

SOUTH PERTH • MANNING
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2025
SOUTH PERTH
YOUNG WRITERS
AWARD

ANTHOLOGY

City of
South Perth





YOUNG WRITERS AWARD

The City of South Perth Young Writers Award, now in its 39th 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.

In 2025, the award again saw a significantly higher number of entries than 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 South Perth Young Writers 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 writers of South Perth.

Acknowledgements

The City of South Perth Libraries would like to extend our sincere thanks to the 2025 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, Nathan Jones, Sandi Parsons 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 2025.

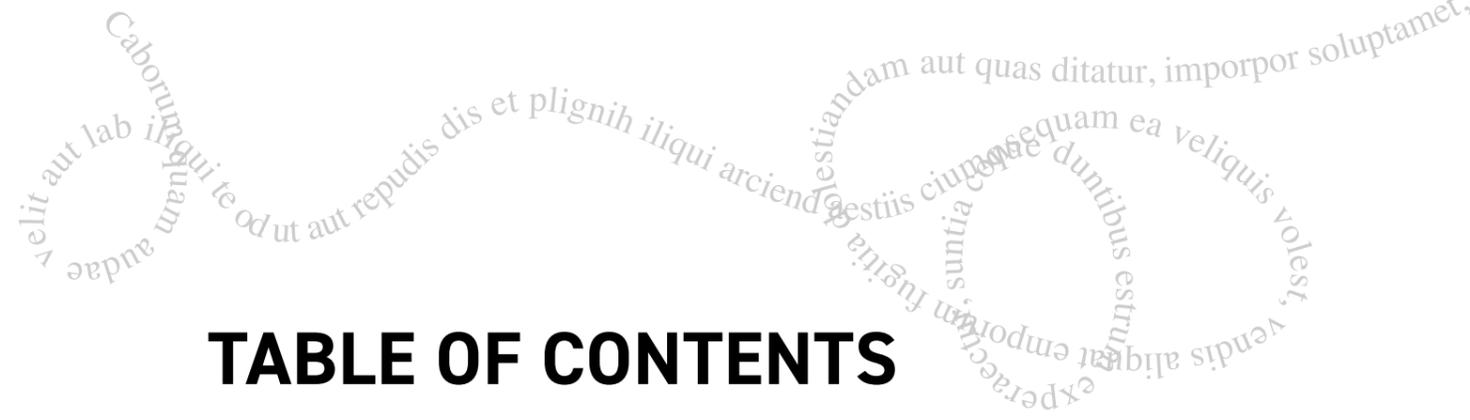


TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LOWER PRIMARY | | | |
|--|-------------------------|--------------------|----|
| <i>The Volcanic Adventure</i> | Declan Tam | Highly Commended 🏆 | 4 |
| <i>The Red Packet</i> | Kaylie Rafferty | Runner Up 🏆 | 5 |
| <i>The Dragon in Disguise</i> | Maurice Matich | Winner 🏆 | 6 |
| MIDDLE PRIMARY | | | |
| <i>Don't Judge a Book</i> | Hana Phillips | Runner Up 🏆 | 7 |
| <i>Midnight Swan</i> | Eloise Abbondanza | Runner Up 🏆 | 10 |
| <i>The Firestone Sword</i> | William Barwood | Winner 🏆 | 14 |
| UPPER PRIMARY | | | |
| <i>The years that ceased to matter</i> | Sakeenah Azizi | Highly Commended 🏆 | 16 |
| <i>The tree of knowledge</i> | Cara Sutherland | Runner Up 🏆 | 19 |
| <i>The sun, the moon and the stars</i> | Rose Nommeots-Nomm | Winner 🏆 | 22 |
| LOWER SECONDARY | | | |
| <i>Twisted: Deadly Clues</i> | Athena Wang | Highly Commended 🏆 | 27 |
| <i>A Moon for Mirah</i> | Josephine Nyaanga | Runner Up 🏆 | 30 |
| <i>Broken</i> | Laura Burton | Winner 🏆 | 34 |
| UPPER SECONDARY | | | |
| <i>Lying Across the Flames</i> | Sophia McPhie | Highly Commended 🏆 | 38 |
| <i>Metronome</i> | Sue Pham | Runner Up 🏆 | 42 |
| Progress or Decline | Ryan Raghuvanshi | Winner 🏆 | 44 |

Progress or Decline, by Ryan Raghuvanshi, was awarded the South Perth Young Writers Bronze Medallion as the entry judged to be the most outstanding across all categories.





The Volcanic Adventure

Early in the morning, the birds are chirping sweetly, the trees are swaying calmly. Declan is slowly waking up from his miniature soft bed. He had planned to go on a huge adventure to the enchanted forest. With excitement, he rolled out of bed to brush his teeth and then went on to pack his bag for his adventure. He brought along his favourite sour jelly snack in case he gets hungry, a water bottle that can refill itself with refreshing icy water, and binoculars so he can see far far away. He packed all his stuff into his back pack that has a secret glider compartment that can pop out in case of emergency. He got more and more excited about his trip ahead. Finally, he starts making his way from his house to the enchanted forest, about half way, he sees a gigantic park from afar with his binoculars. The park had a giant twirly slide, some monkey bars and a rock-climbing wall. There's no one there but Declan because it was still very early in the morning. While Declan was at the park, he had a joyful play on the rock-climbing wall and twirly slide. Before it got too late, he sprinted away from the gigantic park, along a ridiculously windy foot path, he passed some big oak trees, and the chirping birds flew over his head and almost pooped on him. This startled Declan and made him notice a ginormous, steamy volcano near the gigantic park. Time passed so quickly because Declan was having a lot of fun, it was already twelve and Declan heard some rumbling like he was hungry for lunch. Declan was confused because the rumbling was not from his hungry belly, but instead, the volcano was the one rumbling, it was due to erupt and explode!!!

Soon enough the volcano was spitting and spewing hot boiling lava everywhere. Declan was petrified!! He rushed into his back pack and grabbed and ate his sour jelly snack to help him focus and think about what to do. A few seconds later, he figured he can launch his glider from his back pack because this is an emergency. The glider wings helped him fly away from the shaky volcano to a rocket car nearby and he managed to drive home in a blink of an eye. Declan went through this wave of light that took him through his front door, up the stairs and swirled him back to his room, to be back in his miniature soft bed. The light was so intense, it made him go back to sleep. When he woke up, he slowly went back to the volcano. It was all molten rocks. These molten rocks created an extension to the play equipment in the gigantic park. Now instead of just having a giant twirly slide, monkey bars and rock climbing wall, it now also has a waterfall, little bumps to hop on like hopscotch and an obstacle course. The next day, Declan went back all excited to play with the new additions to the gigantic park but all of the parts made from the extra molten rock have turned into a pile of ash. A sudden gust of wind blew and lightly puffed the ashes away. Life carries on...



The red packet

Once upon a time there was a girl called Lucy who was 4 years old and very polite. It was Lunar New Year the next day and Lucy was helping her mum hang up the red lanterns around the house. She was so excited to get a red packet but her mum only had 30 red packets and there were 31 children in her family. So, someone had to miss out.

Lucy was playing with her dolls, and her mum came in and told her all about the problem. She said that it might be her that won't receive a red packet. Lucy gazed at her mum. Her mum asked if she would like a snack. Lucy wasn't very polite this time and she kept playing with her dolls. Lucy frowned as she thought about not getting a red packet because she was saving for a special doll.

Then there was a knock on the door. It was the neighbour, Mr Tune. Lucy thought he would give her a red packet, but he was dropping off mandarins for Lucy's dad. Lucy stomped up the stairs. That's when she had an idea and started drawing a red packet that looked real so she could add it to the other ones. Lucy had to use special red and gold textas, fold the cardboard into a rectangle and cut a semi-circle at the top to make it look the same.

When Lucy's mum got back from her walk and started sorting out the red packets ready for tomorrow, she noticed one that stood out and wondered who put it there. Then she saw the coloured textas on the kitchen table and thought Lucy's artwork was wonderful, so she planned a little surprise.

That night before bed Lucy's mum read her a book about the exciting Lunar New Year traditions, celebrations and festivities. Even though she loved getting the red packets she equally loved eating all the yummy treats, especially the dumplings and noodles. Lucy went to bed smiling and couldn't wait to dream about all the fun she would have with her cousins.

When morning came, Lucy was surprised to find her decorated red packet underneath her pillow. She couldn't believe her eyes and jumped downstairs to tell her mum and dad. Her mum and dad both gave her a big hug and wished each other happy new year.

Lucy was wearing her new pink dress when she arrived at her aunties house for lunch. There was a loud drumming sound coming around the corner. Three colourful lions appeared, gold, red and pink. They performed a joyous dance and the pink lion came to stand in front of her, opening its mouth, big and wide. Lucy looked up into the pink lion's big round eyes and suddenly she knew what to do. Lucy reached into her pocket and pulled out her red packet and fed it quickly to her favourite lion. She knew the lion would protect her and provide a whole year of good luck!

The Dragon in Disguise

Maurice Matich



Foxy Doxy was a friendly fox that lived in a cabin in the Amazon Rainforest. It had beautiful trees and rivers around it like a moat. Foxy Doxy ate worms. One day, he decided to go outside for a little lovely jump in the forest to find some. He went with his pal Tongy. Tongy was very smelly but very nice.

While they were out searching for worms, Foxy Doxy got distracted by a beautiful butterfly that was in disguise. It was actually a dragon. He followed the beautiful butterfly and then it led him into a deep, dark cave. He was feeling very scared inside the cave.

Tongy realised he had lost his mate. He looked everywhere but he could not find Foxy Doxy.

Foxy Doxy heard a loud "Roar!" in the cave with a shadow that looked like a dragon. There were blood orange flames and a deep breath that went really dark red. Another giant loud "Roar" came again.

Foxy Doxy was even more nervous. "How am I going to get out of the cave without being seen by the dragon," he thought.

