

the Creative Writing Society

Compendium



Spring 2022

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Editor's Welcome

Welcome to the fourth edition of the Creative Writing Society Compendium! Everything you're about to read has been written, edited, and produced by members of the Creative Writing Society, and has been discussed and improved in our weekly meetings. This digital, termly publication showcases the work of our talented, wonderful group of writers, in a collection of prose and poetry with a variety of genres and styles.

We're incredibly proud to publish this. It has been a massive project for us, and we've been delighted with the level of involvement within our society. All who have participated have worked incredibly hard to make this happen, and we'd like to thank everyone.

If you're a writer or just enjoy hearing/reading others' writing, we'd love to see you at one of our meetings! The details are all on the next page, and if you're interested in getting involved with the next issue of our Compendium, get in touch!

President's Welcome

The Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society (AUCWS) was founded during the 1980s to offer students a platform to share, develop, read, and listen to creative pieces. Its goal is to create a welcoming place where writers can improve their work through encouragement and feedback. We meet once a week to read out, listen to, and develop pieces of writing, followed by a post-meeting hang-out.

The most important rule here is to have fun! Whether it be sombre or light-hearted, short or long (within reason...), every piece of writing has its place here, and a diverse, enthusiastic community of people ready to listen and help each other grow as creators! Members are never required to submit their work—you can just come along to listen and have fun!

Open to students and non-students, writers and readers alike, the Society welcomes all. We hope you'll join us!

How to find us?

If you enjoy anything we put in this Compendium, then you might be interested in checking us out on our various platforms!

Please send any inquiries or submissions you might have to our email address at creative.writing@ausa.org.uk

Once term starts again in September, we'll meet on campus at 6PM every Thursday. If you're unable to join us in person, you can do so via a Google Meet link that will be given out on our Facebook page and Discord a little while before the meetings start. All details about our meetings will be posted on our social media.

Speaking of, do find us there!

Facebook: [Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society](#)

Instagram: @au_creativewriting

Discord: <https://discord.gg/EUmNTNFXve>

E-mail: creative.writing@ausa.org.uk

Website: [Aberdeen University Creative Writing Society](#)

We sincerely hope you enjoy this publication, especially if you decide to join us because of it!

Happy reading!

Aidan William Armstrong

Ladies and Lines

“A heart for the lady.” The waiter took a mug from his tray and placed it on Faye’s side of the table. Just as he’d said, on the foam of the drink was a latte art powdered heart shape.

“And lines for the—” He paused as he looked at me, then turned back to Faye.

“Does it matter which is which?”

Faye and I exchanged a look. She replied first.

“Um... no. Same drink.”

The waiter took the second mug and placed it down on the table. Again, as he said, it was decorated with latte art of two—apparently masculine—lines. A messy equal symbol decorating the head of my hot chocolate. He gave us an awkward “Enjoy!” and wandered off through the café.

Faye and I sat for a moment.

“Why did they... gender our drinks?” she said, once the waiter was out of earshot.

“Does that not usually happen?” I asked.

“No? They usually kinda... mind their own business?” Faye chuckled. She gestured to the drink. “Do you want the heart?” I gave a nervous laugh. Of *course* I did. Hearts are *much* cooler than lines.

“Better not challenge the binary.” I raised my drink to my lips.

“A-G-A-H-C.” Faye smiled. “Assigned gender at hot chocolate.”

“Jesus Christ,” I sputtered through the foam of my drink before reaching for a napkin as Faye laughed. Dabbing at the foam around my mouth, I thought back to the waiter.

‘A heart for the lady.’

I looked down at the ruined lines in my drink.

‘Lines for the—’

“Are lines *masculine*?” The words escaped without much thought.

“Huh?”

“The waiter was gonna say ‘lines for the gentleman.’” I looked up at Faye “Like, gender roles are dumb and all, but I can at least see the link between hearts and femininity. Why the lines? Are they masculine?”

“Maybe the barista doesn’t know how to make latte art of fragility?” She smiled. So did I.

“He hesitated though.” I tapped the side of my mug with my spoon as I thought.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, he walked to the table, offered you the heart, looked at me, then hesitated and asked if it mattered which drink was which?” I tilted my head.

“Are you... going somewhere with this?”

“Was I just misgendered?”

Faye turned her head. “Were you?” She laughed.

“Like, I don’t mind so much, but...” My train of thought had departed, and I was still standing at the station waving my ticket. “Is that what just happened?”

Faye’s eyes narrowed. “You seem to care about this a *lot*.” She took a sip from her drink.

I snorted.

“Maybe it’s just my fragility showing.”

Mini Minnie

Ding Dong.

The compressed doorbell recording crackled through the speaker as I pushed the button outside Sam’s front door. From behind it, I could hear the padding of footsteps. After a moment or two, the door opened with a creak.

“Annie!” Sam smiled. “Come in!” Sam was wearing a pink apron with a cartoon winking kitten motif. Her hair was tied into a messy bun. “Did you get what I asked for?”

“Yeah, it’s all here.” I held up a plastic shopping bag.

“Great!” She leaned in for a hug before taking the bag from my hand. “Dinner’s almost ready. Go sit down, I’ll take it through once it’s done and we can look for a movie.”

I slipped off my shoes and wandered through to the living room. After allowing myself to collapse onto the sofa, I closed my eyes, and let out a sigh. I left my hand lying open to my side and waited. After a few seconds, I felt a brush of fur against my knuckles. I opened my eyes and turned to see a small, grey tabby cat nudging at my hand. Minnie.

She looked back at me with wide, round eyes and gave a small mew. I smiled, sat up, and pulled her onto my lap. I could never get over the size of her eyes. Little green marbles in her tiny kitten head. Sam would joke that they didn’t leave much room for her brain.

She adopted Minnie from a friend of a friend while she was still a kitten. We still called her a kitten, but she was near enough six years old. Not long after Sam adopted her, she just kinda stopped growing. The vet didn’t have any answers. They said that she was perfectly healthy. Just... small. I made Sam tell me everything when Minnie and I first met.

It was our first date. Sam didn’t drive, so I gave her a lift back to her building. She invited me in, but I didn’t feel a spark. Lucky for us then that my car died. Waiting inside seemed like it’d be more fun than standing in the rain, so I accepted her offer. Sam’s place was messier then. She didn’t have me to bully her into tidying up. She led me through an arch of cardboard Amazon boxes and moved a pile of magazines from the sofa. Romantic.

She offered to get me a drink. I figured that every second she took getting it was a second we didn’t have to spend in awkward silence, so I asked for a hot chocolate.

While she was in the kitchen, I pulled out my phone. I was scrolling through the comments on some shitty article about some shitty person's shitty tweets when I heard it. A quiet mewling from the floor. I looked past my phone to find the tiny dust bunny of a cat staring at me from beside an empty bowl. When Sam came back, she announced her arrival with the dot of a laser pointer over my shoulder. Startled, Minnie pounced, I laughed, and that was that. Turns out it wasn't the hot chocolate that finally melted me. It was Minnie.

"Do you want pizza?" Sam's voice pulled me back to the present. She was holding her phone by the doorway to the kitchen. Her apron was gone. I could smell smoke.

"I thought you were cooking." I felt Minnie gently headbutt my hand the moment I stopped paying attention to her.

"...I was." Sam smiled. "Or... I tried at least."

I rolled my eyes. "Now that you mention it, I *am* in the mood for pizza." Sam's face lit up. She scooped Minnie up with one hand, and set her down on a stack of boxes, crudely arranged and taped into a cat tree. Minnie jumped back off almost immediately and made for my lap.

"She really loves you," Sam laughed. "...And so do I."

I gave her a glare and rolled my eyes again. "Shut the hell up and order the pizza."

She laughed and gave me a light kick. "You're so mean!"

I stroked Minnie as she settled on my lap and purred. "She doesn't seem to think so."

Sam took a seat next to me on the sofa and planted a kiss on my cheek before pulling up the website for the pizza place.

One day, I might tell her that I only kept seeing her for the cat, but not today.

Maybe on the honeymoon.

Out of the Coffin

Content warning: Mentions of blood

The alley was dark, lit only by my phone and the red rays cast down from the neon light shining above the doorway. Drops of rain padded noncommittally to the pavement. I had three messages. All from Vlad. The first read, *I'm here*. Ok, good. I hadn't been stood up, at least. The second, *Are you coming?* Yes. I thought. I had planned to. I wanted to. But for some reason, it had felt like too much to respond. The third: *Are you lost?*

I looked up to the sign, the red glare lit the raindrops on my glasses into drops of blood. *Was I lost?* Should I have been there? I had never been somewhere like that before. I was always too scared to go alone. But when Vlad asked if we could meet there, it felt... right.

At least until I found myself standing alone in the rain and wondering if I could really go in.

Maybe it was just a phase. Somehow. Maybe the cravings were normal. Just one of those things nobody likes to talk about. Maybe I was just overthinking things. Maybe—

My thoughts were interrupted by a buzzing from my phone. A fourth message.

Is everything ok?

A red drop of rain landed on the 'y,' and I realised that I'd come too far to back out. Vlad was waiting for me inside. He had been nice. Understanding. Patient. If I stood him up, I couldn't forgive myself, even if he would. I took a breath, put my phone into my pocket, and took one last look at the neon red sign before taking my first steps down into the club.

The Blood-Shed.

There was no bouncer. A place like that didn't need one. If you were meant to be there, you'd have no problems. If you weren't, though...

I entered without issue to find what looked like a seedy bar lit by red-tinted spotlights shining through a thick mist. It wasn't exactly the kind of place you'd go for a quiet pint. Shitty techno dance music played through black speakers on every wall. The place was packed. Wall-to-wall pale faces in a range of mostly black and red clothing. Some looked like they were trapped in the 1980s. Less common were the ones that looked like they were trapped in the 1800s. Among the fake leather jackets and high waisted jeans, there were boxy black suits and the occasional full-on cape. I arrived at the bar and found myself distracted by the range of drinks on offer. I had expected only the one option, but behind the bartender was a wide range of bottled and branded booze, all various shades of red. Some of it was even on tap.

"Adam!" a voice called from behind me. *Vlad*. I turned, and there he was. His black hair slicked back, and his pale skin illuminated pink by the red spotlights. It was the first time I'd seen him in person. He held a crimson glass with a distressingly viscous head. "You made it!" He put a hand on my shoulder. Around his mouth was a fresh red ring. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Oh... Vlad!" He didn't seem to notice my hesitation. "Sure... I'll have..." *Shit*. I hadn't thought that far ahead. I peered over the bar to look for a drink I recognised and was confident wouldn't kill me.

"Uh... A Bloody Mary?" I forced a smile. Vlad raised an eyebrow. He turned and called out.

"Tim! Pick up a Bloody Mary for my friend?" he yelled over the music. Nobody seemed to mind. "And another of my usual! Put it on my tab!" He gave a thumbs up and then turned back to me. "Should we sit?"

"Y-Yeah. Sounds good." Vlad took hold of my arm and led me through the club. He walked ahead of me, opening a gap in the crowd. Leading me like Moses between two walls of the white, black, and dead sea. I had expected only men. Places like this only ever had men in the movies. We reached an empty table. Vlad let go of my arm, and we sat.

"I was worried you'd gotten yourself lost!" He smiled over his drink. I flashed half a smile back.

"Maybe for a bit." I could feel his eyes on me. I tried to look anywhere else. He had been so easy to talk to online. Why was it so hard in person? I felt a buzz in my pocket and pulled out my phone.

Nothing to say, huh?

I looked to Vlad. He smiled warmly, with dark eyes and red lips. I moved to reply.

I guess it's just easier online.

He was already typing his reply when I looked up.

Are you alright? We don't have to stay here.

He was nice. He was patient. I looked back at him and placed my phone face-down onto the table.

"I'm fine." I felt my leg twitch. "Thanks, though." I smiled. He smiled too. "S-So—"

I was interrupted by a burly man with black-painted nails carrying a tray.

"Bloody Mary?" He glared down.

"Oh, thanks." He placed the glass in front of me. It was tall. And darker than I had expected. Tomato juice wasn't that dark, was it?

"And the usual for Vlad." The man picked up what looked like a sealed plastic bag of scarlet liquid attached to a straw and lobbed it across the table.

"Thanks, Tim." Vlad bit the end of the straw and began to suck. I watched as Tim made his way back through the crowd. They opened for him too. I wondered if they would open for me if I tried to leave. Red lights lit the dancing bodies through the smoke, and I realised that I couldn't see the exit. I turned back to Vlad to find a pale creature hunched over a rapidly deflating blood bag. I looked to my drink. Bloody Marys weren't supposed to be that dark. I shouldn't have been there. There were no bouncers. I wasn't like them; I wasn't—

"Adam." I felt Vlad's hand on my arm. He wiped his mouth. "Are you sure you're ok?"

I didn't answer. It was too much. The music, the mist, the people. The drinks. Viscous crimson liquors of all types and shades. I had seen it all before. In movies and online. I thought this was what I wanted. I thought this was who I was. For all I had seen, I had never considered my own teeth sinking into a pulsing throat.

"I have to go." I pushed myself away from the table and into the crowd.

"Already? Adam, wai—" I tried not to listen. He was nice. Patient. It killed me to leave. How could I explain?

The bodies surrounded me. Their swaying, grinding forms blurring together in the mist and the low light. Dizzying black and white waves surrounding and convulsing to the tunes from the speakers. I wondered how long it would be before they drowned me. Through the music, I heard a cry.

"Adam!" Vlad. He was following me. I couldn't slow down. Caution wouldn't let me escape fast enough. Without thinking, I pushed through the crowd. Faster to apologise than to ask. It wasn't as if I could harm them anyway. Without daring to look back, I drove through the dancers and the rising red mist until I saw it. A green gleam above the entrance, signalling escape.

Fire Exit. I made for the door to find—

Tim. He stood between me and my safety. Black nails now hidden in a clenched fist. Sharp gaze cutting through my tender flesh. He started to walk. With each step, I felt my heart slow. He knew. How could he not? And now that he knew, there was no way in hell I was going to make it through the door. I clenched a fist of my own. And my teeth. He raised a hand to stop me. I prayed to God as he made it closer and closer until he spoke.

"I think my friend wants a word." He raised a finger to point. I turned to find Vlad, panting, hands on his knees.

"It's alright, Tim," he gasped. "Let him through." I looked to the hulking man before me. He gave a nod and wandered to the bar. Vlad approached. "Can we have a chat?"

.....

The night air was still, save for the muffled music from below. We stood by the entrance, under the Blood-Shed's neon sign. The light didn't feel quite so red anymore.

"Do you want to tell me what just happened?" I didn't look at Vlad as he spoke.

"I..." The words choked me. "I shouldn't be here."

"Why do you say that?" My eyes burned. My chest raced. I couldn't feel myself breathing.

