



PENN IN HAND
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Happy Reading!

Cover art by Elizabeth Xu



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On a cold rainy fall day, there's nothing better than being with friends in a nice dry place. One of my favorite spots is Steam Scotts, a Steampunk cafe/boutique/bookstore owned by the county's former treasurer Adam Scott (who has an uncanny resemblance to Lin-Manual Miranda) and his family. I love this place, always so warm and inviting. Not to mention they have amazing and incredibly delicious merchandise.

The cafe has a lounge area where people can just chill. There's two tables, each surrounded by couches and chairs. Me and my beautiful girlfriend Grace are sitting on one of the chairs, it's not really made for two people, but a lot of creatures make it work. I know Grace doesn't like to be out in public in the "mortal world" when it's not October because of her appearance, (she's a Bird Deet, so she has a beak and a body full of feathers) but I keep telling her to ignore the stares. Who cares what people think? I love her, and no matter what, I'll always see pure beauty when I look at her.

Next to me is my hetero-life-partner Harry, I want him to be on the chair with us, but that might be uncomfortable. So he's instead on the couch to my right.

Next to Harry, is my 10-year-old niece Jazz and her older brother Tom. Jazz doesn't like socializing, but Tom usually drags her along. At the moment, she's busily typing away at her laptop. Tom is a grade younger than me, which makes it harder to believe that we're nephew and uncle, but my sister Alice has a lot of in-laws.

On the chair opposite me, are two of my "Detention Buddies": Lex and Currie. Ever since that day in detention, those two have become inseparable. They're even foster siblings, and honestly, I never seen Currie so happy before.

On the other couch surrounding our oval table are three more of my "Detention Buddies": Gilbert, who's the closest to Lex; Ray and his boyfriend Ian. I gotta say, those two do make a cute couple.

"So what's everyone's Christmas planz?" Gilbert asks us. His English is getting better by the day, but he still has a somewhat thick accent. Not that I mind seeing as how I'm fluent in French. (As well as Ray)

"Same as every year." I answer, "On the day of Christmas Eve, travel to Spain, which is six hours ahead of us, with mis hermanas, Yoli, Don Xavier and Doña Jade for nochebuena; then when it's evening here, come back here, go to my Aunt Isolade's and because her husband's Italian, partake in the 'Feast of the 7 Fishes'; keep my older sister Alice and our mom from destroying each other; make small-talk; and watch as one of us dresses up as Santa for the kids. This year is my cousin Justin's turn, although Uncle Tristen did say it would be my turn in a few years. Then on Christmas Day, spend the day both in Wales, which is five hours ahead of us, and here with my Mom's family and try to keep the peace."

"Are the fights that bad?" Ian asks.

"Yep." I take a sip of my tea. "No matter what, Mom, Grandma and Aunt Max can't help but tease. Especially Mom and Grandma."

F
iction

"I write to give myself strength. I write to be the characters I am not. I write to explore all the things I'm afraid of."

- Joss Whedon

“Why do you always go?” Tom asks me.

“It’s the holidays.” I answer, “And they’re still family.”

“So’s my dad.” Ray replies, “And I’ll be lucky to get even a message from him; whether it’s my birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter.”

“What’s Za-Thanksgiving?” Gilbert asks. He’s an exchange student from France, so he’s probably not knowledgeable on U.S. customs.

“Every year on the 4th Thursday of November, the U.S. gives thanks for everything we have.” Tom answers, “Also you stuff your face with friends and family.”

“Usually there’s turkey and a potato dish.” Grace says, “Or in Max’s family, there’s at least two.”

“Two?” Currie asks.

“Yep.” I answer, “Mashed potatoes and Alice’s mashed sweet potatoes. The sweet potatoes are always a hit.”

“Yeah, she adds sauteed sweet onion, garlic and rosemary, as well as mashing the marshmallows and brown sugar into them, rather than just putting them on top.” Grace adds. Since we started dating, she’s always come over for Thanksgiving, since it’s not a holiday universally celebrated in Fayland.

“Why?” Lex asks.

“Why just have the good stuff on top?” I answer.

“Why onions and garlic?” Ian asks.

“Tastes good.” I answer.

There’s a bit of silence, we eat and drink, and Jazz types and clicks away.

“I’m going to my Grandma’s.” Harry finally says, breaking the silence.

“For Thanksgiving or Christmas?” Ian asks.

“Both.” Harry answers, “I’m really close with my dad’s side of the family, but not so much my mom’s.”

“Doesn’t your mom’s brothers send you a card?” I ask.

“Yeah, but you know they don’t come every Christmas Day.” Harry replies. Then he takes a sip of his hot chocolate.

“On Thanksgiving, me, Jazz, and our guardians are going to our Grandpa’s.” Tom says.

“It’s ‘Jazz, our guardians and I.’” Jazz corrects.

“This ain’t Language Arts!” Tom retorts.

“Proper English matters no matter where you are.” Jazz replies while glued to her screen, “Also, that sentence can lead to confusion. You should’ve said, ‘Jazz and I are going to our grandparents along with our guardians.’”

Tom rolls his eyes. “Are you done on that thing?”

“I just have this one last paper to edit.” Jazz answers.

“How much they paying you?” Tom asks. Jazz has a business where she edits her classmate’s papers.

“Five bucks.” Jazz answers.

“That low?” Harry asks in confusion.



“That much?” Ray asks.

“These are 5th graders.” Jazz states, “They don’t have much money. Besides, \$5 is my standard now.”

“You charged my cousin \$10!” Harry tells her.

“One: he could afford it. Two: it was way more than a simple essay.”

“So?” Harry asks.

Jazz faces him, and says in a sharp tone, “Uncle Harry, please.”

I place a hand on him, telling him to just let it go. He sighs, and eats his cookie.

“Well... uh...” Currie starts. I see Lex comfort her. Currie takes a breath, “I’m not sure of my plans. Normally I go to my grandparent’s, but I’m not sure if I’ll be welcomed there.” I hear her family’s giving her a hard time after the child abuse claim was filed against her parents.

“Don’t worry.” Lex tells her, “I told you, you’re always welcome in my family. I’ll always be here for you.”

A gracious smile spreads across Currie’s face. I can tell she’s still getting used to a non-toxic environment.

“Yeah. We’re going to my Uncle’s place. And you don’t need good grades to eat. You just need to show up and not be a dick.”

We can’t help but giggle.

“Wait, the lawyer uncle?” Ray asks.

“Yes.” Lex answers, “And no, he is not looking for an intern.”

“You sure?” Ray asks.

“Yes.” Lex answers.

“Awe.” Ray complains.

“I told you I could get you in touch with Jade’s sister.” I tell him.

“That’s all the way in Philly!” Ray complains.

“And you need the experience.” Ian scolds, “I’m serious. Do you know how hard it is to get a job these days?”

“Yes.” Ray answers, “But I can’t get an affordable, reliable way to get to Philly on a consistent basis.”

“We can help you.” Grace tells him.

“How?” Ray asks.

“I’m sure Rita can convince Ms. Janet to cover your transport costs, or-”

I squeeze her. There’s no way I can secure a portal gun for him, he’s a plain human who will be using it in a highly populated place.

“Or what?” Ray asks.

“Nothing.” I dismissively say.

“She said ‘or’.” Ray tells me.

“Portal gun.” Grace quickly throws her voice.

“Like on Rick and Morty?” Ray asks intrigued.

“More complex and easier to use.” Grace answers, “If you don’t have Teleportation powers, it’s how you get from place to place when you don’t feel like other modes of transport.”