All of a sudden he could smell his mate Tongy. Foxy Doxy gets an idea. He calls out to Tongy, "HELP! Tongy, I'm inside the cave, come quickly!"

Tongy enters the cave. He sees Foxy Doxy in front of an enormous, very scary, loud roaring dragon. The dragon has heard them, and has now smelt Tongy too!

The dragon stops roaring and then his face turns green in disgust. He steps backwards and forgets where his footsteps were. Then he accidentally falls into a deep dark hole with stalagmites and some bats that had skeleton faces. He had lost all his powers and couldn't escape.

Finally, Foxy Doxy and Tongy get out of the cave and jump all the way home.

They live happily ever after and will be very careful the next time they see a butterfly.
THE END.

Don't Judge a Book



Chapter 1

One day, three friends, Emma, Rosie and Isla, were talking in the school library.

"Our library is so old!" exclaimed Emma.

"I know, I've read every single book!" replied Rosie. "Except for one - it looks so old, I don't think I'll ever want to read it." she continued.

"Don't judge a book by its cover!" said Isla.

"I know, but I wish our school could get some more books." complained Rosie. The librarian, Miss Pier, overheard them speaking and approached them to say "I'm sorry Rosie, but our school can't afford to buy new books for the library."

"I know, Miss Pier." sighed Rosie.

As Miss Pier walked away, the three friends looked back up to see a boy in their class pick up a book. The pages fell to the floor, and the cover fell apart. He looked sad and disappointed. The teacher said "One more minute till we leave the library!"

Rosie ended up getting the old book she didn't want to read. She blew the dust off the cover, and the title read "History of Williana Primary School 1940s-1960s". That sounded interesting - she was curious to see if her grandmother was in it. Rosie's grandmother used to go to their school a long time ago, but she died when Rosie was 1 year old. She used to be a famous artist, and her artworks were now worth a lot of money.

As soon as she got home that afternoon, Rosie sat down on her bed and grabbed her book. As soon as she opened the cover, she gasped.

Chapter 2

The book wasn't about the history of her school. The pages folded out into a large sheet, as wide as her arms. It looked like a map! The title read "Secret Room". Rosie's heart began to race. She ran to her mum and begged "Can I call Emma and Isla? It's an emergency!"

Her mum agreed, and handed Rosie her phone. Rosie called her friends and told them about the map. They agreed to meet up at the Lilly Pilly tree at school the next day.

"Show us the map!" pleaded Emma, as they sat huddled under the Lilly Pilly tree. Rosie yanked the book out of her school bag and showed it to them.

"Huh? This isn't a map!" said Emma feeling disappointed.

"No, look!" insisted Rosie, as she unfolded the pages.

"Wow!" exclaimed Emma and Isla at the same time as their eyes darted across the page.

The sheet was old, yellow and curled at the edges. It looked like it was hand-drawn and the black ink was beginning to fade. A part of the paper was torn off in the bottom left corner, and there was a dotted trail leading to a large red "X" in the top right corner.

"There must be something at the X, but how do we get there? Where do we start?" asked Isla.

"Nowhere! It looks like the starting point is ripped off! We'll never get there now!" exclaimed Emma.

"Wait, I have an idea!" replied Isla. "These shapes on the map must be buildings around our school right?"

Emma and Rosie nodded.

"If we can identify one of the buildings, we can figure out where we are." continued Isla.

The three girls went quiet in deep thought... Suddenly, Emma's eyes lit up.

"I know, our Year 1 classroom had a weird shape, right? It's the only classroom like that in the whole

school!” exclaimed Emma.

The Year 1 classroom was shaped like an “L”, and the girls used to love playing hide and seek in there and peeking around the corner.

“I’ve found it!” Emma shouted excitedly, pointing at an “L” shaped room on the map..

“The search has begun!” sang Isla excitedly.

When they got to the Year 1 classroom, they placed the giant map on the floor, and rotated it until the “L” was pointing in the same direction as the classroom.

“So to get back onto the trail and get to the X, we should go straight across the courtyard... and then turn left... and then go past these three buildings and end up here.” explained Rosie.

They picked up the map and followed along the trail towards their destination. They finally ended up in front of two big double doors.

“The library!” the three of them squealed in unison. They rushed inside and searched along the back wall. They looked on top of the bookshelves, behind the computers, and under the tables.

“What are we even looking for?” asked Rosie. “I don’t see a door or anything that would lead to a secret room.”

“The X is supposed to be right here!” shouted Emma, pointing at the blank wall. “But there’s nothing here! What should we do?” said Emma, collapsing onto the wall.

When her back touched the wall, there was a loud clicking noise and the wall opened up behind her. She fell on the floor and tumbled backwards into a long, dark corridor.

“You’re amazing!” shouted Isla excitedly.

“I guess I am,” replied Emma, proudly. “But my head hurts a lot, and I can’t see a thing!”

“Well, it’s pretty dark in there.” added Isla

“We used torches for science! They’re in our classroom. Let me go get some!” called Rosie as she ran off.

Chapter 3

Emma, Rosie and Isla switched on their torches and made their way down the corridor. At the end was an old door. Emma tried to open it, but the door wouldn’t budge. It appeared to be rusted shut. “Everyone, push!” commanded Emma. They pushed on the door with all their might, and finally the door creaked open.

“Wow! A secret room! It looks like no-one has been here for ages!” gasped Emma.

They shone their torches around the dark room. Inside, there were paintings spread all over the old brick walls.

In the middle of the room was an old wooden box decorated with carved zig zag patterns. Rosie curiously opened the box, and beckoned her friends to come and see. Their mouths dropped open.

They were all shocked to find a letter in the box. It read:

“This is our Time Capsule for the class of 1961. We have decorated this room with our paintings. We hope that you like them!” There was also an old photograph of a class. The photo had names at the bottom. As Rosie’s eyes zoomed across the page, she looked up, surprised. “Debra Carpenter? That’s my grandmother’s name! She was in the class that made the time capsule!”

“Does that mean some of these paintings are hers?” Isla asked.

“These ones!” shouted Emma.

The three girls gathered around the paintings and admired them. There was a portrait of a woman wearing a yellow hat, a picture of a lake painted in beautiful watercolours, and a city in the night sky,

painted in thick acrylic. They all had the name “Debra Carpenter” signed at the bottom.

“They are beautiful!” said Isla. “What a discovery!”

“So, what shall we do with them?” asked Emma. “Your grandmother was a famous artist, Rosie. These paintings will be very valuable.”

“We can’t sell them!” replied Rosie.

“What if we donate them to the art gallery?” suggested Isla.

“Yeah, then we could see the paintings any time we wanted!” added Emma.

“You’re right. I’m sure my grandmother would have liked a lot of people to see them too.” replied Rosie in agreement.

Chapter 4 - One Month Later

“Miss Pier, Miss Pier!” the girls screamed, running into the library.

“Shhhhh, girls, this is a library! What’s the matter?” replied Miss Pier.

“We have amazing news! The art gallery was happy to receive my grandmother’s rare paintings. To say thank you, they are going to donate some money to the school!” explained Rosie.

“We asked the principal if he could use the money to upgrade our library and get some more books.” said Emma.

“And guess what... he agreed! Apparently it’s enough to get one hundred new books for the library!” exclaimed Isla.

That’s wonderful girls! I am so grateful - and I’m sure your grandmother would be proud, Rosie.” replied Miss Pier.

Rosie, Emma and Isla beamed.



Midnight Swan

The river glistened in the window behind Amy as she packed her final box. They were moving to Western Australia from the USA.

“Amy,” her dad called, “come help me with the last boxes.”

She ran downstairs with the box filled with her posters. They carried the contents of their life down to the big, grey moving truck. As soon as they put everything in the huge vehicle, it drove off, towards the port in the distance. Amy sighed as she trudged back towards the house. Suddenly, a twig cracked behind her and she turned to see her two best friends, holding a package wrapped in pretty turquoise paper.

“We wanted to wish you luck for your journey,” said Anna, handing her the package. Amy unwrapped it to find a book about swans – her favourite animal.

“We heard they have black swans in Australia, Amy, not just boring white ones!”, Ivy told her.

“Thanks, guys,” Amy said, tearing up as she hugged them.

“Bye Amy,” they smiled sadly as they walked back down the path. It was probably the last time Amy would see them. She turned and fled towards the house in tears.

Her dad was already packing the bags into the car.

Soon, they would be off.

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Amy felt jet lagged when she got off the plane at Perth Airport. The sky was so bright, it hurt her eyes. Her dad called a taxi and told the driver to take them to Sunrise Hill Farm. As the busy roads turned into winding country lanes, Amy saw a flicker of movement. Suddenly, a big bird flew up out of the bushes, wings as black as night, beak as red as blood with a band as white as snow. One of its wings had a streak of white. Amy gasped in delight; a black swan! She imagined that this was a good luck gift from Anna and Ivy.

A few minutes later, they arrived at Sunrise Hill Farm.

Looking into the pastures, Amy saw a little black pony, munching on grass. She looked at her mum excitedly, who nodded.

“Can I ride him?” Amy asked.

“Yes, his name is Star,” mum replied. “The saddle is in the stables.” She pointed towards a small wooden building.

She smiled as she went to get the pony and took it towards the small building. ‘Hello, little boy, you wanna go for a ride?’ asked Amy. The pony nickered. The two of them rode

across the field. Soon, they reached a gate with a hand-painted sign that said, “Mushroom Woods.” Star pulled towards the trees on the other side. Amy pulled against him, thinking, *maybe next time...*

As they headed back, Amy noticed a small lake next to the stable. In the little body of water was the same black swan with the white mark on its wing. As she passed, it gave her a friendly “honk!”. Amy decided to call the swan Midnight.

When she got back to the house, Amy went upstairs to choose a bedroom. She picked the one with a balcony that had a view of the stables and the lake. She brought in all her stuff and put some posters up on the walls, then made her bed with her swan bedspread. The small family then sat down and had dinner at the kitchen table. It was starting to feel like home.

