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2024
SOUTH PERTH
YOUNG WRITERS
AWARD

ANTHOLOGY

City of
South Perth





YOUNG WRITERS AWARD

The South Perth Young Writers Award (SPYWA), now in its 38th year, celebrates the talent and creativity of young people in the City of South Perth. Originally called the Christobel Mattingley Award for Young Writers, entrants were able to submit prose or poetry. In 2007, to better reflect the community to which our young writers belong, the award was renamed to the South Perth Young Writers Award and entries were limited to prose.

The 2024 award saw a significant increase in entries compared to previous years, which were judged by a panel of educators, industry experts, advocates, and enthusiasts of children's literature. Shortlisted entrants were invited to work with HM Waugh, the Perth author of the Mars Awakens trilogy, on ways to edit and finesse their work before the final placings were decided. This unique process gives our shortlisted writers an experience of editing and publishing, by reworking and resubmitting their entry.

Prizes are awarded in five age categories across primary and secondary school. The most outstanding entry overall is awarded the Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion. The awarding of prizes encourages young writers to challenge themselves and extend their writing prowess.

This anthology presents all the finalist entries and will be added to the City of South Perth Library collection. We hope you will enjoy the original ideas, immersive settings, sophisticated writing, ambitious and important themes, and gripping storytelling from these young City of South Perth writers.

Acknowledgements

The City of South Perth Libraries would like to extend our sincere thanks to the 2024 SPYWA judging panel, who gave generously of their time, creativity and expertise to further the writing journeys of the wonderful young people in our community.

Thank you to Jen Jackson, Denise Johnston, Jenny Botje, Naama Grey-Smith and Kris Williams.

Thank you also to HM Waugh, for giving her support, encouragement and creative expertise to each of the wonderful young writers shortlisted for SPYWA 2024.

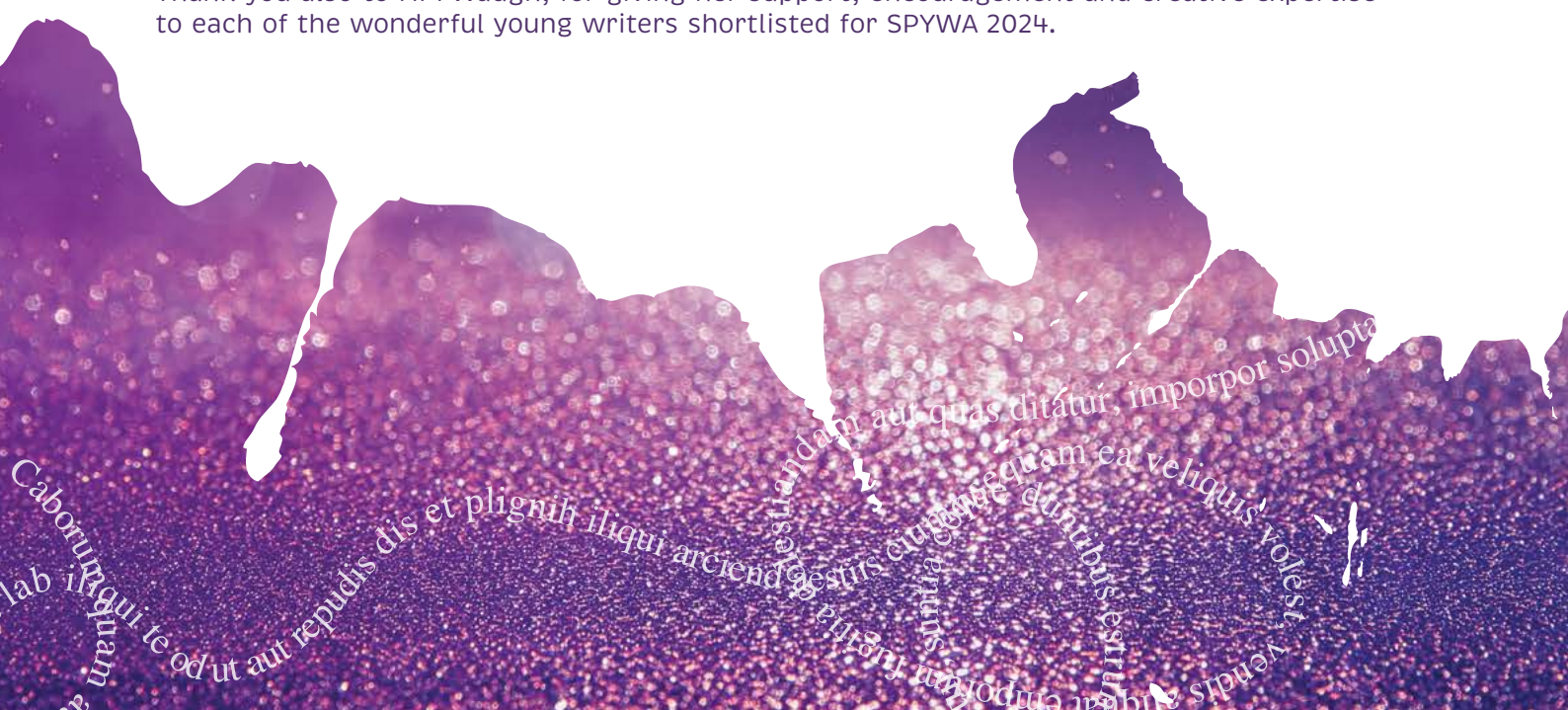

















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The Funeral, by Qian-Qian Wong, was awarded the Christobel Mattingley Bronze Medallion as the entry judged to be the most outstanding across all categories.



The Horse Rescue

Annabell has a white horse named Willa. Willa is tall and has very bright green eyes. She has brown patches on her back. Annabell is a grown up and has brown hair that turns green at the end. She will feed Willa hay and grass and also a bucket of water. They have been friends ever since Annabell found Willa in the cold snow one day and decided to give her shelter. And to keep her as a pet and friend.

Now they are on the snowy path riding to the shop, "Stay here girl, I will be back" said Annabell. When Annabell went into shop not looking, Rusty Rat was there. Rusty Rat is the same size as Annabell but maybe an inch smaller. He has one red eye and one green eye. He looked spooky. He had been stealing horses, but mostly he wanted Willa because she is a magical horse and could make him turn humungous!

When Annabell was in the shop, Rusty Rat captured Willa and put her in his giant van. They drove off into the forest in a big hurry. He was scared of the wolves in the forest and wanted to get back to his lair.

A wolf saw Willa in Rusty Rat's van and ran to the shop to tell Annabell what he saw. The wolf is Annabell's best friend. He saved her once before from Rusty Rat when she was a younger adult.

The wolf went to his pack and told all of them what had happened, (except for one who had babies to take care of).

Annabell ran with the wolves to Rusty Rat's lair. In the forest you could hear the howling of the wolves and the growling of a puma. It had deer and a beautiful smell of leaves. Annabell thought that there were fairies in the forest.

The lair was made of snow, it was an ice house. It was big but only had one room and had a very big door. It was in the shape of a rat. Outside he had a pack of guard rats, one was the size of a four year old and the rest were the size of a three year old.

Now they are at his lair and Annabell had an idea. In her pocket was a box of cheese from the shop. She threw the cheese far into the forest and watched the guard rats chase after it. Annabell threw the delicious cheese so far into the forest that the guard rats could not find their way back. They really wanted that cheese so they ska-daddled away!

Annabell ran into the snow house and found Rusty Rat and Willa. "Ride you horse!" he cackled at Willa. Willa tried to use her magic to make herself humungous so that she could break through the lair. But Willa's magic only worked on other people, she could not get any bigger.

Then Rusty Rat saw Annabell and got so mad that he was going to burst. He said "Now I'm going to grab her and tie her to a chair with a rope". The wolves were still waiting quietly

outside. Rusty Rat had a snow house, in summer it would melt. Annabell had a good plan to rescue Willa.

Annabell asked the wolves to go back to her house and get the Chinese fireworks (that she had from last Chinese New Year) and come back and sneak them under the snow lair. She told them to set off the fireworks when she shouted, "Go!".

It began snowing which made his house even stronger. Annabell's heart started pumping up and down, she was worried that the fireworks would not work.

Rusty Rat made Annabell sit on a chair next to Willa. Willa looked happy to see Annabell but it was not a good idea to smile while Rusty Rat was around because he might move them both far apart.

They waited for the wolves to come...Annabell already knew what her plan was.

The wolves came back and Annabell saw a fluffy tail underneath the floor of the chair. She knew the time had come.

Annabell had a necklace with beads and let the beads drop on the ground. They made a clicking sound and distracted Rusty Rat. Annabell shouted "Go!" and the fireworks exploded. The lair began to melt with the fire from the fireworks. Rusty Rat screamed "You're a naughty girl!"

Annabell and Willa rode out of the melting lair. Rusty Rat was inside and he yelled “Help me!”

The wolves went into the melting house and surrounded him. The boss wolf said “Be dinner or be kind.”

Annabell and Willa rode home to safety. We don’t know for sure what happened to Rusty Rat.

THE HORSEY END



Emergency Landing

BANG!!

"We lost another engine! There is only one left!"

"OMG! We are all going to die!!!"

Four Hours Earlier...

My name is Stephen. Although I'm only seven years old, I am a well-trained and certified pilot. I was sitting in the cockpit, staring boredly through the window at the rainy morning scene of Berlin Airport, waiting for my co-pilot, Jack. Jack, only six years old, is still an uncertified trainee pilot. He really loves flying, but if he put as much effort into flight training as he does into football, he would probably have graduated by now.

"Stephen, it's 2022 now, and since the COVID-19 pandemic has been controlled, people have started travelling again," Jack said as he sat down, rubbing his eyes. Clearly, last night's football game had kept him up all night.

"Yes, so we need to test these planes first," I replied, looking at the old Lufthansa Boeing 747-400 we were about to test.

"This flight is from Berlin to Perth, covering 14,000 kilometres and taking 17 hours," I added as the four engines roared to life, signalling a good start.

"Do you think this will work?" Jack asked, a bit unsure.

"I can't be sure, but we have to try," I said firmly.

Crisis in the Sky!

The takeoff went smoothly, and soon the plane was on autopilot. Jack and I both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Not bad, this old girl can still fly," I remarked.

Jack yawned, saying, "Oh, I can't take it anymore. I'm going to the kitchen to get some coffee and bread. Do you want anything?"

"No, thanks. I don't like eating while on duty," I replied.

Soon, Jack returned with a tray piled high with breakfast and set it on the control panel.

