. The furry paw was removed from around his mouth, and he felt a presence leave behind him.

Several hours after the encounter with the tiger and the tracker, he came across a clearing with grass carpeting the ground. *I might as well hole up here until I figure out what to do*, he told himself. He used the machete to chop down some thin trees and lay them down. He had always been taught to start with the small things, and not try to do everything at once. He sliced the bark off the trees, and then cut the wood into planks. He lay the planks down in rows, making a rough square. Then he stopped, unsure how to go about making the walls for his cabin. A voice behind him said, "Here, let me help you with that." He spun around to confront whoever had spoken, but stopped when he saw a Teshian walk into the clearing, the dead tiger slung across its back. Mitchell instantly raised his sword in defense, thinking that they had found him, sure that an army of them would be on their way. But no, it was only the one, grinning at him.

"Don't stand there staring like an antelope in the torchlight, come and help me skin this. We need to make walls before nightfall or we'll catch our death of cold." He nodded wordlessly and began hacking off the fur and skin of the tiger with the machete. "You would actually be more help if you cut trees for the support poles. Get four thin trees of medium height and strip their bark, and then one thicker, taller tree. I'll show you how to place them after I'm done here." The lion resumed slicing away the tiger's hide with its sharp claws. Mitchell strode over to the edge of the clearing and selected four thin, strong trees. He swung the machete and felled the first in a single blow, some of the force carrying though to the second and making a large dent in one of the other trees. He proceeded to cut down the rest of the thin trees, then spied a moderately thick one that looked sturdy enough to use. He swung at it and was met by a loud metallic sound, of metal striking metal. The Teshian roared, "What was that? Are we under attack?!"

"No!" Mitchell called back. "I think this tree is made out of metal!"

"What are you talking about?" asked the lion, jogging over. Mitchell scratched away the bark, showing a rusted green metal underneath.

"There are rumors of green towers standing in great numbers, scattered all over the world. We were told as children about this legend, but most discarded it as our ancestors thinking of trees. Apparently we should put more stock in the old tales..."

"What exactly are these tales?" asked Mitchell, suddenly interested. The lion glanced at him and sighed.

“These green poles were supposed to allow instant communication between far parts of the world. None believed it was possible, so no searches were ever mounted. We use our paws to get to wherever we need, although a few have searched their entire lives to find one.” The Teshian sighed again. “You might like to know, I was one of the council a long time ago. I opposed the search for these, calling it madness, along with most of the council. Those who looked for them were ordered to death.” He looked away.

“Who were the ones who you killed?” asked Mitchell, a cold feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach.

“Your race,” answered the Teshian. “The humans that used to live on this world.” Mitchell felt like the world was swaying under him.

“There were . . . humans . . . on this world?” The lion nodded. “And you . . . killed them?” He nodded again.

Mitchell turned and walked into the trees, ignoring the calls of the lion. He walked right past the telephone pole and vanished into the jungle. The lion sat down and muttered, “Damn. The council will have my head if I don’t find out what he’s up to . . .” He turned and jogged off, trying to find Mitchell’s trail so he didn’t have to come back empty handed. Maybe if he found a scrap of clothing that a tree had torn off, he could go back saying that he was attacked and killed the boy in self defense.

Mitchell saw the trees thinning in front of him. Less and less vines were visible, and the trunks narrowed and seemed to fall in upon themselves, quickly becoming shorter. He entered sparse woodland, trees scattered around a grassy field. Falling to his knees in happiness, he lay on the ground and stared at the sun, too tired to move. Then he noticed there were two suns, which would explain why he was sweating so much. The suns seemed to orbit around, unlike that of earth. Instead of rising in the east, moving across the sky, and setting in the west, they seemed to exchange position. One would rise, move to the middle of the sky, then seem to turn at a right angle before the other took its place. He lay on the grass for several hours, watching the suns go in their peculiar pattern, before he realized that there was no moon or night on this planet. It seemed that everyone slept when there was only one sun in the sky, which would make for about a four hour day and a three hour night.

He lay there in the shade of a tree until he judged that it was about as cool as it was going to get. Standing up, he saw a small hill in the middle of a clump of fruit trees, but with a door set into it, and some windows surrounding the wooden door. Mitchell jogged over to it, hoping for some reprieve from the blistering suns. Even with only one in the sky it was still extremely hot, probably around ninety degrees on Earth. He raised a hand to knock on the door, but suddenly a bang sounded from the other side, causing Mitchell to leap back just in time. The door flew open, slapping into the grass hill and emitting a cloud of foul smoke. If he hadn't moved, he would have been pulverized.

An old man, human, stumbled out, coughing and waving his hands in circles to clear the smoke. Seeing Mitchell, he called, "Sorry! I sneezed."

"Your sneezes cause explosions?" asked Mitchell skeptically.

"Well, no. Not as such. I sneezed, and the chemical reaction on the grass I was growing caused said explosion. Don't eat that grass, by the way. It's toxic, meant to kill all those pesky cows that keep showing up here. But please, come in! I can't offer you much more than some mint grass I've been experimenting with. I'm sure you don't mind testing it!" The man beamed at him. "Well, come in, come in, you'll catch your death of cold out there." He ushered Mitchell inside and slammed the door. The house was small, with a chimney set against the far wall, and tables without chairs lining the walls. There was a small rug in front of the hearth, with three chairs and a sink sunken into the floor. Mitchell realized the man walked stooped over, as if old age had borne down on him, crushing him to the floor. He walked forward to what he thought might be the mint grass, and smacked his head on a roof beam.

"Careful of those beams, you might have to crawl a bit, you being a giant and all," warned the man. "I'm David by the way, thanks for asking." David picked up a pile of dried dandelions and presented them to Mitchell. "Here you are, Bob! Mint grass, just like I promised. Don't I always come through for you?"

"Um, David?" asked Mitchell timidly.

"Yes, Frank? Hurry it up; I'm quite busy refining the toxic grass. Trying to make it explosive, that way I don't have to throw away the cow carcasses."

"Well, my name is Mitchell, not Frank or Bob, and these are dandelions, not grass stems." The old man sighed, looking at Mitchell like he would look at an idiot child.

“Of *course* they’re not grass stems, Jesse,” he said slowly, as if Mitchell had trouble understanding human speech. “Grass doesn’t have stems. I’m very sorry to burst your bubble like this.”

“Look, old man,” said Mitchell, getting quite impatient by now. “I’m stuck on this world with you, so we might as well make the best of it. And I am *not* stupid, or named Jesse!” he roared. David sat down next to the hearth and ignored him, picking up some knitting from under the rug. “If you’re going to act like a child, then I’ll treat you like one,” sniffed the old man.

Mitchell sighed and said calmly, “Alright, what are you knitting?”

“A towel, so I can roll it up and smack you, you insolent little boy!” said David. Mitchell marched over to him and whipped the chair around. “Don’t hurt me!” whimpered the old man. “I’ll give you whatever you want!”

“I want a way back to Earth, the world I came from!” snarled Mitchell, grabbing him by the front of his shirt.

“Under the rug,” squeaked David. “Everything is under the rug. That’s where I got my knitting, after all.” Mitchell reached down and gripped the rug, yanking back hard. Instead of the rug sliding away, Mitchell’s arm was nearly dislocated. He fell back, gasping in pain, and then turned to David angrily. “I thought you said it was under the rug! That thing must be nailed down; I can’t move it at all!”

“It’s not nailed down,” sighed the old man. “It can only be opened by those pure of heart, because of the power contained therein. I lost my tests on explosive grass down there; set me back a year and a half. It’s hard to find blood with all these damn cows turning up on my field.” Mitchell turned away, disgusted, and tried to yank up the rug again. Again it wouldn’t move, and again he pulled at it. He pulled and pushed, punched it and stomped on it, but all to no avail. Finally he grabbed a flaming log from the fireplace, disregarding his own safety, and hurled it at the rug, just as David screamed, “NO!!”

The flames ate through the rug like it was covered in oil, and an oily substance began to bubble up from the floor.

“You opened it! I said it could only be opened by the pure of heart, you dolt! You couldn’t stop at destroying your own world, but you have to destroy mine as well. Selfish, greedy little...”

“My world is destroyed?” asked Mitchell, panic in his voice.

“Yes, you destroyed it. Killing six billion or so people isn’t a good way to get the Pure Heart award,” snarled David. “And now this world is doomed as well, because you were too selfish to listen! The void of Nothing will kill this world.”

Mitchell didn’t wait to hear what else the old man said. He just stepped into the blackness.

Facts of Life and Love for Teenagers

by S.M. Bremer

Let me tell you about this kid, this patient of mine, this miserable little pseudo-intellectual Allen Ginsberg wannabe with tortoiseshell glasses and a tweed blazer patched at the elbows. He lusted after the same girl for three years. Every week it was “Miriam *this*,” or “Miriam *that*.” He talked about Miriam more than Moses talked about the Promised Land. So finally I tell him, “Kid... *Kid*. You either ask this Miriam girl out, or get over her.” But he flat-out refused my offer to coach him a bit in romance or *something*. When I asked why the hell not, do you know what Little Ginsberg told me? He told me that he and Miriam had never even spoken. When he told me *that*, the tick in my eye went just about crazy. I mean, he carried a picture of this girl in his wallet. He showed it to me, once, and *let me tell you*, she’s decent. She’s one of those girls with a half ton of piercings and some weird sort of hairdo, but if you can look past that, she’s decent. She looks like some kind of lesbian, if you ask me, but a lot of teenagers dress crazy these days, so who can tell any more?

Anyways, Little Ginsberg comes in all excited one week.

“Doctor! *Doctor!*” he said. “An unbelievable coincidence has recently occurred! It must be fate!” The kid’s got my first appointment after lunch and I’m usually ready for a nap, particularly when he starts talking, but *that* woke me right up. He told me that, by bizarre happenstance, he and Miriam had been seated next to each other on a flight to L.A.

“That’s fantastic!” I said. “You two must have had a lot of time to get to know one-another on your journey.”

And do you know what the kid told me? He said, “Oh no, sir. *No*. I hid in the bathroom the entire time.”

It is typically a matter of professional courtesy that you not laugh at your patients, but I couldn't help myself. I just laughed and laughed. I couldn't stop laughing, and the kid was so angry at that point that he just storms out of my office, which just made me laugh even harder because of how damn funny it looked.

After laughing for about half an hour, I get a call from the kid's father. He's one of those hotshot lawyers from Wall Street and sounded pretty miffed, but you can't sue a guy for laughing, so I unplugged the phone. My receptionist canceled all of my appointments for the rest of that head-over-heels gorgeous afternoon and I went to Central Park to feed stale bread to pigeons. I have always been fond of pigeons, which my wife says is unnatural, but I still like them. They have no concept of self-actualization, so an entire day spent eating trash doesn't bother them so much. If we human beings were pigeons, we'd start comparing our neighbor's trash to ours and worrying about how that cigarette butt we ate will go straight to our tail. Pigeons are also polygamous, and God *knows* that would cause a whole host of problems, and *let me tell you*, I know a thing or two about problems.

I used to run this big-deal sort of private practice specializing in psychotherapy for teenagers over in Gramercy Park. Well, you might say I specialized in psychotherapy for *extremely wealthy* teenagers in Gramercy Park because I charged out the goddamn ears. Do you know what kind of car I used to drive? A Bentley. An actual Bentley. I mean, that was a while ago, of course. Things stopped working out for me after the day with the pigeons, at which point I had been in practice for twenty years, sixty-two days, and being a therapist was making me a little crazy even though it took me a little while to realize it.

Let me tell you about something developmental psychologists call "*rebellion*." There's an ongoing debate in academic circles about whether or not it's a natural or necessary part of the growing-up process. *I don't care*. It makes my job hell. It makes parent's *lives* hell. It's the single worst thing that has ever happened in the field of adolescent psychotherapy. *All* I did for twenty years was listen to stories about petty acts

of rebellion stemming from low self-esteem and hating mom and dad. Do you know what eventually became a real treat? Relatives *dying*. Just because it was something different.

And, you know, I used to like to think that we, as individuals, were unique. That *I* was unique, even. That's what they told me in elementary school. That I was special. And then, in exchange for a salary equivalent to three Bentleys a year, I got this daily parade of snot-nosed punks shoving the fact I'm not into my face. And they're not either, and *that's* what kills me.

Take Little Ginsberg for example. I just know he'll turn into his father once he gets over the fact his parents love the law more than him. He wants to be a writer, he says, but I know it's just some *phase*. Right now, he's accentuating what a limp-wristed bastard he is because his father is one of those square-jawed, hard-ass business types who exudes manliness from every pore. Little Ginsey will go off to the Ivy-Leagues and go to law school and he'll get himself a haircut and some polo shirts. And you want to know the thing that kills me even worse? He's brought me some of his work. It's good. A bit convoluted, but GOD. *Very* good. Little Ginsberg can really wax poetic if he wants. And then I've got this little goth kid... I mean, "*Spooky-American*" because apparently "goth" isn't politically correct any more even though I'm pretty sure she's just messing with me because she's sharp as hell. And anyways, this "*Spooky-American*" will lose the act once she's out of the house, too, I'm sure, and she'll forget how damn different and brilliant she wanted to be at sixteen... *God*, I wish one of these kids would just *commit* to their stupid dreams of being beat poets or the people you cross the street to avoid or whatever.

I mean, at least they *try*, you know? That's more than pretty much anyone ever does. The idea that normalcy and happiness are interconnected is imperative to our way of life, so most people never bother to do much of *anything*. I mean, I could've been the next Freud of Kinsey or something, but I just *had* to take the three Bentleys—

Anyways, look... I'm very sorry... Back to the kid. Well, I mean, everything I've been saying is about the kid, more or less. I guess I've just been listening for so damn long it's nice to talk for once. I didn't finish the story about the pigeons.

I was in Central Park feeding pigeons on one of those days that makes you feel good to be alive and makes you think there's a God if you've got some doubts like me. Did I tell you I really like pigeons? And I'm just sitting there, feeding them this stale bread when out of the corner of my eye with the tick, I see Little Ginsberg sitting on a distant bench. Moving a little closer, I see he's reading this ancient looking book, *The Makers of Light*, which is very beautiful and very convoluted. It was one of my favorites when I was a kid, and I just wanted to talk to him a bit about it.

“Hey, kid!” I shout at him. “What's that you're reading?”

“Go away, jerk off!” he shouts. I know I should've kept my distance and everything, but something just came over my legs. They were lifting themselves up and down until they propelled my entire body forward. This look of terror flashes across Little Ginsberg's face and he starts running away, but my legs just started lifting and falling faster and faster until I was running, too.

“Kid!” I shouted “I just want to talk!” But he wasn't having it and just kept running. My legs and I, we caught up to him at the boathouse, and I reached out to grab his shirt – I don't know why, but I did, and Little Ginsberg just starts screaming and crying and yelling and I'm just standing there holding onto his arm trying to tell him what a great book *The Makers of Light* is when the police showed up and took me away in handcuffs.

You might have read about the case in the papers. “Noted Psychologist Assaults Patient,” or something. I mean, I didn't go to jail or anything. We settled out of court, his father and I.

The practice is gone, or course. And the Bentley? *God*. Long gone, and golly that was a nice car. But I'm still here. Right?

The Best Time of my Life

by Luke Hampton

We grew up together, did everything with each other. It was the beginning of my sophomore year in high school when my family had to move away.

“When will we see each other again?” Paige asked with worry in her voice.

“I really don’t know, but my promise is that I will always keep in touch with you.” I sadly replied.

“Bye Jack,” she said giving me a hug.

“Bye,” I pulled away.

It sucks that I had to move away and leave my best friend. We had always talked about the stuff we would do together as we grew up, but now none of that will come true.

Time flew by with me being a couple states away. For the first few months we talked on the phone and computer a lot. Time started to speed up even more. Paige and I didn’t talk as much, our lives just became filled up. We would talk on the phone every month or so, and with more work in high school I didn’t have the time to go on the computer. By the beginning of my senior year our communication had completely stopped. It was like neither of us existed.

When time came for college I got an athletic scholarship for baseball. As I was packing up things I would bring to college and right before I packed up my laptop I saw I just got an email. When I was looking at the email address I didn’t recognize it. I didn’t realize who it was until I read the first sentence:

“You broke your promise.”

My heart sank; I immediately knew who it was. The rest read:

“I just wanted to know how you’ve been doing and what college you’re going to. I am going to a school on the east coast. I know you always wanted to go to one on the west coast, get back to me. Love, Paige.”

I deleted it. It’s like I was scared of something. Like I didn’t want to go through an old chapter of my life. It’s not that I didn’t want to be friends with her or do the things

we wanted to—I did. I just thought I moved away so it wasn't meant to be. Plus her school is on the opposite side of the country.

Life went on as usual. I sped through college. It was my senior year in college when my school's baseball team got chosen for a rare tournament called Travel Across The Country. They usually only choose the best teams in the country, but my team wasn't that good. There is this rare occasion where they would randomly pick one or two teams for the tournament, maybe all of them. This tournament is where you play until you lose a game, but if you get to them all, there are six. You play two on the west coast, two in the central states and two on the east coast. All the chosen teams start on the west coast.

Surprisingly our team won the first two games and we moved to the central states. Those games were tougher, but once again we came out on top. At each of the schools we got to tour the campus and check out the baseball field right before the game. I couldn't believe at how well we were doing, it was like some sort of miracle because our team didn't win too often in our regular season. We had our last two games, one in Florida and hopefully if we won that one we would have our finals in Maine .

Florida State University was one of the two best teams in the country, our team would be lucky if we scored one run.

The final score was 2-1. We had won. It really was a miracle—there had to be a reason. Now it was off to the University of Maine .

We flew to Maine , and first thing after we arrived at the campus we got the grand tour by one of the school officials. I interrupted,

“Excuse me, where are the bathrooms?”

Our guide pointed in me in the direction and the tour for the rest continued on.

I was walking along a building and was about to pass a stairwell when this woman came walking hastily out and ran into me.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” she said.

“No, don't worry...” I paused.