I can see Ray is intrigued. Better shut him down now. “They cost as much as a smartphone, and once people know you have one, they’ll either want one for themselves, or won’t stop bothering ya to make portals for them. Trust me.”

“Do you have a portal gun?” Ray asks me.

“I plead the 5th.” I answer.

Ray nods his head with a knowing glance. He’s smart. I need to change the subject.

“So Gilbert, did your host family mention Thanksgiving?”

“Uh... oui. They zaid zat zey were having family over.” Gilbert answers, “Zey zaid it was a feast for family, or zomething. I didn’t pay much attention.”

“Was it the English?” Ian asks.

“Partly.” Gilbert answers.

Ray and Ian take on a mischivious grin. “Were you thinking of Ada?” Ray asks.

“What? No!” Gilbert denies.

“You two are close.” Ray says.

“So?” Gilbert asks, rather defensively.

Ian gets off Ray and leans in super close to Gilbert, “You’re always flirting with each other. And you do give off the vibe of a married couple.”

“So does Max and Rita.” Gilbert replies.

“Yeah but we’re siblings.” I say, “A better argument would be me and Harry.” I feel a squeeze from Grace.

“Please don’t drag me into this.” Harry mutters to me.

“What it’s true.” I reply. He looks away. I turn to Grace, “And all I said was it was a better argument. Everyone knows we’re a couple.”

Grace makes a face, “Everyone?”

“Yes.” I give her a kiss. She returns it. I’ve never minded her beak, it doesn’t feel poky. Oh I love her.

“Get a room!” Lex says. I feel a paper ball thrown at us.

“We’re in a room.” I playfully retort.

Lex rolls their eyes.

“Sooo Ian,” Gilbert says after a moment of silence, “What are you doing for Zanksgiving?”

“Well, this year, I’m going to my Aunt’s house.” Ian answers, “She lives all the way in Swarthmore, so we’ll be staying three days.”

“Three days?” Ray asks, he looks hurt.

“You can handle three days without me.” Ian says with a smile.

Ray looks uncomfortable, “I guess. But, this is, like, one of the longest romantic relationships I’ve been in.”

“Really?” Ian asks.

“Yeah.” Ray nervously answers, “Dating someone for more than two weeks is rare for me. It’s only happened once before.”

Ian takes on a smug look. “Guess I’m special then.”

A genuine smile crosses Ray’s mouth, and pink hearts appear in his eyes. (Although, among



the 10 of us, only me, Grace, Tom and Jazz can see the hearts) “Yep.” He kisses him, Ian kisses back. They kiss until they end up in Gilbert’s lap.

“Hey!” Gilbert cries.

“Sorry.” Ian and Ray say.

Libby

On a cold rainy fall day, there’s nothing better than going to a cafe. Although that can get boring after a while. The best way to make it unboring is to always go to different places. That’s why today, my sisters and I are taking the trolley from Central City to Spridly. We’re sitting in the middle, with Abby closest to the window, and Margo closest to the aisle. It’s a bit of a tight squeeze, but we make it work.

“Why are we going all the way to Spridly?” Margo complains.

“Because it’s fun.” I answer.

“Shouldn’t we have told Dad?” Margo asks.

“Dad doesn’t need to know.” Abby answers.

“But Dad doesn’t like us going so far from home.” Margo nervously says.

I stroke her hand in comfort. “You didn’t have to come with us.” I tell her. I feel the strong urge to boop her nose.

“I didn’t want to be stuck in the house all day.” Margo answers. “The forecast calls for rain all day.”

“You can go places with your friends.” I tell her.

“Or alone.” Abby adds.

“They’re all busy, and I don’t like to be alone.” Margo pouts.

“Well you’re here now, and our phones have full charge.” Abby tells her, “Nothing to worry about.”

We rode in mostly silence for the rest of the trip. With only the chatter of other passengers and the occasional noises Abby makes as she reads something on her phone. I wrap an arm around Margo, and she leans into me, resting her head on my shoulder. When our stop comes, we pull the bell and exit.

Ah, Welsh Road; the hangout of Spridley. A road filled with shops, offices, and an arcade. On the other side of the trolley stop is the town’s elementary school, a Catholic Church, and all the way down is our Aunt Gretchen’s farm.

“Where to first?” I ask Abby.

“Steam Scotts.” Abby answers, “I want a pumpkin latte.”

“Ooh, I hope Horace is working the register today!” Margo squeals.

Me and Abby giggle. Margo and her crushes.

“He’s too old for you.” Abby laughs.

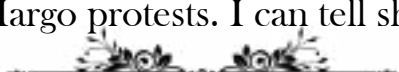
“So?” Margo asks. “It’s only a few years.”

“You’re an 8th grader, and he’s a senior.” I tell her, “It won’t work out.”

“Says you!” Margo scowls as she puts her hands on her hips.

“He’s told you he’s not interested.” Abby says, “Besides, he’s a womanizer. Trust me, I go to the same school as him.”

“You’re only a sophomore.” Margo protests. I can tell she’s getting desperate.



Abby laughs as she shakes her head. “Come on, let’s go.” She opens the umbrella and grabs my hand, and I grab Margo’s. We huddle under the umbrella as we rush to the cafe. There’s a long line. While we wait, we look around and gossip.

“Maybe we can check out the boutique.” I suggest, “I could use a new top.”

“Your wardrobe’s near bursting!” Abby scolds.

“Well, I did offer Margo and Ada some clothes.” I remark.

“I didn’t love them.” Margo replies, “And when would Ada have the chance to wear them?”

“Good point.” I say. I think I have a problem.

“What are you guys gonna get?” Abby asks, changing the subject.

“Pumpkin hot chocolate.” I answer, “And I wonder if they have those pumpkin blueberry scones.”

“They should at this time of year.” Abby replies, “What about you Margo?”

“Chocolate drizzled lemon drop cookies.” She answers, “And maybe a hot chocolate.”

“Plain?” I ask.

“Yeah, I like plain.” Margo answers.

“But they don’t offer Pumpkin every day.” I tell her.

Margo shrugs her shoulders, “It’ll be available until Christmas. I can handle it.”

“True.” Me and Abby say in unison.

There’s only a few people ahead of us now. Abby checks the news on her phone. I look at the cashier, it’s Horace. Margo’s gonna flip.

I feel Margo wrap her arms around my left one. She rests her head against mine, she’s so adorable. I kiss her head.

We move up the line, it’s very boring.

“Where do you want to go to next?” I ask my sisters.

“Home.” Margo answers.

“Besides that.” I answer.

“Hey, check this out.” Abby says as she shows us her phone, “New gun laws are finally being enforced.”

“Really?” I ask. I know how hard it’s been trying to regulate guns so they don’t end up killing people.

“Yeah, there’s pushback, of course, but that’s expected.” Abby nonchalantly answers.

“What are the laws?” Margo asks.

“Banning of semi-automatics; mandating safety regulations; making sure if you have a gun, it must be registered, even if it’s a gift.” Abby answers.

“They got all that done?” I ask in disbelief. I may not be as informed as my big sister, but I know enough.

“Yeah, it’s amazing what can be done when common sense takes over.” Abby replies.

“Hey!” I hear someone cry. I turn to see a group of people in the lounge. I see 7, no, 8,

people? Maybe more? They seem cheerful. They seem to have a conversation going on. I know it’s impolite to stare, but, I just can’t look away for some reason.

Then, the most handsome man I’ve ever seen rises from the couch farthest away from me.