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The next morning, Amy and her mum went into the village to buy her school supplies.

“Can I go to the stationary shop?” asked Amy. She LOVED stationary.

“Sure” her mum replied, “I’ll be at the café, meet me when you’re done.”

Amy ran over to the stationary shop and went inside.

Twenty minutes later, she had bought all the things that were on the list for school, and a few things that weren’t! She was walking out when someone bumped into her.”

“Sorry,” the girl said.

“That’s oka...”

“NOT sorry! My name is Valentina, and I know literally everyone in this place...except you,” Valentina sounded mean, and Amy did not like mean people. She knew the best thing to do was stay calm and cool.

“I’m Amy Sunshine, I just moved into Sunrise Hill Farm,” Amy sounded really calm, but her heart was pounding fast. Valentina scoffed and walked away. Then Amy remembered where she was supposed to be. She broke into a run. Her mum was waiting at the front of the café.

“There you are. Let’s go home. You can go ride Star when we get back” she said.

Amy grinned; she really wanted to try out the path in Mushroom Woods.

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Amy and Star trotted across the field and then, when they reached the gate, Star cleared it in a single jump. They trotted carefully through the Eucalyptus trees. Amy kept catching glimpses of black wings in the trees – Midnight was along for the ride.

Soon they came across a clearing, and Amy sat down and had the little lunch that her mum had packed for them. Suddenly, she heard a voice and the sound of hooves slowing down.

“We’re almost at the clearing,” the voice said, getting closer.

A girl on a horse trotted into sight and noticed Amy.

“Hi, my name is Scarlet,” the girl said, “this is my horse, Amber”

“I’m Amy, this is Star. I just moved to Sunrise Hill Farm.”

“My best friend used to live there, before she moved to New Zealand, ’Scarlet said sadly.

“Sorry she moved away, ’Amy said.” I really miss my friends too.”

They shared the sugar buns and apples with each other and Amy felt happy to make a friend.

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It was about eight thirty when Amy arrived at school the next morning. She had agreed to meet Scarlet at the gate and they entered the year four classroom together. To her dismay, she saw Valentina taking a seat at the back of the room.

“Hello, my name is Miss Streamers, I am the year four teacher,” said the lady standing at the door.

Amy and Scarlet sat down in the front row of desks and Miss Streamers told them it was report day. They would have to research an animal, write a report, draw the animal, and make a diorama habitat for that animal. Amy chose a swan and started reading the book that her friends in America had given her. In no time at all, she had finished researching about swans and Scarlet had finished researching about geese. Soon they had already drawn their pictures, written their reports and selected the craft materials for their dioramas. They were allowed to go to recess early, and they ran to the handball court. The rest of the class appeared a few minutes later.

“Hi,” Valentina sounded sly,” Well, have a *fun* time making your dioramas.”

“Ummm, thanks?” Amy replied. It sounded more like a question than a statement.

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After a fun recess, Amy and Scarlet went to their desks to start on their habitats, but then they realised...

“Our reports and pictures... are missing! And where are our craft materials?!” They were horrified.

“Are you girls okay?” asked Miss Streamers.

Amy saw Valentina smirking, *she knows something* she thought.

“It’s just that...” Scarlet started...

“Our work is missing!” Amy looked at Miss Streamers, but she was already in front of the class.

“Does anyone know where Amy and Scarlet’s work is?” Miss Streamers sounded very stern. Everyone shook their heads, too terrified to speak.

“Hey,” Scarlet sounded excited when she pointed to something on the floor,

“It’s a trail! Of green straw, our diorama materials!”

“You’re right!”

“You girls follow the trail; I’ll keep an eye on the class,” Miss Streamers said, narrowing her eyes at Valentina.

“Come on!” they ran through the school, following the little trail.

“It goes towards the bins,” said Scarlet, crinkling her nose.

“*Honk!!!!!!!*” The sound filled the air as Midnight, the swan, flew up to them.

“Midnight! What on earth are you doing here?” exclaimed Amy.

The swan nudged something at Amy’s feet. It was a plastic bag.

“Open it!” Scarlet crossed her fingers,” I really hope...” Amy opened the bag, and they grinned at each other. Their work! They ran back to the classroom and showed Miss Streamers.

“Who did this?” she demanded.

Suddenly, Midnight burst into the classroom and went straight towards Valentina and started attacking her, before flapping out the classroom door. Valentina was in for a tough ride!

“I think Midnight knows,” said Scarlet gesturing to Valentina. Miss Streamers nodded.

“Valentina, that’s detention for you. And I think you owe these girls an apology,” Miss Streamers said calmly.

Valentina rolled her eyes at Amy and Scarlet. “SORRY” she said, then, under her breath in a whisper: “NOT sorry”.

Amy sighed and decided not to let Valentina ruin her first day.

She had a new home in a beautiful country town, and three new BFFs: Scarlet, Star, and of course, a swan called Midnight.

THE END

## The Firestone Sword



Click! Bam! Mr Blake closed the door and walked into the class. There were no children, only dragons. Yes, that's correct. Fire breathing dragons.

One of the dragons threw a tomato at Mr Blake's face. It hit him right in the nose. The class of dragons roared with laughter. This got him thinking "Where were the children? Had they taken the day off, or had they turned into dragons?" He recalled that over two hundred years ago, this building was a school for dragons. "Is it possible that some of the dragon mysteries remained?" Either way, he was too scared to back down, fearing the dragons might eat him.

"Okay class, settle down," shouted Mr Blake. He got on with his lesson. Mr Blake sighed. He made it to break, the bell rang loud, and the dragons smiled.

Then... the dragons roared. "Attack!" shouted the biggest dragon. They all charged. Mr Blake sprinted out of the classroom and down the hall. There was nowhere to go. He was dead meat. He backed up against the wall. At that exact moment, he bumped a piece of wood that wasn't usually there and fell three metres downwards through a secret trapdoor, too narrow for the dragons to follow.

"Ahhh" he screamed. He landed on an ancient wooden floor. There was a large stone with a sword in the middle. The sword was silver, embraced with rubies. Old fashioned letters were written on the stone. He read "This is the firestone sword; it holds great power. Whoever possesses this sword will become the Firestone Knight and will hold a map to the Firestone Armour. This blade will also defeat the ancient dragons". This day sure had taken an exciting turn from his usual day of teaching.

Mr Blake pulled the sword out of the stone. He felt power surging through his body. He was surprised that a map didn't appear in his hands. So, he searched around the room for one.

Suddenly he knew where the Firestone Armour was, it was like the sword had told him. He looked around for an exit and saw a wooden door. He pushed, it opened and there he was, surprised to be standing in the car park of the school.

Mr Blake sprinted to his car, jumped in, clicked in his seatbelt and sped off. He drove for five hours through jungles and desserts, swamps and mountains, finally reaching the Caves of Despair.

He got out of his car and entered the cave. There were three tunnels, each with a name. "Death Trap, Guide and Firestone Armour". "That was easy, maybe too easy?" thought Mr Blake. He went through the third tunnel. There it was, the Firestone Armour. Feeling a bit suspicious, he touched it. The armour melted. "Whaaaaaat?" questioned Mr Blake. There was a dent in the wall, he started whacking it. Then his sword got stuck. He yanked it, twisted it, then the stone shifted and there it was, the real Firestone Armour. He grabbed it, putting it on. Now he was ready to attack. "Dang!" he said, "I have to drive for another 5 hours".

"Finally!" he shouted, arriving back at the school. "Wow, the school is on fire". The classrooms were burning, it smelt awfully smoky. He could hear kids screaming, as he leaped out of the car. He stormed the school, and the dragons zoomed towards him. He slashed one with his sword. The dragon disappeared into mist and one of his students appeared. "Cool" said Mr Blake. He slashed, stabbed, jabbed and swished his sword until there were no more dragons, and only his regular class left.

"Woohoo!" shouted the school with a round of applause. "Can I have your autograph?" said one of the kids. "You already do, on your work," replied Mr Blake. The rebuilding of the school started.



## The Years That Ceased to Matter

“Scholarship girl, are you?” A girl glared at me like I was dirt on her shoe. Sneering at my battered suitcase, she immediately decided she was correct. Without waiting for an answer, she snickered. “Don’t just stand there, unpack your suitcase then get to work!” She smiled and unbuttoned her coat. I saw the brand; Burberry.

“Excuse me?” I asked, quite taken aback. “Get to work?” The girl just stood there, as if what she meant was quite obvious. “Since you’re on scholarship, you’d better prove your worth. As soon as you finish unpacking, you can arrange my things. Then you can make my bed, clean my drawers, and tidy the closet to make room for *all* my clothes,”

“Who do you think you are?” I asked defensively. Did it really matter so much that I was on scholarship?

“I think I know very well who I am.” She replied smugly. “Alexis Winthrop, family of millionaire Marcus Winthrop”.

*Who?*

“And your name?” She wrinkled her nose in repulse.

“Cassandra Grey,” I responded indignantly.

I stood there, quite surprised by Alexis’ outburst of pride, her expression dripping with fake sweetness. “Well, Cassie,” she drawled, “don’t just stand there. I expect you to earn your keep” Her voice was laced with mock sympathy. “Unlike you, we own this camp. So my family is practically paying for your stay. Don’t think I’ll let you get off easy.”

I shot her a glare-this was a nightmare-but she just pretended she hadn’t noticed and went on with her dainty embroidery, it was of a delicate English rose. Which eleven year old could do something like that? It was so pretty, her piece looked like it was made by the hands of Mrs. Rachel Lynde, from *Anne of Green Gables*, set in 1908. How peculiar.

But since when did Cassandra Grey clean stuff that wasn’t hers?

I turned to her, my fists clenched. I felt something rise inside me, anger, for sure. I wanted to yell in her face. Slap her. To *do* something. Was it fair that people like her walked around with their perfect ivory families, acting like the world owed them everything? I had worked for what I won, and yet here she was, acting like she was better than everyone else just because her family has money?