"I'm not a vampire." I couldn't look at him.

"What?"

"I just... thought that I might be. I thought it would explain things. Why I feel what I feel. Why I burn so easily in the sun. I looked into it. Websites, apps, forums. Communities. It felt right for a while, and when I started talking to you—" I bit down to stop the words from escaping. Too late. "...It felt... really right."

"...And?" He nodded. I closed my eyes.

"I was wrong. Tonight was... wrong." I sighed. "It was fine in theory, but... this isn't me. I'm sorry." I felt a hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes. I had expected horror. Glaring eyes, bared fangs, waiting to strike. He just smiled.

"Don't worry." He squeezed my shoulder slightly. "Tonight was a lot. I shouldn't have asked you to meet me here." My eyes stung.

"But... I lied to you." I raised a hand to wipe away my tears.

"Did you? Sounds like you were just confused." He laughed. "It sounds like you still are..." Every kind word was a stake in my heart. "But, you know, you don't have to know everything right away."

"What do you mean?"

He let go of my shoulder.

"Nobody starts out with all the answers. It's not the same for everybody. That's ok. You need time to figure things out." He drew back and started to make his way into the club. I was alone. After some time, I wiped my eyes and moved to leave. I didn't make it more than a few steps before my journey was interrupted by a buzzing from my pocket. I quickly checked my phone. I knew who it was from.

But you don't have to figure them out alone.

I laughed. I stood for a second under the red light of the sign. The rain had stopped, and I was still lost. I turned and made my way back down the steps into the Blood-Shed.

Smoking Break

“So, I finally managed to convince somebody to go on a date with me.”

Selina sputtered a laugh through a mouthful of smoke. When she said she was leaving for a cigarette, I figured that it would be a good opportunity to get some quiet and recharge. And talk. I loved being invited to Danny’s parties, but they tended to be more high energy than I could take without breaks. They didn’t leave much room for quiet talks. Smokers made great excuses for quiet talks. Selina brought her hand to her chest and coughed up a response.

“Ok, *one or two* red flags there already,” she rasped.

“What red flags? Agreeing to date me?”

“Not from them honey, from you,” she sighed the last of the smoke from her lungs.

“The hell did I do?”

She fired a glare in my direction and shook her head. “Ok, well, firstly, you didn’t *convince* them to go on a date. They *want* to. We good so far?”

Selina had always seemed to know when I deserved to be talked down to.

“So far.” I smiled.

“Good.” She took a drag from her cigarette. “*Secondly*,” she started, “the self-deprecating look may be good around friends, but it’s not exactly attractive.”

“What do you mean?” I laughed. Selina raised a hand and turned it in the air as she spoke.

“Oh, woe is me! I’m so un-dateable! I have bad hair and I can’t hold a conversation to save my life! But at least I’ve managed to *convince* somebody to give me a chance!” she sang in an exaggerated posh accent. I clasped my hands together and let out a sigh.

“...Is my hair really that bad?” I smirked. Selina rolled her eyes.

“Shut the fuck up you narcissistic prick.”

“Charming.”

“Yeah, more so than you are at least.” She took another drag from her cigarette. She sighed smoke out through her nostrils like some tired, septum pierced dragon. “God, I wanna smack you sometimes.”

“Yeah, I wanna smack me too, sometimes.”

She shot me another glare.

“If you talk to your date like this you are going to be single for the rest of your life, you know that right?” There was silence for a moment. I stood against the wall as she waited for a retort. I didn’t have one.

“That was tremendously uncalled for.”

“No it wasn’t.” It wasn’t. She leaned back against the wall and slid down to sit on the pavement. “So, who is this person?”

I slid down the wall to follow her partway. Not wanting to sit directly on the pavement, I settled on a kind of awkward squat.

“We met online. They’re super fuckin’ cute.”

“Fucking hell, it’s like I’m reading a teenagers diary. I’m asking about your date, not for the love poetry of a 12-year-old.”

“Why do I even talk to you?”

“Because nobody else wants to listen.” She blew a puff of smoke in my direction and turned back away. “Now tell me more.”

I chuckled.

“What do you wanna know?”

“Jeeesus Christ, literally anything at this point.” Her shoulders deflated. She took a breath before she continued. “What do you like about them?”

“They actually talk to me for one.”

Her mouth fell as she turned to look at me.

“Oh honey...” She shook her head.

“Shut up.”

“Are those really the standards you’re at now?” She spoke softly. The harsher tones of her jokes had fallen away. Something about that hurt.

“Like I said.” I smiled. “I finally managed to convince somebody to go on a date with me.” Selina gave one final blow of smoke before dropping her cigarette to the pavement. She pushed herself up and offered me her hand.

“C’mon. We should go back inside.”

Blair Center

These Fields

In these sweet fields, where red blood was once spilled,
in work and war, beneath these blue skies clear,
where colours grow tall on soil ploughed and tilled,
you would not now think that there was pain here.

Beneath sunbeams showing off Nature's wealth,
bright, ripe barley winks, shining silver-gold.
You might not think of dangers to Earth's health;
you might not think about them unless told.

See those stunning peaks there, the heather hills,
where granite is scorched with violet flame.
Down here, you might not think of wind and chills
which dance and race around the rock's domain.

See that sea of bonnie thick purple strands
but wait and see them turn to twigs tipped white.
Regal robes soon pass in Time and Frost's hands,
so enjoy the healthy summer's long light.

Hear the thumping heart pump its youthful life,
both on these calm fields and that cool stone numb.
Here, now, you would not think therein lay strife;
you would not think that Death could ever come.

Clarence Royall

Cast

Content warning: Misogyny, mild transphobia

It is your fifth quest, and the first one in the summer months. The chainmail heats under the crackling sun and you feel rivulets of sweat drip haphazardly down your back.

They call you Sir Ulric, and it is a name you wear with pride. You have your name, your title, your armour, your sword, and your horse. A true man, protector of the people. A man of honour you shall be. At the end of your quest, you shall gain a bride, holding your shoulders as you swing her down from her tower prison, flush-cheeked and strong of intelligence and wit. So grateful for her rescue, marriage shall be a feeble price to pay.

It is a path you have followed since birth, the path of your father, and his father before him.

The path is long. You have far to go, Sir Ulric.

There is a dragon, a vicious snarling beast, who snatched the then child-Princess from the arms of her sobbing parents. The Princess was not cursed, nor brought up as payment for a past misdeed. The youngest of three, she was the darling of all who knew her. Twelve men have been lost on the same quest you have now taken on. You are the thirteenth. The omen of it all hangs around you like smog.

There is a forest ahead Sir Ulric, would you like to go in?

It is midday and yet you already have to strain your eyes against the dark. Shadows glisten among the trees, the canopy above providing blessed shade and diminishing treasured sunlight. You hear a crack of a twig. Your horse startles. You hold on tightly, clenching at the saddle. “Woah, boy,” you say, and you see a fox, flinty eyed and red of fur, dart across the path, the assumed source of the noise. Your horse calms. You ride onwards, shifting slightly in an effort to release your tense muscles.

There is a fork in the path. Left or right, Sir Ulric?

The map says left. Another omen. Is that a crow you hear in the canopy above?

The rhythmic clapping of horse’s hooves seems to sync with the almost mocking pounding of your heart. You venture along the path, straightening yourself up in a show of bravery that you try to convince yourself is not really a show at all. You wear grey armour. The horse is grey and your sword shall be grey when you get it out of your scabbard. The woods look grey as well, the life seemingly sucked out of them in the darkness. You stop at a stream; the water slides over smooth rocks, clear and burbling. You drink, and invite your horse to follow.

You can see your face in the water, distorted and ugly. Your skin looks grey too, in the light.

Your hair is not grey. It is yellowish, like straw.

You decide to camp near the stream. The road is long and you do not wish to fight the dragon in darkness. You take off your armour, your skin singing as the sweat from your back is washed by the stream. You hum. It is a moment of quiet you enjoy. Perhaps when you regale the story—first to your fellow men in the tavern, accompanied by several pints of mead, then years later, to the wee-uns that will sit in awe upon your lap—you shall refer to it as the quiet before the storm. It is poetic, in a sense. Just you and the water, and the horse munching peacefully on the surrounding foliage.

Or mayhaps you will not tell the story at all. After all, there is no honour in the wait; no tension in the solitude and silence of the moment.

You eat meat pies and they taste of ash. The butcher on the edge of town—the bar-maid told you once, eyes a-glittering—cuts the meat in his pies with sawdust instead of rusk. But he remains the cheapest in town, and an dishonoured knight is not a wealthy one.

(You dream of the Princess, golden, and her radiance shining so much brighter in person as opposed to the musty portraits that are all that remain of her image.)

(You dream of a dragon, hulking and scarlet red, blood colours standing harsh against the ashen greys of the landscape. It snarls, a deafening, soul-clenching noise, and then, gaping jaws drawing open, revealing teeth as long as your forearm, it speaks. A shockingly human voice. You try to figure out what it is saying—it is Brittonic after all—but the words drift past you like the stream over the rocks.)

You wake, laying on your mat and wondering why you feel so shaken.



Sir Ulric starts onwards, leading the horse by bridle. Not far to go now.

You see light peeking through a gap in the trees ahead, and it seems so bright in comparison that you find yourself shielding your eyes from the sudden onslaught. You squint your eyes at the map. The forest was but the first half of the journey. The second, the planes of the cliffs. You squint on ahead, trying to see if you can spot a glimpse of the castle in which you are told the dragon resides. No luck.

There is mist, creeping its fingers in the waist-high strands of meadow. You steer the horse to the edge of the cliff, and gaze at what should be the ocean, but instead is soupy fog and the glimpse of rocks, jagged and uneven.

It may make you a coward, but you don't look over the cliffs for the rest of your journey, steering your stallion far away from the edge. *It's better to be safe than sorry*, you think to yourself. You know you don't believe it.



There is a castle on the horizon ahead. Are you sure you want to go forth, Sir Ulric?

You are no longer sure. *It is noble, it is honoured*. The voice of your father rings in your skull. That is right. You have too much to gain, too much to lose. The joy of finishing your quest shall far outweigh the pain of the journey.

The castle looms, black against the white mist of the skyline. Cragged turrets jut out, higgledy-piggledy in a way that surely cannot be conducive to its stability. You wouldn't know, you guess. You had apprenticed under a labourer once, you remember, as a young teen. *Character building*, your father had said. You remember the work being back-breaking, and steady in a way that knighthood never was.

There was no honour in being a labourer. You apprenticed first as a squire, then a knight, every following year.

.....

The door is tall enough to let in six men, and made of dark wood and iron grille, bolts holding it together—each the size of one of your clenched fists. You suppose that while the door may seem ridiculous to a man, it is probably on the verge of tightness for the beast.

You dismount from your horse, leading in gentle fashion toward the entrance ahead.

You knock.

Your armour makes such a deafening clang that you find yourself covering your ears in instinct. You glance around, heart hammering its blacksmith's tune in your chest. Good. Nobody is around to see your cowardice. You straighten yourself in proper knight fashion.

The door opens, suspiciously silent for something so large. It has to have been a near two feet thick. You are glad for your armour in the moment, for it conceals your shiver.

A man stands in the doorway, slim, short, and golden-haired in a way that makes your own locks seem more straw-like than ever. A captive of the beast, it seems. And yet the man is serene in a way that you can imagine no captive to be. The man speaks, and his voice is melodious. You feel a little tension ebb away at the sound of it.

"A traveller?" the man speaks, tilting his golden head to one side. "We don't get many of those around here. Would you mind stating your purpose?"

You find yourself straightening. This is it, the finale of your quest. You know you must be on guard, but first impressions are important, as your father would've told you. You open your mouth, and pray your tone doesn't betray the shaking anticipation that you feel.

"I am Sir Ulric of the great Kingdom of Camelot. I have come to rescue the Princ—"

"There is no Princess here, Sir Ulric." The man's voice is now hard as steel, clipped in a way that makes the melody of his voice a harsh staccato.

"I—I beg your pardon?"

"There is no Princess here. I shall have to ask you to leave."

Numbness spreads through your veins with every beat of your heart, which seems all too loud in your ears. You know this is the right place. There is but nought for miles in the surrounding area, and every previous landmark had been one that had lined up so perfectly with one on the map.

"There must be some mistake, kind Sir!" you cry, and something bitter seems to crawl up your throat, which seems to grow ever tighter in your panic. Perhaps you hadn't explained yourself quite clearly enough.

"I am Sir Ulric, and in a quest to gain my honour, I have come to rescue the Princess from the claws of the wicked beast!"

The man smiles, but it isn't a nice one, teeth showing in a way that feels slightly less than human. "They are no beast, Sir Ulric, and they have been far less wicked than any noble I have met." He pauses, looking you up and down in an intense manner, akin to a physician considering a subject for dissection.

"You seem to be at a crossroads, Sir Ulric. Would you care to join me for tea?"

And, with a hurried tie of the horse, and little other options, you join the strange man for tea.



“My name is Cassian,” the man says, and his voice is back to its melodious serenity. You open your mouth and he silences you pre-emptively with a raise of one hand. “And no, I am not the beast.”

“What did you do with the Princess?” You burst out, a splash of tea escaping your mug. “She was a child! And your beloved beast kidnapped her!”

“The Princess wasn’t kidnapped.”

“It was in broad daylight. There were countless witnesses!”

Cassian sighs, deep and thoughtful. “Can I tell you a story, Sir Ulric? And do try not to interrupt until I have finished.”

You nod, and with a clink of Cassian placing his mug on the table before you, he begins to talk.

“The Princess came to the dragon, one day, and said the following: ‘What makes a woman?’ To which the dragon replied that they did not know, for they were certainly not one. And then the child asked, ‘What makes a man?’ and the dragon told the child that they did not know this either, for the same reason.

“And it was then that the dragon said this: ‘What you know as man or woman, is simply what you have been told makes a man or a woman, told this by the people who benefit from the power that divide creates.’

“‘True serenity,’ the dragon continued, ‘is achieved when a person learns that. And whether they choose to remain as they are, or choose to become someone entirely new, they will always be a stronger person for it.’

“And so the Princess, who was never really a Princess, thanked the dragon for their kindness, and asked if they had enough room in their castle for two. And the dragon laughed. It was the sweetest sound I ever heard.”

Cassian smiles, and you feel wrung-out, head spinning in a way it has never before.

“You are the Princess.”

“I never was, not really.”

The man before you begins to pack up the tea-set. “What shall you do from here?”

You sigh, armour clinking as you put your head in your hands. “I do not know. My whole life I have been preparing for this, my moment of honour. Now I know it shall never be.”

Cassian sits down once more. “Perhaps you should stay here a while. I believe there is some soul-searching you are in need of.”