He has auburn hair in a ponytail, with some blonde in it. His face, oh, so handsome! I wonder why I’ve never seen him before! New Wales County’s quite small, so you’re bound to be familiar with everyone. But him, oh my.

“Who’s taken your fancy?” Abby asks.

I point.

“Him?” Abby asks in disbelief.

“Yeah.” I answer, “Do you know him?”

“That’s Ray McJames.” Abby answers, “He’s on Debate with me, and he’s in a few of my classes. He’s a HUGE flirt.”

“Like Jeff?” I ask. Jeff is an Elite who’s always flirting with Abby, Ada and Maria Ricardo. Even though Abby and Ada keep rejecting him for being a jerk. Maria’s more open to his advances, even though she and Abby are both in serious relationships. Although rumor has it that Maria’s boyfriend is abusive and she’s only with him because of her mother.

“Oh no.” Abby answers, “Jeff doesn’t understand boundaries nor how to take a hint. Ray does.”

We move up in line. I think I remember her telling us.

“Is he nice?” Margo asks.

“Ray? Yeah. He’s witty, caring, intelligent,” She takes on a wistful face and tone, “handsome, worldly, cunning,”

“Do you have a crush?” Margo asks.

Abby snaps out of it and quickly says, “Oh, no. I just see him as a friend. I would never cheat on Jack.”

“I never said you would.” Margo replies.

Abby looks embarrassed. I should change the subject. We move up in line. “Is he seeing someone?” I ask.

“Kinda.” Abby answers, “He’s really close with Gabrielle Scott, and there’s rumors he’s dating Ian Foster.”

“Ian Foster?!” Margo and I exclaim. Ian’s an Elite, and there’s rumors that his dad’s a homophobe.

“Yep. Started when they were in detention for that fight with Lee Butcher.” Abby answers.

“Why haven’t I noticed?” I ask, I’m in the same school, and I do keep in touch with some Elites. Not as much as I used to, but I do.

“Well, you’re not one for gossip.” Abby answers.

“True.” I answer.

We reach the front of the line. I see the pumpkin-blueberry scones in the display case, yay! When it’s our turn, we go to the register.

“Hey girls.” Horace says with a flirty smile, “What can I do for ya?”

Abby sighs while I roll my eyes.

“Date me?” Margo squeaks.

“Uh, you’re too young.” Horace awkwardly replies.

I see Margo pout.



“Medium pumpkin-spice latte and an apple scone.” Abby orders, bring the subject back to ordering.

“Uh, sure.” Horace says, then he rings her up. “Are you separate?”

“Yes.” Abby says.

“Ok. That’ll be \$4.71.” Horace says.

Abby smiles and takes out a five. Horace then gives her the change and receipt.

He looks at me. He knows to give us our orders all at once. “And you?”

“Pumpkin hot chocolate and a pumpkin-blueberry scone.” I answer.

“Usual size?” Horace asks.

“Yes.” I answer.

“That’ll be \$4.77.” Horace answers.

I’m all out of fives, darn. And I only have three ones. I give him a ten. He looks a bit upset.

He puts the bill in the register and gives me my change and receipt.

He turns to Margo. “Your usual?”

“Yes.” Margo answers. She still looks upset, but I see a bit of hope.



The Therapy Session



Alexis Welsh

2011 – 2012 school year

“Who are you texting?”

“A friend.”

“Do I know this friend?”

“You probably don’t remember.”

“Sweetie, I have an excellent memory.”

“What’s my saint name?”

“Saint name?”

“The name you receive during confirmation. I told you this last year.”

“Alice that was months ago!”

“I thought you had an excellent memory?”

“I do, but you hardly mentioned it. And I have a lot to do. I have three kids to raise, four dogs and a house to take care of, I have a lot to do.”

“One, Whitney was adopted by the Garcías two years ago.”

“She was? Oh yeah.”

“Two, what about Burnadette?”

“Burnadette? Burnadette, Burnadette, Burnadette... Oh the cat! I don’t know why I keep forgetting about her.”

“She’s the same age as the puppies, and we got her shortly after they were born.”

“We did, didn’t we. You know Alice, for some reason I just can’t remember. I know I said I have a good memory, but I’m not perfect. No one is, so please stop putting me on this pedestal and pay attention!”

“Sorry Mom.”

“Now, oh! ... No, I was just not paying attention. ... Uh, Alice.”

“Ok.”

“See you later sweetie, have fun.”

“Thanks Mom, you too.”

“Hey Mom.”

“Fine. I was making plans with my friend Penny. I was going to take my siblings to the Please Touch Museum, and she wanted to hang out. And since we both love museums and she has a little sister who gets along well with my siblings, we decided to go together.”

“I’m at the therapists office.”

“Yeah, I love hanging out with my siblings. Sometimes me, Penny and our friend Xena joke we’re in a ‘Mom’s Club’ because we have siblings to take care of.”

“No, I’m in the waiting room. Alice just went back.”

“My mom helps out, but she doesn’t do much anymore due to her acid reflux, which made her anxiety way worse. So they see me as more fun.”



“Mom, you remember me talking to you? Alice’s been distant lately. It all started when we took in Rita. She’s always out, hardly ever tells me anything--”

“I don’t mind. Although I do make sure to make plans without them. And Xena’s parents have a part-time nanny who doesn’t mind looking after Max and Rita.”

“I know Mom, but I need her. You’re all the way in Jersey, Arthur doesn’t give a shit, Maxine’s too busy and overwhelmed, Danelle’s too far away and Jace is all the way in Tennessee!”

“Oh they don’t mind. In fact, they view us as part of the family. They even give me an allowance if I do my homework and be Xena’s sparing and dancing partner.”

“Yeah but Mom, I don’t have many friends. The ones I do have, either get it but are too busy, or don’t get it and treat like nothing! Alice is the only one who gets it and is there for me. I know she’s only in 8th grade, but Mom I need her.”

“Well, it all started when we took Rita in. She’s my foster sister, and her birth family is really nice, but they felt like she would be better off with us. My parents seem to forget this, and all the good her family’s done for me and Max. My Mom, although loving and trying her best, tends to treat me like a doll and nurse. I have a social life, I need money but too young to get a job and my parents don’t believe in allowances. I fear she’ll do the same with Max, and Rita and her family helps with that.”

“Well, Rita is very nurse-like, but she’s only a preschooler. I need someone older, like Alice. She can take over if things ever get bad. It’s a shame I have to take her out of school so much, but I need her.”

“They act like a barrier. They provide a safe space for us. When I’m with them, or my friends, I feel like I can talk about anything and get nothing but support and understanding. I try that with my parents, Grandma and Aunt Maxine, but they don’t get it. I feel like I have to explain myself or something at least a dozen times just for them to even get a basic understanding. They think they’re supportive, but they’re not. They either don’t care, or say that it’s trash and try to do it their way!”

“I’ve gotten better. I don’t take her out as much as I did last year. ... I really hope Alice isn’t saying anything damming in there. We haven’t gotten along lately, and I worry that she’ll say something to put me away. These people aren’t very understanding.”

“I’ve tried, but they either make false promises, come up with an excuse, or think I’m attacking them. The Garcías and the Welfishes, and my friends, they’re not like that. I never have to worry that they’ll make me feel bad for simply stating the facts. I feel at home with them.”

“Mom I never told you, but, while you and Dad were going through your divorce I went to therapy and almost got sent to the nut house!”

“I’ve tried, but no matter what I do I can’t get through to them. They’re very condescending of me.”