“Alexis,” I snapped. “I don’t care who your family is, or what kind of money you have. That doesn’t make you better than anyone. And it definitely doesn’t make me your servant.”

I stomped out of the cabin, my heart racing. My hands were shaking, not from fear, but from the adrenaline of standing up for myself. Like I had just committed some unforgivable crime? I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had crossed a line, that maybe I should have just done what she said, kept my head down, and endured, but that wasn’t me. I wasn’t some pushover, who would just let people like Alexis walk all over me. I was more than that. I had to be. But where did that leave me?

I walked back to my cabin, after a wander in the bush to shake off the jitters. As soon as I saw Alexis, I quivered, and what confidence that was left in me evaporated. I quietly crept into the room, willing myself to go unnoticed. To my surprise, she just sat in her bed and stared at a photo frame.

I saw tears glinting in her eyes, but she whipped herself around to face the wall and continued with her delicate embroidery. Something wasn’t quite right, but maybe Alexis wasn’t so bad. Maybe she had a reason.

That night I stayed awake, unable to sleep. I lay in bed, shut my eyes and willed myself to fall asleep. A creaking sound came from the bed opposite mine, and out the corner of my eye, I saw the shadow of the heiress creep out of the room.

Why was she wearing her Burberry coat and pearl laced beanie and heading out? I wanted to let it slide, but unfortunately, a part of my mind didn’t. I watched as the dark outline of Alexis slinked out the door. I silently slid out of my bed and followed her out of the room through the frosty forest. A freezing gust of wind swept through the trees and I let out a whimper. Alexis stopped in her tracks. She had heard me. I was dead meat.

I covered my mouth, eyes shut, scared of what Alexis would do to me if she found out I had been following her. I kept my eyes closed, and after a few moments passed, I slightly opened an eye and braced for impact. The shadow of my bully lunged towards me, and the soft smell of roses crept around. “I’m sorry,” Alexis breathed into my ear, and everything went black.

I woke up in my bed, stiff and croaky. My mouth felt like metal, and the memories of last night came flooding back. *Alexis. Creeping out. “I’m sorry,”* What had Alexis meant by, “*I’m sorry,*”? That morning, Alexis seemed softer, lighter even. But I had to figure out what Alexis had been doing, and what she meant, or was it just a dream.

For a few nights, I stayed awake, wondering if Alexis would try it again. She didn’t. She knew I knew. After the fourth night, she did. So I followed Alexis out and she strode into the woods. She stood in front of a hut, Alexis swiftly pulled something out of her neat bun and pushed it into the keyhole. She turned her hand, and a satisfying click came from the door. She turned the knob, and I braced myself.

Alexis walked in, I waited, looking in, making sure I wasn’t visible. Alexis kneeled, spreading her hands across the splintering wood. Her fingers reached a bump, an out of place knob in the floor. She stood up and pressed the bump, and disappeared-beneath!

I cautiously stepped into the shed, and copied Alexis’ movements.

Pictures on the walls, black and white with *Alexis* on them from 1932? And she was wearing the same coat and beanie.

And in the middle was Alexis trembling, looking at herself in a Victorian mirror. She whipped around, and visibly flinched when she saw me.

“You! YOU!” She barely contained her rage. “What are you doing here?”

I answered calmly. “I followed you here. Alexis,” I gestured to the photos, they were over a hundred years old! It was genuinely confusing. “What is this?”

“Nothing... This is just a photo filter, and... I just added it for fun?” She tried weakly.

Alexis was terrible at lying. But surely those photos couldn’t be of her. Surely not. They were too old.

I cocked my head, and even though I was fairly certain that those photographs weren’t picturing Alexis, my legs were shaking beneath me. “Alexis, the truth,” I said steadily, a lot more firmly than I felt.

Alexis hung her shoulders. She was going to have to spill. “I don’t know how, I don’t know why, but I just kept living, looking the same after an accident at the frozen lake. Our car crashed and I fell. I stopped breathing. A lightning strike hit the water and it acted as a defibrillator and I was revived. After I was rescued, I didn’t keep growing like a normal eleven-year-old.

“My name is not Alexis Winthrop. I am Aurelia-Jane Hall. The manager knows, but the staff don’t. They only have a two year contract. The manager is my brother’s child, Inara Hall. This is why the camp started. My father did this so I wouldn’t have to go to school and explain to the world why I never grew. He was afraid I would be taken by authorities for experiments. Inara took over the responsibility to protect and provide for me after my brother, Marcus died. But Inara’s child passed from cancer early last year. Since then, we’ve been really worried about my future. I know we got off to a bad start, Cassandra. But maybe, you could do it? And maybe even keep the camp running? When Inara’s gone. Please, I know it isn’t easy, but I still look like I’m eleven. It’s destiny, Cassandra. For 100 years, nobody else has seen these photographs. But now I don’t have family. You are meant to be my future guardian. Think about it. I don’t know how long I will live. The years have ceased to matter. This has to remain a secret. Swear you won’t tell anyone. I’m... s-sorry.”

It looked like it physically pained Alexis–Aurelia to apologise. I felt an overwhelming sense of anxiety and bewilderment. I was awestruck! I had always been fascinated by history, but the thought of actually *being* with someone who lived all those eras for the past hundred years? It was a dream.

“I am immortal . . .” whispered Aurelia.

## The Tree Of Knowledge



**It was a rainy afternoon. I was asleep with my limbs drooping low. A sharp sound pierced the air, the dangerous sound of a chain saw. I jolted awake hearing the sound and preparing myself for the worst. I quickly glanced down at the tyre on my arm checking it was still there. That tyre might be my last connection to Tim.**

**Tim is a wonderful kid, he loves the environment and all the animals in it. Tim has eyes as blue as the ocean and brown scruffy hair like a bird’s nest. He is a strong climber, and he also loves to write. He sometimes comes to sit underneath me and looks into the rich multicoloured shrubs and lush green grass surrounding the backyard, for inspiration. I sometimes read his stories over his shoulder, and I think they are beautiful. They are normally about nature and animals.**

**A few days earlier, it was a sunny morning. I was soaking in the sun’s beams of light when I heard a wailing sound progressively becoming louder. I also heard the screech of a vehicle pulling up in front of our house. I knew that the vehicle would either be a fire truck, police car or an ambulance. I did not know why any of them would be here. I heard voices and hurried chatter. “Hurry, the boy is unconscious” I heard them say. As soon as I heard that I thought about Tim and then I heard the forceful sirens starting again and the ambulance swiftly tore down the street.**

**The wind began howling. The birds took cover in their nests. I felt alone. I heard from no one until the next day.**

**It was cloudy but still warm the next day. Walking towards me now were Tim’s parents. I expected them to be crying but to my surprise they were not. I could just make out Tim’s Mum saying in a hiss, “How are we going to explain this?” “Should we just tell someone what we did?” murmured Tim’s Dad. “We can’t, it will be too risky” whispered Tim’s Mum. I then saw them walking even closer towards me “do you know why he spends most of his time in this old tree?” “I do not know,” said Tim’s Dad. “No one watches him when he is playing, wait...no one watches him when he is playing...” “Now, that’s a good idea”, replied Tim’s Mum.**

**They started to walk back to the house, leaving me pondering what they meant.**

...

**“Hello Mrs Thornley, I am Finn the tree lopper. Sorry to call you at this hour”**

**“Hello Finn, it’s ok. You can call me Julie.”**

**“Julie I just wanted to check if you are sure you want me to cut the tree down because it is ancient and if you cut it down then...”**

“Yes, I want it cut down. My son is still in hospital because of the tree. He had a horrible fall from one of the top branches and was found unconscious. He might have a concussion or something even worse, so I do not want the tree in my backyard.”

“Ok see you tomorrow I guess.”

...

Suddenly I heard the chain saw again and it snapped me out of my thoughts. I wondered why there was a person standing in front of me with a chain saw. Then the person said, “give me 1 hour and then the tree will be all gone.” “Ok we will be inside, but you can leave when you finish,” said Tim’s Dad, then Tim’s parents walked away.

“Ok tree it is just you and me now” I heard the tree lopper mumble to himself. He started looking in my branches to see if he could find something that prevented him from cutting me down. “Sorry I have to do this, the people living here are making me cut you down because apparently you hurt their child.”

I felt like all of the wind had been taken out of my leaves. That must have been what they had meant when I heard them say no one watches Tim when he is playing with me.

The tree lopper had nearly finished checking me when he started taking the tyre off. Then I just saw out of the corner of my eye something white in the tyre. Wondering what it was, I glanced down again and there in Tim’s tyre was a little slip of paper. Whilst the tree lopper was taking the tyre off, he saw the piece of paper too and said, “what is this?” He flipped it over and read the message aloud. It said, “Help my parents have been hurting me, please help”. The tree lopper walked backwards in shock. Then he stumbled on his words, said “I have to report this to the police” ran back to his van and left.

Half an hour had passed, and I had seen no one so I was getting nervous. Then I gradually heard sirens that sounded different from the ambulance I heard before, getting louder every second. The sirens stopped. I heard someone yell. Then people in blue uniforms came into view. “What is all the commotion?” I heard Tim’s Mum shout. “Mrs Thornley, Mr Thornley you will have to come with us” “why?” said Tim’s mum “you are under arrest for suspected child abuse that is why.”

The next day is sunny and birds are chirping again.

Tim is feeling better and at home. Everything is back to normal except Tim’s parents are not hurting him. I finally feel like I can be calm again. I am now swaying side to side with the morning breeze. Tim is sitting under me writing in a diary about all that happened in these last few days. Once he finishes, I really hope I can read it.



# Chapter one

"I love you more than the sun, the moon, and the stars"

Before everything happened, my mum used to say it to me."

I didn't always understand what she meant, but I knew it made me feel special. It made me feel loved in a way that was bigger than anything else in the world. When she said it, I felt like I was important. Like I was as beautiful as the things that held the whole world together—things I couldn't even touch but could always see. The sun, the moon, and the stars.