A thundering sound of flapping wings sounds outside, followed by the crash of something very large and very heavy landing outside. You reach for your sword, before withdrawing your hand. You have no fight left in you. Cassian gives you a look that is almost proud.

“Mother is home,” the man said, standing and offering you a hand. “I think you should meet them.”

Loom

Content warning: Arachnophobia, animal death, body horror, body dysmorphia, mentions of cannibalism, unreality, hallucinations, panic attacks

There is a spider on your wall. It shifts a spindly leg, skittering in sickening fashion across the plaster.

There is a spider on your wall, and you can't look away. You stagger back, spine hitting the wall. A strangled whimper claws its way from your throat and between your gritted teeth.

Don't look away. Don't look away. Don't look awayDon'tlookawa—

The spider strings a web. It shimmers in the light, and you feel bile creeping up from your throat. You can't look away. If you look away it'll play its bastard game and skitter off, sparing itself, letting itself live to make more and more of it that will *continue to haunt your fucking room*.

You grab your boot. A heavy, worn thing. You will your hand to stop shaking. The movement, your scattered mind says, will be enough to alert the beast, to let it *get away and oh shit it's on the move again*.

You dart forward, a hunter on the prowl. The boot is raised, your eyes laser focused. A draw-back of the wrist, a slam forward. A thud.

You don't feel the crunch of legs and abdomen beneath your boot. *Missed. You missed it*. A skittering of legs catches the corner of your eye, and you feel your heartbeat rabbit-quick once more.

The Beast crawls behind your bed. You look, but by the time you get the torch on your phone up, the beast is gone, crawling, spinning webs, the perfect place to hide, to gather its troops, to *wait to pounce*.

If there is one, there will be more. They know the way in. Stand guard, Penelope.

(You don't sleep that night, curled up on your bed, covers discarded so as to provide the beast no surface to climb on without your knowledge.)

(By the time morning comes, you shake with exhaustion, yet your eyes do not droop.)

(Your mother rings. She asks how you're doing. Hot, thick shame curls in your gut. You're too old to be like this.)

("I'm fine, Mum." Lies. Spun from your lips like molten sugar, sweet and saccharine. You try not to think of the other weaver that comes to mind.)

.....

You catch the spider the next night. You abandon the boot. Too imprecise. You can only rely on yourself.

You wrap a tissue around your fist. *No use in creating a mess, Penelope*, your mother's voice chants obediently in your head.

A lean at the hips. A lunge, viper quick. You feel the crunch of legs under the thin barrier you have created, the burst of the abdomen. Turning the tissue, you shudder at the twitching legs, the yellowish-brown fluid leaking from the creature's cracked exoskeleton.

You toss the tissue in the dustbin, a shuddering gasp of relief shaking out of your throat. Gone. It's over.

(For now, a voice in your head mutters. You shake it off. You know there will be more spiders. But that is something for future Penelope to deal with.)

.....

There is a hair on your arm. An inch long, dark, and so thick and wiry it stands almost on end. It almost reminds you more of a dog's whisker than anything else. You are blonde. You wonder how you didn't see it sooner. You grasp it between forefinger and thumb. The skin around the follicle is red and slightly swollen, similar to a pimple. *An ingrown then.* That would explain why you hadn't seen it. A light tug is applied, before you realise it would be more likely to snap, and that would fix nothing. You hunt down a pair of tweezers, the plucking of the hair seeming to jerk a nerve, a slight hiss escaping your teeth. You withdraw it from the tweezer teeth, twisting and spinning betwixt your fingers. Odd. But no matter.

It has been dealt with.

.....

(You dream of spiders, crawling over your flesh, spinning webs over every orifice till you are rendered mute by gauzy threads that lay thick between your teeth. They bite and you swear they burn, venom twisting its way through your spine, your skin, your skeleton, letting the creatures paralyze you into their puppet.)

(You wake up and you still feel the skittering of spider's legs across your skin)

.....

There are more hairs growing on you, more and more and more, all dark and wiry and standing near on end upon your flesh. They grow in stranger and stranger places, out of your right shoulder, on your ankles, and on one memorable occasion, on the tip of your pointer finger, neatly sat in the spiral of the print. You pluck them and each one brings a new pain until, one day, there are simply too many, in too hard-to-reach places.

(You begin to wear heavier clothes, less t-shirts, resolving to pluck only those that begin to grow on your hands and face. You sweat up a storm, it is summer after all, but you can't bring yourself to show your body, what it is becoming.)

.....

You dream of spiders.

Big ones, little ones, moving moving moving. You keep dreaming of spiders' legs crawling on your skin, pitter patter pitter patter sounding in your ears unnaturally loud like hailstones.

You wake up.

The spiders are still there, you can see them in the darkness, feel the itching on your skin. You yelp, scritch and scratch, the spiders getting caught under your fingernails, legs and guts smearing themselves over your skin.

You can't see.

You turn on the light.

You can't see any spiders, just the raised red lines your fingernails have created in your skin. You sit there, chest heaving, heart thumping out of your ribcage.

You look up, and you see a spider on the wall, your room small enough that you clearly see every spindly leg.

You blink, and the spider is gone.



Have your teeth always been that sharp?

You gaze into the mirror, lips pulled back with a finger. No. No. They look fine, don't they? The seeming growth of your four incisors must be the warping of the mirror. It is old after all. You touch a finger to the tip. Sharp, but your skin has grown all the more sensitive in the past few days. You must be feeling things differently. The finger travels up, prodding and pressing at the gum.

Scarlet red, and tender to the touch.



You know your measurements by heart, your mother taught you to sew as a child and you kept it up. You know you are 5 ft 8 with a long torso that makes it hard for you to fit into jumpsuits.

*And thus you know you seem to be a full two inches shorter than when you last checked. Two months ago. How didn't you notice? How didn't you **feel** it?*

Well, Penelope?



You wake up with a sharp pain pressing into your ribs, like you slept on baseballs. You wriggle around trying to dislodge them before pushing yourself up and towards the mirror on your wardrobe wall. You lift up your shirt, and freeze.

Two lumps on either side, one around halfway down your ribs, the other just above the bone of your pelvis. About the size of one of your clenched fists, each throbs and almost seems to glow with angry irritation. You gently probe the lower left one. Hard, unmoving at the base and skin seeming thinner on top.

Like something is growing. You shake your head, trying to dissipate the rising panic. You should try to think logically.

You should call a doctor.

But you haven't changed your GP yet, despite moving a full three months ago. Would this count as serious enough to warrant an A&E trip? Probably, but the idea of being seen by other people makes you want to cry.

You'd give it to next week, you decide. If you get worse, then you'll go then.

(You ignore the fact that you know you'll probably say the same thing then. No. You have to take control. Just the one week.)

(You call your mother and can barely speak over the sobs in your voice. Her voice is comforting and you oh so wish you could actually hug her in person, that you could have someone just notice the way your body keeps on changing and how your mind seems to be unravelling.)

(She asks you what's wrong. You say you're homesick.)

(And sure enough, when the week is up, you still don't go to the hospital.)

.....

Here's something.

Your name is Penelope. Your Father calls you Penny and your friends from high school called you Nell. But you have always called yourself Penelope.

Your mother liked Greek mythology and read you the epics when you were small and sleepless and half-distracted by the glow-in-the-dark stars on your bedroom ceiling. It probably wasn't the first time she had read you *The Odyssey*, but it was probably the first you remember. She had turned to you, a small smile on her face, and gently removed your sucked thumb from your mouth. You were trying to quit. It would pull your teeth out of place, she said.

"This is where I got your name, you know? Penelope, the weaver."

You had giggled and responded that you thought weaving for so long sounded boring.

She had also read you Ovid.

You don't want to think about Ovid.

.....

You run out of groceries when you are 5ft 4 and your eyesight is slowly dimming. The lumps on your ribs have grown, all four growing in length but not width. Thirty centimetres currently and coated in a hard shell and black fuzz. Your arms and legs have gained the same treatment, and both seem thinner, slowly reaching the size of the others and when you probe your ribs, they feel flatter, closer to one another.

You dread the day they'll merge.

You put on your largest hoodie, then your thick winter coat for extra coverage. The heat makes you feel faint. You go to your freezer and tape ice packs to your abdomen and neck.

In the supermarket, you avert your eyes from the judgemental stares when you pile instant noodles and canned soup in your basket. You don't want to do this again for as long as you can manage.

You meet eyes with a man, middle-aged and balding. You freeze, saliva filling your mouth as your thoughts grow blank and a deep, animalistic desire to *rip and tear and catch and consume* fills your mind. You find yourself stepping forward and the click of your heel startles you back into your humanity.

The man stares at you, frozen and with wide, fearful eyes.

You pay for your produce and leave.

.....

You dream that night of a bird, of your home and one of the pigeons that lived in the fir tree in your back garden. Dream-you lunges forward, grasping onto the bird, ripping feathers from flesh, canines sinking into its neck, the squawks silencing instantly.

You feel the blood running down your chin and when you start into consciousness you feel tears running down your cheeks.

A week later, you will have the same dream, birds and bugs and flesh merging into one.

You cry with eight eyes instead of two.

.....

You call your mother, and you find you cannot speak, only a series of hissing clicks escaping your throat. You hang up, and text that the signal in your building has gotten really bad.

You have to hold the phone an inch from your face. You can't tell if it's from your dimming eyesight or the tears that never seem to leave nowadays.

.....

Penelope wove a shroud. But you have no husband, no lover to weave over and over to help you remain faithful.

Spin, spin, spin, spin your strands, Penelope.

Your mind isn't so good these days.

The phone rings and rings and you can't seem to remember what you're supposed to do when it rings.

.....

There is a spider on the wall. Arachne spins her web.

Daniel Kearns

A Soulless Corporate Announcement. With Dinosaurs.

Content warning: Implied death

Greetings, whoever may be reading this announcement!

If you are seeing this, then guess what? You have been specially selected by our company, PaleoBiologics, for a once in a lifetime opportunity to tour our brand-new, state of the art research and exhibition centre located... Well, it's a secret, but you'll find out when our helicopter escort brings you down!

Now, we know what you're thinking. "*Isn't this just Jurassic Park?*" or something else to that effect. And to that, we say, "Piss off!" We here at PaleoBiologics specialise in the display of authentic prehistoric bioforms from a range of different periods, from the Cambrian to the Quaternary, meaning you'll be witnessing so much more than simple dinosaurs. Using the latest in temporal exploration and animal capturing technologies, we seek to bring in creatures from the distant past and house them in artificial environments replicating their natural habitats. It is our primary aim to dispel any unsavoury rumours or misinformation that may have been brought on by inaccurate paleomedia.

What this means is, no, the *Dilophosaurus* does not spit venom, yes, all our 'raptors' have feathers, and yes, the *Tyrannosaurus* can still see you even if you aren't moving. Trust us on this, we tested. Ensure you pay respects to Joey from Accounting at some point whilst visiting exhibits displaying tyrannosauroid theropods. Oh, and all their wrists are correctly pronated.

To calm any fears you may have, the PaleoBiologics Security Association has ensured that all security measures meet our current guidelines. Exit points are clearly marked for visitor convenience, and security patrols will regularly make sure that there is always distance between you and whatever you're looking at through the glass. Don't be afraid to call for help, which can be done through the use of the many safety checkpoints located throughout the complex.

Our facility is broken up into several different sectors, each containing 10 'levels' that feature a diverse range of creatures housed in unique environments designed both for their comfort, and for displaying them in all their glory to those coming along to see them. Each animal's individual needs will be catered toward, thanks to a wide network of supporting organisations who have offered their services to provide food and other materials needed to provide care toward these remarkable creatures.

So, come on down! Settle in, reserve your seat on the transportation now, and come along for the time of your lives!

PaleoBiologics

The Fractured Sky

Content warning: Death, mild homophobia, one use of slur

January 1st, 2022, otherwise known as the day the world had ended. That's when it all began, almost as soon as the clocks struck midnight. It had not been easy for the people of Earth: global pandemics and a collapsing trust in world leaders took an incomprehensible toll on the world. Everybody hoped that the next year would show improvement, praying that they were approaching the light at the end of the tunnel. Instead, once the new year had begun, the skies cracked open and bled, strikes of lightning destroying whatever lay directly beneath them. Nobody was able to explain what was happening. Scientists scrambled for answers while the public decried the apocalypse coming upon them.

Of course, that was the beginning. Things got worse from there. People began to disappear. The lightning strikes had stopped simply destroying everything beneath them and began to target people. Seemingly at random, no rhyme or reason to any of it. Nobody knew what happened to those who were struck; they were just assumed dead. Once again, scientists struggled to grasp for some form of understanding, while the general public spread paranoia throughout social media, with nobody allowed even a moment of rest as events worsened still. Over time, the fear and initial shock of the event faded into the background, becoming a memory. The extranormal became the normal, the random disappearances just became an accepted component of the everyday. The broken sky had become the new normal.

The new normal... for most, at least.

.....

April 11th, 2022

Three Months After the "Fractured Sky" Event

Jodie lay still upon the roof of her home, staring up at the sky hanging above her head. The clouds offered a temporary reprieve from the looming wound in the air. The wind blew strongly, keeping her against the tiles beneath her and pushing her down as she tried to sit upright. She smiled, closing her eyes and feeling the breeze flow past her. It was moments like these that gave her flickers of hope, reminding her that the world wasn't devoid of it, that there was still something worth fighting for.

Not that she was much of a fighter. Jodie was never one to rush headfirst into a conflict, preferring to keep her distance or seek some sort of peaceful resolution—provided that was an option. She was thankful, in a way, for the events of the last three months. While the world around her seemed to fall apart, Jodie had managed to become closer to those she held dear. Her immediate family and small, yet tight, circle of friends... their bonds grew stronger through these dark times, giving one another the strength to carry on through the day-to-day of their new existence.

She felt a buzzing in her pocket: her phone vibrating with the quiet 'ding' of a notification. Jodie reached into her pocket and unlocked her phone screen, seeing a message from one of her friends, Owen. The message was simple, reading '*30 mins. Stone list.*' Taking in a small breath, Jodie pulled herself up and made her way along the rooftop, reaching the ladder she had taken to make her way down. She climbed down and made her way to the bag that she had left on her doorstep, grabbing it and swinging it over her shoulder as she walked through the front gate and down the street. She glanced once more at her phone to remind herself of where she needed to be.

Looking around the pavements on either side of the cracked road, there was an eerie atmosphere that nobody else seemed to be consciously aware of, which was arguably worse in her eyes. People still went about their day, giving passing greetings as they walked around, not even paying attention to the giant, dark-orange tear in the sky. Smaller cracks extended beyond the rip and further scarred the once-beautiful blue hanging above everybody. Jodie continued walking. She heard a distant rumbling, and looked toward a young boy riding his bike, tossing newspapers left and right. She knew what was coming. Part of her wanted to try and save the boy, though she knew she could not. Closing her eyes and turning away, Jodie clenched her fist as her ears filled with the crackling of lightning and the cut-off scream of the child in quick succession.