“Mom all I did was say that I felt overwhelmed and hated life, and they told me to go somewhere that I got a bad feeling about. And I knew instantly that it was a place for the insane. So I--”

“It seems that no matter how hard I try, my parents, Aunt Max, Grandma and Aunt Jace will always see me as a child. I think Aunt Isolde is the same, but I don’t spend much time with her.”

“Mom! Let me finish!”

“My foster family, well, I like to think of them that way, they don’t make me feel like that.”

“So I told them, ‘I’m not crazy, and you can’t force me to be here!’ and then I turned around and never went back.”

“Because that’s what they feel like to me.”

“Thanks. Oh! Mom, and that’s not the only time I had to deal with bad therapists.”

“Yeah. I spend more time with them, my friends, and my polyamory than I do with my parents. I love them, I feel like no matter what, they’ll love and support me. I don’t feel like that with my parents, their siblings and their parents. With them, I feel like I should be seen and not heard, but with my foster family, my siblings, my cousin Justin, and my friends, I feel like I can do and say anything. And that’s what family is about right? Being love, supported and respected?”

“Well yeah, I still needed someone to help me get through my bad feelings.”

“Yeah. I haven’t told my birth parents yet, but, three of my friends and I, around September, decided to form one. We all love each other, and we haven’t found a reason to end it, so we don’t.”

“Mom, I told you, it’s not your fault! I have feelings that I need to tell someone, and the doctor recommended--”

“Well, there’s my girlfriend Canis, and our boyfriends Aussie and Leo. We were all friends, but we decided to date around September. Although I think Canis and Leo were dating each other before that. It’s hard to tell what’s affection for a close friend, an unofficial romance, or official romance.”

“Mom, not all doctors are bad. And you should really get that lump looked at.”

“Well, an official romance is when you’re in an official romantic relationship with someone. An unofficial romance is when you’re romantic with someone, but you’re either just friends, or are unsure of your status.”

“Mom,” sigh, “I want you to live a long life and be here for your grandchildren.”

“I told my foster family, and my friends, and Justin. I-I do plan on telling the rest of my birth family, but I’m worried.”

“Mom, simply being positive can’t cure cancer.”

“Well, my mom really only talks to me when I’m a captive audience. Like, when I’m trying to go to sleep, going to the bathroom, in the car, or trying to do my homework. And sometimes when I’m trying to get dressed. She lacks an understanding of privacy. And she’ll just blabber on and on about her past and whatever she had to deal with that day, and I’m trying to tune her out.”

“Mom, listen, one of my co-workers died of cancer because she didn’t get treatment until it was too late. I don’t want that to be you.”

“Yes. She’ll just open the door and walk in and start blabbering. Even when I lock the door, she’ll just bang and demand that I unlock it, or she’ll get the key. And she has gotten the key before.”

“Danelle said she’d pay for everything. You can handle a year in Philly.”

“Well my dad tries to stop it, but he’s not always there. And sometimes, even when I’m a captive audience, she’ll just talk to someone else, either on the phone, or in person, and act like I’m not even there. She’ll talk about anything to anybody, no matter how personal. And although



she claims to not be a homophobe, her comments... they make me feel uncomfortable.”

“Mom, you’re acting like a child.”

“She thinks that bisexual and polyamorous are the same thing. I’m both, but that doesn’t mean anything. Being one doesn’t automatically make you the other, and when I try to tell her that, she just says I’m wrong.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you, but it’s the truth.”

“Physically. I know they would never intentionally hurt me, but I don’t feel like I belong there.”

“Lord, I know I don’t go to mass, and I don’t follow the rules, but please make my mom see her errors. I want her to live a long healthy life.”

“Oh they were fine with it. Although it is taking Justin a while to adjust. I know he’s trying, and he seems open to it. Also he knows I can kick his butt.”

“Mom, please calm down. I know this is hard for you, but you need to listen and take care of yourself.”

“My foster family’s been training me in combat three days a week since they took me in. I really like it, it’s fun.”

“Why do I even bother? There’s no way Mom’ll listen to reason. She’ll just do what she wants.”

“No. They’ve never noticed, and I did mention it before to Mom and Grandma, but they just forgot about it. They usually forget the things I tell them about a minute or two after.”

“Oh, it’s almost my turn. I should get ready. Oh, a text from Jace.”

“Dad’s not really around much, and he doesn’t seem like the kind you can pour your feelings out to. But I’ll be 18 in a few years, so I don’t mind. I can just leave and take Max and Rita with me, I’m sure they’ll follow me. And If I want to, I guess I could leave when I’m 16 or 15. I don’t think my parents will notice until Mom has another attack.”



Levatio

Taylor Blazinsky



He sat still in the course recliner, the blinds shut so nothing but darkness encased the room. A half empty bottle of rum hung loosely between his numb fingers. His cold stare was focused on the empty wall in front of him, his eyes glazed over. A picture frame rested alone on the small mahogany table placed to the right of the man; a young woman sitting at a piano was its contents. The man reached out his long, cold limb and brought the frame to his face. This was his wife in the picture; Phoenix.

He slowly turned his head to face the Steinway and Sons grand piano, which he had pushed to the corner of the room and thrown a tarp over. He didn’t want to have to see it everyday. He didn’t want to be blatantly reminded that his wife was gone. Two days prior, she had lost her battle to cancer; breast cancer to be specific. When she lost her battle, the man, Jayce, lost his whole world. He had quit his job teaching English to a bunch of unenthused high schoolers the very next day, not wanting to go back there since Phoenix had also worked there as the music teacher and choir director. The couple had gone to middle school and high school together, but didn’t begin their relationship until their sophomore year. They instantly clicked once they finally acknowledged each other’s existence. Many of their friends told them they were moving too fast, but they never listened because their love was unlike anything they had ever felt before. Once they graduated from high school, the two went their separate ways; Jayce went to Penn State University and Phoenix went to Julliard. However, their relationship never faltered under the pressures of a long distance relationship; in fact, it brought them closer. The Summer before their senior year, Jayce had bought Phoenix that Steinway and Sons grand piano and hid an engagement ring in the compartment under the cushion of the little black and white bench. She practiced on that piano everyday. Jayce enjoyed just sitting back and listening to her as she moved her fingers gently over the keys; she was gifted, he always thought. Sometimes the two would squeeze together on the tiny bench and she would teach him how to play Heart and Soul; the beginner version, of course, but she knew how to play the real 1938 Hoagy Carmichael and Frank Loesser version. He would play the left side part pretty averagely as her fingers flawlessly played the right side part. As time went on, he got better of course, but they never moved on to other songs; that was their song. After their college graduations, the two waited until they each had found jobs to begin planning their wedding. Luckily, the couple were able to find jobs at the same high school they graduated from. And now, the two had just celebrated their eighth wedding anniversary and were beginning to discuss starting a family. It was like something from a fairy tale, until Phoenix got sick.

She had felt a lump at the side of her right breast and immediately scheduled an appointment to get it checked out. After a few tests, she was solemnly told that she did in fact have stage four breast cancer - terminal stage four breast cancer. Despite this, she persisted on beginning chemo treatments, but only received one treatment before passing away at home in her bed. It was a quick and unexpected death. Suddenly a bright and happy future turned to nothing but loneliness and darkness.



Jayce raised the bottle up to his dry lips and took four generous sips. With every sip, he felt guilt; he felt he was letting Phoenix down so soon after her death, but he didn't know what else to do or how else to feel.