In mid sentence I stopped, and looked at this woman with a blank stare.

“Uh, are you okay?” she asked.

I was speechless, I had no response. This woman, this girl, was Paige, my best friend, I knew it. It was like all this time this was the reason why my team was chosen for the tournament and why we made it to the finals. Finally after minutes of hesitation I spoke.

“Paige?”

“How-how do you know me?” she asked

“Oh-oh never mind, have a good day,” I replied as we turned our separate ways.

Millions of thoughts were rushing through my mind; I knew I’d be crazy to pass up what I thought was the reason for me being here and in this situation. I turned back.

“Paige!” I shouted

She turned back and looked at me.

“I’m sorry,”

“For what?” she asked confusingly.

“Breaking my promise,”

Her jaw dropped, stuttering she yelled running towards me.

“Jack?!”

I opened my arms as she sprung towards me.

We both looked at each other and we didn’t know what to say. I finally broke the silence.

“How are you?”

“I’m good, how are you?” she asked with a sigh of relief.

“I’m pretty good. My school’s baseball team made it to our tournament finals so we’re playing here.” I explained.

I felt kind of awkward because I haven’t talked to this girl in many years and we are just meeting back up for the first time. It was hard to talk.

“Oh, so you go to San Francisco, and you’re a senior like me right?” she asked.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to graduate.”

“You haven’t spoken to me in five years! I don’t get it. My last attempt was the email I sent you right before college.” Paige exclaimed.

“I know and I’m sorry about that, now I want to pick up where we left off,” I told her.

“Okay, so after five years you feel the need to pick up where you left off??”

“Yeah, I don’t know, I guess my thought was that us being friends wasn’t meant to be because I moved away, but we bumped into each other here so this could be telling me something,” I said with my head down in shame.

“Well...I’ll give you another chance. After your game lets meet up and we’ll do something fun. You still have my cell phone number right?” she said.

“Okay,” I said very relieved, “Yeah I’ll give you a call, but I’ve got to get going.”

“Okay. Good luck,” she told me.

I went to the locker room knowing my coach would yell at me for being gone so long and not checking out the field. As soon as my foot crossed the locker room door,

“ Wilson where were you?” he shouted.

When our coach is mad he calls us all by our last name.

“Uh, I was checking out the campus on my own.” I lied.

I lied because if I told him I had met up with my friend and we were talking, he would probably kill me. He doesn’t like when players put their old private matters before a game, especially a big game like this.

“Okay whatever, get your uniform on and get to the field,” he yelled.

As the game went on the other team just kept getting hit after hit and run after run. I knew the reason we made it this far had to be for me to see Paige, but I didn’t know why I needed to.

We lost our game 10-2, but I didn’t care about the outcome.

After, I showered and then I called Paige. She wanted to hang out down by the beach and walk along the pier.

We walked and talked for hours saying what we’ve missed in each other’s lives.

“What do you want to do after you graduate?” Paige asked.

“I want to travel the world and do photography, what about you?”

I’ve applied to medical school. I want to become a doctor,” she told me.

“Wow that’s really cool,” I said, amazed at who she’d become.

“Jack, I’m having this graduation party in the middle of June, do you want to come?”

“Of course, I’d love to,” I replied

We stayed out so late that night talking, I hadn't had this much fun since the last time I was hanging out with her about seven years ago. It got really late and I walked her home. We both looked at each other, stared back and forth.

Finally we both opened our arms for a hug,

"Thank you," she said in my arms.

"Thank you," I mimicked.

"I'll see you in a month in a half. Bye Jack."

"Bye," I said.

I walked back to my hotel and slept so well that night, but I had to wake up early because of our flight back to California. I slept the whole plane ride as well.

Ten days later I graduated and had about a month until Paige's party. I called Paige.

"Hey!" I shouted, "I graduated!" as soon as I heard her pick up, I spoke.

"Yeah, me too!" she said, "I'm out partying with my friends."

"Well have fun, I'll see you in two weeks, and I'm going to come earlier so we can hang out. Be safe!" I laughed.

I said that because it sounded like there was some drinking going on, but I know Paige is responsible. I got one of those really bad feelings.

"Okay, I will! Bye!" she replied with laughter.

Later that night I got a call from her cell phone. I didn't want to believe it, so I didn't.

For the first two weeks before I was going to see Paige I was shipping my big things back home and packing up my smaller things to take on the plane.

After I graduated my parents told me that since I was older and practically on my own they re-bought our old house in New Hampshire. I flew back to our home town in New Hampshire where the party was going to be.

The afternoon I got home I spent the rest of that day unpacking and doing my laundry. The next morning I woke up earlier than usual and drove to Paige's house. It looked like no one was home, but I knocked anyway. Paige opened the door.

"Hey!" she said giving me a hug.

"What have you been up to?" I asked.

“Nothing really, unpacking and doing laundry, the usual college come home stuff, thanks for coming earlier so we can hang out!”

That day we went to a movie then walked along the bike path. But there was something off, I could feel it.

“Today was fun Jack, thank you,” Paige sincerely said.

“Yeah it was fun, no problem,” I replied.

I drove her home.

The rest of the week I hung out with Paige every day.

“Paige, tomorrow I’m going to walk around and take pictures all day, but on Tuesday we’ll hang out again, okay?”

“Okay sounds good. I’ll talk to you later,” She replied

I drove home. By the time I got home my parents were already in bed, so I slipped into bed very quietly. The next morning I woke up very early, even before my parents did. I grabbed my camera, loaded it with film and walked to town.

I have always preferred film cameras because I like the idea that every picture you take has to be a good one: you can’t delete it. A few years back my dad put a dark room in our basement for me.

My first destination in town was the bridge. It was large, and gleamed in the sun as it shadowed the river. The sunlight was trying to peek through the bridges holes to warm the river. My second destination was the cemetery. For the cemetery I loaded black and white film because I wanted a spooky feel in my pictures. I took the most pictures at the cemetery. My third and final destination was the center of town. After my long day of walking, I went home and took a three hour nap.

When I woke up from my nap I began to process my cemetery pictures. Black and white film is a lot easier to process than color. Once the film was developed it needed to dry. It got really late so I went to bed.

The next day I hung out with Paige all day.

“How was taking pictures yesterday?” she asked.

“It was good, I went to town bridge, the cemetery and town center. After I started to develop my cemetery film, this weekend I’m going to finish all of them and begin to enlarge pictures,” I explained.

We continued hanging out. We went mini-golfing and did many of the things we did together as kids.

Our day sadly came to an end.

“I have to go down to Rhode Island for a couple days for a family thing, but when I’m back I’ll call you,” I told her.

“Cool I can’t wait, don’t forget my party is in one week, I’ll see you later,” she said going into her house. It was as if every time she’d remind me of her party she was throwing me a hint of something.

It was my grandma’s 90th birthday, so our whole family was going to be there. “Mom, can Paige come to Rhode Island with us?” I asked as nicely as I could.

“Honey, I’m sorry, you know she can’t, you know if...”

That was all I heard and I just went outside and got in the car, I wasn’t really mad, but she would always let Paige come on trips with us even when it was my grandma’s 83rd birthday. It just didn’t make sense to me.

It was fun to see my family, and especially to see my grandma for her birthday, but I was glad to be back. When I got back to town, I called Paige’s cell phone.

“I’m sorry, the number you are calling is no longer in service at this time.”

It was the phone recording when a phone line was disconnected. I soon forgot about it, because I drove to Paige’s house to get her.

“How was your time with your family?” Paige asked.

“It was fun; my grandma said she was sorry that you couldn’t come.” I said.

Paige’s face went from happy to straight face. She looked like she got frightened by what I said.

I was with her for the next couple days, each day got better and better. We were doing all the things we talked about doing as kids. This was truly the best time of my life. Each day ended how they usually do, drive or walk her home and we hug, then we go to bed, and the cycle begins the next day as well.

The night before Paige’s party, and after we hung out, I began to enlarge my cemetery photos. I enlarged this really interesting one, and then I fell asleep, I started to look at this picture very closely. This picture scared me. I saw an outline of Paige’s full name on a gravestone. My stomach was twisted. I quickly ran to my

computer to scan the picture on it so I could zoom in. I saw it; it felt as if my heart skipped a beat. The gravestone read,

“Paige Marie Collins

April 3, 1990 – May 25, 2012”

She died that night of graduation. It amazed me. I couldn’t understand, I woke up and ran to Paige’s house. Once again no cars were in the driveway. I knocked and Paige was there.

“Paige,” I said panting out of breath, “There’s this picture, and your name’s on the gravestone.”

“Show me where you saw this,” those were the only words she said to that statement.

We started to walk towards the cemetery so I could show her where I took the picture. It was a perfect day; there were no clouds in the sky, the air was cool and breezy. I have had the best time of my life reliving my life with Paige. Nothing was in our way.

“Paige there was a reason for us running into each other in Maine, I know it.” I told her.

“What was it?” she asked.

“I needed my best friend again. I needed to see her—my baseball team would have never made it as far as we did if there wasn’t a reason.”

“Jack,” she paused and looked in my eyes,

Her eyes were a big pool of blue that looked as if the sun was always shining in them reflecting its bright and cheery color all around. I loved them.

She continued.

“I’m glad I got to see you before.”

I was confused.

“Before what?”

“Who are you talking to?” some man from behind me asked.

“Uh,” I stuttered, “What?”

I turned around and looked in the man’s direction and saw many people gathered together, all dressed formally. I looked back at Paige with a puzzled look.

She wasn’t there.

“Do you know where you are, Jack?” the man asked grabbing my arm and leading me towards the group of people.

I didn't know how he knew my name.

I had a long pause to answer his question,

“Yeah.”

“Thank you for coming!” Mrs. Collins said frantically crying into my shoulder. I felt out of place, I didn't quite understand, how did I get into the formal clothes? Where am I?

The man, who appeared to be Paige's brother seated me in the front row and whispered in my ear,

“She wanted you here the most out of any of her friends.”

There was a light breeze throughout the cemetery; the day was still the most perfect day. There was now only one cloud in the sky; it was shaped like a heart.

I leaned over to Paige's brother as he sat down,

“What's the date?”

“June 3,” he replied.

What felt like a month since college has only been ten days.

I finally took the time to observe what was going on. I looked around the area and saw Paige's family gathered together, and a casket. There was no Paige, there was no fun times doing the things we did as kids. It was all a figment of my imagination. This was Paige's funeral. She died the night I talked to her on the phone by driving under the influence. That was the last time I ever spoke to my closest friend in the world. I made myself feel so bad about not seeing her as much as I could have that I made her up in my mind. I got the hints all along. The dream, the cell phone, why her house was always empty, and why I didn't want to hear my mom say the reason Paige couldn't travel with us. Once Paige died, her parents moved into an apartment in the center of town and abandoned their house. Everything was so obvious. I just didn't want to face it. The best time of my life didn't even happen.

Eating her Heart

by Aaron “Khonsu” Spratt

Frank felt most comfortable in restaurants. He liked the idea of going out and taking on a new persona: he would wear his one good suit which had a double-breasted brown coat, a light brown vest, and a red and gold striped tie. He paired those with pants, cuffed and pleated, with patent leather shoes. It was a bit old-school, but that’s why it was so sharp. However, the suit was too big for him. His father had shoved it into his arms one day right before he went of to college to major in Philosophy: “Here boy, be a man!” His father’s voice echoed throughout his head every time he put it on. His father’s suit made him feel powerful nonetheless.

Once, when a waiter began to pour wine into his glass, he shoved it back to him, splattering wine making a big pink stain on his shirt, saying, “get me champagne instead. I did not ask for this.” Then he brushed off his suite swiftly with the tips of his fingers and gave the waiter a stern look as if *he* had done something terrible. The waiter got him some champagne alright, along with an infusion of his own gourmet bodily liquid. Frank couldn’t help but notice the difference. He didn’t complain, though, because a part of him knew that he had gotten exactly what he deserved. He just never ate there again.

But he wouldn’t have needed to go out to eat so often if his wife Zahara would ever cook for him. Seven years ago he was still into his same restaurant self-help ritual: spending his breakfast, lunch, and dinner telling other people what to do, but always going home alone to read a book or star-gaze while lying on his front yard. One day, he heard that there was a new bakery in town and he wanted to try something new. He once again put on his suit and went down the street into Zahara’s Bakery. The brass bell that hung above the door like mistletoe jingled as he entered the small place. Zahara was busy taking buns out of the big brick oven in the back and loading them into baskets for display. Her apron came down to cover her thigh, but left the ripped knee in her jeans exposed. Her bandana was slipping off her dark, silky hair as she bent her body backwards to carry the big bread bins. “Welcome to Zahara’s Bakery, I’m Zahara,” she said without looking.

Frank came in expecting one thing:

“I want a medium cappuccino, two cinnamon crescent donuts, and a turkey sandwich,” he demanded while doing something on his cell phone.

Zahara just stared at him strangely.

“Do you see any of that here, sir?”

Frank immediately looked up from his phone: “I’m sorry!” It spilled out in a high, squeaky voice.

She let out a short, exasperated laugh then leaned over the counter, letting her wavy hair spill out in front of Frank. “Because this is your first time here, I’ll let you slide. But let me tell you something, this is *Zahara’s Bakery*,” she signaled towards herself while looking out of the corner of her eye. “Every morning I make what I want to make, so what you get is what you get.” She smiled in a phony way while crossing her fingers “So why don’t you sit down and let me tell you what you’re going to try today.” He complied, partially because he was excited about being served personally by a woman other than his mother. There was a silence that surrounded Zahara, but it was not passive. It was profound and powerful—she had a mystery that transfixed Frank.

She was attracted to his shy boyishness: his big curious eyes magnified by his round glasses, and the messy brown hair that fell over his forehead. Something about his slight body that got lost in that big suit made her want to get to know him. He stayed, and they talked late into the night.

Zahara had gone to college and majored in the culinary arts because she had so much passion for cooking. She had converted her deceased mother’s home into a very successful bakery.

Zahara and Frank dated for three years. They were married in April. After moving in with Zahara and a year of marriage, Frank began to feel stifled. Frank became a regular at this place called The Nook, “the best breakfast in Florida”. This was one of his many restaurant stops he had begun to accumulate throughout the day.

He usually ate alone. He met Elina, the daughter of the owner, when he stopped in for breakfast early one morning. Elina’s eyes immediately stuck to his as he opened the door and saw the rolls, golden-tan, that Elina always made personally fresh for him. He

called early every morning before his wife was even up and told her what he wanted, and she delivered.

Zahara had turned her house into a very successful bakery built upon assortment of secret recipes. Maybe she was too successful, too good to be true because every one coveted her recipes. However, there was nothing especially extravagant about her bakery. The plain, off-white walls, one big wooden counter, an old wooden floor, and a couple of metal tables all screamed to be decorated. Yet this simplicity magnified the focal point of her love and creativity—food

He went down stairs into the bakery to meet Elina with his breakfast. He smelled that sweet, distinctive smell even before she came in. They got settled and she opened up, releasing the warm and sweet aroma of her fresh pancakes. He breathed in the irony of being in his wife's bakery. He ate them as if his wife was not an amazing cook herself, as if these pancakes were so different and so much better than what he already had.

The next day he went off to work with these thoughts, almost slipping into a deep meditation as he followed the rhythmic monotony of stopping at every stop sign and obeying the law to the letter. He thought he could drive to work with his eyes closed because he'd been doing it for so long.

The black Mercedes approached the guard in her rectangular booth. She nodded to him and opened the gate to Tallahassee's astrological center.

"Your dreams will take you to the stars," Frank mocked the words that were on the front of the building. The electronic device on the wall beeped and turned green after he swiped his ID with a picture on it that he always thought made him look old. He was only forty years old but he felt at least seventy. Frank sank heavily into his swiveling laboratory chair. Adjusting his glasses, he moved toward some calculations that would predict the angle of the falling star that was due at the end of the month. The huge telescope in the center of the room was a magnet to his eyes. When they drifted from his calculations, his eyes would always drift there. He worked until the light that came through the retractable roof turned into moonlight and the numbers on his computer screen turned into stars.

Finally he carefully saved his work and walked in a dreamlike trance over to the spiral staircase that led to the giant telescope. The telescope was almost sublime: so

powerful and alluring. Every six or seven steps he would pause briefly and gaze like a child up at the glassy eye of the telescope. He peered through that window with the curiosity of a child because the universe was once again open to him.

This was his ritual. He knew practically every star and planet in the galaxy and that is precisely why he looked. Frank wanted to see something that was beyond the known universe. He wanted to discover something, something that could be his for a lifetime. He felt more powerful using his telescope, as if he could conquer the universe; put his name on a star, planet, or even a whole galaxy.

“You can’t know every star in the galaxy,” declared Charles Defranco. Frank turned around suddenly, his eyes wide, heart beating fast, and breath coming even faster, as if Charles had awoken him from an especially poignant dream. “Why are you here so late, Defranco?”

“I could ask you the same question, Frank.”

“But you won’t because I’m your boss and you want to keep your job.”

“Alright, well he came back to get my jacket and he saw you up here stargazing.”

“I was just doing my job, that’s all, nothing more,” Frank said as he brushed passed Charles and hurried down the spiral metal staircase. “I’ll see you in the morning. On time!”

Charles laughed at him silently and shook his head. “Yes, sir!”

As Frank made his way to the car he called Zahara on his cell phone. It was late and he wanted to tell her where he was.

“Hey Zahara”

“Good evening, Frank”

I just wanted to tell you that I’m on my way home now — sorry I’m late. I got carried away in the lab again. What’s for dinner?

“The same thing you had for breakfast”

“You didn’t make me breakfast today”

“I know. I went out with a couple of my girlfriends that I haven’t seen in a while — eating, dancing, talking.

One day he thought about how he got caught up in this network of secret eating habits. He concluded that it was probably marriage, but not just marriage—marriage to Zahara.

First Kiss

by Jessica Chandler

Prologue

“I love you!” I said crying, kneeling on the ground. “I *love* you!”

He gave me this cold, hard look that clearly read that he didn’t believe me. It was true, though. The moment our lips touched, I could feel a spark. I was sure he felt it too, but now I’m not too sure.