She opened her eyes again, looking at where the boy had been, a fallen bike on the ground being all that remained of him. Jodie sighed, glancing around the street and noticing how nobody seemed to be reacting to the strike, as though it were just some normal occurrence and not the tragedy that it was. *'Is this just meant to be our lives now?'* she thought to herself, not halting her walk down the street and trying to focus on where she was going and who she was going to see. Shifting her mind toward the positive, something she sought to cling onto during these times, Jodie wore a smile as she reached the end of the street, spotting a small group of three waving at her from beneath a leafless tree.

Waving back at the group, Jodie sped up her walk, her arms outstretched in front of her to greet Alan, a young lad wearing an oversized hoodie and his hair spiked out in various directions. The pair embraced each other closely for a moment before they pulled themselves back. "Good to see you're still here," Alan said, wearing his signature infectious grin, something that she was impressed he could still pull off after everything.

"Same to you, Al." She returned the smile and glanced toward the other two members of their group, Mandy and John. "So, are we going to the Stone List?"

Alan nodded, before tilting his head toward Mandy, who was holding a basket in her right hand. "Yeah. Mandy's brought some stuff, so I thought maybe we could picnic near the stone. Well, it was her idea, but it was mine to invite you, so..."

Jodie laughed a little, nodding as she moved some of her hair behind her ear. "Alright, yeah. Let's do it." She patted Alan's shoulder as she walked past him and toward Mandy and John. As she glanced at Mandy, Jodie felt something catch in her throat. The sort of nervousness that, for whatever reason, only Mandy was able to bestow upon her. "Hey John, hey... Mandy..." She trailed off slightly, watching her friends chuckle at her slight predicament.

"Nice to see you too, Jodie." Mandy smiled, her hair blowing over her face as she raised the basket, shaking it a little. "Hope you brought an appetite, because I made sure to bring enough food for everyone."

Jodie smiled too, watching as she turned around and began walking past the nearby trees. Mandy motioned for John, Alan, and Jodie to follow. The group walked together, passing through the trees and reaching an open field. A large stone structure lay as a centrepiece, several scattered groups of people surrounding it.

Jodie walked ahead of the group, her eyes focused on the large stone, watching as it grew larger the closer she got to it. She held up one of her arms as though to try and reach the top. She drew closer, looking at the stone's face, seeing a list of names written all across it, with room for more. Her intrigue turned to a solemn silence, knowing that those were the names of those taken by the cracked

sky. She recognised a few names, people she knew from university. She brushed over them; Wyatt, Veronica, Riley, Adri, Kain, Sienna... all people who were met with a fate that they didn't deserve. Jodie pondered for a moment, thinking to herself: *'What do their families think? Do they miss their children?'*

It wasn't something she could help thinking. Everyone else around her had been all too keen to just move on and chalk up the sudden deaths to something that just happened naturally. Had the families of those people done the same? Or were they, like her, hurting and hoping for a way of getting back to the life they once knew? Perhaps she'd never know, but she couldn't let herself get too dragged down in the negatives. She had a picnic to look forward to.

Turning away from the list of names, Jodie put on a smile and made her way down to her friends, who had already picked a decently shaded spot to set up shop. She joined them, slumping herself onto the ground and crossing her legs. She watched as Maddy opened up her basket and started passing out canned drinks and wrapped sandwiches out to everyone else. Jodie smiled as she received her food and drink. She unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite, nodding her head. She looked around, watching her friends enjoy their food and drinks as well, a moment of quiet bonding that she wished they could have more of.

The group's joy began to falter with the rising sounds of distant conversations from the clusters of people surrounding them. Jodie raised her head, turning around to see what everyone else seemed to be focusing on. Not immediately noticing anything, she tried to get back to enjoying a meal with her friends, but they too were distracted with the commotion, so she looked again. Now she could see it; a group of people, armed, marching forth toward the Stone List, looking as though they were sheltering something in the centre of their formation. Jodie squinted her eyes, trying to get a better view and getting up onto her feet to do so.

The formation came to a stop, and the armed people parted through the middle, revealing a well-dressed man somewhere in his middle age, donning a fancy suit. Something clicked within Jodie's mind, a realisation of who the man was, soon followed by frustration that she didn't even know she had buried within her. She was looking at the mayor of the city.

"People, people... your attention, please," the mayor said, his voice somewhat gentle, but still commanding and firm, grasping onto the full attention of the surrounding citizens. "I have decided to join you today, in this historic moment, three months after the first of our people vanished beneath the broken sky, to further unite us all and move ahead with our lives!"

Jodie rolled her eyes listening to the mayor's words. "Move ahead, he says..." She looked down at her hands, twirling a partially eaten sandwich crust between her fingers.

Looking up at her friends, Jodie could see Mandy reaching into her basket for something concealed by a thin sheet. "Right pig, he is. 'Ooh, let's all just move on, hardy-har-har.'" She watched her pull out a megaphone, getting it ready for some sort of grand speech, eyeing the mayor as he continued prattling on in the distance. "It's about time someone else's voice was heard, don't you guys think?" Mandy looked around the group, as though seeking validation for what she was going to do. Her eyes darted between John and Adam before settling on Jodie, who simply bit her lip and gave a nod, authorising her friend to do what she wanted.

Jodie watched Mandy get onto her feet and hold the megaphone up to her mouth. A few people scattered around glanced over at her, but the attention of the masses remained on the mayor. Jodie watched from the side-lines, contemplating what she should do. Tapping her fingers impatiently

against the grass, she got up onto her feet and grabbed Mandy's hand, an unfamiliar confidence radiating through her as the megaphone turned on.

"Oi, dickhead!" Mandy shouted, catching the attention of the mayor and those around him, all eyes falling on the pair. "You don't know us, but my name is Mandy, and this here is Jodie. Just two regular people, absolutely sick of what is happening to our world! On the New Year, the skies tore open and began taking people away, while you tell us all to turn the other cheek and just act as though nothing is happening! We are tired of losing our friends, our families, and tired of you doing nothing to help us!"

"Uh, y-yeah..." Jodie tried to join in with her friend's rant, but fumbled her words and felt her confidence waning. Looking around, she noticed all the eyes turning their attention to her, picking up on the faint murmuring of the surrounding masses. Thinking quickly and acting within the moment, she swiped the megaphone from Mandy. "It stops now! Your ignorance and complete lack of anything resembling the capability to provide aid is killing us! *You* are killing us!" she yelled into the megaphone.

The murmuring surrounding her grew louder as people began debating among themselves. Feeling her confidence return, Jodie smiled. "We aren't the only ones, oh no! People all around are tired of living in fear that they will be taken next, so why don't you get off your fucking privileged arse and do something about it?!"

The mayor stumbled with his own response, no words leaving his lips as the people turned to him asking questions, sharing their own struggles. Evidently losing control of the situation, the mayor was ushered away by a pair of armed guards, while yet more guards attempted to calm the masses. Jodie and Mandy exchanged large smiles as they walked away, feeling satisfied in getting at least a couple of people to ask questions and stick out against the current system they lived within.

Later, that evening...

"Jodie Duncan, I cannot believe you! Going out in the middle of that memorial and stirring up all that fuss! You and those friends of yours... If it were up to me, the lot of you would have been given a right smack!"

She sat in silence as her mother berated her, angrily waving a TV remote in front of a news report going over her and Mandy's interruption of the mayor's speech. Jodie rolled her eyes and turned away from her mother. "It was nothing, Mum. I was just following Mandy's lead."

Her mother let out a frustrated sigh. "Of course, that Mandy. You're always getting into trouble with her, and spending so much time with her... One would think you were a pair of dykes—"

"Mum!" Jodie spat at her, turning around and staring with shock and anger. "Don't call u—*her*, that!" She got up from where she was sitting and stood defiantly in front of her. "Talk to me however you want... Ground me, punish me, whatever, but don't talk about my friends that way!"

The two stood silently in front of one another, a disapproving stare on her mother's face telling Jodie all she needed to know. "I will. Now, go to your room. I'll deal with you later." She spoke harshly, and while Jodie wasn't planning on showing it, the encounter had hurt her. Mothers were supposed to be loving and caring, so why she had to be in the care of the opposite was yet another part of the

world that bewildered her. Turning away, Jodie marched her way up a flight of stairs and into her room, closing the door behind her.

Moving quickly onto her bed, she pulled out her phone, dialling a number and holding it to her ear. “Hey, Mands... Um, how are things?”

“Fine enough. Took a bit of shit from the folks, but oh well.” Her voice coming out of the phone brought Jodie some comfort, but she still felt hurt, a feeling reflected in her voice. “What about you? Your mum have anything to say about it?”

“Nothing you’d want me to repeat...” She trailed off, glancing over at her bedroom door, as though expecting her mother to burst through at any moment. “Listen, um, I was thinking, maybe we could... sneak out?”

There was a moment of silence, one that seemed to stretch for an eternity, before she got a response. “Great minds think alike, Jodie. I got someplace I wanna go, meet me at... the swing set on the edge of the park. Soon as you can.” The call ended there. Jodie looked out her window and onto the darkened streets. She took a deep breath, knowing that now she couldn’t keep going about her days merely thinking about the changes that could happen, rather than actually making the change happen. She and her friend had made that leap, whether they wanted it or not, and now they had to follow through.

Opening up the window, Jodie began to climb through, carefully guiding herself down, sliding along once she’d gotten through the window. She took care to make sure she didn’t just fall and snap her neck. Using the wheelie bins positioned near the door, Jodie eventually got to the ground. She walked out onto the street and took another look at her home, not fully planning to return, before turning around and heading off to meet Mandy.

Emma Bristow

Future

It seems there is a limit
to what we can achieve.
Can we all succeed
without treading on the spines
of those we have pushed down?
Will we consume friends' futures
in a desperate search for our own?
Perhaps, then, it seems
none of us can truly win.
Instead, we will fail together.

Green Willow

Tendrils submerged in the water,
She bathes in the river.
He watches, peeking from a boat,
Fingers dragging through the ripples.
His love is but a lie,
But neither realises this yet.
A hand dragged through damp green hair,
And lips meet.
They no longer understand each other,
She disappears beneath the smooth surface.
Under the mirror, mourning, she survives.

Storm

Content warning: Mentions of death

We lie there in the shallows,
water dead and still around
without a single ripple
as we do not breathe.
Soon the silent peace will be broken
and we will be forced to leave
but, for now, we rest motionless
just before the storm.

Notebook

Content warning: Parental pressure, neurodivergence

When The Girl had just started in year four, Mother decided that she would be taking the 11+ exam and going to a grammar school, and immediately set about signing her up for tutoring to achieve these aims.

“So, you’ve already got one tutor on Thursday, but I’m starting you on a second one on Fridays,” Mother said.

The Girl replied, “But I have choir on Fridays.”

“But you’ll be fine dropping it, right? You want to go to a good school more than you want to go to choir, right?” Mother asked, in a way that The Girl understood what the answer should be.

“I’ll be fine dropping it,” she whispered, somewhat disappointed.

Father spoke up here, surprising The Girl, as he was so often silent, “Is it really necessary for her to have two tutors for this? Just take her to one and let her keep up the choir she loves.”

Mother sighed. “It’s not like it’s a proper choir anyway; it’s just the church choir. Besides, they sing hymns at school all the time, in assembly, it’s not like she’s missing much.” She turned towards The Girl. “You’re fine with it, aren’t you?”

“I’m fine with it,” The Girl quickly spoke, not wanting to escalate this longer as it wouldn’t change the outcome anyway.

Mother nodded, satisfied, and Father remained silent, turning back to his laptop and his work.

“I’m signing her younger sister up to them as well,” Mother announced to the room, and everyone nodded.

Sister began her two tutors a week at the same time, too, although not on Fridays, and she was able to keep on choir. When they both got home on Friday nights, The Girl from tutoring, and Sister from choir, Sister whispered excitedly about the new medals she was working towards, and the Girl nodded along, pleased for her Sister, but looking at her blue ribboned medal hanging on the door of the cabinets for the fancy plates, that she’d finally earned on her last choir session before she’d had to leave.



The day came around when the results came out for who passed the 11+, and who got into which school.

The Girl knew the night before that she’d failed what she’d been working towards for a year and a half. She had panicked in the exam, nearly crying, not that anyone had noticed. The maths had been excellent—she’d had the highest maths score in her year at school for years now, but the reasoning section was beyond her. She’d tried to figure it out, but she’d never been able to wrap her head around it, not that Mother had listened to her.

She didn't sleep that night but pretended she had when Mother came in to tell her that morning what had happened.

The Girl had not gotten into the grammar school she had wanted; instead, she would be attending the local Catholic girls' school. She found herself with a dull ache inside that she couldn't quite identify other than that it wasn't disappointment.

"Well, you've gotten the music scholarship for that," Mother said. "So at least you've passed that exam, even if you failed the 11+."

The Girl nodded.

Mother continued, "We're on the waiting list at least, so there's a chance you'll get into the grammar school anyway, even if it might be a bit into your first year."

"I don't want to switch schools once I've started, though," The Girl whispered.

"Nonsense," Mother said. "Of course, you will."

.....

The Girl came home from school with Sister in their summer checkered dresses and blazers and berets, and Mother had a letter in her hands that had arrived during the day.

Mother smiled wide. "You've gotten in!" she announced.

"What?" The Girl asked.

Mother looked at The Girl as if it should've been obvious but elaborated anyway, "You've gotten an offer for a place in the grammar school."

"Oh."

"It's *excellent* news," Mother said.

Sister quickly nodded and scurried off upstairs before Mother could continue.

"That's good," The Girl said. She thought that at least this happened before she had started the catholic school. She didn't want to have to start secondary school twice.

"It is," Mother agreed. Then she began to speculate. "It must've been one of those private school kids who dropped their place—you know some of them take it just because and end up going to the private schools anyway, like that boy in the year above you. You know how rich people are."

The Girl thought that the boy had gotten a full scholarship to the private school, and that was what had happened, and she was sure that neither what her mother said nor what had actually happened were really all that common, but she said nothing.

Mother smiled, pleased in the silent air for a bit, before frowning quickly, and starting to scold, "I need to remind you, you nearly failed the 11+ plus because you spent all your time drawing in that

silly notebook of yours instead of studying. You would've gotten in on the first try if you didn't spend all your time doing that doodling."

"Yes, Mother."

"You really should work harder once you get into secondary. This will all affect your future, you know. You do want to get into a good university, right? I don't want to see you just spending all your time messing around and doodling anymore."

"Right." The Girl thought it was far too soon to think about university—she hadn't even started secondary—but she supposed Mother knew what she was talking about.