Suddenly, the plane hit turbulence. The tray tipped, and hot coffee spilled across the panel, causing a short circuit. The control lights flickered, and alarms blared.

"Jack!" I shouted, trying to mop up the coffee. But it was too late. The smell of burning electronics filled the cockpit.

"We have a problem," I said urgently.

Jack's eyes widened. "What do we do?"

"The coffee caused a short circuit. It looks like it's affecting the engine controls," I said.

A loud bang echoed from outside the plane. The emergency lights cast an eerie red glow.

"We've got a fire in the engine," I said, gripping the controls. "We need to act fast."

"Jack, contact Air Traffic Control (ATC) tower immediately. We need help," I said.

"Got it. Mayday, can someone hear me?" Jack repeated into the microphone, but there was no response.

"The fire must have destroyed our Wi-Fi. We can't contact ATC or use the GPS," Jack said, frustrated.

"Alright, it's not the end of the world. The display shows two engines are unresponsive, but we can still use the remaining two to get back to Berlin," I said, encouraging Jack and myself.

Suddenly, a loud bang.

BANG!

One of the remaining engines exploded, causing a fuel leak.

"We lost another engine! There is only one left!" I shouted.

"OMG! We are all going to die!!!" Jack said, despairing. "Oh, this is all my fault, Stephen. I shouldn't have wished to Santa in Coles for an exciting adventure."

"Calm down, we still have hope. How much fuel do we have left?"

Jack said, "10%."

I said, "Then, to save fuel, we need to completely shut down the other three engines. Even if they come back online later, we can't use them anymore."

Jack said, "What if the only working engine also fails?"

I said, "Shut up!"

Jack and I successfully shut down three engines and cut off their fuel lines.

"It works, the fire on the engine is out!" Jack shouted excitedly.

Just as we were celebrating, I suddenly realised a new crisis. Due to the failure of our Wi-Fi and the GPS equipment, we lost our direction in the sky and couldn't find our way back to Berlin Airport.

"We have to find our way back, but without navigation, we're completely lost," I said.

"What should we do?" Jack asked.

"Stay calm. We can use landmarks to navigate. Look outside and see if you can spot the Berlin TV Tower or the Brandenburg Gate. These are key landmarks in Berlin, and we can use them to determine our position."

Jack asked, confused, "The TV tower or the 'burger' gate?"

"Just the tower, please..." I said.

Jack peered out of the window, searching carefully. "I see the TV Tower, Stephen! It's over there!"

"Great! We can find our way back," I said.

Safe Landing?

"I can see the airport and there's an empty runway!" Jack shouted excitedly.

"Yes, I can see it. We are going home," I said, feeling a surge of relief.

We had just enough fuel for one attempt at landing. But the fire had damaged the plane, making it difficult to keep balanced. As we approached, I could feel the plane wobble.

"Stay focused, Jack. We need to land this perfectly," I said, gripping the controls tightly.

The runway got closer and closer. I adjusted the flaps and prepared for landing.

"Almost there..." I muttered, my heart pounding.

With a final push, I lined the plane up with the runway. The wheels touched down with a bump, and the plane skidded along. I carefully applied the brakes, and after what felt like forever, we finally stopped.

"We did it, Jack! We're safe!" I exclaimed.

Jack sighed in relief. "That was too close, Stephen."

As we rolled to the gate, I couldn't help but smile. Against all odds, we had made it.

On our way back, Jack suddenly said, "Why didn't we just parachute out earlier?"

I laughed and said, "Thank you! That's the smartest thing you've said today! Since you haven't helped much today, you'll be the one writing the accident report."

Jack cried, "No!!!"



Slime Dog and the Bloop Genius

Esther looked out the window feeling angry with the sky and made a wish for something different to fall down other than rain.

"Everyday the same thing, rain and I'm bored of it. I wish something new would come down," she said.

"Hmmm," how to get something new to come down was hard to think up.

Tim, her big brother is a science genius. He is the smartest boy in the world and invented a robot dog called Slime Dog. The dog has big blue eyes, a shiny marble nose and a happy wire tail like a number 9! Everyday Tim and Slime Dog eat breakfast together, they are best friends. The robot doggy always gets a huge bowl of his favorite treats. He eats cornstarch and blue magnetic particles which mixes in his belly with water to make slime that you can take out through a little door on his cylinder body.

Esther asks, "what is this blue stretchy, gloopy slime that he makes?"

Tim says "It's gloopy and bloopy, I'm going to call it.... 'Bloop!' It's a non newtonian slime that changes, if you press down hard it goes hard but if you touch it gentle it turns runny. Go on, whack it or squeeze it, it's as hard as a brick or even limestone."

"Do you mean Slime-stone," cheeked Esther.

Then she does a joke, "if it's runny, you could drink it like Slime-onade," Hah ha ha!

For lots of days and days Tim thinks of nothing to play with Esther because he is all about Slime Dog. Slime Dog is always wrecking it. He's cute but he clings and clanks when he walks and makes sloppy goop sounds, Blehhh!

Esther flies into an angry mood. She thinks about maybe Tim could build a rocket ship and send Slime Dog into outer space to be the first doggy on the moon! He would be famous, a real science tycoon! who put a doggy on the moon! Then he would play with me.

One rainy day when Tim was busy in his room Esther whistles for Slime Dog to come. "Sit. Good dog," she says.

"You are going to be the first robot doggy on the moon. I can't send you in a rocket but I can program you to fly," she tells him. She gets a giant parachute and fills it up with enough cornstarch and blue magnetic particles for Slime Dog to eat for a whole year. Esther hooks it to the dogs tail but she slips on the messy floor and falls. She accidentally puts a big rip in the parachute. Slime Dog waves his paw goodbye, his ears are up because he's excited to fly. His happy number 9 tail is wagging and taller than ever. Then off he flies.

Esther runs to the window to see. Oh' No. Slime Dog wasn't flying far at all. He was just spinning around the yard, like the earth orbiting the sun. Her wish for something new to fall down was about to come true. He was dripping stringy blobs like sticky blue honey from the sky. Excited Esther was being in silly mode and joked, "do you think the slime is blue, if you think it's blue then we could give it a cheer up!

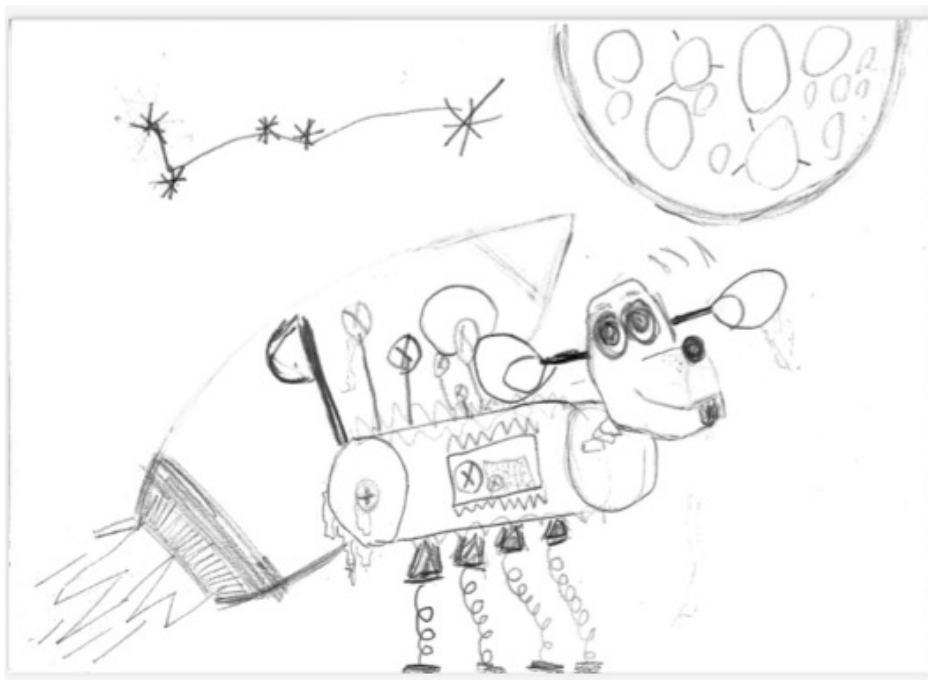
I love blue, it's like the blue sky on a sunny day."

But..... this day was 'Big Rain'!

The rain mixed with the ingredients in Slime Dog's parachute making too much heavy bloop. Then it rips dumping a huge pile of blue bloop down. Esther could see some jelly blobs plopping on top of the huge pile in the yard. Are they giant blue gummy bears that you can eat falling

from the sky? her eyes wide with wonder, or gummy dinosaurs. She runs outside and stomps to the top of the huge pile and shouts, "Yummy Gummy Bears, come and get some!" Tim hears the shouting and looks out the window into the yard. "Oh No. This is bad." He grabs an umbrella and runs to help. He is sensible and doesn't want to get stuck in the bloop. Tim stomps his feet hard to the top. Esther says "It's yummy, look I'll show you," and she eats some! The bloop sticks her teeth shut. Tim knows when you press down hard on it, it goes harder but when you touch it gentle and slow it gets runny. So he tells her, "move your mouth open very slowly." She does and a massive blue bubble comes out and they hear a POP! Slime Dog is still going around and around, he sees big trouble down below. On top of the pile of bloop in the yard was a distracted Tim and Esther sinking like sailboats up to their knees in bloop. "Help us, it's quicksand," they yell. They wish many helping hands could sneak around and grab all the slime but there is nobody. Tim puts out his arm for help and bloop drips off it. He sticks one finger up to the sky with an idea. Slime dog could help because his wire number 9 tail has electricity in it that can get bloop to move. Tim blows a long whistle and his best friend comes to the rescue. "Please help us Slime Dog, deploy the electricity in your tail." The good dog sits near the pile of bloop. The magnetic particles in the bloop sparkle in the light, fields connect and it slowly sucks all the bloop to his tail to form a 'C' shape cluster. They can walk out of the gap and be safe. Phew! Esther says to her brother, "I'm sorry I tried to send Slime Dog away, he is a very helpful dog." Tim thinks about how spending time with her was fun today. It was epic! When they all go inside Tim holds Esther's hand. They remember the most important thing is family it doesn't take a genius to figure that out!

Hmmmm Cringey !!!!!
The End





BEING BIG

Hi, my name is Ellie. I won't describe how big I am. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse. Now, I am not normal-sized... I am only normal to myself and my family.