But one day, everything changed. My parents—they passed away. It didn't feel real. One minute they were there, and the next, they were gone. It was so fast, and I didn't know how to make sense of it. All I knew was that everything felt different. The world seemed bigger, and I was so small, so alone.



# Chapter two

After that, I went to live with Grandma. At first, it felt strange. The house was different. It wasn't the same without Mum and Dad. The walls were quieter, the rooms felt emptier. But Grandma—she made everything feel a little better. Her home was warm and safe. Her voice, kind and steady, would wrap around me like a comforting blanket. She would smile at me and tell me, "We'll get through this together, Belle."

Grandma was always there. Whenever I felt sad or lost, she was there to help me. She made me feel like I still had a place, like I wasn't completely alone. Even when the days felt hard, she made sure I knew that she loved me. She didn't say it in the same way Mum did, but she said it in a way that felt just as real.

One night, I was sitting outside on the porch, looking up at the sky. I missed my mum so much. I missed the way she used to say she loved me more than the sun, the moon, and the stars. I wondered if I would ever feel like everything was going to be okay again. But as I stared at the stars, I said it to myself.

# Chapter three

*The sun, the moon, and the stars.*"

It just came out. I didn't know why, but somehow, saying those words made me feel like my mum was still with me. It felt like a piece of her was in those words, like I was holding onto something that would always remind me of her. And after that, I started saying it all the time. Every day. Every night.

Whenever I missed her, or felt scared, I would whisper it—"The sun, the moon, and the stars." It was like saying those words helped me carry her love with me, even when I couldn't see her anymore.

As time went on, I started to realise something else. Grandma was like the sun, the moon, and the stars in my life now.

She was the steady, calm presence I could count on when I needed comfort. She was the one who made me feel safe, like everything would be okay, even when I wasn't sure. She was my constant, the one who held everything together when everything else felt broken.

# Chapter four

One evening, as we sat together at the kitchen table, I looked at her, feeling warm and thankful inside. In that moment, I knew. Grandma—she was like the sun to me, shining when things felt dark. She was like the moon, comforting me when I felt alone. And she was like the stars, steady and constant, lighting up my world, even when things felt hard.

And then, I said it to her. The words I had said so many times before, but this time, it was for her.

“I love you more than the sun, the moon, and the stars, Grandma,” I said, my voice soft, but full of meaning. “You are my sun on the darkest days and my moon on the loneliest ones. You’ll always be my stars because you make everything brighter in my life.”

Grandma smiled at me, her eyes filled with tears, and she gently brushed a stray hair from my face. “Oh, Belle,” she said quietly. “I love you so much. I’m so proud of you.”

In that moment, I felt like everything was going to be okay. My parents might not be here anymore, but I still had Grandma. And she was my sun, my moon, and my stars now. She was everything I needed.

The end.

## Twisted: Deadly Clues



“This is humiliating,” Faith mumbled. This was the sixteenth house we had visited trying to sell one of our cookies. The only problem was that Faith’s “work of art” wasn’t exactly qualified for a grand prize. Having chunks of big brown blobs making our clients crinkle their noses was *not* a good look. Faith knocked on the door again. This time an old man appeared from behind the door whose smile looked like he could make sunflowers grow.

“What may I help you with...” he squinted at my label from my Girl Scouts uniform, “Eid Everly?” We smiled and offered him one of our cookies as he welcomed us in, introducing himself as Mr. Casta. I caught Faith’s eyes and saw a glimmer of hope along with relief sparkle within them. He led us to his leather couch, a watch with a cracked glass surface sat on top of his coffee table, before he walked towards one of the wooden doors which matched nicely along with the patterned orange wallpaper. “Let me just go get the cash.” He said before disappearing.

So, we waited.

And *waited*.

The ticking of the watch grew painstakingly louder as the seconds drew on.

“This feels creepy, Eid.” Faith whispered, and I hugged her. The ticking grew louder. Faith huffed and wailed “It feels like *forever!*” as she leaned forward to reach towards the watch, “Faith no-”

“I just want to know what the time is Eid.” She said reassuringly, “And I’m your little sister, so I have your brains in me.”

“Faith, I swear don’t-”

Too late.

The ticking slowed down to a stop.

Faith looked up at me with confusion and panic in her eyes. She flipped over the watch and ran her thumb across the silver smooth surface that had a single word engraved onto it: ‘Cash’.

‘Let me just go get the cash.’ The memory of Mr. Casta’s words echoed in my mind.

Cash.

The final word echoed all around inside my head as I raised my hand to touch the middle of my forehead. Wet, sticky transparent drops of liquid glazed the surface. Vertigo started to kick in as I swayed in the process of standing up.

“Let’s get out of here.” I said roughly, tugging at Faith’s sleeve.

“But-” Her reply was cut off short as I whipped my head around – which I regretted instantly as soon as I tripped over my own feet - and narrowed my eyes at her. Knowing that she just lost a battle with an overprotective mama bear, Faith gulped and nodded mumbling something of what sounded like ‘no one appreciating my cookie sculpting skills’. I headed over to open the front door, reaching towards the handle but- *click*. It was a sharp and muted sound. “No, no, no,” I frantically rushed to turn the doorknob only to find an expected resistance. No longer able to hold onto my mask-of-calm anymore, I let go of Faith and ran to every door in the room, trying to pry them open.

Locked.

The ticking started again, much faster. That time associated with a faint ringing in the ears.

“Eid,” Faith said in a hushed tone, snapping me out of my panic zone. I looked questionably at her and she pointed, “Look.”

Cautiously, I followed the direction of her finger to where she was pointing and stopped at an oil painting with a stunning gold frame and a plaque that read “*Yellow Brick Road, Sold to Mr. Casta for 1 million dollars in Cash Palace Auctions*”.

There it was again.

*Cash.*

Then everything just clicked together. Small pieces of an impossible puzzle joined together to form the bigger picture. Clues to show what was going to happen. The watch, the painting, the ‘cash’ clues. They all lead to this one single point. Looking up to study the painting again, was Dorothy on the Yellow Brick Road.

“Symbol for going home, when Dorothy needed to follow the Yellow Brick Road in order to go home.” Faith chimed in.

I squinted my eyes and leaned in a little closer to see a missed detail of the painting. Dorothy holding a basket full of white-bleached strands of hay.

No, not hay...

As if reading my mind, Faith looked up again to the painting, finishing of my thought.

“Bones.” She whispered. “Symbol for danger and...” She didn’t finish her sentence because we both knew what she was going to say.

Death.

Danger and death.

The air suddenly felt thick around me, choking my windpipe. The ticking of the watch became dauntingly louder. Too loud. Its pulses echoed throughout the room as if to mock us for ever being too naïve and met with consequence to seal our fate. I shook my head, but the action itself just made my head more dizzy instead of clearing it. I felt my heart about to explode.

“Eid.”

Black dots blurred and disorientated my vision, making my head spin and want to scream.

“Eid.”

Tastes and smells of metal coated my tongue.

“Eid!” I snapped back into the present and looked down to see poor Faith, who had tears welled up in her eyes. Realising that I held her hand too tightly, I instantly released her. Her knuckles were white from the temporary severed blood circulation.

“I’m so sorry Faith,” I whispered and hugged her gently, careful not to suffocate her this time.

“You’re bleeding.” She said pulling back. I lifted my index finger up to my lips to find a smear of red on the tips of my finger. That explained the metal taste inside my mouth, I must have subconsciously bit down onto my lip too hard. Taking a few seconds to calm down with deep breaths I took a step away from the painting but screamed. At the front of the painting stood Dorothy – all sweet and innocent on the brick paths, but from afar, I saw Mr. Casta. Eyes horrifically wide with a menacing smile plastered to his face, words in red that were smeared on top of his head. I rubbed my eyes, hoping the appalled message would disappear from both my memory and the painting. But as I lifted my head to look around the room, the walls were splattered in the same deep maroon colour with the same sentence as in the painting.

“Eid is to Die.”



**A Moon for Mirah**

It started the day Mirah coughed up blood. Noah could feel the warmth of Mirah’s weak breath against his face as he huddled over her in the ambulance. His thumb found the curve of her cheek, stroking it beneath her breathing tubes. In the hospital, Noah gripped mums’ sweaty arm as the doctor mumbled words he could barely comprehend, “Lung...cancer.” Noah’s eyes kept trailing back to where Mirah lay silent on the hospital bed.

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The machine beside Mirah’s bed beeped quicker with each passing second as a pair of tiny hands found Noah’s. His eyes met with jade ovals glowing like jewels against Mirah’s paling skin. A breathless voice struggled through cracked lips, “Do you think the stars dance with the moon to keep it company?” A smile masked the sadness on Noah’s face as he stroked Mirah’s forehead. “I think they do. They leap and twirl every night, so the moon never feels lonely.” Noah paused. “Do you want to know something Mirah?” With a slow nod of Mirah’s head, he continued. “You are my moon. No matter how far apart we are, we’ll always dance together in the night sky.” Mirah replied weakly, “So we never feel lonely.” Noah echoed, “So we never feel lonely.”

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Noah didn’t sleep that night. His eyes found their way outside where glowing shards of silver fell from the night sky. Moondust stuck to his palm as he opened the window and stretched out his arm to be engulfed by the moonlight. A single silver shard fell in his hands, shaped like a broken piece of glass. Noah’s eyes found the uneven edges digging into his palm. Several tinier shards fell from the sky, as Noah noticed a slight defect in the side of the moon.

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Noah soon realised that collecting the shards could potentially rebuild what Mirah longed to see for the last time. The Moon. The dull pathways and buildings were brought to life by the radiant colours of Noah’s pouch stuffed with hundreds of tiny fragments, which grew dimmer, with each passing day. Noah stumbled past downward turned faces as he leapt off the ground, catching pieces in his palm. Noah didn’t mind that no-one seemed to notice. His plan was almost complete.