Mother dismissed her, and The Girl headed upstairs to her room.

She looked at her notebook, the one that she had been using since she'd started year 4. She'd been diligently labelling the pages with numbers in the corner, and even in the months since the exams had passed, she was still only on page 43.

She wondered if 43 pages of doodles over two years had really ruined her exam that much. She supposed, if Mother said so, it must've been. The Girl sighed and, after hesitating, opened her desk drawer all the way and shoved her beloved notebook to the very back.

She closed the drawer and walked over to her bed, laying there for an hour staring at her desk as she heard Mother and Sister leave the house.

Once they were gone, Father knocked on her bedroom door. When she didn't immediately answer, he called through the door, "Do you want to go out to a restaurant for dinner? You've done really well; you deserve something nice."

She rolled out of her bed and opened the door, a smile sneaking its way onto her face. "I'd love to," The Girl said hesitantly.

"What do you want to have then? We can go anywhere you want."

"Could we get pizza?"

"Of course we can, whatever you want."

As they waited for their pizza in a half-empty restaurant, her father placed his hand over hers. "I'm proud of you."

"You are?"

"Of course. You've done great. I'm sure you'll do great in either school, whether or not you accept this offer."

The Girl knew she wouldn't really have the choice of whether to accept it or not, but for a second, she allowed herself to fantasise that she could. She could choose either way, and she'd be fine.

Father continued, "And you'll do great because I know that you're an excellent girl."

"Thanks." She smiled.

"Make sure you do well, but most importantly, be happy, okay?"

"Okay."



Two years later, The Girl was getting ready for yet another day of secondary school when she heard her mother and came out to see what was going on.

"You've done great!" Mother crowed to her Sister. "You've gotten into the right school, and on the first try too, unlike your sister."

She kissed Sister on the forehead before leaving the room, walking past The Girl.

The Girl stepped into her Sister's room and hugged her. "I'm so proud of you," she told her Sister. She was being honest, truly, but that was not all. In the back of her mind, she thought of her old notebook, still sitting at the back of her drawers, and she wished she could take it back out.

Fen Webster

Darkness

Content warning: Implied assault, threat of death, murder, detailed gore

There are tears streaming down my face as I run.

The hard packed dirt road underneath my feet is almost reassuring, as I sprint as fast as I can through the forest. I don't know where to go. I can't let him hurt me more, I won't let it happen.

The night sky is clouded over, and I can barely see the road ahead. I trip on a stone, faceplanting into the dirt, and I quickly look behind me, listening for anyone who could be following me. I feel pathetic, lying in the dirt and feeling more scared than I've ever been in my life. There's no sound, and I think I've managed to outrun him for now. Even if I get away now, he could find me in the town. Would anyone even help me if I asked?

My uniform is ruined. A simple dress with an apron over the top for working at the pub. I've been working there for years with no problem. Why now? I get to my feet and try to get the worst of the dust and dirt off, my tears falling without my permission.

I can sense it. The shadow. I used to be more wary of it but I have bigger problems to worry about now. It seems to sense this, although I don't know how. The wizards and witches sometimes make mistakes while they're working, creating things that would never appear naturally. I'm just glad this particular creature doesn't seem to be a violent creation.

"That's right, I have bigger things to worry about at the minute, so you can't cause problems right now, okay?" I sniffle, trying to wipe away my tears.

The shadow lurks in the trees, impossibly large for anything to have cast it naturally. It moves from one tree to another, getting closer to me. It changes. Sometimes it looks like some strange arrangement of shapes, or some kind of animal, or a combination of things I don't know what to call. It gets to the nearest tree and peeks out from behind it, watching me. I've gotten used to it, even talking to it after I've had a bad day at work. It doesn't seem to want to hurt me, so I've just left it alone for the most part.

A branch snaps in the distance. Oh gods, did he follow me?

"Hey, it's time to go, okay?" I whisper to the shadow, but I'm more talking to myself, quickly stumbling along the path again, trying to pick up the pace with my legs shaking from the adrenaline.

The shadow follows me, I can feel it, and all of a sudden it's in the shape of a wolf, running beside me. I'm glad of it, I don't want to be alone. Maybe that's why it came today.

"C'mon, Georgie, just think about it won't you?" The shout's far in the distance and it makes my blood run cold. I whimper, and try to pick up the pace, gathering my skirts up and running faster. The shadow steps in front of me, and I stop in my tracks.

"We have to keep running, what are you doing?" I whisper frantically, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest. It steps forward and grows bigger, nosing me. "What is it? What're you doing?"

I put my hand forward, and it sinks into the shadow slowly, like it's honey. What was it—

I'm inside the shadow, my view of the world is blurry but it's like we're one being. I can sense its thoughts, and it can sense mine. Our memories collide. And together, a spark starts, our thoughts coalescing into one emotion—*rage*.

We're strong, fast, powerful. We can take him. We should take him. Death comes for those who harm those stronger than them. We're the night, an animal, a shadow. Everything no one else could ever be.

He's still searching, following. Stumbling through the woods making so much noise. Do we chase? No, he can't even see we're here. He deserves to suffer; we need to hunt. We get behind him, and claw his legs. He screams, so loud for such a small wound. He starts hopping away, leaning against trees. We slowly drag our claws along the ground, and slice one of his arms. The iron in the air starts to build up, as his life flows out of him. He falls to the ground, scrambling away. Pathetic. His expression is terrified, and our memories resurface. We were more terrified.

We leave his entrails hanging from the trees, his limbs scattered around the forest for the scavengers. Now he can have use. We travel far away, bounding through the forest until our energy fails, and we fall apart.

I collapse onto the ground, simply falling out of the shadow. What the fuck was that? We—I—He's dead now, we—oh gods.

I can't help it: I throw up near a tree, emptying my stomach of the few things it had. The shadow is resting, hiding behind a tree. It's still night-time but the clouds have cleared somewhat, and I don't think it likes the light. It doesn't have enough energy to fight the light, and it doesn't want to disappear. I wipe my mouth and walk over, lifting up my skirt somewhat.

"Here, you can hide under here. I trust you. It should be dark enough." I notice a splatter of blood near the bottom, and I ignore it. The shadow slinks underneath and I can feel it curling around my legs. It can rest there for now, out of the light, and I can walk. There are only a few small villages in this part of the country, and I just committed a murder in one of them, so I don't think it's safe to stay in the area. I should make my way to Rigeon, just south of here, and then maybe travel into the far lands. They haven't been fully mapped yet, maybe we can both find a place to live, far out in the wild.

"Don't worry, we'll make it," I whisper to the creature under my dress. Maybe I should name it?

It seems to sense this intention, and nudges me. Oh, they already have a name.

Kalune.

"Thank you for saving me, Kalune. I promise I'll try to repay the favour."

I feel them nod, and we set off into the unknown.

Fate is just decisions we make

“Take me with you!”

The voice was so high pitched, it was grating on my ears. “For Myhidryl’s sake, child, why must you shout so?”

“Because you need to take me with you! You need me with you!”

I turned and looked down at the young human. “And why would I need a little thing like you?”

“Because you get lonely!”

I wanted to laugh, but they had a stubborn look on their face. “Child, I am already alone. Why does that mean you have to accompany me?” I pretended that I didn’t have my shadow familiar wrapped around my torso, since they couldn’t see it.

“Because I want to.” They stuck out their bottom lip, trying to give me the biggest puppy dog eyes I had ever seen.

“Oh please. You don’t know what you want. You’re so small, you’ve barely started learning all the basics for surviving.”

“If I learn everything I need to survive, will you take me then?” They gasped with anticipation, clasping their hands together.

I rolled my eyes, knowing that this wasn’t going to go well. “Sure, if that means you stay here for now. You have to do your best to learn as much as you can, alright? And make sure that you look after yourself.” I gently tousled their soft hair. They were so young, they had no idea what they were trying to sign up to, if they wanted to travel with me.

Kalune was curled around my stomach, my shadow familiar already attached to the small child. I could feel them whining to take the child with us, and I ignored them. Kalune didn’t fully understand humans, despite us interacting with them regularly. I blamed their napping habits.

“I’ll do my best! But you have to promise, okay, witch lady?” The small child held out their pinky, their hand chubby and small.

“Ha! Witch lady?” I couldn’t help but chuckle; they were very endearing.

“Sorry, I don’t know your name...”

“It’s Yemai, alright?” I held my hand out, pinky outstretched.

The child beamed, and immediately wrapped their pinky around mine. “My name’s Kris!”

“I promise, that on your, Kris’s, coming of age ceremony when you turn twenty-one, I will return and give you the chance to become my apprentice, as long as you’ve learnt to look after yourself, look after others, and some basic skills. You will be able to accept or decline on your decision alone. Okay?”

“Yeah!” They were so excited, and I doubt they even knew the power that a witch’s promise held, or how lucky they were that I had no ill intentions. Still, I would’ve just had to visit this village in a decade or so and have them decline my offer. At least I could make them happy for now, and hopefully this meant they’d be motivated to be a good person.

They did a little happy dance, with a little wiggle and a whirl. “I’m nine now! That means you have to come back on the second moon of the fall, okay? How many years is that? Didn’t you say twenty-

one? Then that's..." They took a moment to count on their fingers, their face becoming more crestfallen. "That's so long..."

"I'm afraid that any earlier will be too soon. You're asking to be the apprentice of a witch. Not only that, but you're asking to be *my* apprentice! You're going to have to be very sure of that decision before you can actually join me."

"Alright..." They looked truly disappointed, and I hoped that that meant they were no longer interested. "I'll be patient! Just make sure and come back for me, okay?"

I gently smiled. The earnest child had such a look on their face that I couldn't say no. I had already promised anyway, I would have to come back no matter what. "I will. I promised, didn't I?"

Kris nodded, and I pointed them back towards their house. "Come on then, I need to tell your parents."

Kris's parents were of course horrified when I stepped into the door, but I quickly reassured them that I meant no harm and explained the situation. Kris's father took them to bed, while their mother asked me every question possible.

"And it'll be their choice? You're not just going to take them, right?"

"Of course not. I promised, I'll only come back when they're twenty-one, then they can decide to be my apprentice or not. Even then, they'll have a trial period if they say yes, and they can change their mind after that. I'm not going to force them whatever happens. Being a witch is hard. I'm here in your village because I had to restore your water supply, and had to fight off a void demon in the process. It's a difficult profession."

She looked deeply worried, and I coughed. "Of course, apprentices don't always make it to being full-fledged witches, it depends on a lot of things. You don't need to worry about it now. Just raise them as you were going to before, and they'll decide when it comes to it, okay?"

She looked at me, into my eyes, studying me for a moment before she nodded. "Thank you. But please, leave now. I cannot have a witch in my house for so long."

I nodded, used to this, and swiftly took my leave.

Gods, I hoped it wouldn't come back to haunt me.

Performance

The stage is set.

The crowd whisper,
anticipation in the air;
the curtain rises,
and They stand there.

A figure, alone,
saying not a word.
The crowd falls silent;
nothing can be heard.

Without introduction,
He begins his tale.
Acting all parts,
the story sets sail.

With magic and research,
heartbreak and pain,
people you never meet
will live without refrain.

She has performed here before,
telling tales old and new.
Sometimes the hours are many
and sometimes they are few.

Whether you watch or not,
the story still begins.
No matter if you pay attention,
the ending bell will ring.

He does it not for you,
but you can watch all the same.
She'll perform the last act
without an ounce of shame.

Some nights the critics call it art,
the next they scoff at Him.
They write their opinions out,
and change them on a whim.

They never seem to mind.
He's never tried to stop.
She hasn't shared her reasons,
and most think They're rather hot.

Some started to ponder,
Their reasons for their play.
He didn't get much money,
so why waste the day?

Many have asked those questions,
but still She will not answer.
Until, finally, one day, They cave,
and most react with anger.

'I didn't think people would watch,
my stories, my practice, my art.
I was creating and you, always,
could have come up and taken part.'

This was the start of it, you see,
and despite the protestors,
more and more like Him took part,
and called themselves actors.

She was no longer alone,
the stories grew and grew,
people of all kinds took part,
to create something new.

The stage is set
for you,
if you want it.

Lillie Sanderson

Circumnavigating the Universe

"I love you to the end of the universe and back," he says, squeezing her hand.

"How long would that take?" She looks up at him, laughter twinkling in her eyes.

"How long would what take?" he asks, a small frown crinkling his forehead.

"How long would it take to circumnavigate the universe?" She drops his hand. "If you love me to the end of the universe and back, you ought to know how long you're promising to love me for." She takes a few backwards steps along the path.

"I don't know how long it would take me," he laughs, following behind her.

"Shouldn't you know before you promise someone you love them that much?" she teases. She leans down to pluck a flower out the ground, just off the path, bringing it to her face to inspect.

"The universe is endless," he states, "science says that the universe is ever-expanding. I suppose that would mean that it would be impossible for me to circumnavigate the universe because there is no way you could reach the end."

"So, what does that mean for your love for me?" she asks, twirling the flower stem between her fingers.

"That my love for you is also ever-expanding?"

"You don't sound sure," she sings as she skips down the path away from him.

"My love for you is infinite, just like the universe, and just like the universe, I can't fathom ever coming back from the edge of loving you. You are my universe, my world. I love you for however long it would take me to circumnavigate the universe and even after that. You are my everything." he confesses, finally catching her up in his arms.

"If I were going to circumnavigate the universe, I'd want to do it with you—" she tucks the flower behind his ear— "even if it would take forever."

"I'm glad." He pulls her in close and promises to the universe that even if he couldn't circumnavigate it, he would still love this girl until the day it ended, that he would follow her to whatever far-flung corner of the universe she decided to explore and that nothing would part them. She lets out a giggle when the hug lasts a little too long, pushing him away before continuing her adventure down the park path. He smiles and watches her go for a little, appreciating the joy she finds in the world around them, then follows after her, just like he promised.

Midnight Dances

A young woman walked through the graveyard. The mist of the night swirled around her bare shins. She was humming a tune, something jazzy, as she skipped down the path. A young man was waiting for her, leaning against the entry gate, watching her, a smile on his face. She let out a giggle as she saw him and ran over.

"I am convinced that you look more beautiful every time I see you." He smiled and spun his wife, the fringe of her dress spinning out around her.

"That's because you forget how I look between visits," she teased.

"I could never forget your face." He squeezed her hands. "Now, come, we've much to do before sunrise." He took her hand in his, weaving his large fingers through her delicate ones.

"I couldn't expect anything else from you." She swung their hands between them, letting him guide her through the graveyard. "My lovely over-planner." She leant up to brush a kiss on his cheek. He blushed a little, patting his wife's arm.