“Brigit,” he said. His voice was the most beautiful thing I had heard in the world. In a few moments it turned into the most deadly. “Brigit I don’t give a *damn* how you feel about me. You went behind my back just when I needed you the most. And now...well, now I can’t trust you.”

“We kissed!” I gasped between sobs. I couldn’t really understand what he was talking about because I was there for him the whole time. Wasn’t I? “We kissed! We...” I stopped talking and listened. Dead silence. Not even a cricket, a bird, or the comforting sounds of honking horns nearby. Just dead silence. Then, here in the alleyway, in struck me how alone we were.

“Does it matter if we kissed? God, Brigit!” He fumbled with something in his back pocket for a few moments and then dropped his hands to his side, looking at me sadly.

“What’s wrong?” I said standing up. “Is everything okay? We can talk it out...”

“I am *sick* of talking things out! Just shut your mouth!” He took a long pause. After a few moments he fumbled with his back pocket again and his hand stayed there. I casually inched closer and closer to the end of the alleyway where, hopefully, other people were.

Suddenly, out of his pocket he took a black gun. If I had run faster I would have made it, but I was so lost. I was still wondering how a kind person like him could have turned so bad.

And then he killed me.

A few weeks earlier

I was holding a letter in my hand. *Dear Brigit*, it read, *Things are not going at all well here. Mom and Dad are almost done with their divorce papers and they still have to figure out who has custody over me. At least I'm almost 18, right? Alexander.*

Alexander's parents and mine have been friends for a while and ever since we learned to write we've been sending letters to each other. Back and forth from Washington to Rhode Island. I live in Washington, he lives in Rhode Island. Lately the letters he's been sending me have been strangely short, but I suppose things are busy with the divorce and all.

My dad's voice rang through the house, "Brigit honey, it's time to leave!"

It is the end of August and the weather outside is unbearable. So to cool down I went down into the basement and lay on the cool cement floor. There was plenty of space to lie because we're moving and the whole house is empty.

Rising myself off of the floor, I took one last sweeping look of the basement. My whole childhood was here, in this house, and suddenly dad decided to move all the way across the country. He didn't say where either because he wants it to be a "surprise".

The plane landed and off I stepped, trying to locate a sign of some sort to figure out where on the earth I was. And then I saw it: Rhode Island.

"Dad," I said whining. "You moved us to *Rhode Island*?"

"It's not that bad, honey."

"Please don't call me honey."

"Why not? You're sweet like honey, so why can't I call you it?" He winked, and I rolled my eyes. Dads are *so* embarrassing!

The car ride from the airport was unbearably long and boring. Everything I brought on the plane to do I had done already. I sat there looking at the scenery and out of the corner of my eye I saw this gorgeous, dirty-blond guy. Well, at least this neighborhood has something to offer!

We moved to a place called Coventry. Just the name makes me hate the place, but hopefully school is okay.

On the first day of school I arrived, schedule in hand, ready to assume my position as the “new girl” in school. The school was sort of dumpy: no air conditioning, the lockers looked hard to open, the door squeaked as I walked through, and the library looked awkward—new computers paired with old furniture. The students were scattered around the school, sitting, standing, talking in groups. They were the same as usual: Goths, drama and band geeks, the computer nerds (here they even had the glasses!), the straight ‘A’ honor students, the cheerleaders, the sweaty sports teams, etc.

I stopped in the office first to ask a few questions and that’s when I heard it.

“Alexander Jamieson? No, no I don’t think he’s here today. Another excused absence...”

The office lady held up her finger, showing that she’d be with me in a moment. “His parents are getting a divorce, didn’t you hear? No, no I don’t think you did. He’s not a very popular boy. I’ll have to let you go. Okay, bye.” She hung up the phone and then she looked at me over her thin glasses. “Yes?”

“I-I’m new here.” Wow. Such an exciting sentence!

“Name?” she said pulling something up on her computer.

“Brigit Litke.”

“Alright Brigit, here is a map of the school...a pass...an agenda...would you like me to show you to your locker?”

“Oh...um, yes?”

She laughed and walked with me up the stairs and to my locker. Number 137. “Here you go. The first class of the day has already started, but I’ll call up to your teacher to let him know you’re on your way.” Then she left me standing there going *clip clop clip clop* down the hallway, her hair bouncing the whole way.

I felt like slapping her silly because how would I know where my first class was? I had a map, but maybe it would be better to wait until tomorrow to get to know the building, when Alexander is here to show me.

The office lady was right; Alexander was not a popular guy at school. I knew this before even talking to him because, when I asked a group of girls who he was, they pointed with a disgusted look on their faces at a lone person sitting far away from everyone else.

When I sat down next to him he glanced up, clearly surprised. I said, “So I hear you were absent yesterday. That’s too bad because I was *beyond* lost.” Alexander had a good appearance. He had short, but not too short, dark brown hair with hazel eyes. He was pretty hot. I didn’t understand why the other girls didn’t like him.

Since he kept looking at me strangely I tried saying something different to him: “My family just moved here.” Still he stared with that same confused look. Surely I told Alexander that I was moving? Didn’t I?

The guy lowered his head down to look at the table, to an empty sheet of paper.

I sighed. “Alexander...”

His head snapped up. “What?”

“Don’t you know me? It’s Brigit!”

His face broke out in a grin and I saw white teeth. Perfect white teeth. “Brigit? No way.”

I nodded. “Yeah! My mom’s name is Cathleen. She and your mom are friends!”

“I believe you...it’s just. Wow. Here?”

“Apparently my dad wanted to move to the East Coast, to New England.”

“Apparently he had a change of heart,” Alexander said.

“Apparently.” I paused. “So, were you absent yesterday because of the divorce?”

He took a long pause after this. I knew it was a difficult topic to talk about, but he left me nearly clueless with his last letter. He nodded after a while. “Yes.”

I didn’t say anything for fear he would stop talking. And he didn’t!

“My mom wanted me to go with her, but my dad said that I had to live with him. The judge was just making his decision.”

“And? What was the verdict?”

He took a deep breath. “My dad.”

I took this as a good thing but Alexander kept his face frustrated and sad.

“Well...that’s a good thing right? You can play video games all day! Take guitar lessons!”

“No, Brigit. Haven’t I ever told you about my dad?”

I shook my head. “You hardly told me anything at all.”

He looked surprised for a moment, and then said, “My dad’s the sort of person who doesn’t do anything all day. He smokes...and gets drunk.”

“O-oh.” I felt really stupid.

Suddenly the bell rang, making us both jump. Luckily it was only the warning bell, but I could not make it to class in one minute.

Alexander jumped up, grabbing his empty notebook. “What’s your first class?”

“I-uh, math.”

“With who?”

“Mr. Peterson.”

All of a sudden he seemed more relaxed. “Mr. Peterson? He’s like the weirdest teacher here. He only cares if you are late or not if you don’t have a good excuse.” He laughed and it was so musical, so light and free. “How about I bring you to your first class? Okay? Since you were ‘beyond lost’ yesterday.”

I stood up and grabbed my books, all of them since I didn’t know the route of my classes yet. “Alexander? What happens if you’re late?”

“My dad won’t care if I get a detention.” Then he walked off and I trailed behind, continuously wondering why nobody hung out with Alexander.

I got my answer a day later. One reason I didn’t want to mention this was because it might hurt his feelings, mentioning that he doesn’t have any friends. I didn’t want to make it more obvious than it already was. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I thought of a clever way to ask the question the night before.

“So, Alexander, are any of these girls your ex’s?”

He stopped in his tracks. We were on our way to the cafeteria for lunch and luckily we both had the same one. “None of these girls wants to hang out with me.”

“And why is that? You’re *so* hot!” I laughed and, thank heavens, he did too.

“Thanks for that. I appreciate the complement. But, nah, nobody really wants to hang out with me. I’m an independent sort of guy.”

“Independent how?” I wasn’t getting any closer to my answer here.

“Independent because...well yes they are my ex’s...all of them. They kept hanging all over me and before I did want to hang out with them, but a few weeks into

the relationship I couldn't take it anymore. So I dumped them. Some of them didn't take it seriously, though, and thought I was cheating on them. Now no girls in our class want to hang out with me."

I decided not to press the situation any further. But there was still one more question I had been longing to ask. "Where did your parents get your name?"

Alexander asked, "Why'd you want to know?" When I shrugged he scratched his chin and said thoughtfully, "I think they named me after Alexander the Great, because my mom used to call me that before I was born."

I tried to hide my laugh because people were starting to stare. This was only the beginning.

After the long weekend in which Alexander and I indulged ourselves in a lot of chocolate and several horror films, I walked to his house which was, as my dad put it, "coincidentally down the street". I knew his mother had already moved out so it was just his father and him, alone. I rang the doorbell.

A man with a scruffy beard, half closed eyes, and a receding hairline opened the door. In his hand was a half filled bottle of beer and he smelled horribly like he'd been drinking all night. I had a feeling that he had been.

"Is Alexander here?"

"Who?"

"Alexander." I held my breath because the house smelled even worse than the guy. No wonder his mother left!

"Alexander!" He shouted up the stairs. "Your girlfriend...she's here." He walked off leaving the door wide open. I dared not to step in.

Alexander rushed down the stairs and hurriedly slammed the door behind him like he didn't want me to see what his house looked like or I'd feel bad for him. "Ready for school?"

I breathed again. "Your dad seems...interesting."

Alexander made a sort of "tuh" noise. "He's interesting all right." He paused. "You mentioned to him that you were my girlfriend?"

"No!" I insisted. "All I did was ask for you and he just...assumed it!"

“He was drunk. He can assume a lot of things. And I’m not really sure that’s what happened. I think you said it.”

“Well, you were upstairs getting ready so what would you know?”

He grinned again. Ahh, those teeth. I wondered how he kept them so white. Did he have braces? Had he used those Crest white strips? Whatever his secret was I needed it because my teeth didn’t look white.

“I’m kidding,” he said putting one arm around me. “You know I’m kidding.”

Before taking a deep sigh I thought about all that had happened so far. We met officially exactly a week ago and now we were already going over to each other’s houses, watching movies together. Acting like we’d been best friends for years and, we had, but we never really talked about what we would do together. I figured it would come up spontaneously and I was right. It had! I took the deep breath, thinking that maybe moving to Rhode Island wasn’t such a bad thing and then held my breath.

“Alexander!”

“Shit.” He took his arm off around me and looked at his clothes. “I took a shower and washed these but they never seem to get that damn scent off of them!”

“Probably because that damn scent is all over the house!” I breathed out because now he was standing farther away. “I just don’t want my parents to think that I’m doing all that stuff. And if I tell them about your dad then maybe you’ll go live with your mom...wherever she is. And I don’t want you to leave!” Despite the fact that I just told him I didn’t want to smell bad, I rushed into his arms and wrapped my own around him. Underneath all that smoke I could not get a normal scent off of him, and it worried me. “How long has this been going on?”

“He’s been doing it for five years now. Nonstop.”

I let go of him and continued to walk. “Well, go get Febreze or something.” I paused, the gears in my brain turning. I wasn’t really pondering if the Febreze would work. I was trying to figure out a way to help him. “Oh my gosh we totally should! You want to? It would work!”

“But wasn’t it Oust that worked on that kind of stuff?” he said laughing.

“No, Febreze works *way* better! Want to go get some?” I said, begging. “You could smell like lavender or something.”

“Yeah and that would make me even more popular, Brigit. Thanks.” He cleared his throat. “We’d be late for class if we go get some because the supermarket is like five streets over.”

The rest of the way was spent in silence. I was left thinking about my other friends that I left all the way back in Washington. My best friend was Madison, and we had known each other since the fourth grade. I opened my phone and dialed her number, Alexander watching me through his peripheral vision.

“Hello?” she sounded really tired. Whoops, I guess I forgot about the time difference! What time was it there, four in the morning?

“Madison? Hi!”

“Brigit?” she sounded more awake. “Brigit, I think I had a dream about you. You married that Alexander kid that you keep imagining is real. It was weird.”

“But,” I said laughing a slight bit, “Alexander’s not imaginary! He’s right here; we’re on our way to school.”

“School?” she said, confused. “At four in the morning...?” There was a pause. “Oh, wait the time difference. Wow, school starts early there huh?”

“Yeah, I am *beyond* tired. I think I was sleepwalking when I was getting ready. It’s all a blur.”

“I bet.” She paused again. “Can I speak to this non-imaginary Alexander?”

“Sure.” I handed the phone over to him and he answered it with a, “Hey.”

He looked at me. “Um, okay here she is.”

“Madison?”

“Oh my gosh, Brigit, send me a picture of him and then I have *got* to go to bed! I am so sleepy I don’t think I will get enough sleep to wake up at 7:30.”

“Okay, a picture is coming your way.” I snapped the picture and Alexander flinched from the flash. “So,” I said to Alexander once I hung up. “What did she say to you?”

“It was something about not being imaginary.”

“Oh, yeah, everyone thought I was making you up.”

“People at my school were saying that about you.”

“Really? Well, I’ll have to let them know who I am then, won’t I? But that is really weird.”

“Yeah,” he said laughing. “*Beyond* weird.”

I nudged him as we walked into the school. “Okay that is just a habit I started when I was twelve.”

“It can be your quote in the yearbook. ‘High School was *beyond* great!’.”

“Shut up Alexander!”

He waved goodbye, laughing, and I walked right into a group of girls. They all stared at me.

“So,” one of them said. She had long black hair that was wavy. She was wearing shorts that were really tiny. “You started hanging out with Alexander? Not the best choice. He’s like, a total jerk.”

This was interesting because I was about to find out exactly why people didn’t like Alexander. “Why would you think he was a jerk? And I didn’t just *start* hanging out with him. He and I have been—” But she interrupted me.

A girl in the back whispered something to the black haired girl. “Oh my gosh. You’re Brigit, aren’t you? We all thought you were imaginary!” she laughed an obvious fake laugh and then cleared her throat. “But, Brigit, you don’t want to be hanging around with Alexander at all.” The rest of the girls murmured to each other in agreement.

This confused me. “And, um, why not?”

“Alexander is *such* an idiot. You see Brigit he has gone out with almost every single girl in our class, except for you. I’m just trying to give some friendly advice.” She paused and looked around the hallway, probably for Alexander. “I went out with him last year and I thought, ‘Okay this is going to be great I’m going out with a total hottie!’ The first few weeks were fine and we were making out a *lot*. But then he just dumped me for no reason at all to get together with Allison here.” She pointed her thumb to a tan, brown-haired girl standing in the back. “And he’s done that with all the girls! Brigit, I wouldn’t hang out with him.”

I thought about this for a moment and then said, “Alexander wouldn’t do that. He’s a really nice guy.”

The Allison girl standing in the back said, “At first. Then he dumps you a week later. He’s *such* an idiot, its no wonder nobody ever hangs out with him. He says that you’re together but then you catch him kissing another girl. He cheats on everyone.”

A girl who was passing in the hallway with a nose to big for her face said, “I went out with Alexander at the end of last year and met his parents. His mom was okay, she is a great cook, but his dad was downright disgusting. And I’m sorry, if I’m going to marry someone I want my in-laws to be sane.”

The black haired girl (who seemed like the leader to me) said, “*Have* you met his father?”

I nodded. “Yes I have and he was gross. Alexander’s house smelled bad too, like I couldn’t breathe in there.”

“Oh Brigit, you have to dump him,” she said with false pity written all over her face. “...Before he dumps you.”

“Okay, you guys don’t understand. Alexander and I have been friends for *years*. We’ve been writing each other letters back and forth. I think I know Alexander. I trust him and you might not realize it, but it could have been you who were the problem, not him. You don’t have to marry someone in your high school class, you know.”

She said to me, “But every girl was a problem for him? Honestly.”

I didn’t feel like listening to it anymore, “Get the hell out of my way. I’m going to be late for class.”

The group split and I strutted through proudly, even if they didn’t believe me. I didn’t stop walking to get breakfast in the cafeteria, to stop at my locker; I just kept walking and walking until I reached Mr. Peterson’s math class.

The rest of the day went by so slowly I was sure the clocks were broken. Every time I looked at the clock I saw that it moved two minutes, maybe five if I was lucky. At last lunch came and I spotted Alexander at our table, eating some pizza.

“History is going to be so boring,” he said. We both had history class together, which was an improvement because when I hung out with Alexander things seemed to pass more quickly.

“I ran into a group of girls this morning and I asked why you didn’t hang out with them. It was for the reason you said before.” I didn’t want to hurt his feelings by saying that they started the conversation.

He shrugged. “Obviously, but I mean, seriously, did I date every girl in the school? Do I cheat on every single one of them?”

“They’re so stupid to think that, I know I never did,” I said.

“Yeah, sure.” He laughed and I knew that things were perfect between us.

During history Mrs. G, who is like eighty years old, did the usual. All she ever does is talk in a boring, monotone voice and we are left to take notes from what she’s saying. Alexander and I passed notes to each other before the class was interrupted.

A knock sounded at the door and several students lifted their heads off their desk to see who it was. I didn’t know who it was but I did see him hanging around the Guidance Office a lot so maybe he worked there.

“Hey Mrs. G, could I speak to Alexander?”

She nodded and Alexander stood up, taking his empty notebook with him. The rest of class I was left with complete boredom, and the clock had slowed down once more.

Since I didn’t have any more classes with Alexander, I had to wait until the end of the day before I could find out why he had to go with the counselor. When I saw him he was not walking in a way I had seen before. It was not graceful or fast-paced, but slow and saddening. I had to wait almost fifteen minutes for him to get across the courtyard and over to where I was standing so we could walk home together.

“Hey Alexander, what did the counselor have to say?”

“Ah, shit Brigit. What do you think? The usual: someone told them I was doing drugs and they had to talk to me about it. But not matter how many times I denied it they still got the evidence from my clothing and the way I smelled. They also asked about my past relationships.”

“Wow, meeting those girls in the hallway this morning was, like, totally foreshadowing this,” I said thoughtfully. “What else happened?”