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Noah shadowed Mum as beeps rung through his ears. No. Mum’s breathing quickened rapidly as she squeezed Noah’s wrist. “Hurry, NOW.” Doctor’s shouting drowned out the beeps. No. Bed wheels screeched along the tiled floor, as it hurriedly exited the room, forcing Mum and Noah against the wall in a sea of bodies. The lights blinded his view. No. Noah chased the bed. The only thing he could see was Mirah’s little body lying beneath the covers. No hazel hair grew on her head. No shine remained in her green eyes. No freckles dotted her cheeks. No. A sweaty palm gripped Noah’s shoulder, making him stumble back.

Mum pulled him into a tight embrace, her teary face brushing against Noah’s. But Noah stood still, void of emotion.

-----

Noah sat in the waiting room.  
4:00.  
His body weakened.  
7:00.  
His eyelids started to droop.  
10:00  
His vision blurred.  
12:00

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When Noah was six, he wished for a sibling. He would beg to the moon and stars from his bedroom window. “Please send me someone to build pillow forts with and who doesn’t call me little. Send me someone who will listen to my stories, send me someone to love.” Shortly after, a tragic car accident occurred. The confusion clouding Noah’s thoughts cleared until his dad never returned home. Aside from losing his father, he also lost his best friend, his role model, his world. Six months later, Mirah arrived – with eyes as rich as forest jade; just like Dad’s, hair like autumn leaves, and a smile as bright as the moon in the night sky. She couldn’t hold pillows. She couldn’t speak. She couldn’t walk. Yet she listened in awe to Noah’s magical tales of the stars and moon. Mirah was the only one that could heal the hole in Noah’s heart.

-----

“Noah, Noah wake up.” Dark circles hung underneath Mum’s reddened eyes. Her deep brown hair was tied back into a messy ponytail. Noah still found the sorrow in her eyes from the day dad passed, and he knew it would linger. The doors to the surgical theatre swung open as the bed appeared, an exhausted smile growing upon the occupant’s face. Noah rushed over to where Mirah lay and melted at the words that left her mouth. “Noah.” His smile saddened as he knew the sudden lung failure would worsen.

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Noah stood in front of an ancient wooden door slightly ajar; determined to reach the last piece of the moon. Slipping inside, Noah noticed an old man wearing tiny spectacles behind the counter, a faint glow outlining his figure. Noah felt comforted by the librarian’s oddly familiar presence. The room breathed with the warmth of magical books, aged through time. Noah flipped frantically through wrinkled pages, searching for any information on the moon’s rare fracturing, until sudden voices crowded his mind. ‘You’re not trying hard enough..’ ‘You’re her only hope. Fail this, and you will lose her forever..’ Noah’s thoughts were interrupted by an aged voice. “The moon never breaks without reason.”

Noah’s whole body stiffened as he turned to see the weathered librarian holding a thick, worn book covered with dust.

“This wasn’t on the shelves,” he said. “It finds you when you need it.”

Still in shock, Noah took the soft cover hugged with crumpled twine. There was no mention of an author, title, or any description, just a mere imprint of a single piece of silver that made the shards in his pouch pulse faintly as he lifted the cover.

Drawings of a boy gazing up at the moon, moonlight bleeding through windows and onto rivers, and of the same boy holding a piece of the moon painted each page as he flipped through in awe.

Him.

Noah’s eyes peeled away from the book with questions emerging, but the librarian was no where in sight.

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Over the passing days, Mirah’s lungs weakened and Noah’s curiosity of the librarian grew.

Noah paced the streets to the park, he and Mirah always used to visit.

The moonlight reflected off the gleaming river trailing through the trees. Moonflowers dotted messy bushes crowding the drooping willows.

It was as if he had never left.

Noah stood before the river, peering down at his reflection. The pouch glowed faintly from where it rested underneath his hand, vibrating with every movement he took.

It shook harshly now, with shards trying to escape the cotton. Noah’s eyes widened with disbelief as a small piece floated gracefully out of the pouch and hovered above the water. It was shaped like the stars in Mirah’s eyes. The rest of the silver shards and moon dust followed, piecing themselves together like a complicated puzzle.

When the incomplete beauty was finished, it dropped through water with a silent splash. Then came a whisper. Soft. Whimsical. Familiar.

“Noah.”

Mirah’s voice.

Noah gently dropped to his knees at the river’s edge. He opened the worn library book from his bag and let the wind flip through the pages until it reached the last.

Ink bloomed across the paper.

‘Stars don’t shine without darkness.’

Noah smiled to the night sky as one final piece slowly drifted into his lap. It shimmered in the darkness, shaped like a crescent – Mirah’s smile.

“For Mirah.”

Noah kissed it gently and reached over to drop it into the water.

“Noah.”

A voice sounded from the depths of darkness as a glowing figure stood before him.

The librarian.

His face was softer, with hair turned from grey to a hazelnut brown. Noah recognised the rich forest jade eyes, almost identical to Mirah’s.

“The moon breaks for love and grief. The weight of stress and worry is what pulls it down.” The figure stated, resting a hand on Noah’s shoulder.

“Sometimes you must let go of the thing you love most for the love to find its way back to you.”

A sad smile grew on Noah as the figure vanished from sight.

Even during darkness, Noah knew he would never truly be alone.

-----

Mirah lay beneath the covers of her bed, gently opening her eyes beneath a sea of machines. A full moon shone, glowing as beautiful as ever, with the stars dancing gleefully alongside it.

A smile grew across Mirah’s face as she carefully shut her eyes.

Whole again.

Mirah’s breathing slowed.

Noah clung gently to her hand and pressed a soft kiss upon it.

“Look for me in the moon Noah. We will dance together in the sky.” Mirah said softly.

Noah grinned with eyes full of sadness. “I’ll always dance with my moon.”

Mirah took her last shuddering breath, her smile weakening.

“So, I never feel lonely.”

----- The End -----



## Broken

The lamplights flicker, the dim light illuminating a hulking man. His moustache bristles, and you recoil, even while you're behind the bushes a street away. He smokes fiercely on his cigar, coming ever closer to your hiding spot. Your teeth start to chatter, as he takes another step.

1.

Your toes turn blue, as he takes another.

2.

The breeze sweeps your hair into your face, and there's a moment of panic where you think he's going to find you.

3.

Mercifully, he turns into a driveway, and fishes for his keys in his pocket. The relief almost sweeps you off your feet, but you have to stay quiet. You can almost hear a clock ticking down in your head, like the countdown to a bomb going off.

*Tick-tock.*

*Tick-tock.*

**TICK-TOCK.**

He clumps up the stairs, opens the door, and slams it behind him. You ache to help the poor soul that lives in that house, but the very thought of being in the same house as that man makes your arm hair bristle and your toes curl in fear. And besides, some stories are best told from all sorts of perspectives...

\*\*\*\*\*

CRASH!

The door slams, and the noise reverberates around the dingy apartment. Heavy footsteps follow, bringing with them the choking smell of a freshly smoked cigar. I look up, an echo of a smile on my lips, yet a crinkle between my eyebrows. Nero comes and sits down next to me, panting, his moustache slick with sweat.

"Beautiful, I got the tablets for the little one," he gasps, handing the small bag over to me. "How's it going?" He gestures at my belly, and suddenly the kicking and pain starts. I don't mind, I just hope it's a girl – a companion, someone who can make this house more bearable. But as Nero gets closer to me, the pain intensifies, and he wears a disgusted look as I withdraw from him.

"Fine," I reply curtly. I don't know when it happened. But Nero and I have grown further apart, the baby acting as a makeup remover; revealing the imperfections, the ugliness under Nero's concealer.

As I lie in bed that night, my thoughts seem to battle each other, an intricate, deadly dance between Leave and Stay. Nero stirs, and turns over, his back now facing me. The thoughts fight faster, the swords coming into play, no mercy shown. My thoughts contradict each other, never managing to stay on one side, always hopscotching over the line.

*"He's hurt me so much, what if he hurts the baby?"*

Leave starts to win, pushing Stay into the corner of the arena, advancing. My belly cramps, causing me to double over, yet I gently caress the skin over my kicking infant.

*"Could I really protect the baby if we're out on the streets?"*

Stay finds hidden strength, her sword flashing so quickly that the fight is nothing but a blur. Nero rolls over again, and as he faces me, the kicking responds again with intensity.

*Do I leave?*

*Do I stay?*

*Do I leave?*

*Do I stay?*

The questions rocket around inside my skull, feeling as though they're creating permanent indents. The pain strengthens, and I stagger to the bathroom, collapsing on the floor. The wail of sirens hits my ears, and the red and blue lights flash across my retinas, filling my sight with the red cross of the vehicle outside.

\*\*\*\*\*

CRASH!

The door slams, and the noise reverberates around the shack. A baby's wail follows.

"Shush, little Adena," Cyrene croons, rushing to her baby's side, handling her with utmost care despite the large bruise on her arm and the chunky, broken watch on her wrist.

Adena babbles happily in her mother's arms, but stops when she notices the frown on her mother's face.

"Don't worry sweet," whispers Cyrene, carefully placing Adena back down. "I'll fix this." Adena reaches out as her mother strides out of the room, but the only response she gets is the glint of the sun off Cyrene's slowing watch.

Adena lies there, and waits for her mother to return. But the room goes dark as the night claims her, and she slowly drifts off into a restless sleep.

Cyrene marches into her husband’s room, straight-backed, with a shard of ice in her gaze. The clock on the wall seems broken, the hands spinning slower and slower with each step. Cyrene’s eyes dart towards the clock, eyes widening as a realisation seems to hit her, like a prophetic vision, a warning sign from up above. Nero looks up as she approaches the bed, a smirk already on his rugged face.

“Beautiful, have you come to join me?” He whispers, gesturing at the bed. Cyrene stands stock-still, refusing to step closer to him. But Nero does not like that. He stands to his feet, and Cyrene shrinks like a mouse before its predator, unable to help the feeling of terror. Nero’s eyes roam over Cyrene, and he leers when he sees the bruise on her arm. A reminder that she will never have power.