He had just set down the picture frame, when there was a quiet and rapid tap on his front door. He stood, losing his balance at first and clutching to the back of the recliner for support. He paused for a moment to collect himself, then stumbled over to the door. He swung the door wide open with the bottle of rum still loosely in his grip; no one was there. He began to close the door, but something glittering in the sun caught his attention. There was a black envelope lying on the black and white welcome mat. He would not have seen it if it weren't for the sun reflecting off of the gold lettering on the back. Before bending down to pick it up, he slowly turned his head to the left and then to the right; again there was no one in sight. He felt a chill through his body, however, as if he were being watched. With one swift movement, he grabbed the letter and slammed the door shut behind him.

Jayce sat staring at that letter for at least twenty minutes. There was no return address, in fact, his own address wasn't even on it or his name. He wondered how the mailman was able to know which house to deliver it to, and why he didn't deliver through the mail slot in his front door like usual. He became even more confused when he realized it was 5 p.m.; six hours after his mail usually comes. Someone hand delivered this ambiguous letter to his door. He focused next on the gold letters; only one word was seemingly hand printed across the dark black envelope - Levatio.

Levatio? What the hell is that? He thought to himself.

He sat there with the letter before him for about another ten minutes before his curiosity got the best of him. He felt the need to bring out his letter opener, one that he hadn't used ever, feeling as though he shouldn't tarnish the pristine black envelope. Inside there was one folded piece of paper and one envelope, which still did not include a return address, only the name Levatio printed in gold. He set the two envelopes off to the side and began unfolding the letter. He didn't know what to expect; maybe some sort of charity asking for a donation. He was shocked to find only a few sentences hand printed on the page - along with his name and his wife's name.

It read:

Jayce Miller,

If you wish to see your wife, Phoenix Miller, again send us the name of the cemetery where she is buried and your signature, giving us your consent, on the line at the bottom of this letter. Leave the enclosed information underneath your welcome mat. You have 48 hours to decide.

- Levatio

Jayce read the letter over and over again, finding that his drunken state was not deceiving him each time. There was still no name; no identity besides that same word - Levatio. He pushed himself off of the recliner and made his way over to his laptop. He pulled up Google and typed Levatio into the search bar, but was disappointed when the only results brought up some hotel in Muscat he's never heard. It was at this point he decided that some kids from his class were playing a cruel prank on him, but something deep inside told him to keep the letter until the 48 hours was up.

That night, Jayce tossed and turned while sweat covered his body. His mind was still on the letter; he knew it was a prank, but his mind still drifted towards the possibility of it being true.



He slept restlessly that night, mostly due to the nightmare his mind conjured. He was standing in front of his wife's gravestone, but it was dug up. All of a sudden, Phoenix was standing before him; her face painted with worry.

"How could you not want to bring me back? How could you not even try?" He tried to reply but every time he tried to speak only bated breath would escape his throat.

"Jayce...Jayce answer me!" she screamed in his face as an unseen force pulled her back towards the open grave, "Jayce!" she fell back into the grave and dirt began pouring in. Jayce threw his hands out in a desperate attempt to save her, but he couldn't speak or move. He shot up in his bed, panting and sweating. Without much hesitation, he pushed himself out of his bed and frantically filled out the required information, sealed the envelope and placed it under the welcome mat as instructed. He practically ran back to his bed, thinking someone would see him and know what he had just done, but he was able to sleep more soundly that night, knowing that he tried.

The next morning, Jayce's head felt heavy and his mind was foggy. The events of the previous night rushed back into his mind, so he jumped out of his bed and practically knocked over his bedside table and his standing lamp in his living room before swinging the front door open. His next door neighbor, Janice, was out getting her mail and jumped at the violent motion of Jayce's door swinging open. Her reaction didn't phase him though; he went straight for the welcome mat, throwing it to the side and revealing that someone had picked up the letter sometime in the night.

One Month Later

Jayce sat in that same old recliner, this time with a half empty bottle of vodka dangling from his fingers. He had just gotten home from his shift at the local grocery store; a job he's had now for two weeks. He would rather just sit in his home all day, but he needed some way of buying his alcohol - his only form of comfort left. It's been a whole month since Levatio had picked up his letter; a whole month of silence. He just wanted to forget that it ever happened and continue on with whatever life he had left, but he couldn't help but feel slightly let down. He chugged the last of the vodka and threw the bottle across the room, causing it to shatter against the floor. He jumped up out of his seat at the sound of the doorbell being rung rapidly and frantically at least ten times.

"Go away!" he wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone, but whoever was outside his door continued ringing the doorbell.

"Ok. Ok," he started for the door, "What the hell do you..." he froze as the door swung open and he saw who was relentlessly attempting to get in; it was Phoenix. Before he could even process what was before him, his world wet black and he fell back into his house, hitting his head against the floor.

His eyes shot open in a panic and searched his surroundings; he was laying in his bed. Just another damn nightmare. He felt fully sober now and decided to close his eyes to get some more rest, until a noise from the living room made him slowly creep out of bed. It was the sound of the piano being played, more specifically "Heart and Soul."

He walked slowly, pausing for a moment in the doorway, then continued down the narrow hallway. He now stood at the end of the hall; all he had to do was turn the corner and he would be face to face with whoever was in his house, but he already knew who it was based off the skill with which the song was played.



“Jayce...stop hiding around the corner and play with me. It was our song remember?” her voice echoed from the living room. He stuck his head around and saw her sitting there, not looking in his direction, but with her hands still gliding across the keys. He didn’t move a muscle, so she finally turned to face him. Her skin was pale, but she had always been a fair skinned person. Her emerald eyes glittered and her jet black hair cascaded over her shoulders. Her rosy lips were curled into a warm smile; a smile he knew all too well. It was her. It was really her.

He finally took the first step towards her and slowly made his way over to the bench. She looked up into his blue eyes, still smiling in her gentle way and patted the seat next to her. He sat down hesitantly, as if in slow motion, but kept his gaze on her. Once he was seated, she turned her gaze to the piano keys.

“You start. I follow. Just like old times.” she whispered still looking down. She didn’t look at him at all, just down in a ready position. He couldn’t look away from her; his mouth hung open, unable to speak, but he placed his fingers on the keys and began playing. The two played through the entire song; Phoenix kept her gaze on the keys and Jayce stared in disbelief, but they were two again. In that moment he felt whole again. After they had played through the song a couple times, Phoenix turned to look into her husband’s eyes.

“I’ve missed getting lost in those eyes.” she raised her hand to touch his face. He closed his eyes, waiting for her warmth, but what he received was ice cold; her hands were so cold, as if she was still dead. The coldness startled him so much that he backed off of the bench.

“How-how is this even possible? How are you here right now?” His breath quickened as he cupped his face in his hands, “I’m dreaming again. I have to be.” Phoenix pushed off of the bench and put her cold hands on his arms.

“You got the letter right?” “You mean from that Levatio or whatever the hell it was?” “Yes. They saved me. You saved me. You answered their call and they responded. They brought me back! We can live our lives together without worrying about me getting sick again.” He took her hands in his.

“I don’t understand. How did they bring you back and who are they? Why are you so cold?”

“I only met one man, but there’s more of them. He wouldn’t tell me his name or where I was when I woke up. They took my body, took the parts that I needed most to make me..me. The rest is robotic...machine. I could live forever. I’ll never get sick, hurt or be in pain ever again. I’m immortal.”