“They told me to talk to my parents about my” –he paused and made air quotes with his fingers- “problems’. It’s really not fair, you know? Because even if I tell my dad

I am going to be expelled he wouldn't know because he's always drunk. Maybe if I just run away things would work out. He wouldn't even know I was gone." Alexander was staring into space.

"Um, Alexander? How did he end up your guardian instead of your mom? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

He, however, said, "What would you do if you were in a situation like this?"

"Well, I'd go get help. And, Alexander, you've really got to. I mean, like, tell him the truth." I knew it wasn't the answer he was looking for, but hey I tried right?

"But I did tell him the truth! And he didn't believe me because of my stupid clothes smelling."

An idea came to me the instant he said "clothes". I knew it would work! It had to! "Alexander, if I take you shopping for new clothes and bring them to school with me will it work?"

He shrugged and said, "I doubt that scent has even left my skin." He turned into his house and then disappeared behind the door. I could see his father asleep on the couch through an open window.

Had we really gotten home that quickly? I thought. We must have, because time just seems to move more quickly when Alexander is around.

Alexander was absent at school the next day. I could almost hear the office lady saying on the phone: "Alexander Jamieson's out again today. Always absent. Always." Office secretaries seem to talk about that sort of thing all the time, you know?

Today I knew that school was going to go by so slow like those days where you keep glancing at the clock every five minutes but it feels like longer than that. I walked into school and hurried to class. Maybe, I thought, just maybe if I went to class early the day would go by slow, right? Probably not.

I saw the group of girls I ran into yesterday standing outside one of their lockers. They were chatting away, but the conversation turned into whispers when I walked past. The girl with the long, black, wavy hair was smiling. I knew she had done it. I knew she had reported Alexander. Their stares lasted as long as I was passing them, and then they kept chatting away again. Like nothing was wrong.

When I turned into math class there were two people in there. One: Mr. Peterson. Not that exciting. Two: the dirty-blonde hot kid I spotted when we were just arriving here! I was thrilled. But they were talking about homework so I didn't listen in. I tuned them out because, homework? Who cares!

The kid saw me and ended his conversation with the teacher. I opened my notebook and doodled in it with a dull pencil. He walked up to me. Me!

"Weren't you the girl I saw in the car at the end of the summer?"

"Yeah," I said, "I am."

"I didn't know you went here." He held out his hand, "I'm Rupert."

I took his and shook it. "Brigit."

"Aren't you always hanging out with Alexander?"

I nodded and said, "Oh my gosh, if you start ranting on about how bad he smells or how he is such a jerk to all the girls I am going to lose it because it's totally not his fault, okay?"

"Chill!" he said laughing. "I never even talk to Alexander so I wouldn't know him. What's he like?"

"Well, he's really nice and loves horror films. He's allergic to peanuts, likes the color blue, and we have been writing letters back and forth for like *forever*."

"Cool."

Just then the warning bell rang and he waved as he walked out the door. I was left alone as all my other classmates came into the room. Why did he have to leave? I knew I didn't have a single class with him, but I wasn't too sure about lunch. With all those people in the cafeteria you can never tell!

All the way up to lunch my day went by, thankfully, in a blur. I kept thinking about Rupert and how he actually respected Alexander. Everyone else just assumed things from his appearance and how he smelled.

And Rupert was gorgeous. That dirty blonde hair and bright green eyes. Also, when you talked to him, he would look directly in your eyes and listen to you as if it were the only thing that mattered in the world.

At lunch I found myself alone. Since I hung out with Alexander a lot I really didn't get to know anyone else at school, besides Rupert. Wouldn't you know it? He was sitting down in the spot where Alexander and I usually sat waiting, hopefully, for me.

"Saved you a seat," he said grinning to show off his pearly whites. Why is it that everyone here has white teeth? Maybe it's just me. It probably is. "I figured that since you're still new here you might not know anybody yet besides Alexander."

"Thanks! I was so worried I'd look like a loser sitting alone." I sat down and looked at him, asking, "What are you interested in?"

He took a long sigh and said simply, "I want to be a musician when I turn eighteen. You know, rock and maybe some acoustic guitar. Other than that I am into those action-adventure type of movies and fantasy-adventure books."

I raised my eyebrows. "You read?"

"Who doesn't?" he said in a matter-of-fact sort of voice. "I also hate movie theaters because I always fall asleep." He laughed at me when I looked shocked. "Your turn."

I thought about it for a moment and then said, "Well, my favorite color is pink, I love reading romance stories like the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer, my favorite movies are fantasy-adventure like *Harry Potter*, and I think I want to be a writer." That was a lie. I hadn't really thought about what I wanted to be yet, and I figured that it was a good lie because anyone can write stories right?

"A writer...interesting, but have you actually read the *Harry Potter* series?"

I shrugged, thinking back to when the first one came out. "I think I read the first one, but stopped after the third because they all got longer. Oh well."

"You really should read them. It's like..." he paused, "It's like going into another world or something."

I gave him a look that told him he was weird; then said, "And I think movie theaters are awesome. I love going to them."

"You see," said Rupert, "I'm the type of person who would rather watch the movie at home, in my pajamas, on the couch."

I waved my hand at him, dismissing the conversation. Then I took a bite out of the pizza I was eating and we both feel silent.

“Why’d you move here?”

Swallowing my food I said, “I don’t know. One day my dad just showed up and said, ‘Pack up your bags. We’re moving.’ I didn’t have a choice, but now I think I’m starting to like it here. And he kept it a surprise.” I took drink of my chocolate milk.

He didn’t answer me and took a bite of his pizza. After a few minutes he looked at me and said, “Do you want to hear me play? I have my guitar.” However before I could answer he pulled it out and played a tune that I was not familiar with. It was an acoustic guitar. When he sang I felt like I had died and gone to heaven. It was that good! He played a few notes and then sang: “The world seems not the same. Though I know nothing has changed. It’s gone, my state of mind. I can’t leave it all behind. Have to stand up to be stronger. Have to try, to break free from the thoughts in my mind...” During the rest of the song I was only mesmerized by his great voice and the lyrics that went perfectly with it.

When he was done, I asked, “What song was that? It was so beautiful when you played it like that.”

“Thanks,” he said putting his guitar away. “And that song was *Pale*, by Within Temptation. They’re from the Netherlands.”

“Wow, I totally have to buy that CD now!” We both got up and threw our trays away in the trash. “I have to go to class now.”

“I’ll walk you there.”

The day after I met Rupert I talked to Alexander about him at lunch, because Rupert had to go to the music department for something. I said to him, “I met Rupert yesterday. He seems really nice and he doesn’t hate you! He had to go somewhere today though.”

“Who?” he looked at me and I noticed he had dark circles beginning to appear underneath his eyes.

“Rupert. He has blonde hair and always carries around a guitar with him?”

“Oh,” he said looking at his food again. “Yeah, I know who you’re talking about.”

I thought he’d say more, but obviously was wrong about that bit. So I said, “Alexander, how’s everything going at home?”

He shook his head slowly. “Terrible. Not only is my father getting drunk every night, but I think he forgot about me or something because he keeps going around and locking my room. I did move into my mom’s room, though, so maybe he’s trying to lock the memories away and forget her. It’s not going good at all. And don’t change the subject. Why’d you start hanging out with Rupert?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Alexander, have you got something against him or something? He’s not a bad person, you know. He wants to be a musician and yesterday he sang this beautiful song about somebody trying to commit suicide but someone else is trying to convince him not to. It was a beautiful song, you have to hear it.”

He ignored my last few comments and snapped, “Maybe that’s what I need: suicide. It’ll put my misery to an end.”

“Can’t you just cheer up? I mean it’s like: don’t get mad, get glad!” I said that because I meant for it to cheer him up, but it didn’t.

“Honestly, Brigit, can’t you just listen to me?”

I fell silent at this request.

“My father is making my life hell and you’re just sitting here talking to people, making new friends, and not caring about anything?”

I opened my mouth to speak but he held up his hand.

“No, I’m not done yet. I want help out of this hell-hole I’m in. I want to get away from my god damn father and go live somewhere else.” He took a deep sigh and then leaned back in his chair. This was how I knew he was done speaking.

“Alexander, don’t get mad at me for saying this—they did try to help you. The counselor, remember? He came in and asked for you to talk to your parents about it. You, however, didn’t do anything he said to help yourself.”

“It was because they didn’t believe me! They all thought it was me that was doing that stuff!”

I patted his hand that lay on the table and said, “I know that. But maybe you can say something like ‘My parents are a bad influence’ or you could ask them to come over to your house to talk to your parents. It’s not that hard, Alexander.”

“To you it isn’t because you have a normal family. To me it is because mine is so messed up.” He pushed his tray up the lunch table, which meant that he was done eating.

“Hey Brigit, hey Alexander, how are you guys doing?” Rupert had arrived.

Looking over, I saw his hair in the most beautiful fashion: messy. It was like he couldn't get it to stay down and just left it the way it was, and it looked so musician to me: a musician wouldn't care if he had messy hair or not. Neither of us answered his question. I was all angry now because Alexander wasn't doing the obvious thing. He was angry at me because I wasn't paying any attention to him. But, really, I have a life, you know?

“Wow, so much tension,” said Rupert zipping up his guitar bag. “You guys okay?”

After he had said this Alexander stood up and grabbed his tray, ready to leave. I grabbed his arm before he could do this, though and he sat back down after I did. “Just breathe, okay? Everything will be fine.”

Alexander didn't answer me.

I turned to Rupert saying, “He's a little angry because of his father. Can you think of anything that will get him out of that situation?” I wanted to ask Rupert's help because he must have great advice. I hoped so.

“Oh,” said Rupert, “his drunken father?”

Alexander leaned over to me and said in a harsh whisper, “You talked to him about my father?”

“If you want help you're going to need more than one person, Alexander.”

But before Rupert could say a word, before he could say anything that might help Alexander, lunch ended. And since then Alexander hasn't been really happy.

A couple weeks went by and during that time I mostly hung out with Rupert. We both went over each other's houses where we either talked, popped in a movie (and we didn't always watch the movie!), or he would be writing a song and I would be trying to write a story. However, no ideas came to my head except for one which was a bit sketchy. Because of him, my social life increased and some of the girls who didn't hate Alexander as much as I thought started talking to me. They were all very nice and some of them had the same interests as me!

As for Alexander, he and I sat with Rupert at lunch and he continued to reek. I felt so bad for him as the days kept passing because he was probably living with hell at home and here he didn't have anyone to comfort him besides me and Rupert...but mostly me.

It was a Saturday and I was on my way to Alexander's house because we are going to go walking tonight, just me and him. I was actually looking forward to it, and maybe I would get to know him better. Maybe I would get to know why everything's angering him so much.

As usual, that drunken dad of his came stumbling to the door to answer it and called me Alexander's "girlfriend" again. Alexander shut the door quickly behind him and said, "Are you ready?" He kept one hand in a back pocket of his jeans.

I nodded and we started to walk. A couple streets down we started a real conversation.

"Brigit I need you to listen to me. When you moved here I was so happy to see you. The whole time I was sitting there I kept thinking about how far away you were and how we'd ever meet. And now that we've met, I like having a friend to talk to, someone to ask for advice and stuff." He paused and I didn't say anything. I wanted him to continue on with what he was saying. "Brigit you're my only real friend because everyone else thinks of me as...well...you know." Another pause and I was beginning to have pity on him. "Brigit, I don't know what I'd do without you, because with you I'm not a loser who sits by himself at a cafeteria table during lunch. I am actually talking with someone, *to* someone."

"Alexander, I appreciate what you've said. It's just...Rupert and I are going out now. We've been going out for like a week," I said to him.

He stopped in his tracks and I realized that I didn't know where we were. It was on some long dirt pathway that was in between buildings. The buildings did have windows and doors, but no lights were on inside them. When did we leave the road?

Alexander didn't say anything but leaned close to me and I could smell the alcohol and smoke mixed in with his sweat. He grabbed my neck just then and we kissed. It was long and perfect; he was such a good kisser! We wrapped our arms around each other and the sparks went off, so I knew that he was the one.

After what seemed like a century he let go and I stepped back, disappointed. I wanted more. That was the greatest kiss I've ever had in my life! The greatest! I looked into his eyes but they were angry. I could tell he was pissed.

“Brigit,” he said in a harsh tone, “I love you.”

The Ultimate Resurrection

by Gabe Greenwood

Part 1

Our journey begins in the sky. Twelve planes are gloomily flying through the air. Three by three they circle the sky like vultures hunting for their prey. They continue to circle in perfect harmony. Then, the peace is broken by an uninvited visitor. Soon, all twelve planes had disappeared and were now on solid ground. Only one man could do such a crime, and he wasn't exactly a man—his name was Dr. Otter.

No one had ever seen this creature; all anyone saw was his shadow. The evil doctor had done this unfathomable crime in the comfort of his Plane of Preposterousness. It had rubies and pearls and sapphire jewels jack hammered to its top, making it glow in the wind. In fact, it was sixteen times the size of the *Hindenburg*. Too bad it was used for evil.

Fortunately, the crime Dr. Otter committed was not unknown. For when the ship was only five feet away from this scene of evil, hope was restored! Our two main characters had finally arrived.

They, however, were at a slight disadvantage. The ship our heroes were in was half the size of Dr. Otter's skyship. The two of them were Quinn Nan, a Liberian parapsychologist and hero of Liberia and his assistant, or padawan, the American Jack Webb. They obviously had a plan. Quinn climbed on to the roof of the plane, and once the parapsychologist got close enough, he jumped onto Dr. Otter's ship, missing the fuel that was spewing out of the plane by centimeters.

Quinn was now on the roof where all the jewels were. The edges of the rubies were sharp, so Quinn cut himself many times. Suddenly, Dr. Otter appeared from the cockpit of his ship. The doctor was definitely a sight to see. He was in a vampire jumpsuit with nine sleeves (since he had two human arms, two otter arms, two human legs, and two otter legs. He also had a tail).

"Quinn Nan, we finally meet," said Dr. Otter with a sincere grin. "Let us finish this now, with a death combat!"

And after an evil cackle, one of the doctor's fingernails started to grow and grow and grow, until it was the size and sharpness of a sword.

Fortunately, Quinn Nan carried a sword with him as well, which he had "borrowed" from the army of Mumbai.

The tension in the air was tight, the scene was set and a gigantic climax was about to begin. The first swing went to Dr. Otter: it was a miss. The two opponents circled each other as Quinn took a few first swings. Dr. Otter found a barrel of gasoline and rolled it like a bowling ball. Quinn tripped over it as his sword flew out of his hand. "Well, I won't be needing this any longer!" Dr. Otter said as he sliced off his fingernail with the sword. "NOW YOU SHALL DIE!!" Dr. Otter started to charge at Quinn, soon it would be all ov-

SLAAAAAMM!!!! From out of nowhere, Quinn's assistant I told you about, Jack Webb, put the plane on auto pilot, jumped onto Dr. Otter's skyship and head butted Dr. Otter. The doctor's sword flew off the ship, leaving the three of them unarmed. Dr. Otter and Jack were wrestling like crazy. Suddenly, Dr. Otter couldn't take it anymore, he quickly grew a nail. And after three tries, it was all over for Jack.

"Nnnoooooooooooooooo!!!!!" wailed Quinn, and then he charged toward Dr. Otter. "You son of a b----"

But before Quinn could do anything, especially finish his sentence, Dr. Otter put his fingernail against his throat and there was nothing he could do about it.

Part 2

The moment Jack woke up he found himself delightfully floating on a cloud. In front of him, he could see a plank of wood with the word "Heaven" carved into it. But the most peculiar thing was that he had no clothes on!

Embarrassed, Jack started to run in the other direction. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything in the other direction, so Jack had to hang on to the cloud for dear life. Suddenly, an old, frail hand reached out in front of Jack's face. He took it. The man that pulled him up was wearing a loincloth and had a beard that was three inches long.

“Hello there” the man said. “I am Guru Couuo. I’ve been waiting for this day to come. You seem to have died young, eh?”

“I, I guess so.”

“Anyway, of all the good but dead people in Heaven, you have been offered a deal to get your life back.”

“I accept!” Jack said confidently. He didn’t even let the guru say what he’d have to do to get his life back

“To get your life back,” said the guru, “you will have to undertake three challenges.” And the instant the guru said that, three big, red curtains appeared.

“For the first challenge,” the first curtain rolled up revealing 1000 blades of grass. “You will have to step on each blade of grass without skipping any. But...” Suddenly 1000 disconnected eyeballs appeared. “You’ll have to step on eyeballs instead. He he he he he he he!”

The thought of having to step on eyeballs crossed Jack’s mind, and his stomach. However, he wanted his life back more, so he went ahead and did it.

“1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12...” and soon enough
 “455,456,457,458,459,460,461...” and he happily made it to...
 “989,990,991,992,993,994,995,996,997,998,999,1000!!”

“Wonderful counting” sighed the guru “But it’s time for the second challenge”
 The second curtain rolled up revealing a huge, red brick.
 “The moment you look at this brick, you will have only weighed 50 pounds. You must lift this 200,000,000 pound brick within your time limit of 30 minutes. And your time limit staaarrrrrrrr-“

Suddenly, an idea came to Jack’s mind. Did he really need to get into this mess? Did he really needed his life to be controlled by a 90 year old man? And did he really need to lift a 200 million pound brick to save his life? HELL NO!!!

So Jack knocked the guru onto the ground. However, when Jack was only 5 feet away from the guru, the old man started to grow and grow as his skin got tighter and tighter. Until...BOOOOOOOOOOMMMM!!!!!!! The guru exploded into flames. But what rose from the debris was not the guru, but a gigantic, red dragon.

“You thought I was an old man. Well, you were WRONG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

The noise that this dragon made will take up the rest of this page:

HAA

AAAAAAAAA!!!!!!! It seemed like the whole universe was on fire. The deep, black space turned red and lava filled the galaxy. Mud flowed like rough waves and the dragon got closer to Jack. Now he could smell the dragon's bad breath.