I woke up on Sunday morning feeling cheery but when I remembered last night, I immediately cower under my blanket. What happened last night you ask? Well, I went out to pick some daisies for my flower crown last night, when I tripped and flew into the flowing river in the middle of Marentime Bay City. And because I'm so big, I blocked up the river causing it to stop flowing. I sat down feeling glum as people passed by or looked from the inside of the building, their faces pressed on the windows making their cheeks puff out, stared at me. They started whispering and pointing at me.

So, when Mum comes in she looks around the room, then sighs and says, "Ellie, sweetie, come down for breakfast. Dad made pancakes!" I am fuming but I come out from under my blanket, and stare blankly at my wall. She knows what happened, but she doesn't know how to help! I mean... pancakes?! How is that going to help? No offense Mum.

Anyway, I still come down for pancakes (they are my favourite actually).

"Morning Ellie! Did you sleep well?" asked Dad.

"Ahhh... oops!" He adds. I laughed as the pancake flew up onto the ceiling. Out of the blue, my brother, who's really annoying, slid down the staircase rail while shouting, "PANCAKES!" I shot him a glare and said, "Calm down, you won't get a single crumb if you shout at that rate!" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him eyeroll at me. "Charlie, please use your inside voice. And no fighting," said Mum with a stern look on her face. Instead, Charlie whispers 'pancakes' – as if that would be better, I thought. "It's a terrible way to start the morning" finished Dad. 'Like you know how it feels' I thought.

Suddenly an extremely wonderful idea popped into my brain! 'Oh, thought bubble!' I think to myself. I put on a calm, normal smile and turn to my parents and say, "Can I go spend the whole day at the market? I'll take our fierce doggy-woggy."

My face turns to a cute, pleasing face. “Sure sweetie. Are you sure you want to spend the whole day there?” asked Mum. She can get over worried. “Yes, I’m sure. There are tons of things to do including the playground, the fair and the food.”

“Ok then, finish your pancakes first” Mum replies.

Dad yelps as another pancake slaps onto the ceiling. “Charlie don’t shout ‘pancakes’ while I’m flipping them!” scolded Dad. I chuckle as I turn to go. “Bye!” I call over my shoulder while I twist the doorknob open.

I go and fetch the treat bag. Our dog, Alfie, doesn’t need a leash because he’s too well-trained, plus he’s really strong as he is a Rottweiler. “Stay still Alfie!” I say, laughing. “Don’t you want a treat?”

Anyway, you know the bit where I said I was going to the market? I lied. Yep. Take in the surprise... I’m actually going to go to the Jade Jungle to have one wish granted at the Well of Wishes. What is my wish you ask? Well, I wish to be normal-sized so I can fit in... like everyone else...

I head out with Alfie not far behind, pouncing on the grass. It’s a brilliant day but I just don’t feel very happy. As I pass the border for giants, I see a girl sitting under a tree, not far away. My body tenses up. ‘There is nowhere for me to hide!’ I think, panicking. As if things could not get any worse, Alfie runs up to the girl, begging for a pat. The girl giggles and smiles as she pats him. I run after him and say to the girl, “Sorry, he’s usually very well-trained”. The girl smiles sweetly and says, “It’s fine. My name is Lexie.” After I introduce myself, I think, ‘Why is she not surprised?’ So, I ask her. She says “I don’t believe you should judge someone by their looks or size. Neither should anyone else.” As that thought floats around in my head, she asks if she can tag along and of course I say yes. So off we set...

The rest of the journey was peaceful until we emerge into the Jade Jungle. The fig trees sway in the wind, the birds sing in perfect harmony and the fruits of all kinds smell so good you can almost taste them. But then, we hear a deep, sharp growling noise creeping closer and closer.

Grrrrr.... Grrrrrrrr.

... BAM!!!

A coconut slams to the ground!

“AHHHHHH!!!” Me and Lexie were terrified! After taking a few deep breaths, I calm myself down. I stand tall and strong, waiting for the next attack to defend.

Grrr... GRRR!

A massive leopard lunges towards me, missing me by a centimetre. I run towards it, trying to slap it. The leopard dodges and scrapes its paw against my leg.

I scream in pain! I was absolutely helpless! The next bit was kind of a blur, but the one thing I remember was that Lexie saved me by throwing coconuts! (at the leopard of course). Unfortunately, I was still in pain. Luckily, Lexie fetched some mango tree leaves to bandage it up. That’s how we became friends. Soon, I was up and going.

As we reached where the Well of Wishes is, we find ourselves in front of an ancient temple. “The Well of Wishes has to be there!” I thought.

“Probably” replies Lexie. I realise she is... what do you call it? Nervous! So I comfort her and reassure her that it will be okay. And in that moment, I realise I have met someone I can share all my feelings with, and they will listen too. She smiles and climbs onto my hand as we close our eyes. When we open our eyes, we are in front of the Well of Wishes, made of mossy rocks and adorned with vines, inside the temple. Just as I was about to step forward and make my wish, a tiger pounces in front of me, wearing a tutu and headband! The sight is so funny that me and Lexie fall on our knees laughing. As if it could not get any funnier, another tiger comes out, wearing a suit!

“Uggh, didn’t I tell you two to stop dancing together?” comes a voice from behind us. I turn around and see an elephant the size of me standing in front. “Hello, my name is Starlight and I am the guardian of the Well of Wishes. Please, do not mind my.. um.. helpers. Anyway, what are your names?” she says.

I am speechless! A talking elephant?! Two dancing tigers?!

I must be dreaming!!

Instead, Lexie says “I’m Lexie and this is my friend, Ellie.”

Starlight smiles at us and says, “My helpers have been watching you both. You have proven yourselves worthy through your acts of care and kindness towards each other. You may each make a wish.”

Then they all faded into the shadows...

Before I make my wish, I reveal all my secrets to Lexie, as I trust her now. Lexie listens intently then a gentle, sweet smile creeps onto her face. “Ellie, you don’t need to be ‘normal-sized’ because I appreciate who you are right now. **You can’t blend in when you were born to stand out,**” she says. That was her last words in the Jade Jungle that year. As she finished talking, I was brought to tears. We hugged and I made another wish – **to be best friends forever.** And Lexie? Well, she said she already had what she wanted. Something better than gold... a friend.

1 year later...

Now we play in the Jade Jungle because it brings great memories. One thing we love to do... spy on our brothers and play with Alfie and Biscuits, who is Lexie’s dog. **And the best thing about Lexie is that she is a true friend!**

The End



Innocent

I rapidly banged on the door of the cell. I yelled like a maniac. Everyone looked at me. My friend Peter looked and glared. I knew what he meant. *Stop making a fuss. Calm down and stop embarrassing yourself.* That was what he said with his eyes. Part of my brain knew he was right. But a bigger fraction was fighting for my freedom. I was not meant to be here. I was not a murderer. True, the cops found me in front of a dead person holding a blood stained weapon in my hand. But I didn't do it. I swear. Never would I stop fighting for my freedom. I needed to go home. For my daughter. I wanted justice. I continued to bang and yell. I ignored Peter. He looked at me pleadingly. I didn't listen. I was becoming a rebel.

I used to be handsome, but now I was ugly. It was 1956, and I was only 54 years old, but I looked 70. From the torture of jail, the smallest portion of food and the barbaric guards, I had turned skinny and lonely. I had been punished for being hard to handle many times, but I took the punishment willingly. I did not deserve to be here. I was not meant to be here. I needed to escape. I would. I had to. If I didn't, I would live my life in sorrow, knowing that I had been trapped in an awful place where I didn't belong. The truth was, that Peter was in jail because of me. He had tried to stand up for me and broke the police officer's nose. I saw the legs of the murdered man twitch, and there was a spark of hope. Maybe he was still alive. Maybe I could pull the knife out, and he could live. But then, the police arrived and saw my blood stained hands. I know how it looked, but it wasn't the truth. Guilty as seen, they said.

I continued banging and kicking hysterically. Peter saw me, looked and begged with his eyes. *Please, Mathew, stop screaming. I know you shouldn't be here, but you should calm down. You're going to*

put yourself in more trouble. He said this in his head, but I saw it in his eyes. Peter was my best friend. I suddenly stopped. I realised I was only stopping for him. Tears filled my eyes as I thought of the many times he had helped me. I had done nothing for him. The least I could do for him was listen to him.

As I sat in jail, I thought of my home, my wife, my daughter. I knew that if I didn't escape, my daughter would soon be found out. She didn't have proof of citizenship. She had just turned 18. I had to escape. I had to save her. She mattered more to me than anything else. I spent the night thinking how to escape.

That night was when I thought of my escape plan. It would take at least ten days. On the other side of my cell, not the one Peter was in, was a middle aged man. In prison, if you fought with another convict, you would have to spend ten days in isolation. The isolation cell was at the end of prison. It led to the forest, which I knew quite well from childhood. I had been in the isolation cell before, I knew the walls are damp, and damp walls are loose. I may have a chance. Once out, I could get home without being seen.

The best idea would be to fight with the inmate next to me and spend ten days in isolation. I started punching the man next door through the bars. I yelled at him and accused him of taking my dinner. His nickname was Goldy, for the golden tooth at the back of his mouth. Not long after I had started fighting, I, unsurprisingly, was shoved into isolation. I was given my dinner that night by a guard. The food never changed, I was given a piece of bread, with watery soup.

I felt around the walls for a weak spot. I pushed hard on every single rock, and I felt some movement. There *is* hope. Later that night, when I was meant to be asleep, I started sharpening a spoon I saved, rubbing it on the hinge of the bed. I made a dummy out of a pillow and my own hair that I had cut off with the sharp spoon. It was painful, but I had to escape. I needed a dummy so I could dig a tunnel. The dummy would go on my bed incase the guards look into my cell. It would take me a few days to dig a tunnel in the wall with the sharpened spoon. Yet, it would be worth the wait.

Finally, 18th of July, 1956, I moved my bed to expose the hole built by me, to fool the guards. In the morning, my stomach began to flutter. I let my memories flow, from the day I was arrested. I was fighting back with the police. I know I shouldn't have done that. I regret it. The day I fought with them, they were prepared. I passed out with excruciating pain. It was time to make my escape. I wanted Peter to come, I really did. But how was he meant to come? If he were to be put into isolation, we would be in different rooms, far from each other. I had known him since I was two. I wouldn't leave him behind. But I didn't have a choice.

By the time I was under my bed, the guards came to check on me, and discovered my little tunnel. I thought they were pretty idiotic to leave the bars open and keep the keys in the key hole. Anyway, it helped me. Once the guards were in my little tunnel, I silently crept out of the bed. I took the keys and locked the guards in. The keys jangled, which made the guards look in my direction. But I didn't care. I was escaping! I had a sneaky look on my face. It was time for some fun. It had been too boring lately. I locked the guards in.