“Wha-what do you mean the parts that matter?” “Oh! Let me show you,” she released his hands and placed hers on her head. She began twisting it to the left and he watched in horror as she removed the top of her head, revealing her brain, “I know it’s a lot to take in, but honey, I’m back. I’m home, and I’m never leaving again.” she wrapped her cold arms around his waist. He hesitated for only a moment before wrapping his own arms around her. She was freezing, but he still felt warmth. He still felt comfort.

The couple resumed their lives together, a little differently, of course. Jayce found a new position at a different high school nearby while Phoenix remained at home. Jayce didn’t want to hide her, but what would people think if she just reappeared after being pronounced dead? Nobody would believe the truth and he didn’t want his wife to be on display as some sort of half human,



half machine freak. Plus, the ambiguity of Levatio scared him a little; it was obvious they wanted to be kept secret. It was best to just keep her away from people.

Another month had gone by and the two were living a form of the life they always wanted. They decided to adopt a golden retriever to make up for the fact they could no longer have children, but he didn’t care about that anymore, as long as he had his wife back. They lived peacefully. The only thing that bothered Jayce was the fact that she never slept; she always said she didn’t need to sleep. So, she would either watch him sleep, play the piano quietly, or just walk around the house. Sometimes Jayce would wake up in the middle of the night to hear her talking to herself or just walking by the bedroom door. It creeped him out sometimes because it felt like he was being haunted by her ghost rather than her actually being alive.

A few more months went by as she became more and more restless. She would always try to convince Jayce to let her come with him when he needed to go outside. Of course, he would refuse for the obvious reasons and she would always say she understood, but as time went on, it worked on her more and more. Sometimes Jayce would walk in on her just sitting on a dining room chair, looking as if her mind and soul had left her body and she was just this empty vessel. He could tell she wasn’t completely happy. She was gifted this second chance to live, but this wasn’t living.

One day after work, Jayce came home and found his wife sitting at the piano playing “Silent Night.” It looked as if she hadn’t realized he had just walked in, so he smiled as he crept up behind her. He was just inches away when he looked to his left and saw their dog, lying on the floor dead. He let out an audible gasp, but she didn’t flinch.

“He wouldn’t stop barking to go outside,” she mumbled as she kept playing. He stood frozen for a few minutes before running to grab a garbage bag and a shovel. Phoenix didn’t budge; she kept playing “Silent Night” over and over again as Jayce buried their dog in the backyard. Ever since that incident, Jayce remained on edge around Phoenix. It was obvious that her anger was getting the best of her, but he didn’t know how to fix it. Until he could think of a solution for this problem, he just did everything he could to make her smile. He sat and listened to her play the piano, he cooked for her, he reminded her everyday how thankful he was that she was here with him, but inevitably her smile would fade to sadness or anger.

Two more months dragged by and Jayce was barely able to get Phoenix to smile anymore. One day, he decided to bring her flowers and chocolates home in yet another pathetic attempt to make her happy. He slowly opened the front door, expecting her to be playing the piano, but it was completely silent, not even the sound of her breathing could be heard through the house.

“Phoenix!” he yelled into the house, but was ultimately met with silence. He walked further in, dropping the flowers and chocolate on a table in the living room. He figured she might be taking a nap so he started towards the bedroom, but stopped when he saw her silhouette standing in front of the bedroom door.

“Phoenix? What are you doing?” She didn’t respond, she just lifted her arm towards him. He couldn’t tell at first what was gripped so tightly in her hand, but once he did, he jumped to the side as she fired a shot at him.

“Phoenix! What the hell are you doing?”

“You did this to me! I can’t live like this anymore! I can’t stay in this house anymore!” he



heard her footsteps approaching quickly, so he ran towards the living room, knocking over a few chairs to block her path.

“You wanted this too! Don’t you remember how happy you were? You’re immortal. You can live with no sickness or pain!” he was hiding behind the piano.

“But I am living with pain. Everyday! What’s the purpose of living if I can never leave this damn house!”

“But you’re living with me! Isn’t that enough?”

“You get to live your life.You brought me back for your own selfish purposes.” she was standing on the opposite side of the piano, slowly walking around to where he was crouched down. He saw her legs moving, so he quietly began going the opposite direction.

“We can’t live together anymore, but we could die together. It’s so much more peaceful in the afterlife.” she whispered menacingly. She quickly turned around the edge to where he had been hiding before and paused when he was nowhere to be seen. As she stood waiting to hear any signs of where he went, Jayce tiptoed up behind her and grabbed her from behind. The two wrestled with each other as Jayce attempted to smack the gun out of her hand. She was strong, much stronger than before. She practically picked him up and threw his body to the ground. He fell face down next to the piano bench and turned around on his back to see the gun pointed at his face again.

“We can still be together...just not in this world anymore. I’m sorry, Jayce.” As she was speaking, Jayce had wrapped his hand around the leg of the bench and before she could pull the trigger, he picked it up and threw it at her face. The gun fell from her hands and slid just inches from Jayce. Without hesitation, he crawled on his knees and took up the gun in both his hands. He didn’t bother to stand; he stayed on both knees pointing it at Phoenix. The bench had made a dent in her metal face and even scraped a piece of it off, exposing her metal skull. She turned to Jayce, shocked.

“Jayce...”

“I’m sorry. This was a mistake...” he aimed and fired at least six shots at her metal chest and through her human heart. He stayed frozen in a firing position for about five minutes before lowering the gun. She had fallen to the floor, surrounded by a puddle of blood, which Jayce wasn’t expecting to see. He rose to his feet and slowly walked towards the piano, breathing heavily. The gun was still gripped tightly in his left hand as he approached the keys. He stood there, with his wife lying on the floor, and used his right hand to gently play her part of “Heart and Soul.”



A Thousand Words

Alexandria Linke

They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but is it actually. A picture is a captured moment in time that does not show what was really going on in that time. Everyone might be smiling, but are they smiling on the inside? They could have been miserable and unwilling to show it. Angry, but reluctant to express their mood. Was it really sunshine and rainbows? Or was it actually rain and thunderstorms? So they say a picture is worth a thousand words, but it is really missing a thousand words, because a picture only captures a moment where everyone pretends.



The White Room

Marisa Sankey

Prologue

I wake up screaming.
I have woken up a thousand times like this before, but each time has been different. Panting, I allow my body time to cool. A pool of sweat has formed around me, proof of the night terrors that have recently tortured me. Day in, day out. Day in, day out. It occurs to me that I didn’t actually wake up screaming, but instead woke up to my mind screaming at me. Or rather, at the memory that was haunting my subconscious.

I wish I had died that day. That way I wouldn’t have to know this agony. I could have saved myself this infinite string of terror-filled days and nights...this endless fire threatening to burn me alive.

But I didn’t die.
The fact is, I do know those things I am going through. I can feel them, touch them, taste them. Just as if they were lying here next to me. And right now, that is the only thing keeping me sane in this blank world of insanity.

As I write this, I’m sitting with a pencil and paper within the walls of my White Room. I smuggled them in here from the outside world. No one in our Empire would have allowed me to keep such things. They are a remnant of the barbaric times...times forgotten long ago in the past, yet not so far away for me.

If you look around you can see the four blank walls, the four colorless bedposts, the four flawless corners of the sheets. It is enough to make anyone go insane, if they aren’t already.

But I know that I am not crazy. It is the crazy ones who are happy here. Content here. Healed here.

I am not.
I trace my finger along the first page of this account I began writing for myself months ago. *Ireland West, 18. Broke the Code. Defied the Rules. Dared to Love.*

You see, this room should never have belonged to me, but became mine by a stroke of ill luck. Or, (as the Coordinators say) a stroke of rebellion. It is meant to set me straight...to make me a productive member of our superior Race, as we are still called. A Race living in a world without most emotions, otherwise known as the 5 Deadly Sins. The worst of which is Love.