The night was almost perfect for the couple: warm with the slightest wind, moonlight illuminating the world around them. They talked as they strolled along the paths about their short time spent apart. She had been watching over their grandchildren, the eldest of which was just experiencing her first love. A sweet boy, she had told her husband, but nowhere near good enough for their darling Leena. He had been seeing to the house, ensuring that their children were still caring for the old place, even if it was somewhat burdensome. They stopped at a clearing in the graveyard, just under an oak tree older than the graveyard itself.

"I have a surprise for you, my love," he announced, guiding her to stand in front of him. "I want you to think of your favourite song from when we were young." She did. She thought of the song that played the first night they had met and smiled at the long-ago memories. The song began to swell around them. She looked around in astonishment, searching for the source of the music.

"How did you...?" she asked, tears of joyful surprise blurring her vision as she looked up at him.

"A gentlemen never reveals his secrets." He winked at his wife and offered his hand out to her. "May I have this dance, my love?"

"Of course, you may." She placed her hand back in his and was swept into her husband's arms. The couple began to dance, the mist swirling around their twirling forms.

"Do you remember the night we met?" he asked as they gently swayed. She nodded. "You looked so magnificent that night. I thought that I would never see a sight more beautiful than you in that green dress." A smile swept across his face as he recalled the memory. "That was until the next time I saw you, and you were more beautiful still."

"I thought you would never ask me to dance that night. You just kept staring at me, but you never said anything," she reminded him, "I thought I would have to do that myself." He let out a chuckle. "But you proved me wrong."

"It was one of the best nights of my life." He spun her out in a turn under his arm. "Only a few surpass it, and all of those include you."

"You were a terrible dancer that night. You kept stepping on my toes," she teased.

“Only because you were so distracting,” he countered. “I had never stepped on any toes until I met you, but you made me so nervous that I couldn’t focus on my feet.”

“I found it terribly endearing,” she admitted. She smiled once more before resting her head against his chest. “I almost fell in love with you that instant.”

“I knew that I loved you the day we went to the town picnic, the sun was in your hair, and you were laughing at some stupid joke, and I thought to myself that the sun seemed brighter and the day ten times happier when you were there and my days would be much more grey without you. I vowed to make sure I spent every day you let me making you laugh like that.” He told her as if she hadn’t heard the tale a thousand times before. She could never grow bored of hearing it, though.

“I loved you then, and I love you now, possibly more than I did,” she said, gazing up at him. The man who she had shared her life with for decades, who she chose to spend her afterlife with, her husband, her soulmate. He smiled at her, the beautiful spirit that was his wife and pressed a kiss to her lips. They separated in time for him to propel her into another fast spin, laughter spilling free from her, and onwards they danced. They danced to every one of their favourite songs long into the night, twirling and laughing much like that first night until the sun rose and the light began to fracture the couple, and the music faded away to nothing but distant notes on a faraway breeze.

On the Rocks

The sun was just beginning to set when a sailor on the fishing trawler spotted the silhouette of a man, stood upon the nearby rocks. This was strange considering the rocks were several metres tall and unreachable, owing to the swirling tides around their base. The sailor called out to his crewmates and, soon, most of the crew were gathered at the bow, waiting as the captain navigated the boat as close as they could safely get to the rocks.

“Hello!” cried the first mate. The man was perhaps in his late seventies, his white hair long and unbrushed with what seemed to be seaweed caught up in the knots. He was dressed in a thick, white knitted jumper and a pair of bright yellow waders without even a raincoat to keep the sea spray off him. “What are you doing up there, sir?”

“If the sea should take you!” the old man cried. “Bid farewell!” The crew exchanged looks as a large wave broke across the dark rock.

“How did you get up there, sir?” asked the crewmate who originally spotted him.

“The sea gave rise to the rocks,” the man called down. His voice was impossibly loud for the noises of the sea around them.

“I think we should call the coastguard,” said one crewmate to another.

“I have no need for a coastguard,” the old man said as a coastguard’s cap appeared upon his head. “I guard the coast!” he declared, throwing his arms open as another wave crashed over the rock.

“What? Like Poseidon?” called out a crewmate, jokingly.

The old man dropped his arms, looking rather put out. “What...? No... of course not.” He crossed his arms. “I am *just* an old man.”

"I really think that we should call the coastguard," insisted another crewmate.

"There is no need. I belong to the sea!" the man declared as a wave gently hit him. He stayed dry as if a torrent of water hadn't just broken over his head.

"Sir, I really must insist that you allow us to help you down so we can get you home safely!" the captain called out.

"Home?" he cried. "The seas are my home!" He threw his arms up over his head as a lightning bolt cracked across the sky above him.

"Are you *sure* you aren't Poseidon, then?" asked the crewmate once more, his tone a little less joking this time.

"Whyever would you think that?" the old man said, staring down at the small boat bobbing on the now unpredictable tide. "I am an old man, the great Poseidon, King of the Seas would never stoop to presenting himself as a mere human," he scoffed. "Why would the god of the seas want to look like an old man when he could be the chiselled, handsome son of Titans he is?" He tossed his hair behind his shoulder, a move the sea echoed with a pathetic wave lapping against the side of the boat. "Do not mock me!" he yelled directly at the sea. The fishermen exchanged looks once more. "I command *you!*" The sea hit him with another wave that knocked the coastguard's cap off his head. "You are being very unreasonable today, stranding me upon this rock!" he declared as if he was scolding a small child.

"Sir, are you sure you do not require any help?" the captain asked once more. The old man seemed almost offended by the suggestion.

"I have no such need for help, and if I did, it would never be to help me escape my beloved sea!" The sea seemed to like that as it swept the man's cap back to him, a wave depositing it at his feet. He leant over, and picked it up with much more grace than he should possess at his apparent age. He tugged the cap over his brow and sat down on the rock. "I grow bored of this game," he announced, and within the blink of an eye, he had launched himself off the rock in a perfect swan dive just in time for a large wave to catch him and carry him wherever he was going. The crew looked at each other, blinking in astonishment.

"Right, well, back to work," announced the captain. "And no one eats any more of the bread we brought. It must have gone funny." He muttered, returning to the wheel. The crew returned to their duties, and while the tides and waves treated them with care, they returned to harbour empty-handed, the sea not content to give over any of its fishy friends that day.

Snowball Warfare

Crunch! A snowball smashed into the back of my head.

“Ouch!” I cried, spinning to glare at my assailant. “Hey, no head shots!”

“Oh, you’re no fun!” a voice shouted from behind the snow fort.

“You’re not even supposed to be playing! We’re supervising!” I shouted back. Another snowball came careening towards my head.

“I am supervising. I’m supervising my team, so we win.”

“You cheater!” Another snowball was launched towards me. “That’s it. Prepare to be annihilated.” I ran behind the opposite fort. I grabbed a ball and threw it towards the other team. A chorus of children’s screeches filled the air as the snow found its target.

“You hit a kid!” A head popped up above the snow wall.

“Oops.” I shrugged and launched another snowball towards Dan’s head. It hit him straight between the eyes.

“Hey! What happened to ‘no head shots?’”

“Revenge is a dish best served cold!” I screamed as I ducked, avoiding another snowball whizzing past my head. I crouched below the snow wall, hiding from the onslaught of snowy projectiles being launched at me. I had to come up with a plan. I would win this war. Victory would be mine. I roped the children we were supposed to be supervising into throwing snowballs at the opposite team as fast as possible to give me cover. It was a good plan, as far as snowball warfare went. As soon as the snowballs began raining down on the other team, I made my move. I ran as fast as I could across the no-mans-land between the forts. A few of the snowballs were thrown short, and soon the dash across became a freezing game of dodgeball from both sides; really, it was my fault for assuming that a bunch of kids would have good enough aim not to hit me. I made it to the other team’s fort, gathered an armful of powdery snow, and dumped it over the figures gathered below. Dan glared at me from where he was crouched behind the wall.

“That is definitely cheating,” he complained, snow caught in his beard, turning it a fluffy white.

“You look like Santa,” I laughed, and he frowned even more. “If the elves had burnt his mince pies.”

“And you look like you should be banned from snowball fights,” he grumbled, brushing snow off himself.

“You’re just a sore loser,” I tossed back, and made a dash towards my fort. A hand grabbed the back of my shirt before what felt like a bucket of snow came tumbling down my neck. I squealed, shaking my whole body to try and get rid of it, but the freezing slide of snow down my spine just made me shiver even more. “That’s it!” I cried, pushing Dan full force until he toppled over, landing on his back in the snow. “That was rude and uncalled for,” I said, glaring down at him.

“Did that soothe your desire for revenge?” he asked as he flapped his arms up and down in the snow, making a snow angel.

“No,” I grumbled. “You look like you’re having fun.”

“Join me.” He patted the blank snow beside him. “The kids can supervise themselves for a bit.”

I shrugged and flopped down beside him. I was already covered in snow; snow angels weren't going to make me much colder. I sank into the powder, the coldness seeping through my clothes almost enjoyably.

"Why did we volunteer for this?" he asked.

"I don't know. You're the one who forced me to sign up." I stared up at the sky. It was a bright day for Scotland in Winter. Fluffy white clouds slowly drifted past as I lay there.

"Suppose it's better than being stuck inside," he muttered.

"And you get to spend time with your favourite person," I added.

"Oh, Alex is here? Why didn't you tell me?" Dan quipped back. I tossed a handful of snow at his face. "Thanks for joining me, today. I know snowballing with a bunch of kids isn't exactly your ideal Saturday."

"'Tis the season to be giving and all that," I said, gazing up at the clouds once more. "I'm cold," I announced, sitting up. "Can we force the kids back to the village hall yet?"

"Could probably bribe them," he contemplated. He sat up too. "Kids, do you want to head back for hot chocolate?" he called. There were a few groans but more cheers. "Okay, make sure you've got everything. We're going back." He turned to look at me. "That was pretty easy."

"They must be cold too. We've been out here for hours," I said, accepting his helping hand.

"I'm sorry I threw a snowball at your head," he said.

"I'm sorry I pushed you over," I replied.

"Frankie?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you so much," he said. I groaned and rolled my eyes, but didn't quite manage to smile it brought to me.

"I love you so much too," I muttered back. I turned my head to make sure we had all the kids, and spotted something out of the corner of my eye.

"Everything okay?" Dan asked, looking concerned for a moment.

"Oh... Yeah, I thought I saw a raccoon." He gave me a strange look before he slung an arm over my shoulder and pulled me into his side.

"You must be getting hypothermic; raccoons don't live in Scotland. We better get you back quickly." I shoved his shoulder playfully, but accepted his hand as we walked back to the warmth of the village hall.

Martina Ferretti

Snapshot of a Spring day in February

The shadows get longer and longer under our feet as the sun inches closer and closer to the sea. The light shines on the water, so bright that it's blinding. I turn towards blinding smiles instead.

There are people all around, a Renoir painting come to life, and the air is filled with voices and the gentle rumble of the waves—both telling stories that get lost in the wind. It smells like sea salt, but it's too cold to go take a dip, and the water here isn't clean anyway. You can see the islands on a clear day, and there they are, sitting just on the horizon.

Two ships are leaving the harbour—a cruise ship and the sailing vessel—and they cast tall shadows over the colourful buildings. Not over us, though, and we get to sit in the sun just a little bit longer.

My clothes and hair, ruffled by the wind, smell like coffee, pastries, salt, and cigarettes, though none of us are smoking. The scent of today will take a while to wash off from my memory.

Cheeks red from the cold, flailing hands drawing stories in the air, laughter that's too loud and hurried giggly shushes so we don't bother the people around us—everything is warm and familiar.

Maybe if I pray, if I want it hard enough, this last golden moment can stretch into a lifetime, a year, a day, a single moment more. But it doesn't, and the sun sets.

The Bridge

Content warning: Animal death, child death

It was a beautiful day. Beatrice wished it wasn't.

Tito was in front of her, playing in the dewy grass like he didn't have a care in the world—and he didn't. A butterfly landed on a flower just a short distance away, and Tito yapped happily as he pounced towards it. The butterfly flew away, though, leaving the small dog to look up at it wistfully, wagging his tail a little.

Beatrice felt the knot in her throat tighten again, and she swallowed hard.

"Bea?" came her Mamma's voice from the back door of the house. "What are you doing up so early? Aren't you cold?"

She shook her head and didn't reply.

There were soft footsteps then, approaching slowly until her mother's hand landed on her shoulder. "Oh, tesoro," she said. "I'm so sorry."

Beatrice frowned. "It's not fair. Babbo should've said something."

"He tried, you know that, but Don Gregorio said it had to be him," said Mamma.

"I don't care."

She heard Mamma sigh. "Bea—"

“I don’t care! I don’t want to! He’s *my* dog. They can’t do that!” she yelled, jumping down from her bench.

Tito yelped in surprise and came closer to her, nudging her leg with his nose.

“I don’t care,” repeated Bea, staring up at her mother.

She didn’t answer but knelt down to her level and enveloped both her and Tito in a hug. “I’m sorry, tesoro.”

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The day went by slowly. It wasn’t too cold yet, but Beatrice couldn’t help the shivers running down her spine as she walked around the borgo with Tito. He kept close to her without needing to be on a leash, save for the few times when he wandered a few steps away from her to sniff or look at something.

The people around them never met her eyes. Suor Bianca went as far as to rush back into the shop she’d just left when she saw Bea and Tito coming her way. Bea didn’t pay any attention to them, though. She had a destination.

The bridge was deserted, and no one was even coming *near* it. Beatrice wasn’t surprised—it *was* Ognissanti’s eve—but she had to be there. It looked the same as always, almost pointy at its highest and kind of wonky. Every other day, Bea loved how weird it was and how nice it looked when the waters of the Serchio were calm and she could see the reflection in them—but not today.

She sat down just at the foot of it, holding Tito close to her.

“Hey,” she said quietly, staring ahead. “I love Tito. I don’t want him to go. Can you stop what you do every year? It’s been a long time since the bridge was built, right?”

She frowned. It was long enough—it had to be long enough.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps coming from the bridge. She looked up to see a man she didn’t know coming towards her, walking without hurry or worry in his step. Beatrice stood up slowly, suddenly wary of him. The man stepped off the bridge and walked right in front of her, an easy smile on his face.

“Hello,” he said. “This place is usually so busy. Where is everyone?”

Bea frowned. “Nobody comes near the bridge on Ognissanti’s eve. They’re afraid the Devil’s gonna get them.”

The man nodded. “And why are *you* here, all alone?”

“I’m not afraid. But...”

“But...?”

She gestured to Tito. He was hiding behind her, growling quietly. She furrowed her brows, picked him up and held him close to her chest.

“Ah,” said the man. “Mind if I sit with you?”

Beatrice shook her head and sat back down. He crouched down and then sat cross-legged next to her as she hugged her little dog closer. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She frowned. “They’re gonna take Tito away. They’re gonna make him cross the bridge first, at midnight, so that the Devil can get him.”