“Why?” Cyrene whispers, tears in her eyes. Her broken watch doesn’t even seem to be spinning anymore, it’s rotation as slow as the hours before dawn.

“What reason other than power, beautiful?” replies Nero, his eyes like sharp glass.

“It’s cruel, cruel!” shouts Cyrene, trying to escape the room.

“Women are too weak, too gentle to be in this world!” shouts Nero, launching after Cyrene and grabbing her by the neck, pulling her back. He sneers as he pulls back his fist.

Adena waits. The wallpaper of her shabby room starts to peel, the shadows lengthen and shorten, and the hours turn into days, but the clock doesn’t move, not even a tick or a whisper to mark the hour. Broken, like Adena’s world.

\*\*\*\*\*

You can hear the crashes and the screams from inside. Every bone in your body strains to get away from the person who’s inside, and you start to back away, your footsteps light on the dew-kissed grass,

3.

There’s an almighty crash; a thunk and a screech.

2.

There’s a piercing wail, one that penetrates into your very soul, so sharp that it breaks your confidence into pieces.

1.

There’s a shuddering silence.

That’s the one that scares you the most, your imagination running wild, picturing all sorts of scenarios that could be happening. None of them are good, and you stop retreating, but your heart never stops pounding.

*Ba-dum.*

*Ba-dum.*

*BA-DUM.*

You start to tread backwards again, your peaceful hiding spot no longer undisturbed. You’d rather go back home, even if the situation there might not be any better than this one. but something pulls you up short.

“*Could you do something?*”

A little voice in your head calls out through the darkness of your thoughts, like a candle still burning in a room that you’ve forgotten about for far too long.

“*Could you?*”

“*Could you?*”

“*Could you?*”

Could you? Could you, just a young teenager, do something to help? Do something to stop it, to help all families who go through such pain, such suffering?

There was only one way to find out, only one way to start pushing for change. You reach for your phone, and dial up a number that you know off by heart...

## *Lying Across the Flames*



We meet in the shadows, at the borders of our units, in groups of no more than ten.

This process is dangerous. We're dancing on the tips of blades. And yet, we walk willingly into fire, we expect to burn. We are used to lying among the flames.

Here in Velmaria, we're known as nothing more than a unit. Despite the lies we're fed, we're not to complain. Not to refuse. Not to hope for a different future. After all, we've been conditioned into brainwashed followers of the crown.

We are certainly not expected to rise.

*"We're decided then?" I whisper to Syrene and the others surrounding me—cloaked by night's blanket. They nod silently. We've been back and forth for over an hour—on the unit eight and nine border. Syrene, and us unit threes, said we should send the letter to the castle tomorrow night and converge the day after. The higher units rebutted we should wait at least two more weeks. "Yes, tomorrow night it is." Syrene makes eye contact with me, the box of matches in her hand glinting in the moonlight. Then we disappear without a trace.*

Dawn waits on the horizon. The sun hasn't yet come to erase the darkness of the night. But I am wide awake, walking in *Centerground*. Perhaps I'll purchase a slightly bruised apple from my favourite vendor, Aline, who insists on giving me more than I pay for. Or perhaps, loitering under the guise of food shopping, is not what I'm doing at all.

As I'm circling the grounds—like an eagle would her prey, I see posters of the long-gone princess—Velmaria's lost light—plastered on every single surface. *What a shame for her. Her family might never see her again*—The chime of the working clock severs my next thought. It's time to shove my way through the crowds to factory thirty-one. I manage to make it out of *Centerground* and into the bordering outskirts. The outskirts—anywhere beyond the royal grounds—are divided into sixty-five separate units classified by labour—and perilousness. My unit is *Industrial Production*, unit three. Long hours, monstrous machines, and exposure to deadly gases.

As my feet carry me down the familiar path to the factory, my eyes follow the trees with yellowed leaves and colourless trunks. My heart races with fury at the bird carcasses littering the rotten grass. *How can they not see this? Why do they assume we don't know?* I spot a street patroller on a nearby street, but I dart out of his view. I abandon the path to cradle a wren with a torn wing—bones sticking at unnatural angles. I wrap it in some fallen leaves and lay it to rest next to a trunk my fingertips glow with a familiar warmth as I drip life back into its weakly beating heart. I search for a single petal of life amongst the dead. My eyes come up empty—no blooms this year. This is our reality. Branches, feathers, petals, caress the earth before falling into eternal sleep.

It's exactly what the old legends foresaw. Nature herself rejects this king.

*Maybe, I could sprout a few flowers qui—*

*"Oi, you, girl! Back on the paf!" I've been spotted. My feet pound on the gravel beneath me. But I will not get caught.*

No one dares to whisper about the servant woman forsaken within the snow, save for the children whose mother never returned home.

*Wind raged outside the palace walls. Icy rain poured from the heavens. Inside the palace, coals burned—warmth enveloping its inhabitants—bellies full of wine. The princess slipped from the dining room—as if she were a nameless unit sixty—tiptoeing to the southern wing. The servants' door was ajar, a cool draught drifting in. Lyridia peeked through the door after she heard delicate whimpers. A woman many years her senior had been left for the ice to claim her. Lyridia stepped outside and reached her hand toward the lady, but her body was ripped backwards. "Your Highness, get out of the cold immediately." The servant's door was slammed shut. The princess was confined. The woman never seen again.*

You see, the royal family of Velmaria are set in their ways, as most are. But their downfall lies in the notion that they're completely oblivious to their rebels disguised as faithful workers.

*A midnight meeting on the unit twenty-seven and twenty-eight border. Tucked away in a forgotten materials shed. The moon our only source of light.*

*"Okay, threats on the table," Syrene starts for me. Laying out a map onto the dirt floor.*

*"Royals obviously," states Orin one of my lieutenants with great arrogance. Pointing a sharp glare in Syrene's direction. I wave his fire off.*

*"Not exactly. Orin do you remember what happened in the war eighteen years ago?" I ask him.*

*"Umm. Oh! Queen Mirena fainted, and a bunch of soldiers died for her?"*

*"Correct, so we don't have to worry about her now do we?" Orin nods as Syrene speaks. "And Tyon will do exactly as he always does—enlist his advisors to run Velmaria for him," she finishes.*

*"And Alexander's got an inflated ego!" Twelve-year-old Mic adds. Well done Mic.*

*"Oh Dee, have you heard?" Aline pipes up as she sneaks one of last week's plums into my bag very indiscreetly. I laugh, earning filthy looks from those in *Centerground*. My hand flies to my mouth. Whoops.*

*"Heard what Ali?" I reply, eager to hear the words that have been carried to her by the wind lately.*

*"Princess has gone completely dark. No contact whatsoever. Wise, don't you think DeeDee?" Aline murmurs. Interesting. I nod.*

*"Still keeping up with the gossip I see Aline," I look at her smugly, seeping some life into her drooping tomato plant while no one notices.*

*The princess, once told by her obedient older brother, “One day Lye, you will see beyond Ma and Pa’s flaws. You will see what greatness they bring to Velmaria.” As he spoke his nails dug into her flesh just a bit too hard.*

Who am I? Who are we? Well, we are the people aware of the royal family’s façade. We are the rebels. We are the hidden. We are *The Wrens*.

Syrene was my first *Wren*. She knows my name as most do, but she guessed it. I was starting to search for people to join me, then I found her. Half-dead, eyes glassy, curled in an alleyway. Yet she expressed loyalty like I have never seen. *“I recognise your eyes,”* she had said.

At dawn we rise.

The time has come for the king and queen to fall.

There is no looking back. I won’t. My *Wrens* will not fail me.

At dawn we march.

We shall meet them at our border.

As sunlight splits open the horizon, I emerge from the shadows with nothing more than my words and a singular match.

*I saw him once. He did come searching. I was walking back from the factory, the hour close to midnight. His face was unmistakable in the moonlight. The defined lines of his body honed from discipline, stood upright in the sea of slouched bodies. His tailored silk doublet was alien in the messy entanglement of cheap homespun and grease. He strode straight past me. Mumbling my name over and over. Of course he didn’t see me. He was expecting a lady clad in heavy silks, folded gently in a corner, not a grimy girl in a tattered dress living amongst the ashes. They will never find me.*

I see him, standing tentatively just beyond the border. *Coward*. At least he understood my message—part of it anyway.

“Hello Alex,” I spit at him. Alexander Kyris’ face contorts in confusion, rage, pure betrayal. Then flickers with guilt—that clears instantly. He *sees* me for the first time. Ever.

“I didn’t think you’d be this stupid, Al. But after all, you never were the brightest.” A smirk blooms on my face. And my eyebrows rise in question.

“L-Lye?” He’s finally realised I’m not the same girl I was four years ago. He takes a frightened step back. Clouds circle overhead—eager to watch. My *Wrens* have arrived. As the sun completes its

ascent my heart is fulfilled. My purpose has always been to heal what has been so carelessly ripped apart.

He stares at me now, mouth agape. “Please. Please Lye t-think about me. You love me remember? You don’t really want to abandon me, do you?” His final desperate plea. *Pathetic*. I return to my bedchamber—seven years old. *His nails. Dug into my flesh.*

Tyon and Mirena appear, their disgusted faces and tightly wound bodies settling on either side of Alexander. I stalk forward and stand proudly in front of the people I rightfully chose to walk away from. The gaze I turn on them is pure fire.

“Well, you’ve got your beloved daughter back. Such a shame—for you—that I’ve come for a sole purpose.” I glare at the people who gave me life but erased any possibility of living. My final words to them are soft—even gentle.

“To destroy you.”

*My mother once said to me, “My beautiful Wren, I can already see you doing wonderful things for Velmaria. Remember to spread your wings Wren and fly.”* I wonder if she remembers that moment now. If she realises that I have embodied the exact words she spoke, many years ago. I wonder if she understands that I have my own chime of *Wrens* now. We’re ready to take flight.

I speak for my people, my nation, my lands.

