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An Introduction

More than 100 Dayton-area teens participated in the annual Teen Fiction Contest, sponsored by Dayton Metro Library. This year teens were asked to write on a theme of their choice and showcase their creativity in one of three categories.

Whether a 500 word or less flash fiction entry, a 2000 word general or fan fiction entry, the creativity and talent found in our community is impressive. Throughout this booklet you will find the winning entries in each of this year’s categories.

Teen Services would like to send out a special thank you to all our area writers who contributed to the success of this year’s contest. We would also like to thank our judges, and the library’s administrators and staff who believe in and support this contest.

Steve Moser, Teen Services Coordinator
FAN FICTION
Grades 7-9
Writers block is an easy thing to pick up on, and a hard thing to loose, especially for a pink haired journalist like Natsu Dragneel. It wasn't often he found himself in a funk like this, but unfortunately now was one of those times. No inspiration meant no story. Whenever Natsu was struggling with his work, he was always able to find something in a warm cup of coffee, and the place that served the perfect cup was just where he was headed. Fairy Tail was the only place he trusted to get him what he needed, and there was always some sort of commotion going on, whether it was caused by him or not, and most of the time it was. Surprisingly though, the pinkette walked in to no loud ruckus. The white haired beauty, Mira-Jane, stood behind the counter and handed him his usual, a caramel latte and an egg, ham, and cheese sandwich on a biscuit.

"Thanks Mira," he grinned at the woman already working on brewing another cup. Natsu walked over to a table for two, careful not to spill over his drink. The pinkette scanned around the shop for anything out of the ordinary to bring him some sort of a story, but there was only the same locals going through their same, everyday schedules. There was Gray who had his habit of stripping which was always fun to make fun of, but no one wanted to hear a story about that. There was also Erza who had her obsession with strawberry cake, who in that moment had twelve at her table. Even with that though, nothing stood out to Natsu. That was until something, well, someone, in the corner caught his eye.

A blonde, whom he'd never seen in town before, sat in a booth at the back of the coffee shop. She had her phone out alongside a giant road map spread across the table and her strawberry smoothie in hand. Natsu couldn't take his eyes off of her, something about her seemed different, a good different. She glanced up from her map and locked eyes with Natsu, sensing that he was watching her, she quickly shrugged him off and went back to her map. But even though he'd been caught staring, he couldn't take his eyes off of her. Something about her told Natsu that she had a story, one that needed to be told, one he'd be more than willing to tell.

After once again catching Natsu staring, the blonde stood up from her booth and walked over to Natsu's small table, "Do you have an issue with me sitting over there or what?" She seemed slightly angered, annoyed that she had to get up from her map to deal with this.

"Ah! No!" Natsu could feeling himself trembling in the presence of this girl and the angered aura she was giving off. From where the blonde was now standing, he could get a better look at her. She wore a blue tank, white skirt with a belt wrapped around her waist, and a pair of brown boots, she also had her hair tied in a side ponytail with a ribbon.

"Then why were you staring at me?" She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot impatiently. Natsu fiddled with the scarf that he had wrapped around his neck nervously, he couldn't come up with a valid answer for staring.
"Well uh... I don't know to be honest, I'm a writer suffering from writer's block and I'm really just trying to find anything to write about," he sighed as he ran his fingers through his pink hair. "I'm Natsu, Natsu Dragneel by the way."

The blonde smirked as she put one hand on her hip, "Lucy Heartfilia, I do have to admit, I am a bit of an aspiring writer myself."

"Really?" He asked as more of a rhetorical question, not expecting an answer. "Well what's it your doing with that map you've got over there?"

Lucy's eyes widened in excitement, she was rather passionate about the subject of what she does. "I travel, currently trying to decide on where I should head to next; Hargeon or Crocus? I know Hargeon is much closer, but I've also heard that Crocus is very beautiful!" Her eyes gleamed as if she were in her own world.

"That's neat! Why do you travel, is it for a business or something?" Natsu asked, truly curious, but to his surprise, he only received a glare from the blonde.

"No, I travel for the fun of it, there's so much to see around the world in our life time, and I don't want to miss out on a single bit of it!" Lucy tilted her head at the man sitting before her, expecting him to say something, but he didn't seem to have anything to say. Eventually, the blonde welcomed herself to sit down at Natsu's table, receiving an eyebrow raise from said pinkette. The duo continued to chat for a while, Natsu noting little details about the girl sitting in front of him in his mind. After some long and deep conversations, the two found themselves to still be sitting and talking till closing.

Mira came to let them know that she wanted to go home but when she saw the two, she couldn't help but let her matchmaking skills take over, "Awe Natsu! Mira-Jane giggled. "Have you found yourself a girlfriend now?" Lucy's and Natsu's eyes both widened to the size of saucers as they both frantically denied anything going on between them, "Hmm, well if you say so..." The white haired girl tapped her chin, playing along with their little charade.

"Really, Mira! Lucy and I just met today!" Natsu whined.

An idea quickly dawned on the matchmaker, "So if you knew each other longer would there still be no chance of you two getting together?"

"I never said that... Lucy's nice and-" he tried to explain, but was quickly cut off by Mira's fangirling which included running and squealing around her shop. Lucy quickly hid her face in her hands whether it was in frustration or to hide the blush that was creeping on her face. There was something she wanted to tell Natsu, but it was hard to talk with all of the noise being created. She looked over to him and mouthed to follow her outside while Mira was more than a bit distracted, he nodded and they both snuck outside.
"You wanted to tell me something?" The pinkette asked as he looked over his shoulder at Mira-Jane through the window.

"Yeah uh, you said you've got some tough to break writers block right?" he nodded to Lucy's question. "Well, if you wanted to come with me going who knows where, I'm sure you could find something exciting to write about, it's much easier to write when your stuck in one place always doing the same thing, don't you think?" She was giving him a genuine smile, but Natsu didn't know how to respond, he could stay in the only place he'd known his entire life, or he could go with her and cure his writer's block and maybe gain a little something else in the process. Lucy looked down at her feet as she twiddled her thumbs, "Just let me know okay? I'll be leaving for Crocus, I suppose, tomorrow at 8 in the morning, tell me by then. I'll be here in the mean time if you want to find me." In response, all Natsu did was nod and went out on his walk back to his house. He got home, showered, and got into bed, Lucy on his mind through the whole process.

The next morning, Natsu got dressed in a shirt and jeans and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked at himself in his bathroom mirror, then he remembered, "Lucy..." He quickly looked out the bathroom door to the alarm clock on his nightstand that read '7:46.' Lucy would be leaving in a matter of minutes and after that he'd never see her again. For some reason something in himself wouldn't allow that to happen. Was it love? That was the one thing Natsu couldn't figure out. In that moment though, it wasn't his brain that was controlling him, it was his heart. The pinkette rushed out of his home, not even thinking to bring anything but his journal and pen to Fairy Tail in hopes of catching the blonde. When he could see the entrance to the coffee shop, Lucy was nowhere in sight. "She can't be far; it's not even eight yet!" Natsu said to himself in determination. He kept running eventually finding himself at the Magnolia Train Station, where he saw the blonde purchasing herself a ticket. "Lucy!"

She looked over to the person who shouted her name, "Natsu?" He ran up to her, "You came, I didn't think you would!" She smiled at him.

"Of course I came! Why wouldn't I?" He returned her smile with his signature grin. For what felt like forever, they two just looked at each other with the goofiest of grins.

The two boarded the train together and sat in a seat, side by side. Lucy rested her head on Natsu's shoulder, some of her blonde hair falling in her face as she slept. The pinkette picked up his leather bound journal and pen, writing a title on the top of a page, 'The Adventures of the Blonde Beauty.'
Curiosity killed the cat.

He was curious once. It was burned into his nature, after all, he was human. Or, I guess he used to be human. The boy was victim to an intangible concept of feeling and emotion. He was the object of it’s doing. He was killed, murdered, dragged, assassinated, controlled, puppeted. He had fallen under its spell, and it had shaped him and created an eventful path to where he is today.

He had let the curious side get the best of him. He had let the voices in his head urge him to end his seemingly never ending curiosity. He had descended the stairs of an off limits room, to enter a room painted red. No, not just the walls were crimson. Everything. The ceiling, the floor, the little amount of furniture... and most of all, the body shaped duffle bag in the center of the room. It was half unzipped, but he dared not attempt to look into it. The second he had laid eyes on the substance of interest, it had lead to a spiraling infatuation. Moving up and down, though no one could distinguish which way it was moving, and neither could he.

That was the start of an endless interest and curiosity in the familiar, naturally made paint that had covered that room. The voices had gone back and forth, contradicting their own instructions of how he could execute his plan to fulfill his curiosity, but he only became curiouser and curiouser. It had driven him insane, and forced him to take rash actions, including jumping down a seemingly never ending hole to reach a world that he hoped would be covered in that lovely crimson.

However, despite that the land of wonder did not make his dream come true, he did find himself in a form that he could seek out that lovely liquid easier. With his enhanced sense of smell, as the form of a cat, he could constantly smell it, and it seemed to always be taunting him. He was in a constant state joy and mischief, with a permanent smile spread across his feline features. He had accepted the new realm as his home, and had taken each civilian as a friend, and saw them as his steps to reaching his goal. He was no longer curious, but simply interested, and amused. He was inquisitive, and only because of that room that his curiosity had taken him to.

He was insane. He was confusing. He was difficult. He was ill. He was mischievous.

He was mad.

There are no other words for him. He would give people wrong directions, or would allow them to guess, only to get the smell of that substance that he oh so loved. It simply drove him insane. It was like the candy to his sugar high. And there was no way it could stop him.
Not even the voices in his head, neither good or bad, tweedle dee or tweedle dum, left or right, mad or sane, not even they could create a clear path for him. He followed his own, floating through the air, with a wide grin name after himself spread across his features. He was the embodiment of mad, and not even the Hatted man could top the gore lusted tomcat.

Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought him back.
FAN FICTION
Grades 10-12
Two pairs of hurried footsteps tapped quietly against the floor as Thor led his brother, Loki, through the winding halls of Asgard, toward where they were supposed to meet with Sif and Jane. Thor cast constant furtive glances around and behind himself, his senses trained for the sound of guards. He prayed that Odin would be sufficiently distracted by Heimdall long enough for Loki, Jane, and himself to escape on the Dark Elves’ Harrow. Loki, however, seemed much more relaxed, even a bit bemused, about his current situation. Only the handcuffs around his wrists caused some slight irritation. Thor did not quite comprehend how his brother could seem so unflustered – Thor was attempting to take the Aether, which was using Jane’s body as a host, to Malekith in the Svartalfheim with the help of the previously-imprisoned Loki, traitor to the crown. Thor and his friends were defying several of the Allfather’s direct orders and effectively committing high treason. If they were caught, they could all easily be killed. And yet, Loki was entirely composed, his only comments having been quips and jests toward his brother. Perhaps, Thor mused, a scheme such as this was nothing new to Loki; after all, he was the God of Mischief and possessed quite the affinity for trouble.