When I was shoved in to isolation, I caught a glimpse of the emergency door. Once I was out, I headed to the door. I used the keys that I took from the guards. I could hear the two prison wardens yelling and arguing with each other on what to do. A smug smile crept up on my face. I didn't have to worry about them starving themselves to death. Surely another guard would realise they didn't come to collect my dinner to give to me. Of course, soon, the news will spread that I have escaped.

I was out in the woodlands, where I dug a hole and hid my convict clothes under a tree. I could walk in the forest without clothes. I breathed in the fresh air. I realised how filthy it was in the prison. I had been in there for too long, that I had gotten used to the stinky air. I began to track my way back home and realised that I had forgotten how much I love bushwalking. Getting closer to town after three days, I couldn't believe my luck! I spotted a police uniform hanging in a backyard to dry. I nicked it, and put them straight on.

I finally got close to home, and waited for my wife to go out to the market. I followed her. My wife was overjoyed to see me. But that

didn't stop her inquiring into why I was back. My sentence wasn't over yet. I had to explain my creative escape. Unsurprisingly, she didn't approve. But I knew that she couldn't stay angry at me for long. I had just come back from prison. I had dinner with my wife, at Peter's son's house and enjoyed it immensely. That night, we had just turned on the radio. We were more than surprised. We were shocked. The highlight of the news that night was deportation of a few young men and women. Most were 18. They were being moved, by force, to another country. My stomach churned. Was I right? Was I too late? Questions bombarded me. We were traumatised. Was she one of them?

"They have been deported as they did not have proof of citizenship. Among them is an 18 year old girl. We do not know her relatives, address or where she was born. She will be kept in Hagolin Prison until we have gathered more information." The news reporter read professionally.

"No. No. No." I gasped. Was that 18 year old girl her? Was it my daughter?

It looks like my mission continues....



The Snatcher

On a stormy Wednesday morning a gigantic beast was jolted awake by a tremendous roar of thunder. The beast was known to animal kind as the Snatcher. The Snatcher was said to be some sort of amphibian, prowling the land and water for an animal meal.

The adult fish said, “kids be careful when you hear the Snatcher coming because he will snatch you and turn you into soup. You can tell the Snatcher is coming because of the loud roars and the water making big waves”. The sharks told their kids “Be careful when you hear the Snatcher. He is very fast in the water and could hurt you by slapping his tail against your head. You will know the Snatcher is coming by a disgusting odour of chilli and screeching orca noises”.

But on land the other adult animals told their kids “The Snatcher will snatch you and keep you prisoner until you die”. The Snatcher looks like many animals combined. The land animals said “from the land it looks like he has four flippers and two legs so he can move fast on land and in water. He barely ever smiles and has soulless eyes. He has a whale like tail, a fin on his back and strange markings all over his body. He is black and grey so he can blend into the shadows and watch you”.

There was only one animal in the jungle who did not have friends or family. His name was Timothy, and he was a river otter. He was the only one in the area because his family and friends were scared away by the Snatcher, and he was left behind. Timothy lived in a little den near the waterhole. Timothy would stay in his den all day long and think of his family and friends. He would only come out to get fish to eat, frightened that the Snatcher would hurt him.

On this stormy Wednesday, having been woken by ferocious thunder and lightning, the Snatcher was going on his daily walk to the waterhole and as usual scaring all the animals in his path.

Back in Timothy’s den, Timothy could hear a miserable wailing coming closer and closer every second and he could feel vibrations becoming increasingly stronger. Timothy thought one of his neighbours was in trouble and needed help so Timothy, without thinking, looked out of his den and came face to face with the Snatcher. The Snatcher was sitting next to the waterhole. He noticed movement near Timothy’s den and looked up at Timothy. Timothy realised who he was looking at and swiftly retreated into his den. Timothy was shaking with fear, and his heart was racing as fast as a cheetah. He said to himself “it’s ok” and took some deep breaths, “maybe he didn’t see me”. He could still hear the miserable wailing and felt helpless because he wanted to help his neighbour, but he lacked the courage.

The wailing had gone on for half an hour and he was feeling guilty, so Timothy gradually peeked his face out of his den. He observed the Snatcher had tears dripping down his face and his mouth was opening and closing rapidly while the horrible howling was in sync. The Snatcher was the one who was crying. Timothy was astonished, and he thought he was seeing things. So Timothy shook his head to re adjust his vision. But after that he still saw the

Snatcher crying. Timothy didn't like seeing other animals cry because it made him feel even sadder than he already was, so Timothy cautiously approached the Snatcher ready to run at any sudden movement. The Snatcher didn't seem to care that Timothy was walking near him. Although Timothy felt frightened and was questioning himself if he should talk to the Snatcher, he built up the courage and whispered "are you ok?" The Snatcher turned around and sobbed in a squeaky voice, "did you just ask me if I was ok?" Timothy responded nodding "yes I did". The Snatcher explained to Timothy that he didn't mean to scare the animals, his name wasn't the Snatcher it was Jon, and he didn't understand why the animals were so frightened of him. Timothy explained that "all the animals think that you are going to hurt them so whenever they hear you coming, they hide and wait till you have left". "Did you think I would hurt you?" asked the Snatcher. "Yes, I did but now I do not think you will hurt me". "The truth is all I want is to have a friend". "I can be your friend" said Timothy. "You would"? "Yes, I would" said Timothy. "I will also prove to the other animals that you do not want to hurt them". "How will you do that?" said the Snatcher.

The next day, Timothy set out to speak to all the animals by swimming through the rivers connecting to the waterhole. He said, "meet me this afternoon at the waterhole when the sun is near the horizon because I have important news that I think everyone needs to hear". Once Timothy was done telling all the animals about the meeting he set back to his home. When he got back some of the animals were already there. As the sun neared the horizon all the animals had arrived. Timothy said "please everybody sit down, I have got a special guest, and his name is Jon. Come on out Jon" gestured Timothy. All the animals looked around and saw a gigantic beast coming from the depths of the jungle. Once everyone saw who it was, it got a bit chaotic. All the fish in the waterhole were blowing bubbles in fright because Timothy had closed off the exit with wood and the sharks were snapping rapidly for the same reason. The monkeys were screeching and running around in circles. Then in a loud voice Timothy said "Everybody settle down, Jon is not going to hurt you." "That can't be Jon, it's the Snatcher" yelled one of the panthers. "You must have gone crazy. Why did you bring us here?" "Calm down. Jon was the Snatcher, but his real name is Jon. So can you please start calling him Jon. He doesn't want to hurt you. He just wants to play and be friends with all of you. Jon is quite shy, and everyone here has been running away from him which makes him feel very upset. Yesterday I thought my neighbour was crying but it turns out Jon was the one crying by the waterhole, so I asked him if he was ok. He explained everything to me and now I'm not scared of him. I think you guys should be more open to who you choose to play and be friends with. Even though he looks scary he is quite friendly, and he will not hurt you. You're judging a book by its cover". "You must be talking nonsense," said the monkeys. "I'm not because if I was, he would've eaten you by now. He has been standing here the whole time and he hasn't touched you." Then all the animals turned their heads to look at Jon. "That's true" mumbled Jon. "Can you just give me one chance" said Jon gently.

The animals huddled together and had a big decision to make. "Should we give him a chance?" blubbed the fish. "Maybe we should" said a monkey, "he spoke to us in a very delicate voice". "No, we shouldn't give him a chance" said a panther, "remember what he did to all our families". "Did any of us ever see Jon do anything bad or hurt any of our families?" "If he was that bad, like Timothy said he would have eaten us already. Maybe we

were mistaken. I think most of us think we should give him a chance". All the animals turned to face Timothy and Jon. Suddenly the panther roared "I don't believe what you are saying is true. It's late, let's go back to our homes." The animals turned around to leave. "Before you all go", shouted Timothy "I've got lots of food which we can enjoy together, that way you can see how friendly Jon is." Timothy was running back to his den "I will be back soon just stay here". Timothy quickly ducked into his burrow and brought out all the food. "I've got meat for the panthers, fruit for the monkeys, there should be algae in the waterhole for the fish and some dead stingrays for the sharks." Timothy put down all the food and said "dig in". Jon started eating first and ate a piece of fruit. All the animals stared and were confused. "I prefer to eat fruit than meat." The animals all laughed and started to eat.



The Great Rebellion

It was a dream unlike any before – flashes of images of an ancient battle that unfolded millennia ago, at the centre of which I stood.

Ever since the history lesson at school about the Qin Dynasty and the fabled terracotta army, I could not help but to marvel at its magnificence and wondered how such force was overthrown within a relatively short space of time.

Unable to suppress my urge to uncover the truth, I spent countless hours researching this subject at local libraries and the internet, scouring through historical archives.

In a dark, soulless corner of an otherwise buzzing library, I stumbled upon old articles about a manuscript written by an unknown author. It was a first-hand account for the rise and fall of Qin Dynasty and legends of a mysterious figure that led to their demise. I continued at home and eventually fell asleep in the midst of the research.

The next morning on my usual commute to school, I could not shrug off this feeling that something is off about... everything! Unlike my usual self, I decided to take a detour through a dark alleyway that weaved between the towering buildings. As I approached the final turn, an old oriental-styled building seemingly stood out amongst the industrial surrounding.

Overwhelmed by curiosity, I approached the building without the slightest hint of caution and used every muscle of my body to push open the iron-cladded doors.

The inside of the building was devoid of people, littered with seemingly ancient artifacts. One item caught my attention – a book nested on the palms of a terracotta soldier.

‘Could this be the manuscript?’, I thought to myself.

As I turned the pages, it appeared that pages pertaining to the identity of the historical figure were missing. On the final page of the manuscript, it was said that a warrior who wielded this Jaded Broadsword led a great rebellion against the vicious Qin Emperor and vanquished the terracotta army.

Drawing the sword from the scabbard, the sword emitted a warm glow that enveloped my entire body, and my eyes were blinded by a flash of light.

As I regained my vision, I found myself amongst a scene of utter devastation – Buildings reduced to rubble, walls crumbled, streets littered with fallen soldiers, the air was filled with the stench of death and decay, and vultures circled overhead ready to feast on the fallen.

I made my way through the ruins, my heart pounded with sorrow every step I took - The cries of the wounded echoed through the streets, compounded by the mourns of those who lost their loved ones.

Eventually I reached the nearest vantage point – the only sounds that could be heard were the cawing of crows and the distant rumble of the army that had just decimated this city.

Suddenly, I heard movements in the nearby shrubs, and felt a sense of discomfort that I was being watched. As I turned to investigate, mysterious figures surrounded me like prey amongst predators.