I, Ireland West of District 104, dared to wield the most destructive weapon on the planet, and that is why I am here.

The buzzer beeps, and I sit up straight, tucking the pencil and paper into the tightly sewn compartments of my clothes. My mind rehearses all that I have written and all that I plan to write as the Nurse wheels in my morning pills. She takes my arm and injects a liquid into my bloodstream, a liquid designed to soothe me. Make my mind go blank, just like this room.

Many find solace within their own four walls. But I know better. To me, this room brings me no comfort. Rather, is a place filled to the brim with emptiness.



Nothingness.
That is the scariest thing of all. That makes it a room suffused with all of my deepest fears, darkest secrets, and most persistent feelings. And the only way to defeat them rather than let my mind go white just like this room is to identify, step by step, the roles each of them play. To unleash them for all of the Empire to see, and to call them out, one by one, by name.

The Nurse exits, her cart creaking all the way down the hall. I lean back, preparing my mind for the battle against nothingness.

By the end of it all, it is up to you to decide for yourselves whether or not I am truly crazy. But for now, this is my version.
And this, fellow Rebels, is how I got here.

Chapter 1

Tap, tap, tap.
The instructor raps her sensor against the table, inviting us all to listen. Blare grins at me, and I only pray he doesn’t have some devious new prank up his sleeve. Both of us have already gotten in trouble twice for his idiocy, and no matter how funny his tricks are, he really needs to learn to give it a rest.

An ear-splitting “pop” echoes around the room as the instructor sits. I wince. Clearly, that doesn’t promise to happen anytime soon.

The instructor jumps up from her seat, which is now wobbling precariously, and her intimidating eyes immediately pounce on Blare.

He stares back at her innocently with puppy eyes, but his mouth is smug.
“Would you mind explaining to your fellow students, Blare, how exactly you have managed to interrupt the class *yet again*?”

I can’t tell if she already knows the answer or is genuinely at a loss. She might just want a confession from him, and I can’t say that I blame her. If Blare was truly smart, he would own up to his mistake rather than get sent to the Reflection Cell another time. Typical for him, though, he remains silent, staring boldly back at her without making a sound.

Our classmates begin to whisper amongst themselves.
How did he manage it?

I squint my eyes as I peer at the chair, evaluating it from every angle. Several of the screws seem to have come loose, making it possible and entirely probable for the comfortable chair to come crashing down at any moment. Ah. *That’s* how.

You’d think, with all our modern resources, they’d be able to make chairs without screws.

“Blare Laketon, you have disrupted the class yet again without any admission of such childish behavior. Because of your foolishness, I have no choice but to send you to the Reflection Cell once again.” The instructor doesn’t seem terribly heartbroken over it as she hits a button on the wall. Almost immediately, an officer of the lowest class steps into the room. She probably has them all on standby in case a student does so much as sneeze too hard.

“Yes, Instructor Hoffman?”
“Escort this boy to the R.C., if you please officer,” she orders peevishly, adding, “and bring me a new chair at once.”



The officer nods and gestures to Blare, his expression stern. But, despite all appearances, I can see the hint of a twinkle in his eyes. Perhaps he dislikes our instructor just as much as we do.

Blare turns to wink at me once before disappearing out the door.

He knows all too well that his antics are becoming a school-wide joke. If for nothing else, I can at least give my best friend credit for making a name for himself.

“Now, young ladies and gentleman,” our instructor says, resuming her lesson without the slightest bat of an eyelash, “let’s begin.”

I stare absently at the trees swaying outside the window, not really paying any attention to the lesson at hand. It’s the same thing every day, the same old list of rules, codes, and other things we’ve known by heart practically since birth. I understand why they drum it all into us, but I also don’t. Is it too much to ask that now, past the halfway mark to becoming Sixteens, we are taught something fresh and new?

In front of me, Katelynn taps the end of her stylus against her perfectly shaped chin, and I know that she’s bored too.

My mind drifts to my parents at work, and I wonder if they were just as apathetic about class time. Did they pass notes to each other and pull pranks on the disliked instructors, just like some of the bolder students do? Or did they sit quietly with their hands folded, pretending to enjoy the lesson, like me? Perhaps they even took genuine interest in learning; school may not have been as cut and dry back then.

I imagine myself as a younger version of my mother, brilliant copper hair neatly combed, white and grey uniform perfectly in place, as I walk toward my classroom. My black shoes go “click-clack” against the floor like hers until I arrive at the correct door.

“INSTRUCTOR WYTHENSBERG, HISTORY,” it reads.

I’m fairly sure I’ve seen the name around somewhere. Slowly, calmly, I turn the handle, and the door swings forward on its hinges. An air of something musty wafts from the room into my nostrils. For once in my life, I feel eager to enter a classroom. Though I can’t quite put my finger on it, there is something different about it that separates it from all the rest. Just as I am about to venture in, the instructor calls my name.

“Miss West?”

I look up hurriedly. “Yes, Instructor Hoffman?”

Classmates are snickering at me. How many times has she called my name?

“Can you name for us the Five Deadly Sins our forefathers have done away with?” Her tone sounds highly irritated.

I nod and swallow the dryness down my throat, rising to give my answer. It is an easy one to remember. My parents first taught the list to me at the age of three.

“The Five Deadly Sins,” I respond, “Are Fear, Greed, Jealousy, Anger, and Love.” Fear because it leads to doubt. Greed because it brings the equilibrium out of balance. Jealousy because it leads to dissatisfaction. Anger because it produces defiance. And Love because it leads to favoritism and, ultimately, rebellion.

The instructor nods sharply, the motion contributing all the more to her strident demeanor. “Correct. And can you further remind us which is the deadliest of them all?”



“The deadliest of them all is Love,” I reply without a moment’s wavering, and I sit back down in my seat.

“Excellent. Thank you, Ireland.” Without giving me a second glance, Instructor Hoffman turns toward the screen to continue the lesson with the Five Domains that make up our Empire.

I already know the Five Domains since I’ve always liked the subject. My father works as a government official, so he taught me everything before we started learning it this year. The Five Domains are the urban, suburban, sub-suburban, country, and unkempt or developmental regions of our Empire. Other countries and continents have these Five regions too, but they might call them something different. As far as what used to be Great Britain goes, we call them the Five Domains. Whatever lies beyond is off limits.

Folding my hands together, I pay closer attention to the instructor’s words, knowing that this is what is expected of me. Even though the review seems pointless, there must be a reason. As many people have told me in the past, I know it to be true. The Empire always has a reason.

* * *

The bell rings, signaling that class is over. I make my way against the tide of the crowd towards the Reflection Cell, where the officials will be letting Blare out momentarily. As I wait, I scan the identical doors lining the hallway and study the names imprinted on each.

“HEAD INSTRUCTOR CASTAWAY, OFFICE.”

“INSTRUCTOR BLANCHARD, ENGLISH.”

“INSTRUCTOR NEUMANN, SCIENCE.”

My eyes zero in on the name on the door immediately after, the last one on the right-hand side, and my heart skips a beat.

“INSTRUCTOR WYTHENSBERG, HISTORY.”

So I wasn’t wrong. I had seen the name before in passing. I wonder, would the room feel the same as it did in my imagination? I can almost imagine the same smells, feelings, sensations rushing towards me now. Every muscle in my body itches to draw closer to that door, instigating a desire I can’t make sense of. I fantasize that one foot steps hesitantly in front of the other, and I’ve almost wrapped my fingers around the handle when a noise startles me.