Suddenly, the sound of a third pair of footsteps echoed throughout the hall. Thor grabbed Loki by his collar, flinging them both behind a pillar just as a figure entered their field of vision. It was clearly female, with a curved and sculpted physique that suggested she was no stranger to hard work and fighting. Her glossy skin was a pale cream, dusted with tiny freckles across her cheeks and dainty nose. Her tumbling waterfall of obsidian tresses was twisted into a loose side-braid which hung over her shoulder. Several locks of hair fell from the plait, framing her heart-shaped face and revealing a peek of her elfin ears. Her eyes were cast downward, fine-spun lashes barely brushing her cheeks as she gazed intently at a book in her hand. Her slender eyebrows were furrowed in concentration as she read, soft lips silently murmuring to herself. She was adorned in a royal blue leather dress that fell to her mid-thigh, ending in a pleated skirt, over which she wore silver armored plates that ended just above her cleavage, leaving her neck bare. She also wore flexible, form-fitting black pants under the dress along with a pair of black leather boots. Twin daggers were strapped to each thigh and a pair of short swords hung in an x-shape on her back.

Loki’s eyes widened, flickered with recognition as the woman came into view. His gaze darted toward his brother, unable to conceal their wordless plea. “Please, let me go to her,” his voice rasped out. “Just for a moment.”

Thor hesitated. Their time was short and they had little to waste on a personal matter such as this. Once Thor had seen the woman, he had recognized her. She was one of the commanders of Odin’s forces, a highly skilled warrior of Asgard who was a force on the battlefield to be reckoned with. Although Thor never had many interactions with the woman before, aside from the occasional sparring match, she was not only extremely renowned throughout the realm, but she had been something of a friend to Loki in the past when they were younger.
With a slight sigh, Thor nodded his head toward the woman as she continued to make her way down the hall, nearing their hiding spot. “Go,” he relented. “But be quick about it. I do not know how much time we have before our father returns.”

Without another word, Loki slipped out from behind the pillar, crossing to the opposite side of the hall and coming to stand in front of the woman. Her gaze flickered up, standard apology on her lips, but her words died instantly as she locked gazes with the raven-haired prince, sapphire blue meeting emerald green. She froze in her step, body tensing instinctively. “Loki,” she croaked out.

“Sable,” the prince greeted her in turn, inclining his head, gaze searching her face for...affection? Kindness? Any glimmer of the friendship they once shared? Loki wasn’t sure.

The woman, Sable, licked her lips nervously, hands shakily closing her book without even bothering to mark the page. Her gaze flickered over the prince’s new clothes, clean and pressed, not something a person would wear in a cell and were drawn to the cuffs around his wrists. At a first glance, he appeared to be released, but his chained hands suggested otherwise. Loki noted the confusion marking her eyes as she returned her blue orbs back to his face. “What are you doing out here? The last I heard of you, you were in prison for trying to take over Midgard.”

Her words were rough, a snappish tone injected forcibly into them, but Loki could see the pain and questioning underlying her tone. He guessed a part of her was glad to see him, as he was her, but she was also still clearly wrestling with unsorted feelings about him. Loki could see why she might feel that way. Growing up, Loki had been a loner, never quite fitting in with Thor’s group and rather hopeless at making friends himself. Sable had been a commoner from a poverty-stricken village on the outskirts of Asgard. Through her skill with a blade, she had fought her way into Asgard’s most prestigious battling school, which was how she and Loki had met. They were both something of an outsider, neither feeling comfortable around the haughty nobility that roamed the school and palace and as such, they were drawn to each other. Sable had a quick mind and a thirst for knowledge, traits Loki had always admired. The pair had quickly become friends, easing the loneliness that each felt. Although their paths in life later diverged, with Sable earning a position as a commanding officer and Loki being groomed to potentially take the throne, the two managed to stay in touch, meeting up whenever they could.

As the years passed, however, Loki grew more distant from his sole friend as feelings of anger, jealousy, and inferiority toward his brother began to manifest within him. Their meetings became fewer and farther between as Loki began to plot against his brother to take over the throne. Once Loki had banished Thor to Midgard and ascended to the throne when the Allfather fell into the Odinsleep, he had tried to reach out to Sable again, though he admitted in part because he wanted to ensure her loyalty to him. Sable was clever and was quickly able to deduce that Loki had played some part in Thor’s banishment and had manipulated his way onto
the throne. They had fought, and she’d left him in a whirlwind of fury, swearing to never lead forces under a false and untrue king.

That was the last Loki had seen of her before he’d gone to Midgard and attempted to take control of the realm with the Chitauri’s help. He wondered if she’d mourned him when she thought him dead, or how she’d felt when she learned he had returned to Asgard in chains. Her eyes were a storm of emotions now: anger, betrayal, confusion, hurt. It pained Loki to see her like that. A thousand words hung off the edges of his lips, apologies for the way he’d acted, desires to repair whatever relationship they had left, a need for her to understand what he’d done…but his usual silver tongue turned to lead in his mouth as he looked at her, and all he could manage to say, with his usual trademark smirk was, “I don’t believe I’m quite out of prison yet. I’d say I still have to escape Asgard before I’m truly free.”

His words seemed to catch Sable by surprise, and she blinked for a moment before a tiny smile tugged at the edges of her mouth. “Then I’d say approaching me was not your best idea, dear prince, since I am a commander of the guards.”

A wave of relief crashed over Loki as she taunted him with that old nickname, the one she’d always use to tease him with. Maybe she would understand. “But you don’t really want to call the other guards,” he replied slyly. “I’m off to save the world after all.”

Sable raised an eyebrow disbelievingly. “The Prince of Lies is claiming he’s going to save the world?” she questioned skeptically. “Won’t that be the day.”

The mistrust was back in her voice; she was seriously considering doing her job and dragging him back down to the prison cells. Loki also knew Thor would be waiting impatiently for him to finish this conversation so they could continue on to Jane. A desperate note crept into Loki’s voice as he took a half-step toward Sable, pleading with her. “Sable, please,” he implored, dropping all pretenses. “I know I’ve hurt you. I’ve done foolish and terrible things and never stopped to think about how my actions might affect you. And then I did the most witless, brainless thing I could possibly imagine: I lost my only friend. You were there for me when I had no one else and I cast you aside like you were nothing.” He reached forward, gently clasping her hands. At first, she drew away, but then allowed his hands to close around hers. “I don’t have time now, but I promise, I want to explain everything to you and then make up for all the mistakes I’ve made.”

Uncertainty overtook Sable’s gaze as she gazed up at Loki, searching for any sign of lies or deception. She wanted to believe him, believe that he regretted everything he’d done and wanted to make things right. But was she willing to trust him after everything he’d already done? Her brain whispered that he didn’t deserve another chance and she should haul him right back to his cell in the dungeons without listening to another word he said. But her heart longed to forgive Loki, for her life had a gaping hole without him. She wanted her prince back.
After several moments of silence, she finally answered, her voice almost inaudible. “Alright. Alright, Loki. I’ll let you go.” Her hands suddenly clasped his in return, eyes taking on a blue fire as she stared him down. “But you have to promise that you’ll come back. You owe me a lot of explanations. So, don’t die saving the world or even think of running off before you give them to me, okay?” A crooked smile formed on her lips at her last words.

A small weight seemed to lift off Loki’s chest as she agreed to give him a second chance. With a smirk, he bowed slightly, pressing a light kiss on Sable’s hand. “Fear not, my lady,” he whispered. “I have every intention of returning home in one piece.”

Loki straightened, releasing her hands and turning on his heel to walk back toward Thor, Sable’s eyes following him all the way. The blonde prince was fidgeting impatiently, but his gaze turned to his brother questioningly as he approached. Loki only offered a curt nod in reply, gesturing with his hands down the hallway. “Shall we, brother? I believe we have an Aether to destroy.”

Thor noticed the lighter step with which his brother moved, and his expression, which seemed almost happy. He knew better than to make any comment on Loki’s appearance, instead choosing to only allow himself to be silently glad for his brother’s contentment. They did, after all, still have the very pressing matter of escaping Asgard with Jane and the Aether. Thor moved quickly down the hallway after his brother, a tiny smile tracing his mouth.

“Yes. Let’s hurry.”
Jaehyo had nearly everything put away. A few bigger things were still at his old apartment, and they were probably trashed by his old roommates now. He decided to pick them up eventually. For now, sleep.

Sleep was harder to achieve than Jaehyo thought. A neighbor from down the hall was blaring indie music, the floors shrieked with each restless footstep, and the street light outside of his window flickered constantly, providing him with an involuntary front row seat to a strobe light show. After only a few minutes of failing to fall asleep, Jaehyo rose from his new bed and rubbed the sleep from his brown eyes. He stumbled through the darkness and unfamiliarity and flipped the light switch. Eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness, Jaehyo wondered what to do now that he was in a new place with no friends. When someone couldn’t sleep at his old dorm, the boys would roam the city in the pitch black of the night. In hindsight, it might not have been the best idea.

Jaehyo shook his head and slipped on a pair of shoes and pulled a shirt over his mop of shaggy brown hair. He really needed a haircut. He grabbed his phone from his nightstand and made sure to grab his key. He intended to stop by the small cafe conveniently placed in the lobby of the building. His door, however, had other plans. Tugging furiously at it did him no good, and neither did jiggling the knob. Suddenly, he fell backwards as if he was in a tug of war game and his opponent let go. Air rushed out of his body as he hit the floor, and a sharp pain appeared in his behind.

I could have sworn I put it in my front pocket....

“Cafe” was a nice way to describe where Jaehyo found himself. If Kyung were here, he would have called it just plain sad. An older man sat in one of the rickety chairs in the center of the room, yellowed cup of coffee and newspaper in his weathered hands. Jaehyo cleared his throat nervously, still not used to his new surroundings. The man looked up, eyes crinkling as his chapped lips stretched into a smile.

“Good evening, young man,” The man spoke, voice coming out half-awake. Jaehyo returned the older man’s smile and bowed his head respectfully. “Couldn’t sleep?”

Jaehyo shook his head slightly. “I’m not quite used to this place yet. It’s my first day here.”

“Grab yourself a mug. The coffee isn’t bad. Sit with me and I’ll tell you how I’ve survived this place for six long years.” He didn’t ask, but Jaehyo didn’t mind.

Over the next fifteen minutes, the man explained his tricks to ignoring the weird noises and the sirens that seemed to pop up every nights. Jaehyo learned that the old man’s wife had died.
several years ago, prompting him to move here; he said it was better than having to face his wife’s face around every corner. Nodding sympathetically, Jaehyo’s mind drifted elsewhere.

His group giggled into the open night, cold air brushing their unruly hair out of their ashen faces. Yukwon’s breath tickled Jaehyo’s neck and he leaned into the sensation. Jihoon howled at the empty street, causing an uproar from the usually quiet Minhyuk.

“Behemeth!” He cried, amused as always with the youngest’s antics. Jihoon jumped around, the cold night bringing out Jihoon’s hyper side.

“Dude, I can’t believe I let you guys drag me out every time you losers can’t fall asleep,” Taeil groaned from the back of the pack, glasses half hanging off his face. The eldest rubbed his forehead and winced every time Jihoon roused a girly shriek from Minhyuk. Jiho smirked and ruffled his hair, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

“Jae, I think I’m invincible,” The voice whispered in his ear, bringing goosebumps to life on his tan skin.

“Don’t push it, babe,” Jaehyo smirked and held him in his arms. “You’re stupid.” He laughed and shoved him lightly.