One of them emerged from the group and approached me with a razor-sharp blade.

‘What business does a strangely dressed young man have in this god-forsaken city?’, said the swordsman.

‘I... I don’t know, I was hoping you’d explain to me!’, I stuttered in fear.

‘You must be a spy for the wretched Qin Emperor!’, the swordman continued, pressing his blade against my cheek. ‘I will relief your head from your body!’, he yelled as he prepares to swing his blade.

‘**Stop at Once!**’, a hooded man shouted as he approached from behind the group – his voice firm yet reassuring.

‘Why? He’s a spy!’, the swordsman urged.

‘His sword! The Prophecy! He might just be our only hope against the Qin Emperor and his cursed terracotta army!’, said the cloaked man with his eyes fixated on the sword.

After hours of debate, the group decided to take me back to their base deep in the mountains, where they plot their rebellion against the Qin Empire.

Back at their base, the old man revealed himself as a prophet and former Chancellor of the Qin Empire. He explained that the Qin Dynasty hasn’t always been like this.

‘It was an empire built on strength, system, and integrity. We have standardised measurements, languages, and laws that improved everyone’s way of life. But as years went by, Emperor Qin grew old, and he began to feel his age. In his pursuit of immortality, the emperor had fallen into darkness and became obsessed with the dark arts of necromancy. He raised the terracotta army by imbuing evil spirits into clay soldiers that were meant to decorate the great halls of his predecessors.’, said the prophet.

‘As the cursed emperor and his army descended onto these lands and threatened to consume all that exist, a prophecy was revealed that a hero would come wielding a Jaded Sword infused with the power of the gods that would cleanse any evil spirits that it touches.’, he added with a glimmer of optimism.

Without hesitation, I offered my assistance to the rebels in their quest to conquer the conqueror, knowing that death would be certain if we did nothing.

We set out at first light on our perilous journey through the picturesque landscape filled with nature’s gifts. But as the rebellion march closer to the emperor’s fortress, darkness begins to consume the light around us, and the very warmth of our blood seems stolen away.

The sun set behind the darkened sky as we reached the front gate of the fortress. The grounds around us trembled, and hordes of terracotta soldiers emerged from the depths. Their eyes

glowed unnaturally as they stared with malice, and their rigid forms marched in perfect unison under the command of their wicked master.

The stone soldiers advanced towards us as the emperor chanted dark incantations, imbuing his army with malevolent energy that sent chills down our spines.

'We must not give in to fear! This is our only chance to embrace our hopes and dreams and fight for the lives we wanted!', I shouted as I draw the glowing Jaded Broadsword.

The rebel force snapped out of their fear, drawing out their swords and shields and braced themselves for the onslaught, their hearts pounding with determination.

The collision between the armies reverberated through the air as steel and stone clashed. The rebel armies struggled to break through the unyielding ranks of the terracotta warriors. The emperor created further imbalance as his magic twisted and warped the battlefield, hurling rocks and debris at us with deadly precision, while never-ending spawns of terracotta soldiers continued to advance.

The battle continued into the night, pushing us to the brink of defeat. When all hope was lost, the clouds began to clear, and the moon rose high in the sky. The moon casted a silvery light over the Jaded Broadsword, seemingly awaking the powers within.

I leapt atop the pile of rubble that was the slain terracotta warriors, raising the Jaded Broadsword towards the sky. The sword's glow amplified, casting rays of light in every direction and enchanting the weapons of rebel forces with the power of the Jaded Broadsword.

We launched a counterattack against the stone army, our swords flashing in the moonlight with every swing, decimating our enemies with a single blow. Facing defeat, the emperor begins to cast a spell that channels enough energy to self-destruct and take the entire world with him.

Recalling the final pages of the manuscript, the Jaded Broadsword also draws divine energy from its surroundings.

'We must act fast! Everyone point your sword at me now!', I pleaded in desperation.

Beams of light began to converge to the tip of the sword, developing a blinding orb of energy. I projected the orb towards the emperor, quickly engulfing him and sending him high into the sky. The orb exploded into a colourful display of fireworks – and the emperor was finally vanquished. The remaining terracotta soldiers crumbled against the slightest wisp of wind.

We stood victorious. Our bodies battered and weary, but our spirits soared with pride.

'Thank you, young warrior, for standing with us to the very end!', said the prophet.

'We'd like you to lead us to rebuild these lands and be our new emperor!', he continued.

'I wish I could, but I don't have much time left in this world.', I said as my body began to emit the very same soft glow when I touched the sword for the very first time, and everyone bowed to me with gratitude just as I faded back into the modern world.

I found myself back at the oriental building with the manuscript still on my hand, but the missing pages were restored albeit without references to the mysterious warrior.

'Perhaps history was changed for the better? Or perhaps this was all just a dream?', I wondered.

No one knows for sure, but I'll keep on chasing my dreams of being a hero!



Shadows of Hope: A Medic's Tale of War and Love

The deafening sound of gunfire echoed in my ears as I climbed out of the rickety wooden boat, cold blood rushed through my veins, my shaking legs lapping against the waves. Today was the day - the day my world would change, the day the peace was disrupted. The tension in the air was palpable as I waded to shore, a beautiful place now marred by violence. The clear blue sea, the soft fine sand, and the peaceful cliff face loomed over us, a stark contrast to the impending battle.

I scrambled out of the boat, my heart racing with adrenaline. The icy water slapped against my legs, sending a shiver down my spine as I waded to shore. The air crackled with tension, the promise of violence looming over the once serene beach.

Clad in my medic uniform, I felt a surge of determination as I stepped onto the sandy shore, Mary Watson, my name embroidered on the sleeve a stark reminder of my purpose. I was here to save lives, to make a difference in the midst of chaos. But deep down, I knew that my true passion lay in painting, in capturing the beauty of the world even in its darkest moments. My love for painting had started at a young age, my fingers always stained with vibrant colours. It was an escape, my sanctuary in a world filled with chaos and destruction. I allowed myself a brief moment to think of my family, and yearn for my Nathan.

As the early morning sun cast a subtle light into the dim trenches, I prepared my medic bag next to the green stretcher, ready for whatever was to come. The first explosion rocked the ground, sending the soldiers into a frenzy. Without hesitation, I sprang into action, my hands moving with practiced precision as I tended to the wounded. The soldiers emerged from the trenches, their weary faces a reflection of the day's struggles. I did a head count and felt a pang of sadness as I realized some of them would not return. Tears welled in my eyes as I offered what little comfort I could, tearing up strips of paper to make cigarettes for the tired soldiers. My resolve only grew stronger, my determination to survive and see my family again burning like a flame in my chest.

As the day wore on and the sounds of battle faded into the distance, an attack came suddenly, a bomb shattering the fragile peace. I responded swiftly, not worrying about my boots as I followed the soldiers out of the trench. The sprint to safety was a blur, my mind set on survival. We found refuge in a small cave on the cliff face, the ice cold ground a stark reminder of the dangers we faced. As I sat in the cave, my hands trembled from the adrenaline of the battle, I couldn't help but long for my brushes and paints, to create something beautiful amidst this ugliness of war.

It was then that I saw Nathan, his uniform soaked in blood, his face drained of colour. A bullet had found its mark, and I knew I had to act fast. With makeshift supplies, I tended to his wound, desperately hoping to keep him alive. The quiet of the cave was broken only by Nathan's steady breathing, a reminder of the fragility of life and the bonds that held us together.

"Nathan, stay with me," I whispered, my voice filled with emotion. "You're going to make it through this, I promise you. Just hold on a little longer."

Nathan's eyes opened slightly, a flicker of hope shining through the pain. "Mary," he rasped, his voice barely audible. "Thank you... for everything."

Tears streamed down my face as I clasped his hand tightly. "Don't you dare give up on me, Nathan. We're going to get through this together. I need you to fight, do you hear me?"

Nathan nodded weakly, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "I'll fight... for you, Mary. For us."

As the sounds of battle raged on outside the cave, I held onto Nathan's hand, feeling the warmth of his touch and the strength of his spirit. With my head bowed low, I murmured a desperate plea to the heavens to weather the storm and emerge stronger on the other side. I refused to let fear consume me. I knew that we had to keep fighting, keep pushing forward, for ourselves and for the ones we loved.

As the afternoon sun bathed us in its warm light, I felt a sense of hope wash over me. "Mary, are you okay?" Nathan's voice broke through my reverie, bringing me back to the present moment.

I nodded, forcing a smile as I packed up my supplies. "I'll be fine, Nathan. Just a little shaken up, that's all."

He reached out to touch my arm, his eyes filled with concern. "You're a strong one, Mary. I know you'll get through this."

I nodded, grateful for his words of encouragement. Nathan had always been a source of strength for me, a reminder of the goodness that still existed in the world.

As I settled back into the familiar routine of tending to the wounded soldiers, I felt a surge of determination. The world may be at war, but in that moment, surrounded by the wounded soldiers I was tending to, I knew that there was still goodness in the world. I closed my eyes, my heart filled with a quiet resolve to see this war through to the end.

With the sun's warmth flooding the cave, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. I couldn't help but steal a glance at the cliff face, the sun casting a golden glow over the landscape. I noticed a small red flower growing out of the boulder. The vibrant colour of the red petals brought tears to my eyes, a reminder of the beauty that still existed amongst the darkness. I knew that no matter what happened, I would always find solace in my passion for painting. It was my escape, my way of finding peace in a world torn apart by violence.

I allowed myself a moment of reflection. I thought of my family, of my love for painting, of the life I hoped to return to once this war was over. And with a deep breath, I knew that as long as I held onto that love and hope in my heart, I could withstand anything that came my way. The war may have taken so much from me, but it could never take away my spirit, my determination to see a better tomorrow.



Content

The man, like a cat. Seated, balanced on the old-fashioned awning. Staring, determined deep into the city's bustling heart. The city shows his way of disagreement, horns beep, disrupting the tranquil atmosphere in the park below. Again, the surrounding buildings groan their evident disapproval as the man settles closer to the petrifying edge.

He sits there, gazing, his eyes shift towards an empty fog. A million thoughts crowd his muffled head. He cannot think, nor breathe. Streetlights seem to flicker, then dim and finally a cold, lonely silence is all that awaits.

A moment of realization flashes across his face, pale as a ghost. Sirens wail in the distance as shouts and screams erupt from the tiny figures, pointing intently, drawing the red and blue lights nearer and nearer. A dose of rapid adrenaline begins pumping a never-ending beat in the man's heart.