Lava started to hit the dragon's back as he howled in pain. The lava's burning temperature must have crushed his bones, because now the dragon could not move. The shrieks of pain made the battlefield rumble. RRRAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRR!!!! His legs twisted in the air as the dragon's skin turned pink.

Finally, the dragon couldn't hold back the pain any longer...

YPI 2008: a Tribute

by the Week 2 Short Story class

Songwriting:

Sitting alone, Greg strums his guitar. Head bobbing, he plucks away. As time passes, Greg does not move, but now he is no longer alone. The Long Island Sound is across the street, but the YPI sound is everywhere!

Acting:

Everyone should watch Shakespeare acted at a table. Mostly we see Shakespeare as a pageant, complete with period costumes and fake English accents. But Shakespeare at a table is Shakespeare with all the pageantry stripped away; only the language remains. Shakespeare at a table is Shakespeare with room to grow—and it *grows*, grows so big that the table can barely hold it and the room overflows with language. And as it grows, so do the two teenage actors seated there. That's no pageant—that is the real thing.

Photography:

The photography room is filled with a lazy kind of energy. People move in and out of the room, searching for ideas, hoping for the perfect photo. On the computers people flick through their pictures, the measure of their progress so far.

Art:

Justin sits back from drawing his house, and explains why white paper is stupid. His toned paper is a much more suitable canvas.

Screenwriting:

Everyone is working hard—staring at computers intently. Hushed talking continues nonstop as people discuss ideas. Determination, frustration and stress are constants. Precise details matter when you are creating a masterpiece. “What more does this need? What can we fix?” Fragments of dialogue can be heard coming from the computer. To an observer, they don't make sense, they don't fit together yet. But they will.

Dance:

5, 6, 5, 6, 7, 8. Everyone moves together; the dance begins to connect. Stop. Fix their problems. Try again. 5, 6, 5, 6, 7, 8. Now they've got it. Stop. Everyone splits off into small groups, disappears to work.

Musical Theatre:

The Musical Theatre students sit in a circle, discussing, pulling everything together. People relax, drift off, come back. Everyone is equal, important. If someone is confused, it's o.k. Questions lead to clarification. It is a collaborative effort.

Short Story:

The writer is glued to the screen, one hand resting lightly on the keyboard, the other tapping gently on the mouse. The screen is dominated by a picture of the human pelvis, all the small, fragile bones conveniently labeled.

“Which bone should I break?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Maybe this one. The ischium. No! No, it has to be the pubis. I'm breaking the pubis.”

“umm...o.k.”

Decision made, the author's fingers start to fly, the lazy rhythm of his research obliterated by his frenzied activity. He attacks the keyboard, reveling in the gouts of dark words that spurt from the hammered keys. Only when every corner of the screen is spattered with the inky letters is he satisfied. He leans back, smiling—another victory for our nameless hero.

Untitled

By Stefan Garborg

My heart drummed. My lungs choked. My pulse raced inside my temples and wrists. This was no ordinary encounter, and I'd known it wouldn't be from the moment I'd laid eyes on the mysterious, golden-clad warrior.

I keenly felt the gashes, scrapes, bruises, and welts that dotted my face. My left arm dangled, utterly limp, and my right arm was missing a couple fingers at their second knuckle from a nasty brush with that magnificent, lethal shell worn by my opponent.

Each splintered rib inside my chest was like a grating shard of rock wedged into the tender meat of my body. Whenever I crouched, I felt the pinching, needle-like agony of a bone fragment jammed into my heart, not deep enough (yet, anyway) to prove fatal, but definitely deep enough to prove enormously painful and frustrating.

Blood seeped throughout my tortured body into places it wasn't supposed to, saturating my torso with viscous liquid. I almost expected to see it start to soak through my lightweight combat suit. As it was, every step I took left behind a sticky imprint in the dusty soil.

My stomach lurched horribly every other minute, the lingering result of a direct blow to the gut. Trust me, my enemy's punches hurt like bitches. And I'd soon discovered that he fought dirty, too, when he seized a fistful of my hair and tore it out, leaving a field of empty, bleeding pores in its place.

Both legs throbbed from a slap I'd taken while trying to cleave my adversary's head in half with my knife.

I gulped back down the vomit that I felt welling like a coarse bubble in my throat; I couldn't afford the dizziness and weakness that a fluid ejection would undoubtedly bring. Despite my noblest efforts to retain my last meal, a burning, acidic trickle slithered from the corner of my mouth down my chin.

Basically, I was amazed that I was still standing, let alone fighting for the future of my demolished species. Somehow, though, I was doing it. My injuries weren't in vain; I grinned (even though that hurt, too) whenever I had a moment's reprieve and caught sight of my hulking foe.

All the spikes on his left shoulder were missing, shorn off at the base by a well-manuevered sword. The sword was actually his, but a few minutes ago I'd succeeded in expertly wrenching his arm around and yanking the thing from his diminished grip. I'd then immediately gone for the decapitation, but his ugly little head eluded me, and I caught the armor instead. He'd then tapped his shining chest and the sword's metal blade had dissolved into molten slag. *That* was how my left arm had been rendered useless, as miniature craters, valleys, and trenches were scorched into it, consuming the flesh, eating through the vital tendons. At least it had gone blissfully numb soon afterwards.

In addition to the absent cluster of shoulder spines, his once-flawless armor was now scratched, dented, and dirt-encrusted. If not for the fabulous suit that made those marks superficial, I was certain that his physique itself would have been mauled. I could barely believe some of the moves I'd pulled off in the past twenty minutes.

Before we'd started ripping into each other, he'd teleported us to a private area, a desolate planet that I'd easily recognized as Gladrocad, the world on which I'd fought my first major battle against the Zarkons, the battle that had finished with a bang, courtesy of the electrofusion bomb deployed by the insidious terrorist group known as S-cull Corporation. He'd also laid the rules. They were simple: Fight, holding nothing back, until he called a stop to it. No long-range weapons. All up-close and personal.

So here we were, him battered, me bloodied. I knew that my energy was virtually spent, and that my body couldn't take much further punishment. For the time being, I was laying low among the outcroppings of rock, in the hope that I could concoct *something* before he found me.

Lucky for me, lucky for us all, I'm such a damned good tactician.

My right hand, clumsy since it had lost its index and middle fingers, fumbled with my knife. The best bet was probably to hurl it at my enemy from as far away as possible, because I didn't really want to tangle with him at close quarters again. However, I couldn't let him see it coming, because he evidently could manipulate his environment in ways that I couldn't, and I didn't need another liquefied comet all over me. Improvisation time.

I dared to peek through a crevice between two stalagmites, and glimpsed my adversary prowling around, searching. He made no attempt to stifle his shuffling,

clanking noise; *he* wasn't the one hiding. Suddenly, the glint of the knife trapped in my adversary's cheek caught my attention.

"Booyah," I whispered, thunderstruck with inspiration.

I grabbed a stone, slipped it into one of my belt compartments, and knotted my concealed form, ready to spring. I recalled every trick he'd employed thus far, anticipating each of them, and more. I tensed, awaiting the opportunity... *there*. He turned around and began to stalk in the opposite direction.

I leapt over the rocks, banishing the pounding pain in my legs. He swiveled about, but was minus a sword (that was a plus), so all I had to deal with was—

I heard a tiny rustle from right behind me. Exactly the reason why I'd chosen not to simply charge. Hologram ploy. Again. This time, I was wise to it, and I took full advantage of my wisdom.

Roaring some foul curse, I whirled around, slashing horizontally with my blade. Of course, I only scraped a thin line across his armor. More importantly, though, I jumped up and turned ninety degrees in midair, letting his impressive punch sink into my numb left arm. While it was practically flattened, my arm acted as a convenient sort of sponge, absorbing the force of the mighty blow (most of it, anyway).

I careened to the ground, but the absence of a fresh wave of pain allowed me to recover with a swiftness that he surely wasn't expecting from one whom he had just pummeled. I landed solidly on my still-functional right arm and snapped it out, ignoring the protests from my smoldering muscles. Rebounding in an instant to my original position, I had a brief (oh-so-brief) edge. He started to lean back defensively, but I didn't press him. Instead, I skittered back a few paces and tossed my knife high into the air, making sure its flight had an appealing twirl to it. This was not easy to accomplish with only a ring finger, pinky finger, and thumb to rely on. Nevertheless, it spiraled majestically upwards, and out of the corner of my eye, I observed my foe's eyes transfixed by the rising object.

Success!

Faster, I think, than I've ever sprinted before or since, I rushed up to him, unloading the rock from my belt. His diminutive head seemed to shift gently; I could see the individual sinews beneath the rough hide of his neck.

I pinched my clammy stone between my three remaining digits and braced it with my palm. Concentrating all my energy into my point of attack, and with a conviction of motion that could not be deterred, I slammed that igneous chunk right into the spot on his face where a human's nose would have been.

The unidentified warrior reeled back, stumbling, and *now* I pushed the offensive, specifically by pushing *him* to Gladrocad's unwelcoming surface. As he toppled, I snatched the blade of my airborne knife, which had been just about to land. I flipped it and somersaulted far over his prone body so that there was almost no way he could intercept. Well, *that* part worked. I tumbled, but stayed in control, planted my feet, maybe a little unsteadily, and quickly went to seize the insurmountable advantage I'd acquired. Then he did something that I hadn't counted on.

Before I could react, he crossed his left arm over his chest, and, in a single fluid gesture, whipped it my way. I was a meter-and-a-half away, though, quite beyond his personal reach. What would he achieve in doing this? I found out about a millisecond later, when his disconnected metal glove, fingers still extended, soared into my forehead like a golden rocket.

The barren landscape darkened, and I next discovered myself pinned down by my weighty contender, struggling to prevent his hands, one gloved and one not, from strangling the life out of me.

Eventually, the big guy clamped, *hard*, on my neck, with limbs as rigid as titanium beams. I tried something, anything, *everything*, to liberate myself. I started pumping my legs, unleashing a torrent of kicks on his backside to jostle him, throw him off-balance. Like it helped at all. He released my throat, and proceeded to now keep me in place by pressing on my stomach with his right hand and wrapping his arm around my flailing left leg. He stretched it, stretched it, stretched it, and at last... *crackle*... agony rumbled throughout my lower skeleton. I knew what was coming, and I groped for a rock to bite down on. *CRACK*. My pelvis split, the left pubis bone separating from the whole. I crunched down; the rock fractured. I could no longer contain my suffering. The stone dropped from my mouth as I howled in supreme anguish. His expression was unreadable, but I suppose the screaming annoyed my enemy, and that's why he took hold of my chin and brutally jerked it to the side, shattering my jaw.

Sputtering blood with every minor convulsion, I rolled over and lay helpless; it was as if I'd prostrated myself before this terrible, merciless entity. My ultimate fate: to be destroyed by this alleged savior of Humanity. He hoisted me up. Stringy organic juices clung to my feeble form. He swung me around by the neck, and the syrupy threads snapped. My bombarded body was played out well past what it could ever bear. My beleaguered brain was on the verge of surrender to the combative superiority of this fighter. Just before the signature was inscribed on my death warrant, I blinked the maroon clouds from my vision. My sight was failing anyway on the threshold of destiny, but through the deepening gloom that permeated my image, there it was. My trump card. I couldn't afford the distraction of berating myself for having forgotten it. The knife. It sparkled more than ever, standing out against the dimness. I gurgled blood in the pit of my constricted throat, then spat it into my opponent's face. My final chance had arrived, as he grunted and went to wipe himself off. Refusing to be denied, I dug my fingernails into the blade's protruding (and surprisingly, wooden) handle and ripped the thing from his mug. Slime sprayed, and a purple secretion blossomed from the reopened injury. The hilt and blade both were gilded with coagulated gunk. But it was still sharp.

With a feral snarl, I plunged the weapon into his head, straight through his left eye. Not yet satisfied, I kept my grip and jiggled it around in the socket, widening the raw gulf now dominating his features, shoving the knife in further. I was bathed in the alien DNA as he held me aloft and the blood (I assume it was blood) erupted, gushing down the length of my arm, splattering over nearly every cubic centimeter of my skin and suit.

I continued to twist it inside, oblivious to all else, until a familiar voice called out, "Enough."

He lowered me gingerly to the mud, where I propped myself up on a shaky right arm, hardly believing this abrupt change in attitude. He, too, slumped to the Gladrocadian ground.

We sat, him panting, me coughing, on the stony turf. Although the adrenaline was now being replaced by the inescapable hurts collected during the battle, a sense of victory infected my broken face, hoisting the corners of my mouth into an irrepressible (if a bit lopsided) smile. I felt scraps of bone in my mouth, and I drooled crimson onto my lap, but I didn't give one flying frag. I had *won*.

The gray-skinned fighter tapped his chest four times. All the jagged incisions stitched across my body closed; my severed fingers soared from where they lay, pale and lifeless, on the rock-strewn ground, and reattached themselves to my mutilated appendage. Feeling returned to my lame left arm, and all internal abrasions were mended. My crippled pelvis was patched up, and the grinding, serrated pieces of my slack jawbone vanished as it perfectly realigned itself. I also noticed that while my challenger's armor was now unblemished once again, the grisly wound I'd inflicted upon his eye wasn't altered.

Flexing my reunited digits, I peered at him quizzically.

"I have just accomplished four things: First, I've repaired your maimed body. Second, I've repaired my armor to impeccability. Third, because you have passed the trial, I've relocated your people, *all* your people, including those onboard the war vessel, the survivors of your homeworld, as well as the scattered remains of your proud military spread across the galaxy, to the moon of Urnesia. We have supplied them with enough resources with which to erect a newfound civilization. Fourth—"

"Whoa whoa whoa. We?" Maybe this was getting out of hand.

He held up a finger, bidding me silent and pissing me off to no end. I sighed and nodded, resigned to the roundabout way of having matters explained to me.

"Fourth, I've activated a beacon, luring the Zarkons that you detest to a far distant place, quite removed from your ailing and failing Humanity."

"*How* removed? Please...?" Can't neglect logistical info like that, you know.

It paused. "I estimate that the signal lies approximately nine billion light-years outside of the Milky Way. Satisfied?" He seemed reproachful, possibly because I expressed a hint of reservation here.

"As long as I'm absolutely sure you're not a deceitful crock of crap... yes."

"I am *not* a deceitful crock of... crap." He was offended. "Shall I kneel before you and beg for your acceptance?"

"*No*... I'm fine," I asserted.

Sighing, I murmured, "I can't put my finger on it, but something about you is kinda... disarming. I mean, not when we were killing each other, obviously, but..."

whenever you speak, I have to tolerate whatever it is that you're saying, even if it sounds ridiculous.”

My haggard combatant fondled the wooden hilt of the blade inserted into his eye. “Your performance was admirable, worthy of universal acclaim. The universe, unfortunately, is in a state of flux at the moment. Predators approach and changes encroach. I cannot procure the recognition you ought to have, but you have earned the right to my name. It is Gan. Gan Thrithor.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Ok. Thank you... Gan.”

Gan crinkled his jowls into a broad smile.

“So, wait. If I'm tougher than you, then why don't *I* have your job, or whatever the hell it is that you do?”

He began to chortle.

“My goodness, you humans truly are comedians...”

“Ah, cut the crap, *Gan*,” I ordered, not in a particularly mirthful mood at the moment.

Well, I guess I asked for it, because in less than the blink of an eye, Gan was behind me, and his arms were locked around my own. I thrashed and strained to escape, fearing that I'd been duped into an ambush. The crystalline goliath encased me, and he did it *effortlessly*. And then, I was released.

“Why'd you—?”

“For amusement, sergeant. For amusement. You fought me to a valiant stalemate. However—”

“*Stalemate?!?*” I shouted. “I scratched your eye out and put a knife halfway through your head, and you call it a *stalemate?!?!?*”

“Yes.”

“Alright.” I was through arguing.

“As I was saying, you certainly matched me. However, during our altercation, I was utilizing a scant fraction of my ability.”

My jaw dropped.

“You're shitting me.”

“Feel not ashamed, for I have never met a race in this universe that summons my full potency.”

“Great...”

Gan materialized my rifle and handed it over to me. “Shall we depart?”

“To the ship?”

“To your new home.”

Gan and I stood on a ridge overlooking the construction site of the first settlement on the moon of Urnesia. Thousands of people... Excuse me. Thousands of *humans* bustled about down there, building shelters, supply depots, temporary power plants, and irrigation networks. All the requisites for a functioning society. It was dusk; the moon's host planet, Eeriel, wandered across the purple sky, slowly blotting out the system's central star, Eerie. Gan's gemlike armor plating flashed and twinkled as he turned towards me.

“The time may come when you will find your immense value to be utilized to its fullest,” he promised solemnly. “Perhaps not in your generation, perhaps not in the following three generations of your species, but regardless of the time that elapses from now until then, it was this day that restored optimism to us all.”

He was the pristine model of contentment, his flabby, weathered face creased into a beaming smile, his eyes radiating gratitude and relaxation.

“Someone must always be fighting them. It is nature's way, and a sorry way it is, is it not?”

“Affirmative.” I thought it best to agree, but was mystified as to what Gan was talking about.

“I am not overly troubled by this, nor should you be.”

I opened my mouth to phrase one of the many questions burgeoning within me, but he raised a silencing finger.

“I bid you an affectionate farewell, sergeant. Nothing more need be explained to you. Curiosity is often considered a blessing, though I myself would treat it as a sin.”

Gan's features clouded briefly, but he gazed up at the amber sun and was returned to his placid state.

“The universe applauds your heroism, your dedication, your sacrifice for the ultimate cause. The difference has been made.”

Gan saluted me (in a human fashion), tapped his glistening chest, and winked out of my sight, maybe out of existence altogether. I honestly don't know.

It's been a year since that fate-twisting day, which began with dread and uncertainty, which ended with joy and assurance. After I helped to secure the new civilization of Humanity (and convince them, especially Retro, that this was *real*), I retreated, roughly four months ago, to a modest home on the outskirts of the capital city, to live out the rest of my life in well-deserved peace, the peace that I've been deprived of since childhood. If I'm lucky, I won't have to participate in the art of death any longer. Gan's hint of a conflict yet to come lingers in my mind even to this day, an unshakable weight. Clearly, there are many things I don't understand in this universe, but I'd be much obliged if I didn't have to.