“Watch me.” With that, he skipped into the road, dancing wildly. “Dance with me, Jae!” He shouted, causing Jaehyo to roll his eyes.

“You better get out of the street, punk.”

Jaehyo watched from the other side of the road. His voice came out garbled, like he was trapped under water. “Get him! Get him, you idiot!”

The shriek pierced his heart like a dagger, ringing in his ears. He hadn’t listened. No one had. Crimson seeped into the cracks of the road, and everyone tripped over themselves trying to reach the poor boy. Jaehyo let out a sob as he watched his past self gather the limp body into his arms. Blood soaked his clothes, but he didn’t care. None of them cared. Starry eyes gazed into Jaehyo’s own as tears trekked down his face. The feel good of the brisk night air had worn off in an instant as the driver of the car gaped, horrified by the scene in front of him.

“Jae…”

“Baby don’t talk. You’re gonna be okay, you’re gonna be okay.” Jaehyo continued murmuring this into his hair for as long as the boys let him. Before long, Jiho tried pulling Jaehyo from the body in his arms. He retaliated, swinging blindly before landing a punch square on his jaw. Jiho backed away, and Kyung and Jihoon, now somewhat sobered up, took his place.
“The- the ambu- ambulance is here,” Kyung hiccupped placing his hand on Jaehyo’s shoulder. “They gotta- ta take him ‘way now.” He whispered, not wanting to anger him.

Jaehyo collapsed, and that’s the last thing he remembered of that night.

Brought back to reality by a hand placed on his shoulder, Jaehyo realized there were fresh tears rolling down his cheeks and rubbed fiercely at his face, embarrassed. He brushed off the old man’s hand with a quick sorry before scampering off to his own room.

Jaehyo brought the blankets around him, surrounding himself in a cocoon of musty smelling sheets. It brought him comfort, or at least he thought so.

With a sharp sob, Jaehyo let sleep swallow him whole.
All I ever think of is Him. The way he laughs, how his eyes light up when he smiles, such a beautiful smile. It all drives me crazy. I want him to be mine! But...there’s just one problem keeping me from getting to him. Her. She doesn’t love him like I do. She doesn’t want him in the way I want him. She needs to understand, Senpai. Will. Be. Mine.

~

“What took you so long!” A girl with long red hair yelled out in frustration, her green eyes showing it quite obviously. The boy sighed “I’m sorry Lizzy, I overslept again.” He apologize, a shy smile painted his face. “Well you know I don’t like to be kept waiting!”

“We don’t have to walk to school together if it upsets you so much.” The boy looked away from her. His expression changing from a smile to a frown. How dare she upset him! “N-no! Th-that’s not what I meant.” Lizzy grabbed his arm desperately. “J-just forget about it okay? Now come on Nathan, let’s hurry before we’re late”

Nathan. My beloved Senpai. “I can’t let her take him from me.” I followed them to school. Before I could reach them, a voice from behind called my name. “Lunaria, I can help you win his heart.” I turn around to meet a strange girl. Her long purple hair flowed like the cherry blossom trees in the wind. “How do you know my name? And who are you?” I approach her questioningly.

“My name is of no importance, and to answer the question of how I know you. I know everyone in this school. Gathering information is my...hobby.” I glance at her with suspicion, “Okay, and how can you help me?” I stood my ground, my amber hair flowing with the wind just as hers was.

“I’ll tell you each girl that has feelings for him, and you must eliminate each and every one if you wish to win Nathan’s heart.” She smiled. I knew she definitely had tricks up her sleeves. “Alright, I’ll accept your offer. I’ll do anything to win my senpai’s love!” At this moment I knew, this is where my story began.

Of course, my first rival to eliminate was Lizzy. But I somehow had to get her away from Senpai. “Lizzy-chan, can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Of course! But make it quick, d-don’t ask why okay?!”

I smiled. Oh it’ll be quick. Quick and bloody. I led her to the rooftop where I knew I would be able to dispose of her dead body quickly. “It’s actually quite a nice view up here Lu-chan.” I smiled as her back was towards me. “A lovely view to see you vanish.” I laughed as I pushed
Lizzy over the railing and watched her fall. Ah~ The sound of a broken body is music to my ears. After dumping her lifeless body into the furnace, I moved on to my next target.

“Lu-chan, your next rival is Mary. She’s the leader of the Cooking Club.” I mentally took note in my head as I planned a way to eliminate her. “Got any ideas on how to get rid of Mary-chan?” I texted back Info-chan. That’s what she told me to call her. “Poison her.”

As I entered the cooking club room, I saw Mary-chan organizing the cooking supplies. “Mary-chan?” She turned around. “Yes? Are you here to join the club?” It was the only way I would be able to get close to her. “Yes.”

Once becoming a member of the club, I took my chance and grabbed some poison. Taking one of the cupcakes she made, I sprinkled on some of the poison. “That should be enough to do the job.” I said to myself. “Enough of what?” Turning around in panic, I relaxed when I saw that it was only Mary. “I...Have a cupcake for you” I held out the treat to her. I mentally laughed at the easy elimination. “Aw, thanks Lu-chan!” She happily took a bite. In no time at all, the poison did its work. Slowly Mary fell to the ground choking, then, dead. With a satisfied grin, I dragged her to the furnace and left her body with Lizzy’s to burn.

“Alright, two down. Eight to go.” The next seven were a piece of cake. Ruby, the drama club leader, was eliminated by electrocution. Alice, the occult club leader, was eliminated by suicide. Kim, the sports club leader, elimination by drowning. Annabelle, the school nurse, burned alive. Rina, the substitute teacher, framed for murder of a student. Roxy, the leader of the delinquents, elimination by expulsion. And Nathan’s little sister, Amy, elimination by matchmaking.

“This is too easy.” I smiled at Info-chan. “I’ve already eliminated nine rivals, so the final should be no problem at all.”

“Not so fast Lu-chan.” Info pushed up her glasses. “The last rival will be almost impossible to eliminate. Mira, student council president, and the principal’s daughter. She had been recently informed of all the disappearances of the students you disposed of. Mira has more power than you think.” I tilt my head with disbelief. “And why should I be scared of her?”

“Mira-san has cameras, metal detectors, and members of the student council watching every inch of the school.” I sighed, “So, it’s going to be a challenge to rid of her once and for all.” I thought for a moment. “I’ll figure out something.”

“Good luck, and don’t get caught.”

For the next few days, I kept watch on my beloved. Nathan had noticed the disappearances of the girls and his sister’s sudden new boyfriend. “This week has just been getting stranger and stranger.” Walking up to him, I smile shyly. “Hi hi s-senpai.” My heart began to beat miles faster,
my head glazing with dizziness as I got lost in his beautiful green eyes. “Oh, uh hi Lunaria.” I stepped a little closer. I was so close to having him for my own. “Senpai, you won’t have to worry any longer, I’ll keep you safe~” And no one will ever come between us. We’ll be together forever my love. Fear began to dull his eyes. “W-what are you talking about? Do you know what’s been going on?”

“What’s the matter Nathan? I thought you’d be pleased to have all those unworthy girls gone. Hahaha, they were all not good enough for you my love. So I took care of them.” I smiled widely, a twisted grin on my face. “What’s the matter darling? You should be happy, I did this all for you.” Nathan backed away from me, but I grabbed his arm, preventing him from escaping. “Don’t run. You can’t run from me Nathan, no more hiding.” Using a syringe, I carefully put him to sleep. “Sleep well my prince, I’ll be back soon.” Hiding his sleeping body in one of the unused classrooms, I began to finish what I had started.

“Mira-san, it’s been three days with no activity. Whoever was the cause for the disappearances is most likely gone now.” The student council vice president spoke calmly to Mira. “We can call off the defences now.” Mira gazed at the vice prez, her blue eyes like shards of ice. “Alright, I’ll call off the defences for now.” She finally decided. Turning around and gazing out the window at the school entrance, she spoke quietly to herself. “But I won’t stop watching.”

The school day had gone by with no report of a problem. Soon, school had ended and all students had gone home. Mira stayed behind to work on a few last minute things. I quietly stood by the closed door, ready for my final task. Mira was all alone so there were no witnesses to worry about. I opened the door and walked in, a twisted smile painted on my face. “Mira-chan~”

Startled, she quickly turned to face me. “Lunaria, you were behind all this, weren’t you.” I laughed. “So you figured me out huh? Well, you’re too late now.” I approached her slowly, a kitchen knife in hand. “You thought you could take Nathan from me didn’t you? Well you can’t.” Mira grabbed a pair of scissors from on top of the desk. “Hahaha, you really think that will stop me? You’re foolish to try and fight back. So why don’t you just die!” I lunged at her with the knife. She dodged and threw the scissors at me. I simply moved out of aim, the useless weapon missing me.

“Why are you doing this?” Mira fought back, holding a strong grip on my wrist and stopping the knife just inches away from her throat. Kicking her off, I stood there and smiled down at her. “Why? I’m doing this for love. To protect and keep what’s mine.” I drove the blade into her left leg, then her right. “Throughout these past days, I’ve taken out every girl who was in my way of winning Nathan’s heart.”

“You’re crazy!” Mira gritted her teeth, trying to keep herself from screaming out in pain.
“Me? Crazy? What’s crazy is that this world is keeping me from winning his love!” I yelled out in anger. Just stop talking! Just die! Die die die die! I brought the knife up to her throat. “This is where your story ends Mira-san, and where mine begins.” With one swift strike, I slashed her throat. Finally, no one else to get in my way.

“Now, to confess my feelings to my beloved.”

Nathan’s Point Of View

I woke up to find myself in a dark basement. How did I get here? Where am I? Trying to stand up, I only felt a tug hold me in place. “What the...”

“You’re finally awake darling!” A girls voice broke the silence. “Who’s there?” I tensed up, ready for whatever threat might jump at me. She just laughed and walked into view. It was Lunaria.

“Haha, I’m so happy to finally be together with you like this~” She chirped happily, never taking her eyes off me. “It took so much work to get you here. All those other girls were in my way, keeping us apart.” She brought her hand up to her face, “I took care of them though.”

I gulped. “Are you saying that you....You killed them?”

“Of course darling!” She chuckled.

Lunaria’s Point of View

I gaze at my beloved. Finally he’s mine and only mine! “I won’t let anyone hurt you. I’ll protect you forever my love.” Bringing my face close to his, I gave him a gentle kiss. “You don’t have to worry anymore.” I gazed at him with calm and gentle eyes. You will be mine forever, and I won’t let anyone get in my way.

I frowned when I noticed he wasn’t looking at me. “Why won’t you look at me?” I grew impatient when he didn’t answer. Taking my knife, I brought it close to him, but not too close. “Look at me.”

He slowly looked up and stared into my eyes. “Say that you love me.” I demanded.

“I...I...” He stuttered, fear froze him in place. “Say it”

“I love you...” I smiled, satisfied. “I know darling~!” I walked over and put away the knife. “I’ll be the perfect wife for you.” I moved my gaze back to him. “You are mine forever.”