And although the warmth of the day is welcoming to most, he squints past the blazing rays, where he once again finds himself alone and breathless. The man's face crumbles in agony. That dark window in his mind bursts open, the end stares right back, clearer than ever before.

The man makes his choice. His choice to fly far away from the horrid, unfair world. Without warning, the city gasps, along with those that escape the many gaping mouths below. As the man jumps, he smiles and winks, the last burst of joy at the climax of a curse. He drifts away, almost gracefully, landing swiftly on the roof of a speeding van. The city sighs in disbelief. The man lays, face up. Any trace of the life he lived has gladly disappeared. A day that began as torture, a pure nightmare, has ended in a final form of contentment.

Now, the sun sets over the tall buildings and the crowds slowly disperse. The unrelenting heat of the day has at last melted towards evening, along with the man's ghost, filled with memories and rare moments of laughter, floats up to the heavens. A place he can finally be at peace.



Together

“Are you sure we should be doing this?”, a tiny, slightly scared voice echoed off the smooth tiled walls.

“You only live once, sis”, replied a louder, more sure voice from the darkness. They both stared at each other, and then, transfixed, at their local swimming pool, a huge body of moonlit water that they were about to have their own little midnight adventure in.

Peyton was first, quickly disposing of her flowy t-shirt and cutoff denim shorts, tossing them to the side, then diving headfirst into the shimmering water. She radiated such confidence that her younger sister Maddie stood watching, astounded. Even though they were sisters, they were barely alike. Peyton, an extreme extrovert, and Maddie, the exact opposite, like chalk and cheese.

“Come on, what are you waiting for? This is so much fun, woohooooo!!!!”, yelled Peyton from the water, her figure barely visible in the dark. She was frolicking around, as if she finally remembered what it was to be a little girl again. At a snail's pace, Maddie slipped her woolly long sleeve jumper over her head, in the process getting it caught on her insulin patch. She slowly put a cautious toe in the water, her swimsuit clinging uncomfortably to her skin. She was planning on sitting down on the slippery edge of the pool and slowly getting in, but her plans all came crashing down (quite literally) when her sister grabbed her leg and pulled. Hard.

She fell into the water, and it was immediate chaos. It was in her lungs, her mouth, her ears, her nose. It was everywhere. She had no control over her limbs, they were all over the place, she wanted to get out, but she just couldn't move. Suddenly there were strong arms pulling her up, and she finally emerged, spluttering, and out of breath.

“What was that for?”, Maddie managed to get out in between gasps.

“I'm sorry sis, you were taking too long”, as if to show that she really was sorry, Peyton's shoulders shrugged apologetically.

“It's alright, I guess”, muttered Maddie, very used to the outgoingness of her sister's persona.

“Ooo, you know what I wanted to show you?”, exclaimed Peyton, the excitement of pulling her sister into the water long gone.

“Yeah what?”, asked Maddie with a resigned sigh.

“Look how much it shines in the dark!!!!”, she said excitedly, holding up her hand to show off her ever-present engagement ring. Except it was gone.

This ring was Peyton's pride and joy. She lived for it. Before her fiance Mark proposed, she already had big dreams about her engagement ring being big (and I'm

talking huge), silver, with a huge sparkling diamond adorning it. The ring had surpassed her expectations by miles, and she would always wonder how exactly her fiance knew her so well. It was beautiful, and a constant reminder of how much he loved her. So losing this ring wasn't something to be taken lightly.

"Where is it? It couldn't have gone far, right? Oh no, I'm such an idiot, how could I have lost it? No, no, no, it has to be here somewhere", Peyton wailed loudly, babbling away in her misery.

Maddie cast her gaze to every corner and nook of the dark water, willing with her whole heart for a sparkling of light, somewhere, anywhere. And there it was, a tiny glint of silver, in the corner of her eye.

"Wait, I think I see it!", Maddie pointed to the spot where she had last seen the gleam.

And there it was, sparkling at the bottom of the pool, wedged in between the rusty iron bars that served as a vent to clean the water. Before she could stop herself, Peyton was already diving deep down, all those years of swimming that her mum made her do finally paying off as she swam deeper. The pressure was increasing, she could feel it against her, in the way she struggled to go further. But she kept pushing, until she was so close that her fingertips grazed the bars, feeling the edge of the ring, its smoothness contrasting with the roughness of the vent. Her pride and joy was currently balancing precariously on two bars, about to disappear into the dark abysmal world that lay beyond that vent.

Without thinking, Peyton shoved her hand in between the bars, finally grasping her precious ring in her now tightly closed fist. Her lungs were running on dangerously low fuel. She needed air. Now. She wanted to take a breather and then continue trying, wiggling her hand to get it out and moving. Except it didn't come out. It was stuck.

"No, no, this can't be happening", she thought, starting to panic.

She pulled with all the strength she could muster, but it wouldn't budge. Her head was spinning, her face slowly turning blue.

On the surface, Maddie was starting to worry. Peyton had been gone for ages, and the only thing she could see of her was a dark figure, blurred by the water.

"What if something happened?", Maddie panicked out loud.

As her anxiousness grew, so did the realisation that she was very cold. I'm talking bone-chilling freezing. As a diabetic (God, she hated that word), she was supposed to always stay reasonably warm, low body temperatures causing dizziness and sometimes even fainting episodes. Goosebumps all over her skin, she was shivering violently, her arms rubbing against her in a desperate effort to keep warm. Normally, in these kinds of situations, Peyton would come to the rescue, scooping her up and covering her with a blanket and giving her warm hot chocolate. But Peyton wasn't here this time.

“Time to be a big girl now”, she thought.

With all the strength left in her, she swam over to the edge of the pool and attempted to hoist herself up. She couldn’t do it. She tried again.

“I need to get help for Peyton” “She has to be okay”, was all that was in her mind as she pushed with all the arm strength she could muster. Nope. Arms shaking, she was trembling from the effort, the cold, and the feeling deep down that something terrible had happened. She limply tried once more, but her body gave out before her, and with a feeble gasp, her eyes rolled backwards, and she blacked out.

At the bottom of the pool, Peyton had gone still, her struggling had stopped. A strange sort of peace settled in the atmosphere as Maddie joined her sister, two unmoving dark figures. Together.



The Android

The sky is swallowed in an endless blanket of rusty orange. There isn't a single lapse in colour, a change, a shift in the clouds, if there are clouds at all. A small, hazy circle of white is barely visible, ringed in a faint glow of red light. Dark silhouettes rise through the smoke, buildings ripped apart revealing crisscrossing support beams and shattered glass, the skeletons of what they used to be. Dying rays of sunlight filter through the suffocating layers of gas, a scrap of aluminium flashing feebly.

Something crunches and creaks.

PAQ-27 slowly lifts a grimy metal limb, stiff joints groaning protest. Fingers flex experimentally, peeling back broken chunks of stone. Lines of miniscule green text crawl through its vision.

*POWER AT 54%.
ACTIVATING ENGINE.
ACTIVATING SENSORS.
COORDINATES AT 40.7128° N, 74.0060° W.
HIGH LEVELS OF GREENHOUSE GASES DETECTED.*

A small, green light blinks into existence. PAQ-27 feels a motor whir. It lifts a foot, sets it down. The surface is hard, sharp, uneven.

*LEAD DETECTED.
ASPHALT FRAGMENTS DETECTED.
UNEVEN LEVELS OF DEBRIS.
NO LIFE DETECTED.*

At first, its movements are stumbling and jerky. Several times, its foot catches on a jagged piece of shrapnel. PAQ-27 pitches forward, arms spinning in a vain attempt to right itself. It scrapes against something sharp, tearing a scratch in the synthetic casing. An internal cable snaps somewhere inside. For a few moments, PAQ-27 lays there, ocular display blurring into static as its frame shudders and convulses. A glitch in the system.

The moment passes. Legs contract, frame reflexively curling inwards. The arms shift, propelling it into a sitting position. PAQ-27 sags for a moment, feeling the sturdy weight of its metal body, letting the wires inside it fizzle and knit back together.

PAQ-27 sluggishly rises again, left limb responding 0.2 seconds slower than the right, head revolving, camera scanning to find the source of the fall.

A large, dented slab of metal is wedged between hunks of wreckage, formerly white paint peeling and viciously scratched, so dusty and sun-baked it had faded to a dirty tan.

Something inside PAQ-27 clicks with recognition.

DAMAGED CAR DOOR REMNENT.

*MITSUBISHI LANCER EVOLUTION X.
RUSTED STEEL DETECTED.
POTENTIAL HAZARD.*

PAQ-27 cautiously edges around it, sensors spewing strings of additional information. Its metal feet crunch against chunks of gravel and stone.

*POWER RAPIDLY DEPLETING.
POWER AT 39%.
URGENT. MUST FIND POWER SOURCE.
ACTIVATING EMERGENCY SOLAR PANELS.*

Gears shift, something moves. A perfect rectangle of aluminium opens, dark blue panels sliding in its place. They tilt towards the sun and expand, unfolding along the arms, hungrily trying to absorb the few rays there, looking strangely shiny and untouched compared to everything else. PAQ-27 straightens, feeling the smallest hum of electricity trickle back into its system. It won't last for the long term, but it will have to do for now.

PAQ-27 takes another step forward, working slowly, carefully. It can't afford for another accident. At the sixth step, it freezes.

The audio sensor picks up something. Something... different.

A sound.

PAQ-27 heightens its audio sensitivity, straining to listen.

*SOUND VIBRATIONS DETECTED.
FREQUENCY OF 302 HERTZ.
POSSIBLE LIVING ORGANISM DETECTED.*

Living organism? PAQ-27 changes direction, turning to face somewhere roughly North-West. 315°T, to be exact.

There it is again.

A distant cry.

What is it?

PAQ-27 hobbles forward, steps quickening, wariness dwindling. It wants to know. It wants to see. It feels its motors thrumming, engines purring. It feels... energised? Is that the word? What is this feeling? An anomaly? A hitch in the program?

The cry grows louder. Closer.

A skyscraper looms ahead, or what was left of it. Shattered, grungy windows, crumbling foundations. The doors are a strange round contraption, something intelligence informs PAQ-27 to be a *“REVOLVING DOOR”*.

Electricity fuels PAQ-27, surging through its wires in a sudden burst of energy. Steel fingers curl into fists, smashing through the already broken glass, widening the gap, exploding shards that glint and sparkle enticingly in the pale light. The entire pane gives away, collapsing in on itself. Splintering, crashing sounds break through the empty, quiet world.

POWER AT 40%, warns intelligence. *AVOID ARDUOUS ACTIONS.*

PAQ-27 ignores the messages. It is fixed on a single goal: find the source of the sound.