I now sit atop a moss-covered boulder behind my residence, writing my memoirs, watching the “sunset”, which comes fairly late on this moon, recently renamed Waxing Hopeful. The old BK-6 assault rifle is perched atop the mantelpiece, collecting dust, a reminder of the revolting ordeal endured by my people, a warning that its conclusion might be yet to come. For my sake, for the sake of humankind, for the sake of the universe and its innocent population, I pray each night to whatever higher entity chooses to listen. Pray that the menaces of the universe give us time to heal before we're plunged back into the screams and tears and losses of war. Gan said that we now have hope, but he didn't say that we now have freedom from that terrifying tyrant.

Someone must always be fighting them. *Them...* The Zarkons, I assume... I've pondered my enigmatic companion's cryptic words for a year now. I still haven't a clue. I still can't comprehend. I still think that's best.

The light wanes fast on Waxing Hopeful, so I'll just say that this is a tribute to my parents, my sibling, my wife, my child, my friends, my instructors, my comrades, and over fifteen billion anonymous human lives... this is a tribute to those lost souls, eclipsed by the bottomless shadow that is the Zarkon Empire. The graphic description throughout was necessary to really grasp the perils of our time. If, even for a second, you entertain the notion that any detail was exaggerated... you are a fool.

Gan guaranteed me that the monsters have abandoned the Milky Way. For some reason, I trust him. Thus, my part is played, my grief portrayed, my lessons conveyed.

Learn from our tragedy. Prepare for your own.

Date: Saturday, August 16, of the year 1 A.Z. (After Zarkon)

Untitled

By Greg Frank

“How much longer does he have?” Kent Stevens asked, shocked by what he was hearing.

“A few days at most,” the solemn-faced nurse replied. “The tumor in his throat is malignant, and it wasn’t detected early enough for our treatments to be effective.”

“Isn’t there anything you can do?” Kent pleaded.

“I’m afraid not. I’d recommend that you see him before its too late.” With that the nurse walked away, leaving Kent standing alone in front of the hospital door. Kent paused for a moment as if he were trying to find the courage to continue. After a few minutes, he finally resigned himself to what lay ahead and pulled the door open.

In front of Kent lay John Cymbol, Kent’s colleague and friend. Their eyes locked at the doorway and Kent saw something familiar in his friend’s eyes: fear. It was the fear of death, the same fear that Kent saw in every human close to death. Kent knew now that there was nothing he could say to console John. After all, how can you console a man who’s going to die just a few months before obtaining immortality? Instead, Kent walked up and put his hand on John’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” Kent said softly. “I’m here for you. I know you can’t speak right now, so don’t worry: I’ll do all the talking. I just want you to know that I’ll finish it. I’ll finish what we’ve been working on all these years and I’ll keep living long after my body’s dead and rotting in the ground. These past 40 years of work have not been in vain. I can guarantee it. I have to go now—visitor’s hours are almost up, but don’t worry. I’ll be back here to see you tomorrow.”

With that, Kent stood up and began walking towards the door. As he grabbed the door handle, a slight smile came to his face. While he was still saddened at his colleague’s passing, he knew that what he’d said before hadn’t been a lie. The years of work he and John had done had not been in vain. Together they’d found the Holy Grail, and now Kent had it all for himself.

Kent’s first step to immortality presented itself soon after John’s death. The step’s name was Ryan Wesser. Wesser, an aspiring biochemist, was completely devoted

to his field of study, and while this set him apart in the classroom, it isolated him outside of it. After following him for two weeks, Kent knew he'd found the perfect target. All that remained was finding a way to isolate Wesser.

"Thank you very much for taking the time to meet me," announced Ryan Wesser as he entered Kent's apartment.

"No problem," replied Kent, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm glad you were able to take time out of your busy schedule to meet with me."

"Not at all," said Wesser, his eyes darting nervously around the room. "I'm just happy to know that a prestigious organization like The Grant Foundation is even thinking about funding my research."

"Don't be so modest, Ryan. You're at the top of your class and you've had a good deal of experience outside of the classroom, so it's only natural that we'd be interested in funding your research. However, I must apologize for holding this meeting in my apartment. My office is being renovated, so I've been working out of my house for the past week."

"Don't worry about it," replied Wesser. "I'd be happy to have this meeting no matter where it is." After hearing this, Kent feigned a cough to avoid outright laughing at his guest. Too easy, he thought to himself as he took a drink of water from his glass. As smart as Wesser was, all it had taken was a phone call and the claim that he was from The Grant Institute to draw him out. Now he was out in the open and an easy target for Kent.

"Excuse me for one moment, Ryan," Kent said, still laughing silently to himself. "I need to use the bathroom." With that, Kent walked into his kitchen and pulled a syringe out of his cabinet. "No mistakes," he muttered to himself as he stuck it into his arm. Immediately, Kent felt the consequences of his action. His body felt as though it had been drained and even remaining upright seemed almost impossible. Gripping the arm of a chair, Kent took a deep breath and slowly began to walk back towards the living room.

"Are you feeling okay, professor?" Ryan asked as he saw Kent reemerge from the kitchen. "You're covered in sweat!"

“I’m fine” responded Kent as he staggered towards Ryan. “I’m just feeling a little lightheaded. Would you mind giving me a-” before Kent could finish that question, he collapsed to the ground.

“Professor!” shouted Ryan as he dashed towards Kent. “Are you alright? Speak to me!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” Kent gasped. “Just give me your hand,” and with that Kent grabbed Ryan’s hand. Suddenly everything changed for Ryan Wesser. He found himself on the ground and losing consciousness. Above him, he saw someone, but his vision was blurred and he couldn’t make out who it was. Gasping, Ryan desperately tried to call for help, but to no avail.

“Don’t bother struggling,” came a familiar voice from above him. “There are enough drugs in you to bring down an elephant. Relax; it’ll be over sooner if you don’t struggle.”

“Who are you?” whispered Wesser, using the last of his strength.

“Me?” the familiar voice replied. “I’m Ryan Wesser, of course.” Puzzled, Wesser finally lost consciousness and began convulsing. After 30 seconds, his body ceased to move at all and he lay dead on the ground.

Two days later Kent Stevens was found dead in his apartment. His autopsy would reveal that the cause of death was a heart attack caused by the cocktail of drugs found in his system. Because there were no signs that a struggle had occurred, the case was determined to be a suicide and closed. Ryan Wesser was never even questioned by the police, let alone suspected. If they had questioned him, though, on his face they would have seen the smile of a man who had cheated death.

“Reading your own obituary is a strange thing,” thought Ryan Wesser as he took a sip of his coffee. “Not my obituary,” Ryan muttered, correcting himself with a slight chuckle. “My former self’s obituary.” In front of Ryan lay a newspaper containing the obituary of recently deceased Kent Stevens. It had been a month since Kent had been found dead in his apartment, and Wesser’s life had taken a dramatic turn since Kent’s death.

After a good deal of thought, Wesser had chosen to drop out of college and give up biochemistry. “There’s no point in continuing in a field I have no interest in,” rationalized Wesser as he explained his reasons for leaving to his dumbfounded adviser.

“And there’s nothing I can do to convince you otherwise?” questioned the professor, visibly upset at the departure of his student.

“I’m afraid not,” replied Wesser before standing up. “I’ve made my decision already.” With that, Wesser stood up and walked out, leaving his former professor with the mystery of how his prized pupil had changed so much in such a short time.

Turning back to the newspaper, Wesser found himself looking over Kent’s obituary again and again. It just seemed so . . . plain.

“I guess I should have expected this,” Wesser muttered to himself taking another sip of his coffee. “It’s not like I’ve done much to stay in touch with those who used to be close to me. Still-” Wesser was unable to finish his thought as he suddenly found his left arm in a great deal of pain. “What’s going on?” Wesser thought to himself, but before thinking of anything else he found that it was extremely difficult to breathe. Gasping, Wesser tried to remain in his chair, but he was unable to remain upright. Falling to the ground, Wesser found himself writhing on the floor with no control over his body. After a few seconds, the attack passed, and Ryan lay still. Dripping in sweat, he looked around the diner, attempting to regain his bearings.

“Sir, are you alright?” a waitress asked as she walked over to where Wesser now lay.

“Yes,” a dazed Wesser replied. “I’ve been having small attacks like those for a little while now. Don’t worry; they’re gone almost as soon as they appear.”

“Thank God,” said the waitress, breathing a sigh of relief. “You had me worried, sir.”

“Damn,” thought Wesser as he struggled to regain his senses. He’d been having attacks like these since he’d first taken his new body and they were getting progressively worse. “Maybe there was some side effect we didn’t take into account.”

“Could you give me a hand, miss?” Wesser asked finally. “I’m still feeling a tad bit light headed.” Nodding, the waitress reached out her hand to help Wesser up, but as

soon as she began pulling, the attacks returned. Unable to fight it off any longer, Wesser rolled back and lost consciousness.

Even as he lay unconscious, Ryan Wesser's mind still remained active. "How could this have happened?" he thought to himself in desperation. "We were so careful. John and I were tireless in researching the effects the jump would have on us. We explored every possible avenue. SO WHY IS THIS BODY REJECTING ME?" Wesser shouted the last words in exasperation. Suddenly, Wesser found himself reliving a conversation that had occurred nearly forty years ago when he was still Kent Stevens.

"Who is it?" a tired Kent asked without looking up as he heard the door to his apartment open.

"Who do you think?" a familiar voice replied from across. "I'm the only other person with a key to your apartment."

"Hey, John," Kent replied with a laugh. "Let me show you what I've been working on. I know I was skeptical at first but I'm beginning to think that it's really possible."

"Is that so?" John said with a smile. "Well I'm glad to know someone believes me. I've presented the same theory to at least half a dozen of my professors and they all practically laughed me out of their offices."

"Well, we'll show them," Kent said with a laugh of his own.

"Of course we will," replied John, now laughing as well. "We'll show them that we were right all along."

Without warning, Ryan Wesser found himself being dragged out of his memory and into the real world.

"Can you hear me?" came a feminine voice from above Ryan. Unable to speak, Ryan opted to weakly nod his head in response. "That's good," came the voice again. "By the time the paramedics reached you, your heart had almost stopped. A few minutes more and you'd have been a goner. As it is, they were barely able to resuscitate you. Now drink this," finished the voice before putting a cup up to Ryan's mouth and pouring its contents down his throat. The liquid burned Ryan's throat, but at the same time it soothed it. By the time he'd finished drinking the liquid, Ryan felt well enough to speak.

“Thanks,” he whispered softly enough that the women had to lean in to hear him. “So, where am I?” he continued.

“You’re at St. Peter’s hospital. It was the closest hospital to the diner you collapsed in, and as long as I’ve got you talking, how about telling me your name?”

“It’s Ryan Wesser,” came the reply.

“Well, Mr. Wesser, welcome to St. Peter’s. I’m Kaitlin, your nurse.”

“And I’m Robert, your doctor,” came a deep voice from the outside the room. The door opened and a man who looked to be in his mid 40’s entered the room. He had dark black hair which was slicked back, and he wore a large, white lab coat with matching white pants.

“Hello Dr. Hall,” said Kaitlin with a slight blush. “The patient’s name is Ryan Wesser. He suffered a nearly fatal heart attack, the cause of which has yet to be determined.”

“Alright,” said Hall, glancing over Wesser’s chart. “Would you excuse us?” asked Hall after he’d finished looking over the chart.

“Of course, doctor,” Kaitlin replied before exiting the room.

“So tell me,” Dr. Hall said while walking up to Ryan’s bed. “What happened in the time leading up to your heart attack?”

“Nothing much,” Wesser answered. “I was drinking some coffee and reading the newspaper. Then, before I had time to react, it hit me and I fell out of my chair.”

“Interesting,” muttered the doctor, who was now lost in thought. “The woman who called for paramedics said you’d been having attacks like these for the while. Is that true?”

“Yes, it’s true. I’ve been having attacks like this for almost a week now, but they were never this sev-” before Ryan could finish his sentence he found himself once again struggling to breathe. Clutching at his chest he gasped “help me,” while sticking his arm out towards Dr. Hall.

Seeing the danger Ryan was in, Hall rushed to Ryan’s aid. However, he stopped short after grabbing Ryan’s arm.

“Interesting,” said Robert Hall with a devilish smile on his face. “It looks like there’s a limit to how long I can stay in any one body. I guess John and I did miss

something after all.” Glancing at Ryan Wesser, who was near death gasping for air, he let out a small laugh. “It does save me the trouble of explaining the corpse, though, so I guess it’s not all bad.” Still laughing, he walked out the door without a glance back at Ryan Wesser, who had now ceased to move.

Untitled

By Doug Schneider

I am the President of the United States. It is my job to create the policy for my country, but sometimes I must deal with the problems of other countries as well. This was one of those times, and it was the one time when I nearly lost the people whom I really care about. I don't mean my job or my cabinet; I mean my wife and kids.

My plane, Air Force One, which was carrying me, my wife, kids, and portions of my staff, was just about to land in Russia. I was going down there for a meeting with the Russian President concerning Russia's help in the capture of a dictator from the former Soviet Union. We touched down in Moscow Airport and we waited for the plane to come to a stop. The moment it did, the doors opened and my Secret Service got out, followed closely by me, my family, and some of my staff. We walked over to the cars that were ready to take us to the Kremlin. One of my aids gave me a file folder and said, "Mr. President, this should bring you up to date." I replied by saying "Thank you, Thomas. Alright—is everyone ready to go?" They all nodded and we got in the cars.

My family and I got in one car along with some of my aides and staff members. The others got in three other cars that were there as well. With three police cars as our escorts, we left the airport. "Now, kids, while we wait for President Petrov you have to be really quiet, okay?" I say to my thirteen year-old daughter Lizzie and my ten-year-old son Matt. "Doug, you know, while you do your thing with Petrov, I can take the kids to a play or a ballet or something" my wife Alex says to me. I respond by saying, "okay, but remember there is a dinner we are all supposed to attend at the Kremlin later tonight, so don't be late." "Don't worry—we won't" said Alex.

As the motorcade drove through the Moscow streets, I looked out the window. The temple-like structure of the city looked beautiful to me. I took one look out the window and then turned to the file in front of me. "So the guy we've captured is the dictator of Chechnya." National Security Advisor Andrew Hartford replies by saying, "Did you see what it also says, sir? If we hadn't done something he would have caused another Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis." "Look at the amount of nuclear weapons they have, Mr. President," Secretary of Defense Eric Myers said to me. "The Russian

government should know that you took a great risk to come to their aid. If you hadn't, we would have had another Cold War on our hands." Andrew leaned forward and said, "I just hope you know what you've gotten yourself into, sir."

The motorcade was moving around a corner when it happened. The driver said, "That's strange a roadblock out here," when suddenly the driver of the van blocking us pointed a gun our way. "Mr. President, look out! The Secret Service agent up front called. We all ducked just in time before the bullet hit the windshield. Then, without warning, the police car in front of us exploded. "Oh my god" I shouted as I shielded my eyes from the explosion. The second police car exploded behind us. Realizing what was happening, I said to the driver "Back up! Back up! Lizzie, Matt, get down and stay down." My kids immediately got down, as up front the head of my Secret Service took out his gun as the driver put the car in reverse. We backed up right into the wreckage of the police car, behind us the other cars were backing up as well, now knowing what I myself had already figured out: we were in an ambush.

The motorcade was moving back, and as I looked out the window I could see fifteen or twenty men on the roofs of the buildings around us, armed with automatic weapons.

"Mr. President, stay down," said Secret Service Agent Kelly.

"What about the other staff members in the cars?" I asked.

"Don't worry. We're handling it, sir. Just stay down." Kelly replied.

"Look out!" Andrew cries, I look up and I see another van blocking the way we came in. Then all of a sudden we come to a sudden stop,

"Move forward" I shouted to the driver, but it was too late. I looked above and I saw a man holding a rocket launcher aimed directly at our car.

I immediately braced for impact, but the rocket only hit the driver's side door. It nevertheless caused a big explosion, which blew our driver out of the car.

"What are we going to do, Doug?" Alex said, panicking. Thinking quickly as a former naval soldier in the Gulf War, I knew what I had to do.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go! Let's go!" Andrew was shouting.

"Take it easy Andrew." Eric said, although he looked worried too. Alex suddenly said, "we've got keep going. Go, Doug." I immediately climbed up from the back seat and

into the drivers' seat and started driving. Kelly leaned forward and started shooting through the blasted-off door at the men on the rooftops. The men had already started shooting at us, and almost immediately, I saw one of them fall back after being shot. Around me, I heard Secret Service agents in the other cars shooting as well. That's when another rocket hit the car carrying the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence. A direct hit—the car exploded immediately.

“Sir, it would be best if you let me drive” Kelly said.

“You forget that I was in the navy, Kelly. I have military training.” Andrew points up and says, “then you'd better turn, sir.” The second rocket launcher was fired and hit the front tire of the third police car. The police men in the car who had gotten out to defend us were sent flying from the explosion. “Kelly, aim for either the guy in front of us with the rocket launcher or the guy in the back.” I ordered. “Yes, sir,” Kelly responded. Kelly pointed his gun through the window and shot three times. The guy with the first rocket launcher dropped it as he died.

Eric shouted out to me and Kelly, “excuse me, but I don't think we can celebrate yet.” The second rocket launcher was aimed directly at us. “Incoming!” I shouted as the rocket fired.

The rocket hit the road right in front of us and exploded, causing a massive fireball. At the same time, a second rocket hit the car behind us. The smoke was blinding my vision and I couldn't see, so we stopped the car. “Everybody out of the car.” I shouted to them. The Secret Service got out of the cars with their weapons drawn, and all around us gunfire was going off. Kelly, who was head of the Secret Service, was shouting out to all of the agents around him: “Johnson, Walters, get the other people out of the cars!” I turn immediately to my family, “Alex, kids, stay behind the agents and I'll be back soon.”