~

This isn’t the end my dear, I will come back
FLASH FICTION

Grades 7-9
In the Halls by Alanna Burchett

The Bell Rings

The school hallway is soon a sea of Fish, each fish stumbling blindly as they follow the pack swimming to their next period, wherever it may be. Safe in a pack, safe as they defend their own and shun all others. Their big gaping eyes often gazing down at the other fishes shoes or at the tiled beige floor. This rush of students, packed into the halls like sardines, each one yearning to slip from the frey and be free from the cluttered cankerous corridors. The fish stumble into their new classrooms doors as the Parrots exit their last class, moseying into the bathroom to apply another layer of foundation. They roam the halls displaying their plumage, bright colors and tight jeans. Strutting across the halls like Peacocks searching for a mate. For it is always mating season in the halls, as various creatures perform unspoken mating rituals. The Morning Doves hold hands, and sway around the halls as if it would last forever. As the swans curl into each others feathers, and the wolves share a parting nuzzle. The bats fly from their roost with earbuds in listening to heavy metal. The minutes tick by, the halls become a stampede of Buffalo, running and crushing all in their path, their hulking mass forming an impenetrable wall of flesh, shoulder to shoulder, and dart into the class as

The Bell Rings

And i’m left in the halls, alone. Unable to keep up with the competition. Just me, The last Dodo.
Those Seconds by Jessica Brunner

There I am on the court. The room so loud, yet, I can’t hear a word. I was stepping up to the foul line, the game was tied and three seconds were on the clock. This pressure was the most I have ever felt. The gym’s mood shifts; as everyone on the Beecher Prep High school side quiets down and puts their hands up waving their fingers. They send me spirit. I assumed the other side of the gym was screaming and stomping to distract me, however, I cannot be distracted, for I am too focused. This game is mine.

The referee bounce passes the ball to me. He tells the girls eager to rebound: “One and one. On the release.”

I begin my foul shot routine. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Numbers help me focus in times like this. I put the ball in my shooting position and stare at the front of the rim. Breath in. Simultaneously, I push the ball up, stand on my toes and the ball releases from my fingers. Breathe out.

Swoosh.

Easy. I get another shot. Before the referee could pass me the ball I look at my coach, who was looking at me with even more confidence than I had in my self. The ball bounces underneath my fingertips as I prepare myself to shoot. I do the exact same thing as before.

We are pressing the other team. Focused on the person I’m defending, I was slow to see the ball fly over my head and into the hands of a girl at half court. Olivia and Mikalia run to guard her but before they can get the double team, she zips the ball over to the opposite side of the court. I glance up at the clock- one second left. I see the play in action and read it as if it is written down. I sprint to where the next pass is headed. The girl doesn’t see me coming. I anticipate the pass and snatch it right out of the air. Steal. I dribble away from all persons. The buzzer goes off.

Game over. I am overcome with joy and adrenaline.

“Oh YEAH! OH YEAH! OH YEAH!” my team screams and races for me. I threw the ball behind me and run to them. Jumping and screaming and yelling we are filled with excitement. The team’s smile couldn’t be any bigger. This level of hype was through the roof. My head was spinning, it all felt like a dream. My adrenaline was still pumping. I don’t even feel everyone hitting me and hugging me. I look for my best friend and jump into her arms.

“Oh YEAH!” I yell with my feet off the ground and my fist in the air.
I was laying down in the garden, red ripe tomatoes swaying over my field of vision. Clouds drifted lazily across the pale blue sky. The air was calm and peaceful, a stray breeze blowing through my sandy hair.

Suddenly, I felt a warm weight on my hand. My peaceful state of mind was disrupted, and my heart began to race.

I slowly held my pudgy hand up to the sky, finding a caterpillar dancing playfully on my right index finger. I was so scared, but I was brave. I prodded it’s head playfully, and it recoiled. I could almost image it shrieking in pain. It was just as scared of me and I was of it.

I decided to name him Colin Two.

I could be Colin One.

Colin Two inched slowly down my arm. He had a strange way of walking, shuffling along in a haphazard way. I laughed out loud, the sound of wonder echoing through the garden.

“Colin! Time for lunch!” My mama’s loud voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Coming, mama!” I dashed up the stairs of my back porch, nearly tripping over my short legs. I was so excited to show her my new friend!

As soon as I walked inside, my mama scooped me up in her long arms. “My little boy is getting so big,” she said with a smile. I gasped, as Colin Two struggled to hang on to my hand.

“Look, mama, I found a friend!” I held up the caterpillar inches away from her face.

She shrieked, setting me down heavily. I forgot my mama hated bugs.

“Sorry mama.”

“Get that thing out of my house right now! You’re not eating lunch until it’s back outside.”

I sluggishly walked out onto the back porch, dragging my feet down the stone steps. I didn’t want to have to give up my friend. Wandering over to the tomatoes, I held my small friend close to my face. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. I imagined Colin Two turning and smiling at me. Instead, he just clung onto my finger for dear life.
I set Colin Two down on a tomato leaf, and burst into tears. I ran back inside screaming, “Mama! I don’t wanna let him go!”

My mama scooped me up in her strong arms again, and placed a kiss on my forehead. “They say if you love something, set it free.”

I wiped my nose on her shirt sleeve and sniffed.

“That’s dumb.”
FLASH FICTION
Grades 10-12
Fred, the Murderous Unicorn by Katie Coyle

Once upon a time, there was a majestic unicorn named Fred. All the unicorns laughed at Fred because he was the color of the sky on a summer day. Fred was a blue unicorn.

“It’s not fair.” thought Fred. The more Fred thought about his beautiful blue coat the more he wished that the other unicorns would leave him alone and stop talking behind his rear. On a bright sunny morning when Fred was at Unicorn Fairy park he observed a wandering farmer. Now, you must understand that unicorns are magical creatures and humans can’t see magic; the farmer thought, almost unquestionably, that Fred was just a plain workhorse. The farmer captured Fred and made him work long shifts at his barn, pulling the plow and carrying heavy loads. Fred became stronger as he worked more vigorously with each passing day. Eventually, Fred had enough of the farmers unpaid and unrewarding work and rebelled against him. He stabbed the farmer with his sparkling horn and ran as fast and as far away as possible. However, on Fred’s dash for freedom, he ran through the farmer’s house. Fred had burst through the door and knocked bleach upon his sapphire fur. Weeks later, after being lost for quite some time, Fred came upon a small pond in the middle of a small quiet wood and saw his reflection. He was a pure, pearly, perfect white unicorn at last.

“YAY!” Thought Fred as he rushed into the woods to find the other unicorns that once laughed him. When he found his old unicorn herd, he pranced and skipped into the center of their circle. He neighed shrilly and loud as he told his flakey friends of his adventures at the farmer’s house. The other unicorns still hated Fred because he was not a naturally white unicorn, they considered him fake and criticized him for trying so hard to fit in. Fred was hurt by the cold and curt words of his former family, he challenged Snow, the leader of the unicorns, to a battle to the death. With all the muscle mass he had gained from the farm, he easily overthrew Snow and killed him, gracefully slashing open the belly of the once great leader. Despite the end of the fight, Fred had become crazed with adrenaline and he continued killing his herd, dancing in the blood of his enemies. All the years of hurt were put in the past as he impaled them with his horn and pranced around their corpses like a disco ball. However, during the fight, the blood was so abundant that it stained his coat a rusty maroon. He tried for many years to remove the blood from his fur, but alas Fred was stuck permanently red. No matter how hard Fred tried to be the ideal unicorn he failed... enraged he continued the bloodshed and murder and his coat grew a darker and a more gloomy red. Thus the story of Fred, the murderous unicorn, began.
I wake up and I am surrounded by his warm embrace. I have never felt so scared before. I am scared of losing him. Of being forced to live life without him. For the first time in my life, I feel complete. I feel like I have a purpose. I feel like living. I live for him and because of him. I thank my lucky stars, everyday, for giving me him. I struggle to remember how I found him. Then it occurs to me that he found me. How could life be more perfect? This boy loves me and I love him with everything I have. Everything makes sense when I am with him, I have everything I need. He starts to stir and wakes up,

“Hello beautiful,” he says.

“Hi sleepy,” I mutter with a smile.

He starts to get up for work. I roll over so he can get up and he steps in the shower. As I lay there I think about my life. I think of my parents and the little farm we grew up on. I think of how I had all of these big dreams, to go to school and become a teacher. I think of why I never chased those dreams down farther, then I have my answer. It is because of him. When I met him I swore I didn’t and I wouldn’t need anyone or anything else. I ask myself if this is still true? I am not sure, I feel a sort of emptiness in my heart. Perhaps I need something else. After all he goes to work for nine hours a day and I am left here, all by myself, with little to do. He turns off the water and steps out of the shower.

“Do you remember, how I used to dream of being a teacher?” I ask.

“Of course I do. You decided it wasn’t for you. Do you have regrets?” He asks kindly.

“I’m not sure. I feel so alone when you leave for the day and I have little to do while I wait for your return” I said.

“Babe, if you want to go to school to become a teacher, I won’t hold you back. This is your dream after all. I always knew you would make a great teacher,” he said with a smile and wink.

Wow, this boy is perfect, I think to myself. I return his smile.

“We can talk more about this later if you want; but I have to go,” he said and he walked out the door.

A loud beeping pierces through my thoughts. It is my alarm. I am now back to reality. This boy doesn’t exist, at least he is not mine. I don’t have any dreams to become a teacher. I feel him slowly disappearing, slipping away and I cannot hold onto him. Until at least all memories of him are gone.
Doghouse by Charlotte Nieberding

I don’t really have a dog, but this house I moved into has a dog house in the backyard. I was never really sure what to do with it, so I just left it up. Since then, a local stray has started popping in from time to time.

Today it’s raining, so she’ll be around. I stand at the kitchen window with a mug of coffee cradled in my palm, while the rain patters against the roof of the little dog house. But then something catches my eye. It’s her - my dog that isn’t really mine, trotting through my yard on big, floppy paws, soaked down to her bones and looking a lot smaller than usual. She stands wagging at the front of her house before ducking inside to escape from the wetness.

I feel bad that her only refuge has a hole in the ceiling. Also, at this point, I really do consider her mine, and I don’t want her out there getting cold. So I step forward to swing open the back door and call out for her.

“Hey, girl!” I make clicking noises at the back of my throat. In one hand I’m propping open the door and in the other I’m holding my cup of coffee. “C’mere!”

Her head pokes out of the dog house.

“C’mere!”

She doesn’t move.

With a sigh, I decide that I’m going to bring her in here somehow. Slipping into a pair of sandals at the door, I set my mug aside and draw my cardigan up over my head. I step outside and make the trek over.

I am met with my dog’s face after crouching down before the entrance. Her beard is dripping and her eyes are barely visible behind a wet curtain of fur. I reach out to scratch behind her ears when I notice something. Sitting in the back of my little dog house is a human person.

Not really knowing what to do, I stare at his face in wonder. He’s folded very neatly into the back corner, meeting my eyes, caked in a fine layer of dirt, wearing poorly fitting clothing that’s torn at the seams, and no shoes. I can see scabs at the bottoms of his feet, and little pieces of gravel embedded between his toes.

“Um. Hey.” I say, dumbly. “What’s up?”

The little boy doesn’t respond, and for a second I think he’s not going to, until he says, “Nuthin’.”
“What are...you doing back here?”

He shrugs, “Your fence was open.”

I turn to look over my shoulder at my fence even though I know he’s right. I don’t think I’ve ever locked it, but then again I’ve never had a child sneak into my yard. “Yeah, I guess it is.” I rub at the nape of my neck. “Do you... have a house?”