The wailing amplifies as PAQ-27 tramps through broken glass and fractured laminate flooring.

368 HERTZ.

It swells to a crescendo, reverberating around the empty building, bouncing off the walls, drilling itself into PAQ-27’s audio sensor.

The question repeats itself, more insistent than ever.

What is it?

There is a wooden crate, small and unassuming, tucked away in the corner of the building, untouched by the waning orange shafts of light that slip through the windows.

Inside is a squirming bundle of *something*, swaddled in thick sheets of cotton towels.

There is a round, screaming face, shiny and red, with hairless brows scrunched up together in a scowl. Eyes squeeze tightly shut, a wet, toothless mouth spitting drool and shrieking with such a ferocity PAQ-27 can feel the sound waves rattling their system. The voice reaches an impressive pitch of 502 hertz before it finally cracks, gasping and rasping incoherently, dissolving into a mess of hiccups and sobs.

PAQ-27 watches, transfixed. Its infrared vision flickers into view, the *thing* turning a violent shade of orange while the rest remains cold and blue.

*LIVING ORGANISM DETECTED.
SPECIES HUMAN, HOMO SAPIENS.
GENDER FEMALE.
AGE ESTIMATED 2 MONTHS OLD INFANT.
INCREASED HEARTRATE IN HUMAN; 173 BEATS PER MINUTE.*

Human. Homo Sapiens.

Why do those words sound vaguely familiar?

The *infant*, as that was what it was called, has quieted down a little. Its face is wet and covered in liquids identified as “*SALIVA*” and “*MUCUS*”, but its eyes are open, peering at PAQ-27 with a strange intensity. They are dark and moist, as dark and deep as the shadows, but there is a faint glimmer in them.

How is this possible?

How is this human infant even alive?

PAQ-27 reaches out a finger, watching it vibrate just a little as it hovers above the infant. Tentatively, it dips, prods the infant in the middle and drawing away as quickly as it had plunged. In that split second of contact, touch sensors discern the slightly rough but light fabric, the slightly squashy feel of a solid body beneath.

For a moment, the chubby form freezes. Then peals of laughter bubbled from the mouth which fall open in an approximately upturned shape, the bright, explosive kind that seems to rattle the whole body, rocking backward and forward in the crate, towels unravelling around it. Small, plump fists grope at the air, clumsily grasping for metal ones.

INCREASING DOPAMINE LEVELS DETECTED IN HUMAN.

The touch sends an unfamiliar feeling pulsing through PAQ-27. Something buzzes somewhere deep inside the hydraulic actuator. A tingle, a shiver. The infant coos, coltishly fingering the edges of the solar panels, blinking up at PAQ-27 with its wide, innocent eyes.

“Gah?”

PAQ-27 tilts its head, running the word through its sources. It doesn’t appear to have any real meaning in any language it knows. Is making up words normal for human infants? It didn’t know. It might never know. It lifts its gaze, thermal imaging sweeping the building for any more possible living organisms. Surely if there is a human infant, the human parents must be around somewhere.

It finds nothing. No moving orange blobs, no wails or cries. The only sound interrupting the silence is the infant’s cheerful babbling, oblivious to situation around it.

What to do?

It isn’t safe in this building. At least, not for living organisms who would want to survive to adulthood. The proximity sensor is already picking up the slightest stirrings in the supports, small tremors and imperfections that could bring the entire property down.

PAQ-27 slides steel arms under the crate, sweeping it up into its metal grasp. It staggers to its full height, floundering for a precarious moment, struggling to catch its balance.

OBJECT WEIGHT 6.2kg

PAQ-27 pauses for a full second to right itself, straightening the curve of its titanium spine, working out the kinks in its limbs. It regains its footing and spurs its legs into action, striding towards the exit.

Aftermath

Looking back, I guess you could realise the significance of the moment. A lone android dragging a human infant to safety from the remains of a broken world. Oh, how the poets would blather on about all the drama, the tragedy, the metaphorical sign of hope.

If there were poets.

You could analyse it, ponder it, turn it into a riveting narrative. There's the symbolism, the tension, the strange thought process.

And the malfunctioning robot, of course.

There's nothing left of PAQ-27 now, in case you were wondering.

Reduced to a crumpled wedge of scrap metal and wires. The sparks had long stopped flowing.

But I suppose I owe my life to it.

Good riddance.



dove

by angela

Outside the window of a hospital room, people milled in the city streets down below. They lazed from shop to shop like a swarm of fat butterflies, free to do whatever they pleased. A girl sat in a hospital bed in this room, her gaze fixed on the outside of the window she could never open. But she didn't watch the people shopping. Her attention was on the plump seagulls squabbling for food in the street, the sleek flock of swans flying above, and the vibrant rainbow lorikeets nesting in a tree. She stretched her arms out, and she was flying over the sea of her faded blue hospital bed. The plumage of IVs were feathers. The lumps of tumors and bruises formed a silky down. And the breathing mask over her face was a dainty beak wheezing out a lilting melody.

How she wished to be a bird.

A YEAR LATER

The girl's hospital room is dull. Its colours were once wild, but they were muted and tamed by pain and sadness until they all bled into the same shades of hopelessness. Soft knocks echo on her room door. It was painted a sunny gold many years ago, a well-meaning attempt by the hospital staff, borne out of pity, to cheer her up. But she can't help thinking its long-faded amber hue reminds her of the tarnished bars of a cage. Her parents enter the room, and the girl pastes a smile on her face. Their smiles already wobble with pain; there is no need to give them more on her birthday. So she lets them sing happy birthday to her, let them serve her big slices of cake that she can't eat. Let them hope she isn't thinking about how each one of these days might be her last.

A man with a crisp white cloak enters her room without bothering to knock. The sadness on the doctor's face does not quite reach his eyes.

He does not waste his words. "Your cancer has spread."

Outside the window, a bird flies by, its black feathers striking against the bright blue sky. A raven. It calls; a single, solemn, scream.

The doctor continues, but his words are no more than meaningless squawks. She already knows.

After all, the hope in her world had disappeared a long time ago.

A WEEK LATER

The girl's eyes, sunken in waxen sockets, flutter open occasionally. The many machines in her room beep in fast-paced harmony. Her bony chest rises and falls with ragged heaving sounds. She is dying, but she is bound to life and pain, by fear.

Through the girl's pain-blurred eyes, she sees a swarm of white birds perched outside on her windowsill. She wants them to go away, give her a tiny bit of happiness as she dies, but they tap their beaks on her window insistently.

Like they are waiting for her.

And something long-dead in the girl stirs.

Something like hope.

ONE HOUR LATER

The girl exhales a long, last breath. The machines no longer beep. Her eyes no longer flutter, her chest no longer struggles to rise. The birds watch as the girl slips into a peaceful, *happy* death.

Then they take flight, flying into the clouds. Racing to meet the new dove with pure white feathers and a silky down, and a dainty little beak whistling lilting melodies. Soaring above the clouds, free.

THE END



The Human Mill

The reality is, the genesis of this text is more or less a series of ramblings and once-disorganised scrutinisation somehow elegantly articulated into paragraphs, by someone who has not even yet reached the podium of adult-hood. The premature learnings and observations of the psychological and social complex from a personal and juvenile perspective. Whatever could possibly have been assimilated that's worth reading in my fleeting, momentary bulk of existence. Which is why this book minimally has anything to do with genuineness; rather, it delves into the overlooked power of perceived authenticity and the surprising efficacy of individuals assessing and assigning their own value to their worth.

From my brief several years of navigating the social fabric, it was seemingly clear that perception can easily overthrow reality in the domain of human interactions. Sophia Loren is credited for quoting, "Sex appeal is 50 percent what you've got and 50 percent what people think you've got." I have found this applies more extensively across a variety of circumstances within social interests — not just sex appeal—, highlighting the dominance of perception over reality; while of course acknowledging the extremities that exist, and not everything applies universally, (for example, I would not convince a prostitute to go perform an open heart transplant.) The principle holds largely in the context of relationships and social conditions, self-assurance and empowerment. Mastering the art of perception can very much influence one's own probability and merit.

In the nonsensical composition of the daily social makeup, people barely operate through deliberate decision-making, instead, our responses are significantly predisposed by the hidden tapestry of subconscious elements and functions. As a matter of fact, in an Harvard business school review it was stated most cognition — the basis behind our actions and judgments — is about 95% unconscious. Now, the notability of whether our subconscious is helpful in our daily lives, where our status and esteem are more or less gambled with every interaction, is evident in to what degree our immediate reactions align with our goals, as well as the complex civil web of relationships and social structures in which we are involved in. Your habitual responses have a certain magnitude of compatibility with a given situation. When you, or anyone for that matter, really take a moment to stop and observe the personalities in a room, you're likely to be able to discern contrasting levels of power distribution. You'll notice those who effortlessly attract others like moths to a flame; then, you may discern 'the moths' themselves. Among them, distinct behaviours emerge: some may try to emulate the flame, often at personal cost, while others might perhaps resort to deception or conflict to draw nearer. Yet there are also those content simply with being the moths they are.



Trigger Warning: This story contains depictions of strong violence and war.

The Battle of Time

Time is marching on. A phrase I'd heard my whole life before I had ever even considered its correlation to what would truly become of me. As soldiers, we march on until we can't anymore, our bodies discarded or simply disregarded as useless once again, bruised until buried safe underground as skeletons or ashes. Preferably one or the other. Some prefer a combination of the two... or they don't get a choice.

I had never truly been good at managing my time. In my day, I had missed a lot. Even so, I knew that some mere moments meant more than others. The moment the soldiers and nurses around me were born. Like the moments when my own children were born. *Not that I was there for that.*

The moment when their mother regrettably named them Godfrey or Jack, Alice, and Penelope. I only wished I had been around to see them. Or not. Because that would be strange. After all, none of them were likely to survive this anyway.

I couldn't quite tell if this war was creating some form of existential crisis for me or if I was right. Either way, my mind was pounding with a desire to separate good moments from bad, flashing from weddings to fights to funerals and childbirth. Yes, we are on a battlefield... but these people? They lived good lives. *Cut too short.* Time keeps moving, until only mere memories are all that we have left... and after that? Well, there's no one left to remember us eventually. All graves are forgotten. All memories are lost.

I found myself dwelling on reasons again. Surely the reason we anguish eternally is because... well... we must learn! *Correct?* The reason why the good moments are mere nothings must be... *because* they are nothing! Maybe time is designed to march on, leading us to our inevitable demise, causing infinite destruction within our societies and the world itself... until at least someone discovers the mythical fountain of youth. Then and *only* then can we live forever.