“I am Lyridia Kyris, and I will be the one to light the match that will burn this monarchy to the ground. Anyone who dares defy the abolition of the crown will either succumb to the flames or surrender to them.”

**METRONOME**

Tick. Tick. Tick.

His fingers skipped over the keys like clockwork, notes flowing as they vibrated into the room. This piano was a nice one—a sleek, dark work of wood and polish shaped like a wing and gleaming under the golden floodlights.

The audience was silent, eyeing him in dewy-eyed captivation as the music rippled in waves, eddying in a circle and flooding outwards. Shorter, quick staccatos followed, plinking softly. He imagined them as stars, blinking into existence and out again.

The light was too bright on the underside of his wrists, blinding him.

He felt as if his mind had been severed from his body—he was watching a different set of arms from afar, fingers moving of their accord, racing against each other. Which would go the fastest? They were like spiders, scrambling frantically for purchase.

He observed this dimly as he moved on instinct—muscle memory, but not quite. It had become such an ingrained part of him. The piano was an extension of his body so much so that he no longer had to concentrate; he could sit back and let his hands do the work. They played and he half-listened, thoughts wandering in erratic strands that frayed, separating from the main rope. Floating, weightless.

He played, and people somehow listened. He wasn't a singer; he composed and performed and that was all he did. The thrill of the keys had pulled him in, devoured him.

He had first learned the piano when he was younger. Barely a toddler, chubby fists that could no more squeeze a toy than conduct the keys. He wrote things—streams of notes and meaningless words, *andante*, *adagio*, *largo*, and they would begin a life of their own. The thrill of it seized him in its grasp, sparking a fire that had flared inside and aroused him more than anything else had.

He liked it in those days. The notes rang clear and new, his fingers fumbling, growing surer with each movement and drawing home triumphant flashes of victory.

He was always scribbling a bit of music on paper—squiggles and lines and ticks that formed its own language. He wrote like his life depended on it, like it was all he lived for—the constant tick of the clock, the ringing of bells and grinding cogs always inside his head.

It was him and the piano. Nothing else existed. The ticking never ceased, quickening—a physical part of him louder than his own pulse. He lived on the beat, the rhythm that never stopped.

He still did, because he had nothing else.

Now, his hands moved faster, wrist flicking maniacally, racing away from him, away and away as if trying to escape from his own body.

Now, he felt nothing as he watched them.

His fingers swept the keys, wrists giving a final jerk, snapping down upon them like mousetraps.

The last note rang.

Cue the applause.

A strange numbness overtook him as he looked down at the cheering crowd, the cacophony of a thousand clapping hands.

Tick.

His own hands were red and sore, fingers shaking. He felt nothing.

Tick.

Where was the spark?

He bowed habitually, as he always must bow. He watched the rest of the world from the bottom of a pool in which he and the piano had sunk and the rest of the colours and sound had grown dull and muted. A different world.

He felt a lot like that these days.

Tick.

## Progress or Decline



The poster had been a siren's call in the drab monotony of my existence, a vibrant splash of possibility promising escape. "People wanted!" it had declared in bold, almost familial lettering, lost in the depths of the propaganda and graffiti. And the sum promised – it was a lifeline, enough to finally haul me out of the depths of my despair.

Now, nestled in the opulent embrace of this carriage, upholstered in a velvet richer than any dream I have dreamt, I felt a giddy triumph. This was the best decision. My ears practically twitched with delight as my gaze devoured the pyramids of glistening food and the plush seats that mocked the memory of cardboard.

Liveried waiters glided through the throng of hopeful, unwashed faces, their silver platters laden with shimmering drinks held aloft, their gazes carefully avoiding ours. A fusion of enticing aromas – roasted meats, sweet pastries, steaming rolls – danced in the air, each scent a whispered invitation to indulge. With a sudden lurch, the train shuddered to life, gathering speed and leaving the dingy station, with its pale, lifeless lights, receding behind us.

"Hey there, umm what's your name?" A small voice, hesitant as a timid bird, chirped from behind me. I turned to see a girl, her dark braids cascading over her thin shoulders. One glance was enough to recognise a kindred spirit, someone else etched by the same harsh realities of poverty and isolation. Yet, a fragile smile bloomed on her face, revealing a charming gap between her teeth.

"Umm, I'm Gray." I offered my hand, the gesture feeling awkward and unfamiliar. Her small hands shot out immediately, clasping mine with unexpected warmth.

"Hi Gray, I'm Annie." Her smile widened. But I found myself unable to reciprocate, my gaze drifting to the unremarkable wall behind her, a sudden fascination with its grey colour.

"Do you know what this job is?" she asked, her voice a valiant effort against its natural stutter. I opened my mouth to reply, but a boy's voice – oddly flat - cut through the air from a shadowy corner behind us.

"They're goin' to cut us open," he said "An' torture us." The words were hushed, yet they landed with the chilling weight of a tombstone. Nonsense, utter nonsense, I told myself. The boy couldn't be much older than me, but his face, weighed with too much knowledge for his years, remained unmarred by strain or fear.

"And why would they do that?" I retorted, a surge of disbelief and defiance rising within me. He stepped out of the gloom, and his eyes, devoid of any visible emotion, locked onto mine.

"Cause they want to test new plagues on your body." His face remained impassive, yet he punctuated the sentence with a bizarrely practiced flourish.

"Then why are you here, then, genius?" I crossed my arms, tilting my head in a deliberate display of scepticism.

"Cause I ha-" An abrupt announcement blared through the carriage speakers, rippling through the heavy air.

"Alright, everyone, we will be arriving in five minutes! Please change into the attire provided and be ready for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" The doors to the adjacent carriage slid open with a mechanical hiss, revealing figures in drab grey suits rolling out identical crates. A silent wave of compliance rippled through the occupants of our carriage, all of whom, I now noticed with a jolt, appeared to be around my age. We shuffled forward, forming a disorganised queue to collect the offered "attire."

A knot of unease formed in my stomach. The jumpsuits were a disturbing shade of charcoal grey, the coarse fabric and plain design chillingly reminiscent of prison garb and yet it provided a strange sense of security. Each came with a number starkly printed on the left chest, mine saying: 598.

Annie, standing beside me, bore the number 597. The train finally shuddered to a halt, and we pressed against the windows for our first glimpse of our destination. A heavy blanket of dull grey clouds hung low in the sky, the biting breeze stung my exposed cheeks.

We were herded out onto the platform, and the sheer number of people assembled sent a fresh wave of disquiet through me. I had imagined a small group, perhaps filling a carriage or two. But this... this was a multitude. I counted near two hundred youthful faces. Then, a phalanx of guards or officers, their expressions stern and unreadable, marched into formation before us, their polished boots clicking in unison as they began to lead us off the platform.

The crunch of gravel underfoot was the only sound as the silent army of youngsters marched in lockstep towards a looming, featureless building. My mind reeled, desperately trying to reconcile the initial promise with this unsettling reality. The boy's words echoed in my head, a venomous whisper: *They are going to cut you up and torture you.* It couldn't be true. It wouldn't be true. I clung to that fragile hope like a slender thread in a churning sea of doubt.

The cavernous building swallowed us whole, the air inside thick with the smell of disinfectant and something else, something metallic and faintly unsettling. The guards directed us through sterile corridors, their voices jolly, yet something felt amiss. Each turn led to another sterile hallway.

We were ushered into a vast hall, its high ceiling lost in shadow, the only illumination coming from harsh fluorescent lights that cast long, stark shadows. Rows upon rows of metal seats stretched across the floor, each one identical and bare.

A figure in a black suit stood on a raised platform at the far end of the hall. Their voice, amplified by unseen speakers, echoing throughout the hall. "Welcome, participants," they began, their tone inviting, a measured lilt underscoring each word, lulling me. "You have been selected for a vital undertaking, a contribution to... growth."

The whole auditorium held a collective breath, the last words breaking me out of the lull and revealing the truth lurking beneath their pleasant facade. My eyes dart around, searching for the boy who had warned me, but he had vanished.

The figure on the platform continued, their words vague and unsettling. "You will be assigned individual quarters. You will follow all instructions precisely. Any deviation will be... addressed." They nodded to a guard to their left – who I noticed is holding a gun.

We were processed with unnerving efficiency. Names were called, numbers were confirmed, and we were led away, one by one, down more sterile corridors to small, windowless rooms, each containing nothing more than a cot and a metal basin. The door to my room clanged shut with a final, echoing thud, the sound sealing me in a suffocating sense of isolation.

Time passed on, unable to tell how much in this concrete cube, I lay on the cot, listening to the echoing footsteps of guards and dreading the bland meals. There were no explanations, no sense of purpose, only a growing dread that coiled in my gut like a dying ember. The boy's words from the train echoed relentlessly in my mind.

One evening, instead of the usual bland meal, a bloodcurdling knock came at my door followed by two guards, "Number 598," one of them said, their voice muffled. "Come with us."

Fear, cold and sharp, pierced through me. This was it. This was what the boy had warned us about. My legs felt like stone as they led me through a maze of corridors, each turn, each step, dragging me deeper into despair. We finally descended into an aseptic chamber, in the centre lay a table, lit by an overhanging light.

A figure in a full surgical gown stood, waiting, their eyes locked onto me – as if I were their prey. They gestured towards a metal table in the centre of the room. "Lie down," they instructed, their voice flat and cold.

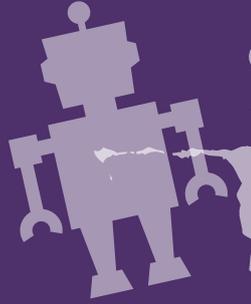
Panic clawed at my throat. I wanted to scream, but a sense of helplessness chained me down. Annie. Where was Annie? Were they doing this to her too?

As I lay on the cold metal, the bright lights blinding me, I saw the figure in the surgical gown approach with a syringe. My breath hitched. This was the end. Tears started rolling down my cheeks, as the slash of betrayal stung much more than anything ahead.



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