The boy curls his lip up, “If I had a house, would I be here?”

“Guess not.” I offer him a smile. “Wanna come inside, then?”
GENERAL FICTION
Grades 7-9
The Audio Journal of Zia Epsilon by Hope McGrew

Note from the Author: This story is written as a series of audio files and therefore, is best read out loud. Any sort of paragraph break indicates a pause and the longer the break, the longer the pause. Enjoy!

((((((((((BEGIN TRANSMISSION)))))))))))

“My name is Zia Epsilon and the date is February 13th, 2204. I was born and raised on the Kepler colonization ship, the Reinhaldt. My parents are military officers who work in central command. So, I’ve lived my whole life aboard this pile of tin, counting the days until I die. And I suppose my countdown is coming to an end.

Yeah.

If you’re listening to this, it means that I’m dead.

Not just me, but everyone else too.

How’s that for an opener?

It all started when an announcement pinged over the ship’s communication network. We usually use the communications network to talk with our friends and family, or even to just join a random chat room with other passengers on the ship. It was almost never used for anything serious, the Excom was merely a tool used to stifle the crippling boredom that comes with space travel. But this morning, a whole lot of calls were interrupted. Flashing bright and big on the screen was the confirmation of something almost everyone had thought about for the last year and a half.

WARNING: OXYGEN LEVEL LOW, SEEK IMMEDIATE REPLENISHMENT

And in an instant, everything snapped into motion. People screamed, utter terror bubbling within them and spewing out without hesitation. A young woman clutched her lover’s hand, the space between them closing as they embraced for what they believed to be the last time. A plethora of emotions raced through my mind as I stared at the screen. I was petrified, fear creeping through my limbs, turning them cold. I was confused, wondering how such a simple calculation had been overlooked. What genius messed up the concept of us having enough oxygen to reach our destination? And perhaps the most concerning thing of all that I felt whilst staring at my own death sentence...

Contentment.
When I was nine years old, my mother finally explained why we were aboard the Reinhaldt. The mission given to us by the government of Kepler was to establish a colony on the distant planet of Xal. My parents, who even then were high ranking officers within the Kepler military, signed onto the mission in hopes of bettering the lives of future generations. So, they signed up to live the rest of their lives aboard the Reinhaldt. Yeah, the journey to Xal was as long as a lifetime, two lifetimes actually. The realization hit me at quite a young age that I was born on the Reinhaldt and that I would not survive long enough to see us reach our destination.

Although, I suppose none of us will at this point.

What I’m trying to get at is, I came to terms with the fact that I will die on this spaceship long ago, perhaps more so than others. If the process is merely sped up a bit, who am I to complain?

Of course, suffocation isn’t necessarily the ideal way to go, but it’s whatever...

Is it bad that I’m not getting choked up about this? Maybe if I just think about it a little bit more some panic will start to set in.

Anyways, we haven’t heard anything from central command. Not a peep. They’ve seemingly locked themselves in the control room.

I’m sure it’s because they’re thinking hard about our problem and not at all because the control room contains a majority of the emergency escape pods.

I’m sure the captain is still here.

I’m sure my parents are still here.

They wouldn’t abandon us, right?

Sorry about that. You don’t need to hear about my life story. I just want future generations to have something to learn from, maybe build off of what we did wrong and improve. I really don’t know. I’m going to be creating audio journals over the next couple of days, just so there is some record of the Reinhaldt after all of us die. Although it is totally possible that no one is going to hear this at all. Wouldn’t that be something? ‘Zia Epsilon uses her final moments to record audio that no one ever listens to.’

I’m going to go think for a bit, maybe go say goodbye to some people. I’m not really sure. I’ll record some more tomorrow. You know, assuming the oxygen hasn’t run out by then.

Thanks for listening.”

((((((((END TRANSMISSION)))))))))
“Hey, it’s me again.

We received another message today, this time from command.

Two days.

We have two days of oxygen left.

It’s more time than most of us thought, which I suppose is nice. But, now we have a literal countdown to our deaths. There’s no darkness silently slipping in to take us, no element of surprise. We all know when we’re going to die, and it is perhaps the most terrifying and comforting feeling in the universe.

We also received another message from command.

Or at least, what’s left of command.

As I speculated in my previous entry, many of our officers exited the ship on an escape pod. Some of our leaders remain, but only four.

My parents are not among those who stayed.

I mean, my mom and dad are smart.

They’re kind people.

They care about me.

So I have to believe that what they did only appears selfish.

That they have some sort of plan.

They’ll be back for us.

For me.

Sorry.

I’m getting off topic.

Essentially, everyone is going crazy. I’ve heard talks of people throwing themselves out the airlock to bring about their deaths faster, though I’m not sure if that’s entirely true. The few who have remained sane, don’t really speak. We’ve all sort of been keeping to ourselves,
wallowing in our own self pity. But on the bright side, school was cancelled, as you can imagine. No use in learning anything new when you’re scheduled to perish tomorrow, right?

I’m honestly still confused about how this happened. I’m bringing it up because I haven’t really heard anyone discuss it. The Xal colonization mission was supposed to take at least 200 years, and yet we’ve only made it for 30. What could have happened to the oxygen supply in such a short amount of time?

I suppose it doesn’t really matter now. There’s no use in dwelling on how this happened, when it has already been done. I still wonder though, maybe some villain is aboard the ship and cut our supply. Or maybe there was an alien monster that attacked the crew and the whole oxygen thing was an elaborate hoax. If only that were the case. If there was some crazy monster aboard, then at least we’d have a chance to fight back. But no, our only enemy now is time.

And it looks like we’re losing.

Sorry, for the pretentiousness, I’ve just been thinking a lot recently. About myself and my family and of course about the inevitable. Like sure, I was expecting to die on Reinhaldt, but I’m literally seventeen years old.

I don’t even know where I’m going with that, I just wish I had a little more time, you know?

Anyways, I think I’m going to sign off for now. I’m just a little tired.

Thanks for listening...

(((((((((END TRANSMISSION))))))))))

“You never realize how loud a gunshot is until one fires off a few inches away from your face.

One hour left and a majority of my fellow passengers have decided to take their deaths into their own hands.


The children, oh god even the children.

You know, I was doing some reading and learned that suffocation is considered one of the most painful deaths.

And I guess my fellow passengers did that reading too. A gunshot to the head is seemingly a more favorable way to go.
You know, I think I’m the only one left now. I have to be, there are just too many bodies in this room.

I should have gone with them.

Except, I don’t know.

The panic I didn’t feel the first day sits on my chest now like a fifty pound weight.

I don’t want to die.

Never before have I been so certain of something. But, the absolute fear that resides within tells all. I do not wish for the Reinhaldt to be my death bed.

I want to see Xalt.

I want to see my parents again.

I just want to live, to do something important with my life, to make something more of myself.

That’s why I decided to make these audio logs, so my name doesn’t vanish along with the rest of me. I was hoping that maybe, just maybe, I could become something more than myself. I don’t want to be a victim of the Reinhaldt disaster or just a number in a body count. I want the world to know who Zia Epsillon is.

Because really, the only thing worse than death is oblivion.

And if you’re listening to this, that means that I’ve succeeded, which I suppose is a comforting thought.

So that’s it, I guess. It’s over. The passengers of the Reinhaldt are dead and well, I will be too in a matter of moments. Ten minutes, I have ten minutes of oxygen left. I can feel the air around me thinning. It’s getting really hard to breathe. So, I guess I’ll have to make this quick. It’s been nice talking to you or at least, talking at you.

Here goes…

Hi, I’m Zia Epsillon and the date is February 15th, 2204.

I was born and I was raised and I perished on the Kepler colonization ship, the Reinhaldt. My parents were cowards who left their only child to suffocate on an empty space ship. I’ve spent my entire life aboard this pile of tin. I’ve counted down the days to my death.

My countdown has come to an end.
And I’m not ready.

Yeah.

If you’re listening to this, it means that I’m dying.

Everyone else is already dead.

Now, how’s that for a closer?"

((((((((END TRANSMISSION))))))))))
"Okay, honey, I gotta get to work! Love you! Bye!" Henry said. He stared down at his phone. When Jennifer, his wife, hugged him, he did not look up once. His 3.3 million followers were more important.

"Be safe, Henry," She was staring at her phone as well. She was commenting on her friends post.

Henry opened the door and looked down. All he could see was the green grass beneath his feet. He started a live video on his feed. The circle was spinning for a little less than a few seconds and Henry was already cursing his slow internet connection. He should post a complaint on his profile.

Henry opened the door to his car and turned on the ignition. Continuing to stare at his phone, he put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway. He stepped off the gas and autopilot took over.

"Where would you like to go today Mr. Anderson?"

"Work." Henry said. The car had a beep and began to guide itself. Henry talked to the building audience of his live video. He talked about how this morning, he accidently used shampoo to wash his hands instead of normal soap. He chuckled at his own mistake. The car halted at a red light. This did not bother Henry. He didn’t even notice. He just continued talking to his magic box. The car continued to move and he quickly arrived to work.

"Your destination has been reached Mr. Anderson." The car spoke.

"Thank you, car. Go park yourself, I’ll be out soon." Mr. Anderson said as he opened what he felt was the door. He then stepped out and did not stop looking at his phone. He was liking pictures, commenting on videos, and continuing his live stream.

"Yes Mr. Anderson. I will see you out soon." The car drove away and Henry walked into the building. He walked up to the front desk, signed in on his phone and then headed upstairs.

"At work you guys. I’ll have to live stream more later." With that, he smiled and stopped the live stream. He checked his other social media and news apps. His shoes grew into focus. He never really noticed how nice they were. Patent leather, brown, dress shoes. He pulled out his camera app and he took a picture of his shoes and posted them.

"Hey, guys, look how nice my shoes are. I never really noticed!" He posted. Henry refreshed the page and he had already a few hundred likes. He gazed down and out of focus, saw the brown
carpet of his office. He walked into the room he’s walked into a hundred times, but never looked at. He sat down in what he believed was a brown leather chair with little buttons. He opened his business tycoon app. He was making millions every day that passed. He checked on his virtual pet, gave it a bath, fed it, and left the app.

Henry felt the bosses presence in the room. He quickly opened up the flow chart app. It was shared with all his co-workers. He heard people sitting down. He examined the flow chart to see that they were making more money than ever using advertisements on people’s posts. Each person in the boardroom was given their paycheck. Two hundred thousand bitcoins was sent to their phones. Henry saw the notification on the top of his screen. He opened it and took a snapshot. He posted this to his wall with the caption “Just got paid!” and then the money face emoticon.

Henry spent most of his time working on new ads for new posts and he then sent them to the sales department.

“Thanks! We really needed this!” The sales department sent back.

“Np, I just hope u can use em.” Henry replied.

“Yea, of course.” The sales department said.

And, Henry continued with his day, until the alarm on his phone (set for five) went off. He didn’t even notice how quickly the time flew. He got up, turned off the alarm and sent a disappearing image to his 3.3 million followers. It was of his hand doing the peace sign, saying “I just got out of work!” and then the tongue sticking out emoticon.

He walked outside, checking his status on his social media accounts. He heard his car pull in front of him. He opened what he believed was the door and entered the vehicle. “Welcome back Mr. Anderson. Where to now?”