If I could, I'd go back to being a child. Being happy and running around... chasing the neighbourhood children who were frightened by my appearance.

But I can't. My mind is forced back to the present, where people are being shot down, my hand holding the gun. Plains of fields distorted by glassy eyes as I wonder for a second just how many people are dead. I feel myself aiming the gun once again, my heart leaping out of my chest. I breathe. This is self-defence. For king and country.

I close my eyes and think about just how much my family hated me. How everyone did. The children ran away from me. Scared of what I could do.

"Stay back." I hear someone scream. The clock strikes another hour, but time isn't real. "Stay back!" My heart rate skyrockets. "Stay back!" I can feel the twitch in my eye turning into a tic, but I bite my tongue to avoid that eventual conflict. "STAY BACK OR ELSE!"

I feel my insides churn. I turn my gun to the screamer. Something plunges into the sides of my body. Once. Twice. Thrice.

Time is marching on, but I won't be much longer. It is the life of not just a soldier, but the civilians too. Marching slowly and painfully into the cold grips of death where no one remembers you.

But I will *always* remember.

I can hear explosions in the distance. I can't tell if that's just what I'm used to now. Bodies fall to the floor as people scream. Gunshots ring out. So many people are hit. "Man down. Man down. Women and children are out here. We can't save them all and ourselves." Another person slams against the tiled floor and I watch one of my comrades scream out. They get shot moments later. My eyes sting with the beginning of tears. I feel myself fall and curl up as I rock back and forth, cradling the knife stuck in my side until I tear it out, brandishing it as a new weapon against my opponents, daring them to come closer.

Shots continue to ring out, until finally there is silence.

I grip the floor, praying for my life, but I feel death meeting me too. I close my eyes for a second. All I can feel is a cold, sickening, inky blackness as muted red blood pours out onto the cold, white tiles. *Tiles again?* I don't hear anyone's cries. *Why aren't people crying?* I don't even know if anyone else is alive.

And so, I stand up, bleeding until there's hardly anything left. A mere jug emptied by a slash, leaving broken glass that will only lead to more blood and pain. But I can sew myself up if I'm desperate. There's a needle and thread in my pocket just in case, and I'd always been good at using needles.

Time marches on. I tell myself that no one will remember me or what I have done. I watch the clock chime before it goes back to its usual pattern. Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick tock.

But I wasn't on a battlefield. That was simply what I wanted to believe. Instead, I'm standing in front of my wife, whose chest bears a bullet hole after she stabbed me with a knife, her screams echoing in my mind.

"Stay back!" she yells in my imagination, but really, she cared a lot less in the moment. My children and family lay motionless, bleeding on the tiled floor.

The gun is in my hand.

So is the knife.

I feel my body release with a sigh. *Not again.* I turn on the radio as I try to clean myself, searching the bodies for signs that they are still breathing. *No one is.*

When the police ask, I'll tell them she killed all of them and stabbed me, only for me to finally grasp the gun and kill her out of... "self-defence". After all, this isn't my first episode.

How terrifyingly... *easy* it is for the mind to twist a story.



The Funeral

Silas watched the smoke from the funeral pyre rise from the raised stack of logs, marking where Jesta's body lay. The smoke quickly faded into the night sky, letting the stars shine and twinkle with mischief, as if they themselves were enjoying the show. He stood beside those closest to the deceased, all silently mourning him as the moon gradually inched across the heavens.

His gaze was inevitably drawn to the most noticeable person present at the ceremony, a brightly clothed woman who stood out amongst the mass of dull hooded figures. Her vibrant red dress and pale blue eyes clearly marked her out as Jesta's nefarious sister Verain; eccentric clothing ran in the family. She stood at the base of the pyre, as was traditional for the next of kin.

Verain's muffled sobs were heard by all and politely ignored. Rumours about her wicked deeds were infamous, especially because they were based on truth. Though many people had less than friendly attitudes towards her, everyone had agreed to let her attend with only minimal fuss. He just hoped they could make it through the night without any unknown surprises.

Eventually Silas's gaze drifted to the only person not gathered around the pyre. Kaiden leaned against a tree at the edge of the clearing, separate from everyone. His long sleeves hid the glow that emanated from his wrist due to activated magic, however no one else could see him. Silas tried to be discrete. Finally, Kaiden noticed him staring. "What?" He mouthed to his apprentice.

Silas glanced over at a discoloured tree he had noticed before. He knew Kaiden couldn't see it because of the smoke and sighed. He turned and tilted his head in its direction. His mentor raised an eyebrow in question and Silas slowly mouthed, "The tree trunk looks weird." The other frowned in annoyance but gave a quick nod in acknowledgement. Silas felt a flush of gratitude for being taken seriously by his mentor. Someone cleared their throat behind him, and he ducked his head, immediately going back to being mournful.

The apprentice winced. Thankfully his hood shrouded his face in shadow so that no one noticed his reaction. Someone saw his exchange with Kaiden. If the situation was more serious, then actions like that could get him in major trouble. This time, the error could easily be written off as a childish mistake.

He waited quietly, letting everyone settle back down, before taking a risky glance at the tree. Now however, the slight miscolour was gone. It took a minute, in the end he managed to meet Kaiden's gaze again and give a small nod in thanks. Silas could count on one hand the number of times Kaiden had listened to him. He looked forward and prepared to wait since the rest of the ceremony would last until dawn.

As the sun peeked over the trees, there wasn't a person out of place. Once the flames of the pyre had dimmed and the smoky scent vacated the atmosphere, people broke off into small groups silently. The only person that remained near the pyre was Verain, but even she had run out of tears.

Ignoring the warning glare from Kaiden, Silas soundlessly moved to Verain's left, noting her smudged make-up and thin rose hood. He wouldn't have thought her outfit would be considered appropriate for the occasion. It looked like she was going to a celebration, rather than her own brother's funeral. He was curious about how a person could be so hostile to family.

As he came up beside her, neither of them uttered a word. Eventually, Silas couldn't stop himself. "Personally, I didn't know Jesta, but from what I've heard, he would have wanted you here." His words were quiet enough to carry across the separation between them, but her scoff never made it past his ears.

"If you believed that, then you really do know nothing, child." The silence stretched on for a few seconds as Silas frowned, annoyed. In some places, he'd be considered an adult at fifteen, however everywhere he went without fail, everyone always seemed to consider him a child.

"You're Kaiden's apprentice, aren't you?" The question startled him out of his thoughts, but outwardly he showed no signs of his reaction.

"Yeah, he's the reason I'm here. He told me Jesta was murdered. I'm so sorry." Silas replied, noticing the way her eyes narrowed suspiciously. A quick signal from Kaiden drew his attention.

"Apologies miss, I have to go." Silas spun on his heels and fled from the conversation, praying that he hadn't ruined the plan by talking to her.

The orange rays of the sun's light bathed the landscape as he noticed everyone starting to gather around the rocky pedestal at the end of the clearing.

He rushed to join them, unceremoniously pushing and shoving through the crowd to ensure he got a front row seat. Just as he got there, the group parted, allowing Verain a clear entrance. She marched in, chin held high and eyes alight with an inner fire. She turned to the crowd, ready to present her speech when suddenly a thunderous crack sounded through the clearing.

Everyone jumped back in alarm. Some reached for weapons or magic, ready to attack before the smoke cleared to reveal Verain; trapped in a black iron cage.

After she grasped what had happened, Verain threw herself at the bars, wrist glowing from her activated runes. The crowd relaxed. Silas couldn't help the smirk that formed across his lips.

Verain relentlessly pounded against the bars of the cage. The black iron held.

She shrieked in frustration before quietening down and leaning her forehead against the bars in defeat.

Silas glanced around and saw the scenery around him slowly morphing to reveal the real world. The crowd parted again as Kaiden moved to stand next to his apprentice, runes on his own wrist glowing brightly from the effort of sustaining the illusion.

Reality came crashing in as hoods and funeral garb faded, revealing hardened faces and triumphant grins. Once the final part of the illusion dropped, a single slow clap sounded throughout the evidently larger clearing.

All eyes swivelled to see a dead man walking out from behind the large tree at the opposite end of the clearing. Jesta wore a bright orange shirt with blue polka dots that matched his eyes, while his hair was dyed an obnoxious shade of yellow.

He came and stood next to his oldest friend, placing a hand on Kaiden's shoulder in thanks, before turning to face his traitorous sister. Verain glared at her brother, cold and bitter hatred filling her gaze. "So, you're still alive," she hissed and he gave her a small, sad smile in reply.

"Despite your best efforts, I've survived my fair share of assassination attempts," he informed her, before taking another step towards the cage. The group tensed automatically, but Jesta waved them down. "She is no danger to us now. Once she is branded, no one will be hurt by her again."

Verain sighed in defeat, her voice layered with a mask of indifference to cover the venom. "I've got to admit, taking advantage of my assassination attempt to fake your death and trick me was a decent idea. No wonder mother left the family business to you, and not me."

Jesta frowned, "Mother left the business to me because she knew I could handle the responsibility. While I enjoy working hard and getting great results, you were always the one finding ways to cheat and lie so that you didn't have to put in the effort. Did you really think your actions didn't affect mother's decision?" Verain didn't answer, but that was enough of a response.

He glanced back at Kaiden and said graciously, "The plan wouldn't have worked without your masterful illusions. Thank you." Silas noticed the way that Verain's eyes narrowed at the statement and frowned. But there was nothing she could do in revenge. Everyone knew not to work with Brandeds and Kaiden had survived far more dangerous enemies before.

Jesta clapped his hands together and motioned to another member of the group. "Reia, let's get Verain back to the manor." Reia nodded, activating her own runes, telekinetically lifting the entire cage off the ground.

Jesta didn't immediately follow, turning instead to Kaiden. The two men briefly embraced before Jesta pulled away and turned to him. "You're Silas, aren't you?"

Silas nodded eagerly and Jesta grinned, "Kaiden has told me many good things about you. Thank you for being here."

"You're welcome, Jesta," Silas happily replied, a matching grin breaking out onto his face. Jesta turned to help Reia while Silas glanced back to Kaiden. His mentor watched their interactions carefully, but before he could ask anything, Kaiden clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good job Silas. Come, let's go find somewhere to catch up on some sleep." Silas grinned and quickly followed his mentor to find a tavern in the nearby village.

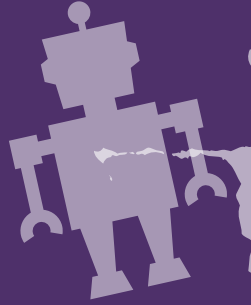


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