“Doug, what are you going to do?” Alex asked. I leaned in toward her and said, “Don't worry, I have military training. Just keep them safe.” I raced over to the car that was hit and helped the Secret Service agents get the other people out of it. “Sir, what are you doing? Stay back!” another agent cried out to me.

As I moved quickly to avoid getting shot, I helped get my military advisor, Major Mitchell, who was unconscious, out of the car while another Secret Service agent covered me.

Then, as three agents were moving towards the other cars, they were suddenly shot down like flies. Agent Johnson was getting the Chief of Staff out of the car that had just been hit, shooting his gun up at the men who were trying to kill us all. As he got the Chief of Staff halfway out of the car, he turned and fired. One of the enemy soldiers fell off the roof. Then one of the gunmen on the roof fired his machine gun and took out another Secret Service agent. A second agent rushed over towards me, but was then taken out by a shot.

“Daddy, where are you?” I heard my daughter Lizzie shout out for me, and then I saw her start to look for me.

“Lizzie, get back!” I cried out. She called out again, “Daddy!”

“Lizzie, stay down and hidden” Agent Horgan ordered her, but then: bang! Horgan fell over dead just as he was rushing towards my daughter. Lizzie screamed as he fell.

“Lizzie, go with your mother—I’ll be right there, now go!” I ordered. That time she didn’t even argue with me, but raced off to join Alex and Matt.

Agent Murray was shooting up at the men when one of them fired his machine gun, and Muurray collapsed against the car.

“Sir, come on, we have to move,” another agent shouted at me.

“Get over here and give me a hand with the Chief of Staff,” I instructed, but too late: a series of gunshots caused that agent to fall over against the wall like the others. I realized I had to move or I would be shot, too, but I couldn’t just leave Chief of Staff Sam Chaney. Suddenly, another agent shouted to me, “Sir, move! You’ve got incoming.”

I couldn’t run with Chaney so I knew what I had to do: I picked him up and started to run as the guns started firing.

I was half way there when Chaney started slipping from me. “Doug, come on!” Alex cried out to me. Then without warning, a rocket exploded right where I had been only seconds ago. The shooters on the rooftops started shooting wildly, and after the

explosion I was knocked off my feet. Chaney was shot several times in the back. Director of the FBI Emil Jacobs was rushing over to me, gun drawn and shooting at anyone he could see. Jacobs rushed over to me and said, “Sir, are you hit?” Jacobs suddenly cried out as he grabbed his left shoulder. A short way away, Kelly, three other Secret Service agents, Andrew, Eric, Alex, Lizzie, and Matt were huddled around as the agents tried to shoot the assailants. I grabbed Jacobs and started to run towards the group.

“Sir, don’t—just go on without me.” Jacobs said.

“Not a chance,” I replied. Then I saw Andrew head out of the group to try and help me get Jacobs. “Andrew! No!” I cried out to him, but it was too late. One of the gunmen fired several times and knocked Andrew off his feet just as he reached us. “What are you guys waiting for?” I cried out to the rest of the group. “Go!” The remaining agents gave my family, Eric, and Major Mitchell who had regained consciousness cover.

I grabbed Jacobs and started to run as well when Jacobs said, “Sir, I think I can make it.”

“Are you sure, Emil?” I asked in return.

Untitled

By Cedar Nelson

Haliny and Zyan rode together on Sacimchi's back. She was a stunning horse: her coat was a golden-brown, and her mane was a lovely cream color. She didn't spook easily, either. She reminded Haliny of her own horse, Kaleda. Glancing over at her paint mare, Haliny smiled. Her father had presented her with the horse when Haliny had gone to learn battle at the castle. The young couple riding her now looked grim. It wasn't a wonder why. The village they had been staying in was now under attack. When the enemy Apello soldiers had broken into the inn where they had been sleeping, they had all heard the army's captain give orders to gather all of the villagers and kill those who resisted. The four of them were running for their lives now—especially Haliny, who was a spy for another country.

They were riding along a street now. Although it was late at night, torches on the house fronts cast an eerie glow on the cobblestone road. The two-story houses gave no sign that the inhabitants there knew a raid was occurring, except for a few candles flickering in upper windows. The raid had luckily not yet reached this far into the town.

The sound of thundering hooves in front of them made Haliny stiffen. An Apello knight appeared off a side street, riding his horse. The visor of the knight's helmet was up. As he turned and saw them, an ugly sneer crossed his face. He pulled the horse to a stop.

The knight was in full armor. Strange metal plates covered his chest, arms, and legs, unlike any armor Haliny had ever seen before. It wasn't the normal chain mail worn by knights from the palace. The only place he wasn't protected was the areas between the plates. His horse was covered in the armor too, but had his reins and sides covered in yellow and blue cloth, the knight's family colors. The knight's shield was those colors also and showed a bird preparing to take flight. Six foot soldiers followed after the knight, dressed in the white and maroon Apello colors. The knight appeared to be leading the group. Raising his hand, he yelled a command that sent all of the foot soldiers running towards them; they formed a loose circle around the two horses, holding up their swords. One held a bow already nocked with an arrow.

The knight slowly brought his horse towards his captives, stopping him short of the circle. He raised a thin eyebrow: "What have we here?" His voice was deep and slightly amused. "Commoners trying to sneak off in the middle of the night? You underestimate our army. You can't escape us." When he spoke next it was forceful. "Surrender now or you will be killed." None of the four captives replied. Haliny nudged Zyan, who sat with her on her horse. She hoped he had a plan for what they were going to do. She glanced over at the couple they had just met who were riding her horse, Kaleda. They looked equally nervous.

Suddenly Haliny saw movement at the edge of her vision. The door to the house on their left opened a little. The knight didn't move, and Haliny hoped he hadn't seen it. The door opened more and a woman crept out. She was dressed in nightclothes, and carried a bag full of belongings. She was obviously going to take advantage of the distracted soldiers. Not bothering to close the door on her way out, she carefully stepped off the house stairs and along the front wall. When she got to the next house, she broke into a run. The knight looked down at his archer, nodding slightly. Bowstring pulled back to his ear, the archer turned and aimed at the woman. He let the arrow loose, and it flew to bury itself in the woman's back. With a surprised shriek, she fell over.

Haliny bent her head, rage piling up in her at the unfair treatment of the innocent. Tears began to well up in her eyes, but she blinked them away. She was not going to show weakness to this man. When she finally found her reserve of self-control she looked up. The knight was looking at her, interest gleaming in his eyes. Haliny wondered why until she saw the lady sitting on Kaleda. She was crying openly. Her husband, sitting behind her on the horse, was patting her arm. *That woman could break in an instant*, Haliny thought. That's why the knight was staring at her curiously. He was wondering why *she* hadn't snapped as well.

The knight finally spoke. "Surrender now or you will suffer the same fate as your friend here." He gestured nonchalantly backwards, where the woman lay.

"She's not our friend." Zyan obviously had the same plan as Haliny. He was not going to show vulnerability either.

The knight snorted. "Have it your way, then." He drew his sword. It flashed menacingly in the light cast from the torches. Haliny felt really lucky that Zyan had

thought to give them weapons. She fingered the bow and quiver of arrows he had handed her. Slipping the leather quiver strap over her arm, she tried to hoist it onto her back, but Zyan was in the way. She cursed mentally. This was going to be a really interesting battle if she couldn't even position her weapons.

The knight barked orders to his men, then turned his horse around and moved away from them. *He's not going to fight?* Haliny thought indignantly. The knight turned and positioned himself at a safe distance to observe the fighting.

Haliny didn't have a chance to wonder why he was going to leave the rest to his foot soldiers. As one, they inched closer to their captives. Zyan didn't wait to act. Jumping down from the saddle in one swift movement, he raised his sword and ran at the nearest attacker. All of them sprung into action. Four other foot soldiers moved in close to the young couple on their horse. Amazement hit Haliny in a wave as she saw the woman start swinging the battle axe Zyan had given her, hitting an opponent's arm. Haliny swung the quiver onto her back as she saw the man from the pair hit his target with a club. Bow raised, Haliny looked around for the worst threat.

The knight's archer had moved away from the group and was looking around for a target. Haliny saw him load his bow with lightning speed and aim at Zyan as he ran to help the couple. A moment later, an arrow burrowed into Zyan's arm. Haliny watched as blood began to seep through the sleeve of Zyan's shirt as he struggled with unbelievable anger. The archer had to be very good for the arrow to actually hit a moving target, not just nick it. Shifting in the saddle, she aimed at the archer just as he turned and saw her. There was a moment where they both looked at each other, and he began to raise his bow before she let her arrow fly. It hit the man squarely in the throat. He choked and fell backwards, a crimson waterfall running from his wound.

Haliny turned, half sick, to find her next target. Zyan was still fighting, but his reflexes were slower than before. She watched as he feinted with his sword and tried to lunge, but stumbled over the other man's foot and fell. Without thinking, Haliny hammered her feet into her horse's sides and shot over to Zyan's rescue. The soldier he was fighting had just begun to raise his sword in a finishing downward strike when Haliny saw a dagger sheathed in a special pocket on Zyan's saddlebag. She removed it and flung the weapon towards Zyan's attacker with closed eyes. Haliny looked up to see

the knife sink deep into the man's chest. He convulsed. Zyan stood and turned to look at the man with puzzlement. He watched as the man fell over. Recognizing the dagger hilt that stuck up from the man's chest, he turned toward his horse and saw Haliny looking at him with guilt.

Haliny felt even worse when Zyan's expression turned to one of shock, but he then yelled, "Duck!" Haliny obeyed immediately, and the sword that was swinging for her head barely missed. Instinctively, Haliny kicked her horse's sides. She and the horse Sacimchi moved out of harm's way before their enemy could try to land another blow. When they were far enough away, Haliny dared to look up and see who had attacked her. The knight sat upon his horse, the questioning look in his eyes once again.

"So," Haliny mocked. "You've finally decided to fight in your own battle, instead of leaving it to the ones under you." She sighed in relief when she saw the couple on Kaleda just behind him. They were okay! Zyan was leaning on Kaleda as well, the blood from the arm injury drenching his sleeve. The six foot soldiers were all lying on the ground at their feet, either dead or too hurt to get up. Haliny couldn't believe they had won—or rather, almost won. She returned her attention to the knight, who was still staring at her. He seemed unperturbed by the taunts, instead looking more curious than ever. "You look familiar. Where have I seen you before?" His face scrunched up in thought. Suddenly, his eyes widened beneath his visor. Haliny trembled. Did he know her secret?

Unexpectedly, he turned formal. He slid his sword into the sheath. Hoisting himself off of his horse with terrible difficulty, he crashed to the ground in heavy armor, landing clumsily on one knee. Haliny realized with confusion that he was actually attempting a bow. The knight stood. "There is only one way to settle a dispute between me and someone like you. Shall we duel?"

Haliny was certain by now that he knew she was a spy. The knight drew his sword, and smiled one last time.

Untitled

By Aryion ???

The lights of the city are blinding. I stand on a street corner with a mass of people, all carrying the same, indifferent expression. Assortments of cars fly by the sidewalk, everyone blaring his horn. The light signals for the mob to go, and we move at the same speed, a herd of sheep in this binding town. I sigh and hug my arms closer to my chest. My scarf blows in the wind as raindrops fall from the ever-present clouds. I look to the bright lights, so blinding, yet so familiar. *I should not be doing this.* I think as I pad down Broadway, swiftly taking turns onto streets hammered into my memory. My pace quickens and soon, but not soon enough, I am at Grand Central station. I am going as far as those rails will take me.

I've walked past the building many times but have never been in it. I never had the need to. I had planned my life neatly and was determined to stick to the plan. Only recently had I taken a detour. But now I walk into the grand station with a wide grin. The atmosphere was so different from the dreary outside. There were no dark clouds, no thunder rumbling the distance—just hundreds of people crossing paths in a limbo that will bring them to their destination. I walk down the steps, confidence building within me, to join that crowd.

The station itself was amazing. Stone bricks climbed up the walls, eventually tuning to the teal dome a hundred feet above me. I smiled. I remember reading somewhere that the sky was painted backwards on the ceiling. My gaze flitted to the hallway, the sign signifying their destination. I looked to the board to see the times of the trains. Forty-four different trains were leaving at the same time. Forty-four possibilities. I walk through the throng of people to the ticket center. A man was sitting there, busily typing on the computer. He looked up and smiled.

“Hello. What do you need? A ticket?” he said. I sighed and looked to the board once more.

“Where are you from?” I asked. He looked at me quizzically but answered anyway.

“I'm from Pennsylvania. Philadelphia was my home until I turned twenty-five.”

“Then Philadelphia is where I’d like to go,” I said. I had to get away from this place—it was driving me crazy. The man punched in a couple of numbers on the keyboard. He looked up. “What’s your full name?”

I smiled and said smoothly. “Jakob Thompson.”

He didn’t think twice about the lie. “Age?”

“Nineteen, sir.”

“A little young to be leavin’ home. What’s the rush?”

“Bad past here.” I said, tightly signaling for him to move on.

“Well, you have the four-thirty train and it will be \$14.00” I handed him the money as he handed me a ticket.

“Thank you.” I said.

“Don’t forget to see Franklin’s grave while yer there!” he shouted as I walked swiftly away. I stood in the middle of the station, checking my ticket. I found the platform I was leaving on and headed straight for it. I checked the ticket as I was walking when I bumped into somebody.

“Sorry, sir.” I said automatically.

“That’s fine. Watch where you are going next time,” he said sternly. I recognized that voice. *No not here!* I thought. I snapped my head up and there he was, looking down at me. Of course he didn’t know me, but I was scared all the same. I composed myself before he noticed my reaction. “Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“To the platform, officer.” I said.

“Really?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Where you off to?”

“Albany.” I lied.

“You got family up there?” he said. I sighed.

“Sir, I really have to go. I- I’m gonna be late for my train.”

“Go ahead and say hi to your aunt for me!” he laughed. I cringed. I stumbled to the bathroom where I checked my appearance. My face was pasty and white, my eyes twice their normal size. I splashed some cold water on my face and looked back in the mirror. No change. I continued to remind myself that there is no need for panic, that I

didn't do anything. There was nothing to be worried about. A few minutes later, I walked out of the station bathroom and continued casually to my platform. I took one look around, my face indifferent. I had no remorse as I stepped into the train and sat down. This will be the last I will see of New York City, and I was relieved.

Untitled

By Amanda ???

Chapter 1:

The strong ocean waves shook Elizabeth from the safety of her deep sleep. In her dreams, she had been safe at home, in her own bed, with only mundane worries to trouble her. But, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, her mind also adjusted, bringing her back to the present. She was not safe at home, warm in her own bed. She was in a cabin in a huge ship traveling across the ocean to the small island nation of Curitia. Until recently, this island was hardly known to any but those who lived there. It was relatively far north, so it did not have the climate to make it a popular vacation spot. It was small, and had little commerce. For the most part, this country was left to its own devices. But, about a month ago, people had begun to be concerned for the little nation. This concern stemmed from the fact that all communication from Curitia had stopped. No one was quite sure what had happened. In fact, Elizabeth was part of a team sent to find out exactly that. People speculated that it was probably a natural disaster that had wiped out lines of communication, or an extremely virulent disease. She was a doctor at the Royal Marsden Hospital in England, and she had been added to the team because of her specialty in infectious disease. She sincerely hoped that her special skills would not be necessary. She had never dealt with an outbreak of this size, and she did not want to start now. She slid from her bed and slipped into a comfortable outfit, trying to wake up her still-tired mind. She glanced in the mirror on her way out, pulling her deep brown hair off her shoulders into a loose ponytail, and grabbed her glasses before heading out the door into a narrow hallway.

She made her way to the dimly-lit, quiet dining room of the ship, where she made herself some coffee in the hopes that it would waken her still-dozing mind. She was surprised, as usual, by how few people were in the dining area. The ship did not usually carry passengers; it was mainly cargo. She took her minimal breakfast and made her way through the maze of cold metal tables and chairs to join Dave, who was sitting by himself in the corner, working on his laptop. Dave was another doctor, and Elizabeth's close friend and colleague. He was on the team, not only because of his medical degree, but

also because he was very knowledgeable in the field of radioactive and chemical contamination. She sat next to him; he glanced up from his work, a smile lighting up his round, boyish face. He was, in general, a quiet person, and he usually preferred to sit in silence. Today, though, he surprised her.

“We should be there sometime today.”

Elizabeth’s heart fluttered at this. She had never been involved in anything this important, and she had no idea what she should expect. She sincerely hoped, for both her sake and the sake of the citizens of the island nation, that it was nothing serious that had cut them off from the rest of the world.

Dave had been right. The boat had arrived at the island later that day, just after noon. The ship had dropped them off on a shore near the river on which they would be traveling. Since the island had a very poor road system, they would be traveling in little kayaks. Each kayak would hold one person and the all supplies he would need. They were also provided with Level A Hazmat suits to protect them from potential airborne pathogens, radiation, and chemicals. But in the noonday sun, they were not the coolest option, and they could not wear them while paddling on the river. However, they did wear air-purifying respirators to provide them with fresh air. They had been paddling up the river for almost an hour, and Elizabeth had not seen any of the typical signs of a widespread disease. In fact, she had seen no signs of life at all. Besides the dark trees stirring in the slight breeze and the tall grasses by the shore waving serenely, nothing moved on the shore. No birds could be heard, and she had yet to see a single mosquito. This made her happy, not just because these insects were infuriatingly annoying, but also because they might carry many different diseases. That was one potential source of disaster she did not have to worry about. But she was a little concerned, because at this time of year there should have been thousands of them, and there appeared to be none. It was probably nothing, but it was disquieting that a whole animal population was missing.