“Home.” The car accelerated. It took a different route home today, not that Henry noticed. He felt the car pull into a driveway. He felt the handle on the door and pulled it. The door unlocked and Henry exited. The door remained opened as Henry was updating Twitter on his arrival. Henry gazed down and his feet came into focus again the sidewalk. He was disgusted to see a frog. He took a picture and put it on his imaginary wall.

“Look what I found on my sidewalk today! Disgusting!” and then the angry face emoticon. He stepped over it and rung the doorbell on his phone. Jennifer came to the door.

“Hi honey!” She exclaimed, liking the picture of the frog.

“Hi honey!” He replied, liking her picture of the laundry she did today. “Sorry I didn’t like your post faster, I had a busy day at work today.”
“Oh, that’s okay, I get it. I’m just glad you’re home!” She said to him. They shared a moment of silence as they liked and commented on earlier posts of the day. Jennifer walked into the kitchen.

“So, what’s for dinner?” He texted her.

“We’re having cod tonight.” She texted back.

“What’s that?” As he already started to look it up.

“A large marine fish with a small barbel on the chin.” The search engine responded faster.

“It’s a type of fish.” Jennifer texted.

Henry figured the conversation was about over now. He went on Twitter to tell the world about what he thought about eating fish. He sat down on the couch. Looking down, he noticed that his couch was red. He never noticed before. He then took a picture of his couch and sent it to the world. Learn something new everyday, he thought. His wife called him into the kitchen for dinner. He walked into the kitchen and opened the camera app. He looked at the table through the camera and took a picture of his dinner plate. Henry then sent the photo to his 3.3 million friends.

His wife, Jennifer, was taking a picture of her dinner and sending it to the internet as well. They both liked each others posts. Henry ate his food without even tasting it. He said it was delicious.

Henry thought it might be a good idea to take a drive downtown and take a walk.

“But, you were just down there!” Jennifer texted at the dinner table.

“I know, I know. I’ll be back soon though.” With that, he left the conversation and opened Tetris. Such an age old classic, yet the app lived on. He heard his car pull around and he felt the handle on the door. He slid into the seat and asked to be taken downtown. The car obeyed and drove a different route, again.

When arriving downtown, he stepped out of the car, still playing Tetris and began to walk. He came to a cross walk and just missed the white blinking sign. The red hand now blinked, but Henry did not notice. He stepped on the street and felt a car going forty hit his side.

Henry’s phone was knocked out of his hand. With the last bit of consciousness, Henry looked up for the first time. He saw the towering buildings of the gleaming city, he saw, the heard about, but never seen moon, he saw people. He saw their faces, he saw pigeons, he saw alley cats, he saw his office building, he saw the stars and streetlamps all for the first time. He cried for help, but everyone was on their phone. Nobody was paying attention to him at all. He felt tears, something he never had felt before. Through the tears, he saw what he was wearing, he saw
things that he saw everyday, but didn’t. He looked down the street, bodies were scattered from all the people who made the same mistake he did and no one ever noticed. He was one of the people who never noticed, and now he’s one of the people who isn’t noticed. With his strength he had left, he tried to picture his mom, couldn’t think of her face, his wife, nothing, his father, nothing, he never saw their face except in photographs. And then, Henry saw nothing at all. And, no one noticed.
The night black mare cantered down the center of the arena. She seemed to be weaving through invisible poles, changing leads every time she changed direction. As the horse floated toward the end of the ring, she appeared to be performing the routine with no cues from her rider. The girl sat perched upon her horse, like a cat waiting to pounce. And as soon as her horse was ten feet away from the far end of the arena, she pounced. The girl slipped both feet from her stirrups and pushed off her mare’s neck. Her legs straightened and her arms flew out from her sides. She was like an eagle in mid-flight, her hair streaming out behind her. They swept faster. Both girl and horse seemed ablaze in pure glory, having achieved what they had been working toward for months. It was a perfect, glorious moment until everything went wrong. The wind chose that moment to blow, whisking a leaf through the open door and right into the black mare’s path. The girl had no chance to stay on, as her horse spooked, she was thrown into the air. It was then, when Khloe Christine Cavall face planted in the dirt.

I rolled onto my back and choked up dust. I pulled myself into a sitting position and promptly sneezed. A glob of mucus and dirt flew out of my nostrils. I leaned back, revolted at my own disgustingness. Stella, my black mare whinnied as if to say ‘Suck it up K. C.’ (And yes, my name is Khloe Christine but everyone calls me K.C.) Stella danced in place in front of me. Despite the fact that she was covered in sweat and grime, she still looked gorgeous. Stella was half Arabian and half Friesian and in my opinion, she had the best qualities of both breeds. Her Arabian blood shone through her high set tail and exquisite face. She had a dished nose and dark liquid eyes that glowed with intelligence and courage. Her coat was so dark it seemed nearly purple. Her curly tail and mane cascading down her side like a waterfall betrayed her Friesian ancestry. She had surprisingly slim, yet strong, legs and a thick back that made her ideal for vaulting and stunt riding. Her name came from the tiny white star in the center of her forehead. Stella means star in Latin. In other words, she was absolutely breathtaking and in my eyes the most amazing horse in the world.

Well, there was no point stalling anymore, I would have to try the stunt again at some point. I struggled to my feet and sneezed again. I sure must have inhaled a ton of dust. I padded over to Stella, moving slowly, so not to spook her again. I clasped the reins in one hand and inserted my foot into the stirrup. I hopped one, two, three and bounced lightly into the saddle. My stomach churned with nerves. I had never been scared to try a stunt before. A little nervous sure, but I could be a pretty reckless person when it came to horseback riding. Yet this time it was different. What if I fell off again and actually got hurt? What if I somehow injured Stella? I chided myself softly. Stunt riding is about bravery, testing your limits, and performing the impossible. Most important of all, it is about trusting your horse. Whatever happened, Stella and I were a team and nothing could separate us. I squared my shoulders. My eyes were now firmly set on my destination. We were going to do this.
I cued Stella into a canter and guided her in neat circles. I slowly collected her until she felt alert and ready to begin. Then I turned her up the center of the arena. I may make it look easy, like Stella is doing all the work. But no, it definitely does not work like that. I was continuously correcting her mistakes. A tap with my heel, tightening my fingers around the reins, keeping her in line. “Shh, it will be okay girl. It’ll be okay” I whispered partly to Stella and partly for my own assurance.

Stella flicked back her ears in response to my words. We were nearing the far end of the arena. I felt like I had swallowed a spider along with the dust and it was presently exploring my stomach. Suddenly we were there. I dropped my stirrups and pushed myself into a crawling position, acting purely on instinct. My moment of doubt had been swept away in the dust. I straightened my legs and stood up fully. The world turned into blur around me. I could not tell if it was from the speed or from joy and relief. I had refused to surrender to my fears and Stella had carried me through. It may be easy to perform a stunt after previous success. But to ride a stunt after you have fallen, that shows true courage. That is the mark of a stunt rider. I know that if I can sustain my bravery, then soon Stella and I will dominate the world of stunt riding. For who could ever create a horse as intelligent, loyal, and beautiful as Stella? And I am K. C. Cavall, a true stunt rider.
GENERAL FICTION
Grades 10-12
“The sky is full of worlds,” Kai’rene’s fellow captive whispered to himself, seemingly unaware of her presence near the other end of the prison cart. He shook his head as if he could hardly believe it himself. “The moons are full of life, bursting with it. Trees, nearly tall enough for the stars to ignite them like matches, mountains high enough to suffocate you before you even get close to the summit. Creatures, vicious creatures, live in the brush and are prepared to rip you apart without a second thought.”

Kai’rene sat up straighter and tucked her long hair behind her ears, her eyes widening with awe as he spoke. He talked the whole evening, his voice weary and bitter, as if he hadn’t slept for days, and his appearance only added to this notion. His entire wardrobe drooped: his black hood obscured the entire upper half of his face. Evening turned to night, and his long one-sided conversation finally ended. After several moments of sitting in silence, the stranger stood.

As he approached the door, Kai’rene grabbed his arm and begged to know how he reached the worlds he’d described. She hadn’t realized how tall he was until he peered down at her. She finally saw under his hood.

His eyes were blackish purple, and in them swam milky silver trails, moving and swirling like a roiling potion. Kai’rene’s heart seized at the sight of those unnatural eyes, but she was determined to get an answer. Her grip on his arm tightened.

The stranger’s expression did not change. He stared at her for a few moments.

“You already know the way,” he muttered bitterly, “but it is not for those who wish ill upon others.”

The traveler pried her hand from his arm, walked out of the prison cart, and disappeared into the rainy night, pulling his hood further down over his face. The guards didn’t even glance his way.

He did not leave any footprints.

Kai’rene gripped the bars, small shining tears of relief flowing down her face. She no longer had to choose between keeping her powers secret and saving herself. She had a chance to escape from the cart before tomorrow morning, when the guillotine would ensure she never practiced magic again. Her mind buzzing with questions, she stared at the moons’ outlines through the cloud layer, and she wished.
The bars seemed to give way, and she fell forward, stumbling into something that smelled of sap and scratched at her skin. This was nothing like the magic she knew.

She opened her eyes wide in shock, her pain forgotten, and stared in absolute astonishment. The stranger hadn’t exaggerated about the trees. They towered above her head, their trunks wider than a house, and their quilt-sized leaves littered the forest floor and left her breathless with the size of it all.

The evening rolled into a freezing pitch-black night, frost crystallizing on the edges of her cloak, and she shivered, pulling it about her more securely.

A twig snapped behind her.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she stared into the depths of the forest, where each behemoth tree cast bone-chilling shadows which made her skin crawl. She no longer shivered only from the cold. Two pairs of eyes, seeming to belong to a single creature, stared out at her from the dark between trees. Kai’rene clutched her cloak’s clasp, staring into the blackness and raising her magical orb of light higher. A creature stepped out of the shadows, and Kai’rene's breath caught in her throat.

The wolf-sized creature hissed at her, its scales and silver fur glistening in the light of her magic orb. She took a step back in awe as the creature’s bat-like wings spread like fans and gleamed in the orb’s light, casting strange shadows on the forest floor.

Under ordinary circumstances, she would have used magic to either gain its trust or kill it, but she didn’t wish to alter this magnificent beast’s true nature if she had to. Instead, she offered it food: perhaps a satisfied appetite would diminish its threat. Kai’rene brought out some meat and offered it with a tentative hand. The creature cocked its head. It eyed her for a moment before snatching the meal with its jagged claws, and it watched her with intelligent eyes as it devoured the food. She could have sworn it smiled.

After finishing its meal, it licked the scraps from its serrated fangs and blinked slowly. It dipped its head in a nod, touched its nose to her foot, and stared up at her. She crouched to its eye-level and smiled as she bowed her own head in return. When their gazes met, Kai’rene had the strange feeling that this creature wouldn’t have harmed her even if she had not offered it something to eat.

The creature followed her for the remainder of her journey, guiding her and assisting her hunts in exchange for warmth and a meal. She gave it no name, as she felt it had one it did not share and simply called it "friend". Days slipped by, as they made their way out of the forest and across a grassland. In the distance, blue and faded, mountains grew nearer every day.
Kai’rene appreciated the creature’s companionship more than she could ever express, though they travelled in relative silence during the long days and nights. It never spoke, but she always felt it would if it ever felt the need. As they traveled, she often thought of the people who’d persecuted her and voiced these thoughts to the creature. At first, she loathed the very idea of them, but as days turned to weeks, and she had little else to think about, an idea began to chase itself through her mind each night: Was she any better than they were if she hated them?