“Oh. So, then, why are you here?”

“I don’t know.” She looked down. “I guess—I don’t know what to do... I wish it would stop. They say the Devil is taking his payment because he helped build the bridge, else he’ll break it. But it has to be enough, right? It’s happened every year since before I was born!”

The man hummed. “He asked for dogs in payment?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No. They say he just takes the first soul that crosses the bridge on Ognissanti. But they make dogs do it, so nobody has to go.”

“The *dogs* have to go.”

“I know! It’s not fair.” She looked down at Tito. “I don’t want this.”

The man was quiet for a while.

“You know...” he started then, “I think you’re right. He shouldn’t have to go. He hasn’t done anything to deserve it, has he?”

Beatrice nodded vigorously. “That’s right! But everyone keeps saying he should go because Don Gregorio said so.”

“And that is...?”

“Our priest. He’s the one who chooses.”

The man clicked his tongue. “Well, he’s not a very nice man, then, is he?”

Bea didn’t answer right away. She looked around for a second—nobody was there—then slowly shook her head.

“Hmm, yes.” The man nodded. “I’m really sorry about your dog. Tito, was it? Nice name. You know, I think you should do something about it,” he said, standing up.

Beatrice cocked her head to the side as she got to her feet as well. “Like what?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Something.” He put a cold hand on her shoulder. “You can save him. I just know it.”

She picked up Tito and squeezed him. “Are you sure? I want to stay with him.”

“Sicuro come la morte,” said the man.

“Alright... Oh, are you leaving?” she asked when he let her shoulder go and turned back towards the bridge.

“Afraid so. There’s some business I need to attend. You’ll be a good girl, won’t you?”

Beatrice nodded, and he started walking away. “Wait! You didn’t tell me your name!” she called.

The man waved without turning around. “A presto, Beatrice.”

She didn't move for a little while. Tito wiggled out of her grasp, and she let him go. He walked up to the foot of the bridge and barked twice at the man's retreating back before coming up to Bea again.

She knelt in front of him and scratched his head. "I'm going to help you, don't worry," she said quietly.

Tito yapped at her, and she smiled.

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She'd gone to Don Gregorio, to Suor Bianca, to her parents, to the notary, to *every* adult in the borgo. Nobody wanted to help.

It's the way it has to be. We don't have time. I'm so sorry, tesoro.

She was sick of all of that.

The afternoon stretched into evening and then night. Ten minutes to midnight, Beatrice was standing in front of the bridge, eyes puffy from crying, and Tito held tightly in her arms. Her Mamma and Babbo were standing behind her, arms around her shoulders, while the rest of the borgo crowded around them, torches lit and voices silent.

"Fratelli e sorelle," started Don Gregorio. He was in the centre of the small plaza, with everyone around him. "Sadly, Ognissanti is upon us. Today we keep paying the price of our ancestors' sin. It's a night of sorrow for all of us, but none more so than our little Beatrice." He gestured at her.

She backed up into her Babbo's body, shaking her head.

"N-No! I don't want to—"

Don Gregorio came close and smiled sadly at her. "I know, piccola. But you know what must be done."

He made a move to grab Tito, but she recoiled away from him. "No!" she exclaimed.

"Beatrice—"

"No," she repeated. "I... I have to be..." She couldn't swallow the knot in her throat.

But Don Gregorio seemed to understand. He stepped out of her way and gestured for the bridge.

Beatrice nodded shakily and started moving slowly.

The crowd was dead silent, and her footsteps echoed in the valley, the only sound to be heard as she got closer and closer to the bridge.

Tito whimpered softly in her arms and nuzzled his nose into her neck, but Bea couldn't look down. Her eyes were set on the pitch-black darkness just beyond the bridge. It was a clear night, but she couldn't make out anything past the halfway point of it.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

She stopped at the foot of the bridge and set Tito down. The small dog looked up at her and took a step back.

“Go,” she croaked, pointing towards the bridge. Hot tears were welling up in her eyes, and she wiped them with the back of her hand before they could fall.

Tito came towards her, but she shook her head. “N-No... You need to go.”

He stopped and cocked his head to the side for a moment. Then, he looked at something behind her. Suddenly, there was a stick flying over her head and onto the bridge.

Tito yapped happily and made to go get it, but Bea screamed, “No!” and grabbed him before he could touch the bridge. She held him close to her chest and swallowed thickly.

Someone shouted her name, but she startled away from the voice and took a step back.

“No!” she yelled. “I don’t want to let him go!”

She saw her parents’ faces, frozen in horror, straight in front of her. Slowly, she looked down to her feet.

She was on the bridge.

There was a hand on her shoulder.

“Aren’t you happy?” said the man from before. She hadn’t noticed how black his eyes were. “You saved him. He can stay with you.”

“He—He can?” she asked.

The man nodded. “Come on now. It’s getting late.” He extended a hand with a smile.

She nodded. She was feeling so much calmer than before and so much warmer. Wiping away the last of her tears, she set Tito down, took the man’s hand and followed him to the other end of the bridge. It wasn’t cold anymore.

Why were people screaming?

Whiteout

Outside our window, everything is white. The snowy hills and the sky melt together and I can’t tell where one ends and the other begins. The other facilities here are bright red, to stand out like stubborn poppies in a sea of daisies, but I can’t see them anywhere. At this point, I’m not even sure that they’re *supposed* to be visible from this window, or if the storm has seeped into my eyes too, blinding me to the world with nothing but white, white, white.

When it began, I doodled on the condensation on the windows until my fingers were too cold to continue. I was passing the time, I thought, until the blizzard passed. It was a matter of hours, I thought. It was a matter of days. Cold, endless, polar summer days.

It’s been three weeks, and doodling isn’t fun anymore. It just makes my fingers cold.

We kept the work going, the first couple of days. But, over time, as the white refused to leave our windows, everyone put their notebooks down, one by one. We have resources, we have electricity, we have heating. We have no way of contacting anyone even in the building next to us, but sometimes

the storm dies down enough to let us see their windows and the people inside. They look like we feel—quiet and tired—but they’re alive, and that’ll have to be comfort enough.

The silence is the worst part, I think. If people were talking, the wind slamming against our door would be less scary when it happens out of nowhere. Instead, everyone keeps to themselves, busy with books, quiet hobbies or simply staring out of the window for a sign that it’s gonna end soon. That’s me. But, three weeks in, all I see is white.

Until it’s not. There’s a flash of black in the distance, for a moment so brief I’m not sure it even happened. I rub at my eyes—they sting when I close them: maybe I’ve been awake too long—and look again. And, again, whiteout. I wipe the condensation off the window, though I’m not sure it actually helps, and squint at the storm outside. If it wasn’t for the noise, I wouldn’t even be able to tell that the wind is still blowing. Whatever the black flash was, it’s gone now.

I lean back in my chair when, suddenly, it’s back and moving. It stays a little longer now, and I can just barely make out a round shape shuffling in the snow. It blinks out of sight for a moment and then reappears. It’s getting closer. I straighten up and press my hands against the cold glass.

The walls shake with another gust of wind and my field of vision goes white again, but I keep my eyes fixed on the last place I saw the black spot in. It stubbornly pushes out of the white and starts moving again, faster now—or maybe it’s just that I notice it because it’s closer. For just a second, I’m hit with the insane thought that I should go check it out. But I don’t really want to die of hypothermia, so I stay put and just keep watching.

The spot goes in and out of sight, covered and then revealed by the relentless storm and, when it manages to stay visible for just a moment more, I finally realise what it is. Against all odds, against all logic, a baby penguin has braved the blizzard to end up miles and miles away from the nearest colony that we know of. It shuffles and stumbles in the snow, alone but stubbornly pushing onwards to reach... something. Our base, I imagine. Red amongst the white, it sticks out like a sore thumb and penguins are curious creatures. The chick trips and falls face first into the fresh snow a few yards away from my window and I stand up suddenly, knocking my chair to the ground.

My supervisor, about to drink her fifth cup of coffee since this morning, drops it. Thankfully, it’s a paper cup. “What’s going on?” she asks, pressing a hand to her chest.

“Look.”

She joins me at the window and follows my line of sight. She squints at the white wind, then her eyes go wide when she spots the little black patch struggling in the snow. “Oh, poor thing,” she says.

“Think it’s coming here?” I ask.

Dawn shrugs. “Probably. Looking for shelter from the wind, I guess.”

She grabs a packet of tissues and goes to clean up the spilt coffee, and that’s the end of the conversation. I turn back around to watch the penguin. It’s gotten up again. I see it shake the snow off, only for more to be immediately blown onto it, and then soldiers on again. Now that it’s closer, I can track its movements even through the thick white curtain separating us, even if just in silhouette. In a brief moment when the storm comes to a lull, it looks up to meet my eyes.

“Alice,” calls Dawn, a wary note in her voice.

I don’t take my eyes off the penguin. The wind is picking up again and it’s struggling to move on. “What?”

Dawn sighs. "You are *not* opening that door."

"Course not," I say.

She lingers for another moment, then I hear her retreating footsteps. When they vanish, I toss a look around the room. The only other person there is Claude, sitting backwards in a chair with a book in his hands. He catches my eyes and shrugs. "As if I could stop you."

I smile at him and turn back. The baby penguin is still there, struggling to keep upright. The sun won't go down for many, many hours, but it feels like I've wasted enough time already. I grab Claude's heavy black jacket from the coatrack and jump in my snow boots. Then, I push open the door just enough to slip outside and stumble into the white world outside, feeling no different from that little penguin making its way towards the base. It spots me and stops in its tracks, cocking its head to the side in confusion. I nod.

I'm a little black spot drowned in white as well, and I won't let the storm overtake either of us.

Tommy Berntsen

An Easy Job

Content warning: Blood, death, animal death, cruelty, unhealthy relationships, implied sexual content

Goddamnit. Ain't no such thing as an easy job. Rhett knew that, yet here he lay, on his back in the mud and pouring rain next to the cleaned-out corpse of a derailed train. "Don't worry. It'll be an easy job." Those words rang in his head as the last thing he could remember. Who'd said it? In fact, where was he? How did he know the train had been robbed? Why could he not remember anything?

Rhett wanted to groan and raise up onto his elbows, but with a start, he realized he could do neither. No matter how much his brain screamed for his body to move, the darn thing refused. This realization was quickly followed by another. Despite seeing the undoubtedly icy rain hitting his face, he could not feel it. Despite seeing the fading embers of the train's furnace spewing their death throes into the air, he could not smell the acrid smoke. Despite seeing the wind whipping his duster's collar about, he could not hear it. What in the Sam Hill was happening?

"You look a mite bewildered there, son." The sudden sound would have made Rhett jump. If he could. His eyes darted around to locate it, as it had seemed to have come from all around him. He saw nothing new until the voice spoke again. "And tongue-tied. C'mon, son. Speak up." Rhett blinked, and suddenly a figure stood at his feet. One, which managed to return a single feeling to him. Fear.

At Rhett's feet stood an animated skeleton dressed in the fineries of a high roller. The black coat, vest and pants cut a disturbing contrast to the pocked, off-white bones of the skeleton's limbs. Even shadowed under the brim of its wide hat, Rhett could see that both of the eye sockets were covered by a bandage wrapped around the skull.

"Now why're you lazing about with the pigs? C'mon, let me help you." Every part of Rhett's mind wanted to scream and back away as the spectre bent down and reached for his hand. As the jewelled digits closed around his, an icy shock screamed through his being. And it only grew in strength as the creature hauled his body up to standing. Then as suddenly as it came, it ebbed away, flowing down from his head and out of his toes. And in its wake, feeling and command of his body returned to Rhett.

"What in the Sam Hill are you?! What's happenin'?" he screamed, as much out of a need to feel his body working as fear and frustration.

"Now that ain't no way to greet someone, is it?"

Rhett realized he had not heard the spectre's voice before now. How had he understood it before? Now he could hear it. It was deep, masculine and held an edge of cold, hard danger.

"Ain't no surprise why folks didn't seem to care much for you. But I'll let it slide for now. I know you humans ain't used to this sort of thing." The skeleton extended its right hand to Rhett in proper greeting. "Call me the Dealer. You're Rhett Butler, right?"

Rhett just looked at the spectre, apparently the Dealer, in frustrated confusion. "Now, you better tell me what's happenin', or I might see fit to lay you out. I ain't afraid of spectres!" Rhett tried desperately to keep his voice from shaking.

The Dealer was quiet for a moment, then burst into roaring laughter. It laughed so hard it doubled over. After straightening up and wiping a mock tear from under its covered eye socket, it simply

indicated the ground behind Rhett. Apprehensively, he glanced over his shoulder, then whipped around and froze in place.

It was him. His body was lying in the mud, a shocked expression frozen on his face. A crimson patch had marred his white shirt, blooming from a thumb-sized hole over his heart. Rhett subconsciously put a hand over his heart. He felt nothing. “No.” His voice was barely a whisper. “This ain’t—I ain’t—I can’t be—” He stopped, afraid that even uttering the word would make this nightmare reality. For surely this was a nightmare.

“What? Dead?” The Dealer’s mocking voice broke Rhett from his thoughts. “Sorry, pardner, ‘fraid that’s exactly what you are. Some scoundrel seems to have shot you in the heart. And stolen one of your irons as well.” Rhett looked closer at his form. The Dealer was right. His off-hand revolver laid in the mud close to its holster, but his main holster was empty, and the regular occupant was nowhere to be seen. For some reason, buried deep in his mind, the idea that his main gun was missing made Rhett’s chest tighten painfully.

The deceased gunslinger turned back to the Dealer. “If I’m, you know—” He gestured weakly to his body.

“Dead?” the spectre prompted.

“Yeah. That. What’s going to happen now? You the devil come to drag me to hell?”

This unleashed another round of uproarious laughter from the skeleton. This time Rhett managed to feel more irritation than fear at the jovial Dealer. “I ain’t exactly partial to bein’ laughed at,” he said with no attempt to conceal his anger.

Still chuckling, the spectre fixed him with its covered eye sockets. “Sorry, pardner, but I told you who I am. Ain’t the Devil, nor God or Jesus. Frankly, you should be glad for having me around instead of them. See, I am willing to talk. Them? They’d have condemned you to the fire and brimstone in a breath. But you don’t remember why, do you?” Unwillingly, Rhett took a step back. How did this thing know he could not remember anything? “Let me help you, pardner. Don’t worry; it’ll be an easy job.” The last words were said with a feminine voice in an Irish accent. And they struck Rhett like a horse’s kick to the forehead.

Aoife O’Callaghan. The red-headed, Irish wolfhound of a woman he fell in love with. The woman whose gang he rode with for years. The woman who had gifted him the ivory-handled navy revolver that he proudly wielded as his go-to gun. The woman who had uttered those words before they had ridden out on that fateful job.