After paddling for what felt like forever, but couldn’t have been more than an hour or so, they came to a split in the river. They needed to find people as quickly as possible, so they split up into two groups. One group of two would go one way, and the other three would explore the other way. Elizabeth was sent to the left with Natalie, a

petite, dark-haired engineer from France, and they were told to contact the larger group, Jacob, Dave and Elissa, every half hour. As they traveled on, they sat in an awkward silence, neither one knowing what to say to the other. Elizabeth had never spoken to Natalie, and knew next to nothing about her. The only sounds were the trees swaying in the breeze and the water gliding underneath the bright red kayaks. This silence was soon broken by a series of harsh shrieks emanating from the shore. The shrieks were not human, and were unlike anything Elizabeth had heard before. The most unsettling part was that, as they continued up the shore, the unearthly screams followed them, issuing from many points on each side of the river. Elizabeth glanced over and met Natalie's eyes. She was surprised to find her own fear mirrored in them. In that moment, she could see a vulnerability that she had never seen in the young woman.

"It's probably just a pack of wild dogs or something like that," she said, just as much to reassure herself as Natalie.

Natalie looked as though she was about to reply when her eyes suddenly caught a glint of white from something on the far bank of the river. She squinted to see better, and then turned back to Elizabeth, her pretty face distorted by a panicked horror that bordered on shock. She opened her mouth to speak, but did not succeed in producing any noise that resembled speech. Elizabeth turned, unnerved, to try and find what Natalie had seen on the shore. After a few moments she found the source of Natalie's growing horror. Lying on the shore, as though dozing peacefully, was a pale, white human skeleton. It gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, and appeared to be perfectly clean. In fact, it looked so clean and perfect that Elizabeth doubted it was real. She turned back to Natalie, trying to prevent the poor girl from becoming hysterical.

"Natalie, that can't be real. It's perfect. If it were real, the bones would be scattered and dirty. Someone probably put it there to scare people."

Natalie nodded, but her eyes had the glazed look of an animal paralyzed by fear. She glanced back at the skeleton, as though verifying that it was in fact there, then turned back to face forward.

"Of course it's fake. Let's move on." Her words were confident, but the quaver in her voice told a different story.

They moved on up the river, resuming their silence, this time because they were both dwelling on their own pressing fear.

At the appointed time they contacted Jacob, who was the leader of the team. They informed him of the skeleton, but reassured him of their confidence that it was not real. They also mentioned the noises, even though by now they had almost faded into the background.

“We’ve been hearing that, too. It’s strange—we can’t tell what it is, but it seems like whatever it is, it’s following us.”

Elizabeth was reassured by how calm Jacob’s voice was. She knew that he rarely showed any fear—in fact, he hardly ever showed emotion at all, but it still calmed her to hear that he was nowhere near panic.

“We’ll call if we find anything else.” With that, she shut the little phone and turned to Natalie.

“Everything is fine. We have to keep moving so we can find actual people who can tell us what happened.” She smiled, trying to reassure the young woman, but Natalie did not even glance in her direction. She simply paddled harder, pulling ahead.

Elizabeth watched her for a moment, vaguely confused, before paddling quickly to catch up. She did not know much about this woman, and did not intend to start pestering her now.

As they progressed up the river, it began to twist and turn, and in places became narrow and shallow, but they never had trouble or got stuck. This was fortunate, because neither of them wanted to find out what was pacing up and down the shore, letting out discordant yowls and infuriated snarls. Elizabeth did find it odd, though, that there were no properties on the water. It was beautiful river; she would have thought that at least a few people would want to live there. So far, besides the bones that they had left far behind them, there were no signs of human life. But, after a long stretch of monotonous rowing, seeing nothing of any help, they finally got lucky.

This stroke of luck occurred as they were passing by a small island that sat in the middle of the river. The island was long and thin, covered in thick, dark trees. Unlike the banks of the river, no fierce shrieks came from the little strip of land. On the bank close to them was a small, sandy beach. Elizabeth happened to glance over at just the right

moment to see a figure dart out of the woods to the edge of water. She got Natalie's attention and pointed to the shore, motioning for her to go in that direction. Natalie stared at her for a moment, confused. Then she glanced back at the shore and saw the person, who was now stabbing at the water with a stick. As they approached the island, the figure came into focus. It appeared to be a young girl, no more than fourteen years of age. She had long, blond hair that whipped about her shoulders in the wind. As they came close to the island, the girl noticed them. She straightened up, watching them with the suspicion of a feral creature. She did not wave to them, nor even acknowledge that she saw them, but did not make any move to run away. When they landed on the shore, the girl jumped slightly at the harsh scrape of the kayaks against the sand, but other than that she did not move at all. She simply stared at them, her cold, blue eyes squinting in the sun.

Natalie made no move to speak, so Elizabeth took it upon herself to take charge of the situation and find out what she could.

"Hello." She spoke softly, trying to make the situation comfortable for all those involved.

"I'm Elizabeth. This is Natalie. Who are you?"

"My name is Phoenix. What do you want?" The girl's voice held no fear, only cold distaste.

"Do you live here, on this island?"

"None of your business. What do you want?" The girl's arctic eyes stared into Elizabeth's, utterly devoid of emotion. Elizabeth stopped trying to be subtle and cut to the chase.

"We have been sent to figure out what happened here that cut off this island from communication with the rest of the world. We would greatly appreciate any information you can give us. If you can, we would also like you to take us to where more people are."

Phoenix's eyes lost a little of their suspicion, but her stance remained defensive, as though she expected an attack at any moment.

"I can't help you with either of those things." For a moment it seemed as though she was just being obtuse, but then she spoke again.

"We don't know what happened." She looked as though she was about to explain, but then she paused, looking slightly indecisive. When she turned back to face them, she

smiled. This small gesture lit up her features, showing the pretty young woman hidden underneath the frosty indifference.

“Tell you what. You guys look like you could use something to eat. Come back with me and we will tell you what we know.”

“Is it safe here?” Natalie glared at the woods with angry suspicion.

“Yeah. Whatever makes those noises on the mainland, it doesn’t come here.”

Phoenix sounded confident in this fact.

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before speaking, not wanting to ruin the small trust they had gained.

“Who’s “we”?”

The girl kept walking, leading them to a path into the deep shade under the trees. She did not even turn as she spoke.

“It’s just me, my older brother Keiron, and Naira. Naira is a little girl we found wandering on the island. We have no idea how she got there and she won’t tell us. She hardly speaks at all.”

Elizabeth wondered about the lack of parents, but thought better than to ask. She simply followed the girl, watching the confident way that she moved down through the woods, and hoping to God that Natalie was following and not wandering off in some sort of shock-induced stupor. She glanced back. Sure enough, there was Natalie, but she looked like she could definitely use some rest and a good meal. She glanced around. The woods were truly beautiful and, for a moment, Elizabeth was able to push all her problems to the back of her mind. She marveled at the tall trees, their long trunks shooting upwards before expanding into impenetrable canopies. This created a muted light that softened the surrounding colors and made a scene worthy of a painting. It was hard to believe, in this picturesque place, that there could be anything to fear in the world. But soon they arrived at Phoenix’s home, and Elizabeth was forced to bring herself back to reality. The home was a faded wood cabin, cute but a little on the small side. It looked more like a vacation home than a permanent home.

“This is where our family comes during the summer. During the year we live in the city.”

Phoenix hopped up the stairs, two at a time, suddenly full of happy exuberance. She flung open the door, and stood holding it open, waiting for them to enter. Elizabeth passed through the doorway into a small dining room. The first thing she noticed was a young girl, about eight years old, sitting in the corner and clasping a ragged quilt around her body. As Elizabeth and Natalie stepped into the room the little girl looked up, staring at them through her deep black hair with wide green eyes. Those piercing eyes followed them across the room as they followed Phoenix into the next room, a small, pleasant living room.

“You can sit here.” She directed them to a couch against the wall. “I’ll go find my brother. He would probably have a better guess as to what happened than I would.” She darted out of the room, disappearing up a narrow staircase.

Elizabeth took this moment to call Jacob and the rest to inform them of what they found. She dialed the number, but she got only static. She tries to call again, panic growing inside of her, but got the same result. She snapped her phone shut and shoved it in her pocket, working to calm herself down. She took a deep breath, feeling her heart race in her chest. She looked over at Natalie, who was just staring at the floor. Elizabeth sat down next to Natalie, and patted her arm reassuringly.

“Everything is going to be fine. I promise you that those were not real bones. They would not have been that neatly aligned.”

Natalie looked up smiling wanly.

“I’m fine. Really, I am. I just need something to eat, I think.”

At that moment Phoenix walked back through the door. Following her was a tall boy who looked to be about eighteen years old. He had the same light blond hair as Phoenix, but his fell down to just below his ears and barely covered his eyes. He had none of Phoenix’s boundless energy—he moved slowly, as though considering his route with the utmost care.

“If you like, I can grab you something to eat. What would you like?” Phoenix looked at them expectantly, waiting for an answer. Natalie stood up.

“I’ll come help you get food. Whatever the problem here is, I don’t think it was a natural disaster. I probably won’t be much use.”

Phoenix's brother Keiron moved and sat on the bench in front of the baby grand piano in the far corner of the room. Elizabeth sat in silence, waiting for him to speak. For a few moments, he simply sat, not looking at her but staring off into the distance.

"They are real bones."

Elizabeth looked up, confused.

Still not looking at her, he spoke again. "Down the river. Those are real bones."

Elizabeth did not know how to respond to this, so she waited for him to keep talking.

"We don't really know exactly what happened. But there's something on the banks of the river that's killing people. It started a while back, no one's sure exactly when. At first it was small. People went into the woods and didn't come back; a few people heard strange sounds at night. People were concerned, but nobody thought it was anything big. It was shortly after that that we came here for the summer, so I don't know what happened since. I guess it must have been bad if you people are here. All I know is, people are gone. Some are dead, but I hope to God that some of the missing are still alive. Our parents left to go to the store, and they haven't come back. That was a few days ago."

He did not look at her, but she could see pain in his face, in the way he moved his body in an attempt to hide.

She looked down at her hands. She knew that she should say something to reassure him, but she could think of nothing she could say that would ease that type of pain.

She paused for a moment, allowing him to regain his composure.

"This is worse than I thought, then. I really should contact the rest of my team. Do you have a phone? Mine is not working."

"None of the phones are working. The further inland you go, the worse it is." His voice was steady and calm, but he still did not look at her; he looked off into the distance, as if staring at something that none of the rest of them could see.

Elizabeth was relieved when Natalie and Phoenix came back into the room. She turned to Natalie, who was already halfway through her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

“As soon as we are done eating, we need to go find a place where we can contact Jacob, Dave, and Elissa. The phones don’t work here.”

Elizabeth tried to keep her voice steady, devoid of any fear, but Natalie picked up on her fear and the seriousness of the situation. She passed Elizabeth a sandwich and began to eat more quickly.

Elizabeth could hardly eat. She could have dealt with a natural disaster; she could have even dealt with an epidemic. It would have been difficult, but it would have been something she had been trained to deal with. However, in the seven years it had taken her to become a qualified doctor, she had never learned how to deal with mysterious disappearances and screams in the night. And for all of her training, she was powerless to help these two young children find their parents.

She was startled out of her musings by Phoenix, who was, as usual, bubbling over with energy.

“Can I come?”

As Elizabeth considered this, she marveled at how different Phoenix was from their first impression of her. When they had first encountered she had been standoffish, suspicious and cold. Now she was bubbly and energetic, all suspicion gone. Elizabeth had expected to hate her, but now found that she enjoyed her company.

“Sure. You can come. You probably know this place better than we do.”

“Can Naira come? I think some fresh air would be good for her, maybe help her come out of her shell a little bit.”

So that was how Elizabeth found herself rowing back downstream, a small, dark-haired girl sitting in the front of her kayak, resting her chin on her knees. Elizabeth was not exactly ecstatic to be going back towards the skeleton, especially now that she knew it was the genuine article. Sure, she had seen dead bodies before, but when people died in a hospital, you usually had an idea of why. Perhaps it was an aneurysm, maybe the infection couldn’t be stopped, or maybe they just weren’t strong enough to make it through surgery. But rarely did a person just die and leave behind a skeleton in peaceful repose. There was nothing in nature that would so effectively clean a body and leave the bones assembled in their original position. The only predators this island had that were

audacious enough to attack enough a human were a few small wolf packs, and they would have torn the body apart, leaving the bones scattered and hidden. Of course, a body would eventually decompose to the point where it was only the bones, but this was a long and complicated process. Somebody would have noticed the body before it had gotten to the point where skeletonization could occur, as just getting to this stage could take anywhere from ten to twenty days.

Naira's presence made the situation all the more uncomfortable. The little girl just sat in the front of the boat, clutching her knees, and staring at Elizabeth. She had abnormally large eyes that were deep and intense, a brilliant emerald color. She just watched Elizabeth, showing no emotion in her pale face. Elizabeth made several attempts at conversation, but got nothing from the silent girl except the same blank stare. Eventually, Elizabeth gave up, simply striving to avoid Naira's piercing eyes.

When they had gotten close to where they had seen the pale, shining bones, Elizabeth pulled out her cell phone. After apologizing and explaining why it had taken them so long to call, she filled Dave, Jacob and Elissa in on what they had discovered. Jacob told them that they had found nothing. He then told them to go back and stay on the island and wait for the three of them to catch up. Elizabeth willingly agreed. She did not, however, mention that she fully intended to find and examine the skeleton and hopefully discern the cause of death. Somehow she knew Jacob would have a problem with this, "Unnecessary risk" he would call it, and she didn't want to have to purposefully ignore orders.

She continued moving along, not telling any of the others of what she planned. Phoenix was chatting animatedly with Natalie, moving her hands expressively, her facial expressions spirited and full of life. Naira simply sat, so still she might as well have been catatonic. Finally, when they neared the place where the remains lay, she slid her boat close to the other, scooped Naira up, and placed her next to Natalie. She was willing to risk her own life, but she would not risk a little girl being savaged by the unknown sources of those outlandish noises.

"No matter what, stay here. I don't know what is over there, but if it gets me, do not risk yourselves. Dave, Jacob and Elissa are coming. They'll be here soon enough. I need to find out what killed that person."

Natalie opened her mouth to speak, shocked and indignant. Elizabeth did not give her time to start her sentence, let alone finish it. She turned her boat, and paddled quickly, gliding towards the shore. She glanced back only once, to verify that Natalie had listened to her. She had. All three young women were simply watching her intently. Natalie looked as though she might burst into tears. Elizabeth wondered how the poor young woman had managed to pass the psychological tests this expedition required. She certainly did not know how to handle stress. As she came close to the shore she paused, listening keenly. There was no sound from the woods, only the waves brushing lightly over the small pebbles of the beach.

She decided it was worth the risk. She would be fast, and the information they would gain could potentially be crucial. She landed her boat almost silently, and moved close to the carcass. She had been bracing herself for the overpowering smell of death, but was surprised to find that the only smell was that of the distant ocean. The bones were truly as clean as they appeared. She took her camera out of her bags and took a few photos, feeling like she was examining a crime scene. And potentially, she mused, she was. After she had the photographs, she moved closer to the remains, keeping one eye on the woods, vigilant for any malicious movements. As she got closer, she could see that although the carcass was clean, it was not undamaged. There were deep gouges in the bones, and several of the ribs were snapped. Many of the facial bones contained fractures, and the left femur appeared to have been gnawed on by some sort of large, powerful animal. If forced to hazard a guess, Elizabeth would probably have to say that it was a mammal, probably canine. The first and third cervical vertebrae were broken, and many of the thoracic vertebrae had tiny hairline fractures branching delicately through them. It looked as though the body had been brutally attacked and voraciously feasted upon.

She knelt down next to the skeleton and pushed it gently onto its side. The back of the skull was completely smashed in. Elizabeth guessed that it was either this blow or the damage to the neck that had been the cause of death. She did not have the tools to determine which it was, and she did not have much experience with autopsies. However, she did notice that the skeleton could not possibly have been there for long enough for the entire body to skeletonize. While the soft tissue on the outside of the body had been consumed, whatever had killed this human being had not gotten to the tissue of the brain,

and it had been left to decompose naturally. The body had only just entered the stage of putrefaction, the tissue of brain having barely begun to liquefy.

Elizabeth paused for a moment to consider the situation. She made a quick decision and returned to the boat, rooting around for one of the huge plastic bags that she had thought would be useless. Grabbing one, she returned to her place besides the patiently waiting cadaver. Cautiously, she slipped the bag around the bones, careful to keep all the bones together and undamaged. The bag was not quite perfect for the task, but Elizabeth was conscientious, and she had almost no trouble. In fact, she was so attentive to her task that she did not notice the looks of shock and terror from the three girls in the other boat.

She also did not notice the shadowy creature that was stalking back and forth just under the trees, following her every move with glowing, yellow eyes. But Natalie, Phoenix, and Naira noticed. They were shocked into a stunned silence, sure that they were about to witness a brutal slaughter. But Elizabeth simply stood, hoisting up the makeshift body bag, and returned to the kayak.

As she returned safely to the water, they were able to push their fear to the back of their minds and look more closely at the animal. It paced up and down in the shadows, regarding them curiously. The shape of its body was thick, with powerful muscles, but it moved with a fluid, almost feline, grace. It had large eyes, set on the side of its head, which glowed yellow, catching the dim light. Before they could say anything to Elizabeth, the creature sprang away, unleashing an unearthly yowl.

At this Elizabeth twisted back in the direction she had just come, scanning the trees. Then she turned back to face forward, and noticed the dread that still lingered on her companions' faces.

“What? You guys look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Natalie’s voice quivered subtly, almost imperceptibly. “We saw one of the... the... whatever they are. It was watching you. I thought you were dead for sure.”

Elizabeth looked at her, surprised by the relief in her voice.

“Well, luck for me, I’m not. We’re all fine. Let’s go back. We have what we need.”

She launched herself forward, but stopped when she realized that she was alone. She turned around, exasperated.

“Natalie wha...”

Natalie cut her off, speaking accusingly. “What the hell is wrong with you?! That was a rash and stupid move and it was completely unnecessary! You could have died!”

Elizabeth was shocked. This was the most emotion she had seen out of the little French girl in the whole time she had known her.

“Did you at least find something useful?”

Elizabeth looked her in the eyes, and told the truth. “I hope so, Natalie. I really do.”

Slowly, they made their way back.