She had been scorned, neglected, and abused for the so-called ‘evil’ of her magic. But... didn’t they have a reason to be scared? And even if they didn’t, wouldn’t hating them for their beliefs simply be an offshoot of what they were doing to her? What if, if she expected them to be accepting of her... she must first be accepting of them?

She didn’t miss the voices, or the hustle and bustle of town life, and certainly not the prison cart, but as days turned to weeks she found she no longer hated the people. The day she spotted the new forest on the horizon, she found that she had already forgiven them. And then, she found she could forgive herself.

The creature’s eyes filled with its own strange version of tears when she said this aloud, and though it still didn’t say a word, its four eyes blinked slowly up at her as it leaned against her hip, smiling as if it were proud.

Kai’rene put her hand on the creature’s head as the sun rose behind a new forest. There lay her journey’s end. She was sure of it. They stood together at the treeline for a few moments, before her face broke into a wide grin. She took off down the slope, her long hair flowing behind her as she ran. She plunged into the woods with her feet light as wind and her heart soaring like an eagle, but she skidded to a halt in a clearing, eyes wide.

Before her stood a man.

He was wreathed in a cloak of darkness, his hood falling over his eyes and obscuring all but the lower half of his face. In his right hand, he carried a scythe; in his left, a balancing scale.

She knew his name at once.

"Do you come for judgment?" he asked, his voice deep, ancient.

Kai’rene nodded.

The creature approached, looking at the man as one would an old friend, and dipping its head in respect as it took its place close by Kai’rene’s side.

"Place everything you value here," said he, offering out the now imbalanced scale.
Kai’rene stared at him for a moment. She quietly whispered that she had nothing of value besides her friendship with the creature and her own self and that those were things which she could not place on a scale.

The man smiled as the scale balanced out, though nothing lay on either side. He nodded to her.

"You have traveled wisely," he said. "I give you your worth, and withhold what is not deserved."

When Kai’rene turned to ask the creature what he had meant, she gasped. The creature’s form had shifted, and it became a different sort of creature with soft, white feathery wings, who smiled past the tears in its beautiful eyes.

“You will be missed,” it whispered softly. “Forgiveness is not easy to come by, when all you breed is hate. You have done very well.”

They embraced, and Kai’rene felt all her pain and aches fade away as a sense of peace enveloped her. She knew exactly what she had to do.

The stranger in the tavern had long, flowing hair and laughing eyes which seemed to cast a light.

“The sky is full of worlds,” she said, leaning forward on the table, “The moons above our heads are full of life and adventures. Trees nearly tall enough to touch the stars, mountains so high their bases swim in the clouds, and creatures so fair and honest, they kiss the hands of those who treat them well.”

She told anyone who would listen of the adventures she’d had, and Edwin, chronically ill though he was, drank in every word, his eyes alight with fascination.

The stranger’s posture was tall and sure, her face was open and friendly, and her air was one of joy. The evening rolled into night, and the rain finally stopped, prompting the rest of the tavern occupants to file out one by one, and the tavernkeep announced that it was time everyone left. She stood, gathering her cloak about her, but before she could cross the threshold, Edwin called to her and forced his weak body to stand as he asked how he might get to the worlds in the sky.

She smiled.

"I believe you already know the way," she said gently.

She pulled up her hood and left, walking down the muddy street. The moonlight framing her white-clad form, she faded into the evening mists.

As she disappeared, Edwin noticed that she did not leave any footprints.
He looked up at the moon and wished.
Coconuts Are Low in Sodium by Colleen Freeze

The car rattled on the gravel drive, its metal parts protesting against its plastic ones in the cold as Julia went on to her old friend’s house. She hadn’t seen Meredith in probably 7 years, though they were friends on Facebook. She didn’t post much. Nonetheless, Julia had jumped in her car moments after she’d hung up with Meredith’s unexpected phone call. She’d said she’d fallen ill and couldn’t get out of the house, and hoped that Julia would come help her out for a day or two, until she got past the worst of it.

“I wouldn’t bother you, honestly, but I… don’t get out much. I don’t really have any other friends. Sorry,” she had said. It was typical of her, really, to apologize for needing help. It was something Julia remembered well about her from high school, and she suppose hadn’t changed. And she probably still dresses like a goth kid, she thought, though she pushed that judgement aside, thinking it was rude of her to make that kind of assumption about someone she hadn’t seen since graduation. But it was probably true.

Julia pulled the car up in front of the address Meredith had given her, and turned it off. The house was in the Middle Of Nowhere, Forestland, but it was cute. Definitely the sort of place that Meredith always said she wanted to live. It was wooden, highly peaked roof, even had a little lantern next to the door and a garden of pale-colored winter flowers. It was like stepping out of the real world and into a fantasy novel.

With a little huff and a stretch after the long drive, Julia got out of the car, turning around only to grab her bag off the passenger seat and lock the doors.

She went up along the gravel path, cursing her city-style for the wedges she was wearing. Her feet always felt a little unstable on gravel, and the wedges did nothing to help that. Fortunately, the front steps were concrete, and it was on those that Julia waited after knocking.

It took a long moment, but eventually she heard shuffling from the other side, then the unmistakable sound of a lock tumbler being turned. The door swung open, and Julia saw her friend for the first time in almost a decade.

She looked terrible. Her face was drawn and pale. The hair that used to be so carefully cut and cared for, sometimes blue, sure, but cared for, had faded to a sort of mousy-brown color that was a mere ghost of the black it had usually been. She had bags under her eyes and a blanket pulled around her shoulders.

A weak little grin split her face, and she invited Julia in.
“I’m so glad you were able to come,” Meredith said, shuffling down the entrance hall with her back turned to her guest. “Close the door behind you, if you would.

“I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all day, though I’m sorry it took all of this,” she turned around and shrugged emphatically at her current state, “to finally have you down here. Thank you for coming, though. It means a lot.”

“It’s no problem, really. I’m just glad I’m able to help,” Julia said.

The two women turned into the living room, where Meredith returned to the spot on the couch that had an indent and a blanket. She pulled the second blanket onto herself, settling back into the cushions as she did.

“Please, have a seat.”

Julia sat, and looked around the room. It was small, but comfortable. Bookshelf, movies, TV. Wireless router. The coffee table had a closed laptop and a pen sitting on it, along with a teacup, which was empty.

“I’m afraid I won’t be much of a host, but-”

“Meri, you asked me to come help you. I’m not expecting you to be a good host.”

Meredith smiled in gratitude, and Julia noticed just how drawn she was. Even her gums seemed to be receding.

“Is there anything you want me to get you?”

Meredith sighed, “perhaps another cup of tea. Make one for yourself too, and we’ll catch up.”

Julia nodded. “Alright.” She picked up the cup from the coffee table and went through the other doorway into the kitchen.

“The box should be on the counter,” Meredith said after her.

Julia reached it and picked it up to show her she’d found it.

“Is this... coconut tea?”

“Yeah. It tastes good and helps with whatever this is that I’ve got. I think you’ll like it. If not there should be some English Breakfast in the cabinet to your left.”

Julia scrunched her nose in distaste. “Ew, no. I’ll stick with this coconut stuff.”
She saw Meredith sink further into the couch back. “That’s what I thought.”

II

“So what are you up to these days?” Meredith asked. “I mean, I’ve been keeping track online and stuff, but that only goes so far.”

Julia laughed. “You’re gonna love this - I’m working one of those nine to five jobs I said I never wanted to have. Got a 6-by-8 and everything.”

“No!”

“Yes. Pays well. Don’t hate it as much as I thought I would. Plus some of the guys are nice to look at. But my boss is real understanding and let me come out here. She gets it.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Well that’ll explain it then. You just never wanted to work for some impersonal corporation.”

“That’s it.”

“I take it by the comment about boys,” she paused to make a face, “that you’re still not seeing anyone?”

Well that was shrewd, Julia thought. But it was just like her, honestly. “No. There was a guy I was talking to at a company event or something, but it’s never gone further than a casual ‘good morning’ once a week or so.”

“Oh?”

“I should probably just get the guts to ask him out for a drink or something, but... you know.”

“I can guess. I mean, you see where I am socially right now, right?”

“Yeah, what happened to the coffee house habit?”

“Went away when there wasn’t one practically next door anymore.”

“Makes sense. You still writing?”

“When I can. I’ve gotten some stuff published, but it’s slow going. Been making money off online services for a while now.”

“How’s that working out?”
Meredith shrugged, a motion barely visible under the blankets. The tea had done her some good, Julia noticed.

“It’s been getting the bills paid.”

“Well it looks to me like you’ve been doing everything you ever said you wanted to.”

Meredith shrugged again. “Except getting sick. I never said I wanted to do that.”

“True enough,” Julia said.

She looked a little closer at her, studying the signs of illness. She seemed almost anemic, with her pale skin, sunken eyes, and bony edges. The harsh winter light from the window behind her didn’t do any favors, either. But there was some color back in her cheeks, which hadn’t been there when Julia had arrived.

“You’re looking a lot better,” she said.

Meredith let out a sarcastic huff. “Yeah, sure. You’ve probably never seen me look worse. I think I’m starting to get gray in my hair.”

“I don’t see any,” Julia said, even though she did.

“If you say so. I haven’t been able to bring myself to look in a mirror, lately.”

“I wouldn’t be able to, either.”

A smile touched Meredith’s lips.

“We should watch a movie or something.” Julia suggested. She was hoping that Meredith would get some sleep, or, at the very least, just some rest.

“Good idea. Drawer under the TV. Why don’t you pick something?”

III

Julia didn’t get back until about 7:45. She’d had trouble finding the drive in the dark. But she hadn’t heard from Meredith since she’d fallen asleep, and quietly hoped she still was. The rest would do her some good.

She pulled her car back into the driveway and killed it, suddenly wishing she’d thought to turn the porch light on before she’d left. The dark was palpable when the headlights went out.
Shrugging off the discomfort of the dark, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned on the flashlight. By that light, she took the grocery bags off the passenger seat and went inside.

“Meredith?”

Julia didn’t get a response, but figured that her friend was still asleep. She crossed through the living room and into the kitchen, and didn’t notice the vacant spot on the couch as she passed.

She flicked on the light and started putting the groceries away in the otherwise empty fridge. If she felt the electrical tension in the house, she didn’t think anything of it. But the humminfluoresent in the room somehow didn’t diminish the darkness that pervaded the house, only flattened it; let you see it.

She looked up and jumped a little in her skin when she saw Meredith standing in the doorway to the back of the house. She seemed almost wraith-like, with her cloud of bed-hair and draped black clothing. Something about her had changed in the hour that Julia had been gone. She couldn’t describe what it was, and the word that came into her head was desperate. Meredith looked desperate.

“Are you hungry?” Julia asked.

“Yes.”

“What do you want? I went out to get something about an hour ago, but you were asleep. So I let you. But I got groceries.”

“Just tea.” Meredith said.

“You need more than that, I’ll make you something.”

“No! I just want tea.”

“Ok, I’ll put some on. But you should try and eat something later.”

“I will.”