Rhett blinked, and suddenly himself and the Dealer were standing on the main road through Clementine. The city where he had met Aoife. The memory before him played out like were he an audience member in a theatre show. Aoife had tossed a mountain of a man out the swinging doors of the saloon into the mud of the street, right at Rhett’s feet. He had looked up into her blazing emerald eyes and knew immediately that his heart was hers. “Give us a hand or get out the way!” she had yelled at him in her musical accent. From that day, he rode with her. And they fell in love.

For years, the O’Callaghans terrorized New Austin. Aoife had taken over after her father’s death shortly before Rhett arrived, and they earned a new reputation for being brutal and merciless. Rhett was no small part of that. He had taken lives as an outlaw before, but being with Aoife, listening to her, had made him more violent and fierce.

Hunter Rhett. The O'Callaghans took to calling him that, as not only did he often take the most lives, he also liked to let one victim run, often a woman or child, and then just as they thought themselves safe, shoot them in the back. Yet Rhett did not care for the title or money. As long as he had Aoife, he was happy. And his little wolfhound loved as fiercely as she fought.

"Weakness is the only sin!" she had told him one night. "I will die in battle or in bed. And with you, I'm as likely to one as the other!" That night, Rhett had wondered if that was what he wanted? He had thoughts of taking part of the money earned, running away to somewhere even further west and starting a family with Aoife. The few times he brought it up with her, she would either dismiss him or get angry.

However, after a particularly close call with a group of bounty hunters, which had left Aoife bedridden for weeks, Rhett pressed one last time. He hated seeing her hurt and wanted them both to get out of this life. They ended up screaming at each other, and it ended with Rhett declaring he would do one last job with them, take his earnings and make his own way west. It had hurt him deeply to say. And deep down, he instantly regretted it. Yet part of him had also hoped the threat of leaving would persuade Aoife.

The deceased gunslinger wondered. When had he become such a manipulative bastard?

And so, they rode at the break of dawn. Aoife had only said a single sentence to him. "Don't worry; it'll be an easy job." And the job went without a hitch. The dynamite blew the train off the tracks, and the gang cleaned out the toppled train. Both of valuables and those unfortunate enough to have survived the derailing. Even the lawmen in the rear carriage stood no chance. One of the bastards did manage to shoot Rhett's horse, though. A last act of pure defiance that left a self-satisfied smirk on the man's face. Until Rhett stomped it into bloody fragments.

Collecting the last of the items he could fit in his satchel, Rhett ran to Aoife's horse to ride with her. And he felt a thrill. In that moment, he realized he could never leave this life. He could never leave Aoife. He agreed with her. Wholeheartedly. He would die in battle or in bed with her!

He first threw his satchel onto her horse then held his hand out for her to help him up. As she reached down, he spoke with such excitement he could hardly finish one word before another. "Aoife, I—With you—I—" Her hand went past his.

Rhett's smile died on his lips. He looked down, following her hand, only to see the revolver she had gifted him pressed to his chest. Her mouth moved, but the words were swallowed by the thunder of a gunshot. The last image now shined clear in Rhett's mind; it was no longer a scene playing before him. The gorgeous emerald eyes. The ruby waves of hair. The whole beauty of Aoife and her person. All disappeared behind the gunpowder's smoke. And then everything was gone.

Rhett looked out to where Aoife and the gang had ridden off. All feeling had disappeared again. All except the unbearable sorrow. His vision washed out, and despite not feeling them, he knew tears ran down his cheeks.

"Broke your heart twice over, she did." The Dealer had come to stand next to Rhett. He did not have the energy to anger at the skeleton's callousness. He simply wanted for all feelings to stop and for his life to finally, truly end.

"Why am I still here?" The broken-hearted outlaw's voice was thick with sorrow.

The spectre reached up and put a hand on his shoulder. "Because my name doesn't come from my ability to play poker."

Rhett was so exhausted, he just waited for it to continue.

“See, I don’t deal cards. I deal something much greater.” With a sudden strength, the spectre turned Rhett and grabbed his other shoulder, forcing him to look the skeleton in the face. “Revenge, Rhett.” The bandages covering the eye sockets did nothing to hide the endless void within. A void Rhett felt pulling. Cold. Powerfully inviting. “Don’t you want to make her regret crossing you?” The Dealer’s digits dug into his shoulders. It was not yelling, yet its voice filled all that Rhett was. And the void pulled so enticingly. “You gave her all you had. And she gunned you down in cold blood! Work with me, Rhett. After all, you have done, there is no sweet afterlife for you. Shake my hand, and I will grant you sweet revenge!”

The pressure let up on Rhett’s left shoulder, and the Dealer extended its bony hand to him. He had to fight every want and need in his head to wrench his eyes from the inviting void and look down at the extended hand.

Maybe it was right? What would he gain from saying no? Eternal suffering in hell? But did he really want revenge on Aoife? Maybe he just wanted to see her again. What would happen if he refused to take revenge after being given the chance? Rhett’s hand twitched. He hesitated.

Mail

Content warning: Misogyny

The sunlight painted his desk in liquid gold. The warm light enveloped him and he felt it all the way down to his old bones. He basked in the feeling.

With a start he snapped his fingers. “I should have the dwarves weave us a blanket of sunlight. I’m sure Frigg would love that.”

“I would love what?”

The all-father jumped, scaring the preening raven off his shoulder. It landed on one of the many overfilled bookshelves lining the small office and glared at Frigg.

She just laughed. “I do apologise for frightening your perch, Huginn. Would you forgive me if I gave you this?” She presented a freshly-baked oatcake from the basket slung over her arm.

In an instant all the resentment left the feathered messenger and it eyed the baked good like a young hound begging for a treat.

“I thought so,” Frigg chuckled. She tossed the cake into the air where it was immediately snapped up by a black streak, which came to rest on an opposing bookshelf.

“Now...” She turned back to her husband. “What would I love?”

“Merely an idea. Do not worry yourself about it.” He smiled and relaxed back into the tall, oaken chair.

Frigg walked up next to Odin and set the filled basket on the desk’s corner. “It is past noon, I thought maybe you would like something to eat? What has you cooped up in here on such a fine day anyway?”

The all-father brought his arms over his head and stretched. He was rewarded with a symphony of cracks and pops, running from spine all through to his hands. "I am catching up on correspondence. I always fall behind in the days of Yule. I will finish reading and responding to one more, then we can eat, yes?"

Frigg nodded and drew up a smaller chair to sit beside her husband as he worked.

Odin smiled at this and retrieved another letter from the pile. To say his face sank would be a gross understatement. Like Ratatoskr on a bad day, his face plummeted. The hand-drawn lightning bolt of questionable artistic capability on the envelope spelled a tedious read.

"What's wrong? You look—" Frigg caught the insignia on the off-white envelope. "Oh. Him."

Odin released one of his patented sighs. One so deep and drawn out, it had to be of greater volume than his lungs. One, which he typically reserved for his sons. Or for his mischievous blood-brother. The Odin-sigh, as his family had dubbed it.

"Let us get this over with," he said and broke the golden wax seal.

Odin! My dude, my bro, my man.

Odin pinched the bridge of his nose. "I have told him repeatedly to not refer to me as 'his bro.'"

Hey, so I need some help. A favour. Advice from the mega oracle himself.

"Oracle?" Frigg questioned.

"That is what he refers to me as. It is a role where he is from. It is not unfitting, I suppose, but I just wish he would respect my wishes and not refer to me as such."

You've been giving me great advice. I appreciate it. I always tell my friends, I tell them "I have a guy. The best guy. Gives the best advice." You could work for me, you know? I would make you the God of Oracles. You could be my advisor. It would pay well, lots of prayers and bitches. Think about it.

Both readers retched audibly.

"Does this man hear himself?" Frigg exclaimed. "Is he saying he would pay you in women?"

"With anyone else, I would think that a slip of the tongue. But not with him," Odin admitted. He shook his head, attempting to clear some of the stories he had heard from his mind.

Frigg shook her head along with her husband. "I had heard he could be crude, but this is vile."

You've already helped me so much. I have no idea how I would have solved the issue with Salmoneus without your counsel.

Odin cringed. "Please, do not attribute that to me."

Frigg looked at her husband. "What happened?"

"Salmoneus was a king in his world, who attempted to impersonate a god. I advised speaking to the man. Explain why it would be unwise to present himself as a god."

Frigg paused. "That sounds like a reasonable solution?"

"He killed him with lightning."

"That sounds decidedly unreasonable."

“Yes. I laid out an explanation for why impersonating a god is a terrible idea. Now, I have given some unreasonable punishments in the past, so perhaps this is a case of cookware colour calling, but I was trying to steer him from the same path I walked.”

“Wait. And his subjects? Were they not on the brass bridge with him?”

Odin nodded gravely. “Collateral damage, he called it.”

Frigg shivered. “I wish to never meet this man.”

Or with the whole Hephaestus situation with the old ball and chain.

Frigg once again looked to her husband. This time, more worried.

Odin sighed, the exhalation becoming deeper with every repetition. “Hephaestus is his son. The ‘old ball and chain’ is his wife Hera.”

“Ball and chain. Really? It sounds as if they could benefit from speaking with a relationship expert.” Frigg sat back in her chair and crossed her arms.

“I am not sure how much that would help. He is stubborn beyond anything I have witnessed.”

Frigg chuckled. “Maybe you two are more alike than you would like to admit?”

Odin started a hurried protest before snapping his mouth shut. “It is not a flattering comparison but I also can not say that you are entirely wrong,” he sighed.

“No, but you listen and learn.” Frigg smiled and looked back to the tiring letter. “What occurred with his son?”

“He was born, and I am quoting, ‘butt fucking ugly, dude.’” Odin slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead.

Frigg imitated her husband’s sigh to a tee. “He wanted advice for that? What did you tell him?”

“I told him what a wise woman once told me, when I was at my wit’s end with my sons. I told him that his son is his son. He cannot change who he is or how he looks. He shall not be perfect; he shall not be who you want him to be. And that is right. For he should be who he himself wishes to be.”

The smile on Frigg’s face was warmer than any golden sunlight. “Now where have I heard that before? And how did he act?”

“He threw him off a mountain.”

Frigg sat motionless. The smile remained on her face. She blinked. “He what?”

“Threw his son off a mountain for the crime of being unattractive in his eyes. And then he blamed his wife afterwards.”

“And this man is a god? The leader of his pantheon of gods?”

“Yes. I fear for the people under his rule.”

Oh man, I would never have known what to do with Prometheus if not for you!

Frigg sighed. “So—”

“Nothing,” Odin exclaimed, cutting his wife off. “I told him to do nothing. Prometheus gave their humans the ability to learn and evolve. I told him that he had no right to keep it from the humans in the first place and that Prometheus had done the right thing. I told him to leave it at that and guide the humans as a leader should!”

The all-father took a breath and placed a hand over his wife’s on the table. She leaned in and placed a kiss on his cheek while rubbing his back comfortingly. “Perhaps you were a little hasty in your judgement, but I think there is wisdom in what you said. Surely, he cannot have twisted that?”

“He tied Prometheus to a rock and has had an eagle eat his liver every day since.”

Frigg was silent. Her expression was neutral except for a twitch under her eye.

Anyway, there’s this fine bitch called Europa I wanna dick down. Should I turn into a bull or pull the old swan trick again?

*Lightning fucking bolt,
Zeus, King of Kings, God of Gods, Master of Olympus.*

Odin folded up the letter and put it in the envelope, which his wife held.

“Sweetheart,” Frigg called and within seconds, Baldr stuck his head around the door to the study.

“Mom, Dad, what do you need?”

“Sweetheart, would you hand this letter to Loki?”

Baldr nodded and went to take the letter from his mother. As he pulled, she held firm for a moment.

“And tell him...” Frigg looked at Odin who nodded with a slight smirk.

“There are no limits.”

Meet the Committee!

Martina Ferretti (President)

I'm a fourth-year English with Creative Writing student, who finally said "no" to the safe career choice of staying in STEM and decided to pursue her dream of being a novelist who doesn't just dabble in, well, *transformative works*. The Society has helped me *immensely* with honing my skills. Every time I submit a piece (mostly prose, though I have slipped into poetry a few times), I always leave the meeting having received praise, constructive criticism, and feedback from people from all walks of life. The Society is an incredible source of inspiration for me as well. In four years of being part of AUCWS, I have gone from a scared introvert hiding in the corner at meetings and submitting anonymously, to a less scared introvert who is still, admittedly, not extraordinarily prolific, but who is much more confident about her work and skills. And this year I've been your President as well. Weird, right? All this thanks to the amazing community I found here. I'm at the end of my Uni journey, and I couldn't have asked for a better community than this one. From the bottom of my heart: thank you, everyone. And with that, I hope you had a wonderful time with the fourth edition of our Compendium!

Freya Juul Jensen (Secretary)

I'm in my fourth and final year of studying English and Art History. My time with the Creative Writing Society has been a bit different than our other committee members. I originally joined back in my first year, but took a break during my second to try out other things. I returned during lockdown in my third year, joking that I had an enemies-to-lovers relationship with the society. Now I'm here! Whilst I don't write much myself, I do really enjoy giving feedback and being part of the editing process. Rephrasing something in prose to make it even stronger or finding *just* the right word for a poem is amazing! This year, I've also been your Secretary, meaning I've been responding to even more emails than I usually do. If you've ever sent in a submission to our weekly booklet, you've probably been in contact with me. I'm very proud to showcase all the hard work of our members in this Compendium!

Aidan William Armstrong (Treasurer)

I'm in my fourth year studying English with Creative Writing, and in hindsight, the society has been a key part of my growth and development as a writer. I've been going to meetings since my first week at uni, and at the end of my second year I somehow found myself on the committee. Over my time in the Society, I've been able to meet and interact with like-minded people and share and develop my work in a safe and welcoming environment. Since joining the committee, I've been proud to be a part of organising our events and contributing to our Compendium. My duties are mostly just related to managing the Society's funds, but I like to think that my role is more than just the funding fiend. I enjoy writing a wide range of genres and forms, though mostly prose. I'm very excited for our fourth Compendium!

Lillie Sanderson (Social Secretary)

I'm a second year immunology student with a keen interest in creative writing. As cliché as it is to say, I've been writing stories since I could write. I joined the society this year and I felt welcomed straight away. I genuinely love this society and its members and couldn't imagine not having the meetings as part of my week. I always leave inspired and itching to write more. I hope that the Compendium helps to display all of the wonderful talent in our society and I am so grateful to be even a small part of it.

We are super excited to close out our fourth edition of the Compendium and hope you had a wonderful time! We'd be delighted to see you at any of our meetings (info way above, on page 6), and make sure to tune in for the next edition of the Creative Writing Society Compendium!

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