IV

The house was quiet even though it was barely 9 o’clock. Meredith had said goodnight to Julia twenty minutes ago, dragging herself to her bedroom door and closing it. The vitality had drained out of her again.
Julia sat on the bed that Meredith had told her she could stay in, lights off, screen on. She scrolled through the posts a bunch of strangers had made, and thought that maybe she wasn’t so different from Meredith. She got out more, but she had just about as many friends.

Who would she have called, if she had been the one who had fallen this ill?

The night slipped by, stolen by the screen and her thoughts.

10 o’clock. 11 o’clock.

Something called outside.

12 o’clock.

The light filtering in from the moon waned.

The screen clicked off.

Julia laid down and stared at the unfamiliar ceiling. She didn’t remember falling asleep, but she also didn’t recall the time between 12:15 and 2:00, when her phone buzzed and lit up.

Meredith

You awake?

“Am now,” Julia said, loud enough for her friend to hear her through the shared wall.

Meredith

Sorry. I’m hungry now.

Julia sighed and sat up. “Alright,” she said. “I’ll go make something.”

The door between their rooms came open, leaving Meredith leering in the doorway. “No need,” she said. Her voice was sharp, like a death rattle. For all Julia knew, it might be.

“Meri, you should go back to bed. You sound terrible.”

“No!”

“Meredith, you’re scaring me.”

Meredith smiled. Her teeth glowed a startling white in the near-blackness of the room. Her eyes seemed to glint red.
Julia felt her blood rush, and adrenaline kick in.

She couldn’t move.

V

3 o’clock. The night is quiet.
This Must Be What Death Feels Like by Nicole Gabriel

All was dark and shadow. The crushing pressure made it hard to breathe. A few unmoving figures lay on the ground. A giant, cracked shell loomed a short distance away. A shattered staff lay abandoned. A crimson liquid crept its way silently across the stone floor. A low voice chuckled.

“Don’t...leave us...”

“So this is how...it ends...?”

“But...Excalibur...”

“I promised to protect you...”

There was a sudden, searing pain. The curved edge of a blade materialised, now stained with blood...

Karvius jolted awake, his eyelids snapping open. His heart was racing and his breathing was ragged. So, it was another nightmare. The same one that had been plaguing his sleep the past few nights. He forced himself to take a few deep breaths to calm down. After he had found his pulse to be at a reasonable rate, he took a look at his surroundings.

The scenery made for a peaceful one; the rising sun was barely peeking over the treetops, casting a warm, golden glow over the land. Birds could be heard chirping somewhere within the idyllic forest of green, while the leaves of the cypress he was seated in rustled gently in the early morning breeze. In the clearing a few meters away, a dwarf emerged sleepily from his tent while a giant turtle, half submerged in the nearby river, poked his head out of his shell. The remains of a fire that had burned the night before now smoldered in a pile of ashes and dying embers.

“...you even listening to me?! Hey!”

A sound drifted up to where he sat on the tree branch and Karvius gradually realised that someone was trying to get his attention.

“I know you’re awake! Don’t ignore me!”

Ah. He knew who it was now; he’d recognise that annoying voice from anywhere. Karvius looked down towards the voice, focusing his golden gaze on the figure that was on the ground. There was a girl, glaring back up at him from under the wide brim of her hat with a look of irritation on her face, the corners of her mouth curled down in a frown.
“Oh, so now you pay attention to me? I’ve been yelling at you…”

As the girl continued to rant at him, Karvius started to tune out the sound of her voice. The tiefling gracefully flipped off of his tree branch and landed on the ground. “Shut the hell up, ice mage,” he grumbled before turning on his heel to head in the direction of the main campsite. The girl followed behind him, refusing to give up her stream of complaints. He sighed, getting severely irked by her presence. He flicked his tail out, catching the mage by the foot and sending her sprawling across the ground, much to her dismay.

Now that is how you get a human to shut up. Karvius allowed himself a small smile.

As he approached the campsite, it seemed that more members of the party had woken up and were packing their things.

“Good morning, Karvius.” A hobbit who was seated on a nearby rock, sharpening his dagger, greeted him. “I saw what happened back there. Thank the gods you finally shut Midna up. She’s been screeching for who knows how long.”

“Jyusk has been begging me to let him take an axe to Midna,” the turtle commented, lumbering up to the two.

“Don’t worry, I dealt with her,” Karvius reassured them, smirking.

The rest of the group arranged themselves around him, awaiting further instructions. Korin the turtle; Garatiocide, the dwarf Shadow Priest; Laucian, the elf mage; brothers Sulor and Jyusk; Aaron, the hobbit; Jason, a swordfighter; Caliborn, a bard; Midna, the (vexatious) ice mage; and of course, himself, Karvius the tiefling. They seemed to be an incongruous band of travelers, yet they had already overcome so many obstacles that others had failed to accomplish; all to achieve their mission of retrieving all the pieces of the legendary sword Excalibur and restoring it to its former glory.

“Shall we be on our way?” Karvius asked, turning towards the cave where the last piece of Excalibur was guarded by an unyielding foe. “Excalibur isn't going to fix itself.”

“Are you sure this is the way?” Jyusk asked, kicking a rock against the stony wall of the cave. They had been following Sulor down the sloping trail for quite some time, and it had just kept going...down. As they continued their descent, the air around them grew heavier, the shadows seeming darker and more menacing. Their only source of light came from the mystical flames that danced across Laucian’s palm. The sound of dripping water echoed faintly around them, and occasionally a curse word would hang in the air whenever Jyusk would run into a stalagmite.
“Ah, my night vision is terrible,” Midna commented, squinting in the darkness. “Where is Karvius?”

“Karvius is busy drinking his problems away. He’s trying to drown out the memory of some stupid ice mage or something,” Korin answered.

“Karvius doesn’t drink,” Garatiocide said, interrupting Midna as she tried to choke out a reply. “...But sometimes he contemplates it when you start talking to him.”

“Can you guys quiet it down back there?” Aaron called from somewhere up ahead. “It’s called stealth for a reason.”

Karvius smirked a little. “He’s right. We can’t have the enemy knowing where we are, right?”

“Honestly, why does it have to be a sneak attack?” Jyusk asked. “It’s not like it will matter. Sulor and I decimate all our opponents.”

“It doesn’t matter how strong they are,” Sulor agreed. “Our brotherly love will prevail!”

“That’s gay,” Midna commented under her breath.

Karvius whirled around and smacked her upside the head. “Shut up.”

“Look! I see something up ahead!” Caliborn called suddenly.

He was right. There was a large, wooden door, almost twice the size of Korin. The slats of wood looked ancient and the edges seemed worn from use. The iron spikes protruding from the door glinted from the light of Laucian’s fire, and didn’t look like they had been dulled from the ages. There was a curious seal placed a third of the way up the door: it was shaped like a stylised skull and there were two stones that glowed dully in the eye sockets. Whoever had put it here wanted to keep people out - or keep something in.

“Don’t touch anything. I’m going to scout and see if there are any traps,” Aaron said, and bounded into the shadows.

“This door looks really old, are you sure we can’t just bust it down with a good swing of an axe?” Sulor sighed.

“Aaron said not to touch anything,” Jason chided him. “Besides, I think it would take more than hitting it with an axe to knock it down, even if it’s old.”

“I’m detecting magic here,” Midna piped up, a look of concentration on her face. “I get the feeling it’s a very strong magic.”
“Finally, she says something useful!” Caliborn said in exasperation.

“But seriously, she’s right. I think it’s coming from the other side of the door,” Laucian supplied. “But I can’t tell what it is. It feels familiar yet…”

“It must be a dark magic,” Garatiocide suggested. “What else would be guarding the final piece of Excalibur?”

Karvius approached the door to investigate the seal. The dull sheen of the metal seemed to call to him. What was it about this particular lock that tugged at the corners of his mind? What was it about those stony eyes that pestered him to no end? The sinister jawline, the gaping mouth, archaic symbols patterned upon its surface...

A faint memory emerged in his mind before it vanished, like a carp breaking the still surface of a calm pond before diving underneath the water again.

Karvius laughed and sighed. “Ah, I remember now.” He snapped his fingers, sending a few blue sparks spiraling through the air before fizzling out. Everything that he needed was right here, which was perfect.

“Midna.” He signalled for the ice mage to walk closer.

“E-eh?” Midna stumbled forward, looking a little shocked and confused. He never called her by name. It was usually an insult or something that he summoned her by.

He reached out and grabbed ahold of her hand.

“Whaaaat are you doing?” Midna asked nervously, the blood rushing to her face.

Oh. My. Gods. He’s totally holding my hand, this can’t be real, this is-

“OW!”

While Midna was daydreaming, Karvius swiftly pulled out a dagger and slashed it across Midna’s palm, drawing blood. Midna snatched her hand away and frowned at him. “What the hell was that for?!”

Karvius didn’t answer her but took the knife over to the skull lock. He tilted the blade towards its mouth and let the blood drop into its jaw. He then dug the blade into his own palm and squeezed his hand over the lock so his blood would trickle into the lock as well. After a few moments, there was a clicking sound; the skull’s jaw snapped shut and the patterns on its surface briefly glowed a bright red before the door swung inwards slightly.
“I guess that means it’s open…?” Garatiocide asked, as a faint windy draft blew in from the sliver of the entrance of the door.

“There are no traps around the door,” Aaron said, returning to the group but remaining in stealth. “But there could be more on the other side. I’ll scout ahead.”

Jyusk and Sulor pushed the heavy door open and Aaron bounded ahead into the shadows.

“How did you know what to do with that lock?” Caliborn asked Karvius curiously.

“And couldn’t you have found a less painful way of unlocking that door?” Midna hissed at him, clutching her injured hand, now wrapped with a bandage, to herself.

“It was nothing,” Karvius said with a shrug and smirked at Midna. “Just a little thing I learned from when I was younger. Those were demonic runes. I had to learn them as a kid.”

“I see something up ahead!” Korin said suddenly, squinting through his glasses.

He was right. The end of the hallway widened into a large, circular room that looked like it had been abandoned for quite some time. There was a single hole in the ceiling where sunlight filtered in through the moss and ferns growing over the hole, casting strange patterns upon the tiled floor. Most of the tiles on the floor looked cracked and weathered, but some in the centre still remained intact. The glossy paint on the tiles seemed faded with age. There were several cracked pillars around the room, and bits of stone lay scattered around. There was one large tapestry hung on the far wall across from the entrance, the edges torn and frayed. The highlights that were once a brilliant gold now shone dully in the half-light, and there were patches of the fabric where the red and blue had faded. In front of the banner was a large chair on a platform with stairs leading up to it. One of the armrests broken, and the cushions on the seat looked torn.

“What is this place?” Jason asked, looking around.

“This is the Ebony-Flame Chamber,” a booming voice announced. A figure had appeared on the platform with the chair. “And I am Drache. You are here to have the piece of Excalibur?” There was a glint of metal as a clawed hand brandished the shard in the half-light.

“You guessed it,” Korin answered. “If you would be so kind as to had it over-” “Nonsense,” came the reply as the demonic creature unfurled huge black wings. Fire erupted from large stone bowls around the room, creating a ring of untraversable smoke and flames. “This shall remain in my care. If you want it, you’ll have to go through me.”

“Very well,” Karvius challenged.

Drache smirked. “Let’s have some fun, shall we?”