The door to the Reflection Cell creaks open and the same officer from earlier lets Blare out into the hallway. The “Reflection Cell” is really just an ordinary room with no furnishings but a desk and chair. A lot of labels the Empire places on things are overly dramatic. At least, that’s what Blare says. I watch the man give my friend a warning and pat on the back that I can’t make out before sending him over to me.

“I hope you had a fun time in there. You deserved it.”

He smirks. “Are you kidding me? I had the time of my life. Spent it all coming up with new ingenious ways to get under the instructors’ skin. There’s this one that we’ll need a hammer and some safety pins for—”

“If you’ve got another plan, count me out of it” I interrupt. I nod my head toward the officer. “Why can’t you ever actually listen?”

Blare’s eyes sparkle with life and mischief. I can already tell that he won’t be heeding the man’s words. “C’mon, let’s go!” He grabs my hand and drags me toward the main doors.



Out in the courtyard, the air is fresh with the promise of springtime. Puddles lie around every few yards, proof of the heavy rainfall our Unit has seen of late. It’s at least serving a purpose in clearing the snow away and encouraging the final departure of winter.

Students mill around us, and I see several girls cast a shy glance toward Blare. Clearly, his regular misdemeanors have earned him more than just a name for himself. My friend Katelynn extracts herself from a group of upper level friends to congratulate him on today’s antics.

“My friends heard about what you did today,” she says, casually tossing her rich black hair in the breeze.

I shake my head. As Elevens, she and I are still too young to even think about acting flirtatiously. But she obviously isn’t the only one who hasn’t taken the hint.

“They’re extremely impressed. There’s barely any excitement in school, so hearing about your pranks puts some fun in their day.” Her entire body emanates over-eagerness. She looks like a puppy whose owner waited too long to let it out. “Actually, they just asked if they could meet you.”

Blare shrugs carelessly, though I can tell through his facade that he’s flattered. Upper level students want to meet him, and he isn’t about to pass up the chance. This momentary hesitation is just a show.

Involuntarily, I draw myself up a little, suddenly proud to call him my best friend. For all his foolishness, Blare is smart, talented, and athletic, someone any girl would probably swoon over being paired with in just a few more years. His impossibly long chocolate eyelashes seal the fact. His personality will only make him all the more popular, provided he doesn’t end up anywhere worse than the R.C. when he gets older. Even though I’ll only ever look at him as a friend, it’s nice to know that I hold such an important place in his life.

“Well, yeah okay, I guess I can talk to them for a little,” Blare is saying now to Katelynn, and she eagerly uses the excuse to take his hand to pull him toward the awaiting group. “I’ll see you tomorrow!” Blare yells backwards over his shoulder, sending me a wave with his free hand.

I nod and wave back, silently wishing I was even a tiny bit as popular as I turn to leave.

There are shuttles that take us to and from school every day, but I prefer to walk. It gives me time to think about my day. Getting a permission slip from the Department of Transportation at the beginning of the year was easy, so now that I’m an Eleven, I can walk or ride as I please. Today is a surprisingly sunny one so I decide to take advantage of it.

The pathways are rigid and smooth, with the occasional puddles glistening in the sunlight. I stop at one and stare at my reflection, surveying the wavy brown locks that descend like a waterfall down my back, the short, thin figure clothed in our school’s uniform, and the deep blue eyes that people say look like old pictures of the sea. I’ve never seen the sea, but I dream of getting to someday. My goal is to travel outside of the Districts into the outside world, beyond the domains. That’s where instructors say the barbarians live. Of course I would never actually break the rules and leave, but a part of me is curious. Adventurous. Even a teensy weensy bit rebellious. I blame that on Blare. But it would be fascinating to meet an outsider for myself.

Pulling my eyes away from the puddle, I continue walking. The daylight is running out, reminding me that winter hasn’t completely lost its grip, despite the fact that springtime is so close. In front of me is a familiar break in the pavement where I cross over the unkempt portion of the road.

Normally, workers would have come to fix this already. But I heard my parents talking about how our District has been running out of funds lately. Not only our District and those around it, but the whole Empire. Apparently they’ve been temporarily forced to put off renovations like paving for other, “more important things”.

The sound of something solid skidding across the gravel meets my ears, and I jump as a rock grazes the side of my shoe. I glance down at it before looking up and around. At first, all I see are trees. Then my breath catches.

Across from me, away from the row of buildings and towards the outer rim where the trees get dense, is a boy. He’s not dressed in our modern school uniform; instead, he has an unkempt, muddy appearance, much like the gravel beneath my feet. His brown jacket is tattered, as are his faded blue pants. But it’s his eyes that shock me the most—I’ve never seen eyes so sad before. He points at the rock by my feet and makes a writing motion with his hand.

It takes me a few seconds to detach my gaze, but when I do, I bend down to scoop up the rock. On its smooth surface is an inscription: *Are you*, it reads, and nothing more. I frown and flip it over. *One of Them?* I glance back up questioningly, hoping for some sort of explanation. But within the short time it took for me to read his writing, the boy is gone.



Poetry



*"I have never started a poem
whose end I knew. Writing a
poem is discovering."*

-Robert Frost



Loving Eyes

Darian Byrne



Loving eyes
Scan the crowd for flirtatious eyes
They know they can't lose her
They're attached to her as flesh is to fur
She tells them to slow down
But all they can think about is her future wedding gown
They apologize for being too much
For being nothing more than a crutch
She says she loves them
She says she'll never leave them
But they've been told that before
They hope she's telling the truth, that she truly is their past and way more
They've opened up in ways they never have, ever
They shared stories with the hope of making her their forever
Songs and poems encase the feelings they brandish
She's the very idea upon which they wish
Each day worried they'll get left behind
Forgotten and tossed aside like an old rind
People will lie
And people will die
But the one thing that will never bring forth your cries
Are my loving eyes.



The Longest Slumber

Darian Byrne



As I lay here to rest
I know it's you I love best
My arm outstretched
Awaiting by you to be fetched
Laying here patiently
For you to trod in daintily
I whisper I love you unto ghostly ears
And I know you say it too, a thousand miles away and suddenly I have no fears
Waiting here patiently for you to snuggle in for endless cuddles
Dreaming about our future kids splashing in puddles
I can't wait for these dreams to become a reality
To hold you in my arms gallantly
As I lay here to rest
I know it's you I love best.



You Were Not There

Taylor Blazinsky



When I took my first steps;
You were there.
When I said my first words;
You were there.
When I entered my first school;
You were there.
When I made my first mistake;
You were there.
When I had my first heartbreak;
You were there.
When I drove my first car;
Something changed.
For the first time,
You were not there.

When I had my first relationship;
You were not there.
When I posed for my first prom;
You were not there.
When I received my first diploma;
You were not there.
When I started my first day of college;
You were not there.

One day, you were here;
The next you were gone.
But, someday,
When I have my first dance at my wedding;
You will be there.
When I have my first child;
You will be there,
Because that's just it;
You were always there.
I just couldn't see you.



The Shadow

Alexandria Linke



The shadow.
It lurks in the dark.
Only wanting to be alone.
Never showing its face.
Never showing its passion.

The shadow is everywhere.
Always following you.
Because it is you.



Lights in the Black Sea

Gavin Clineff



A mind that twirls,
It flutters in the sky,
To the crystal pearls,
Who work to purify

Each my friend,
Each is like family,
In the darkest of nights you send,
You can comfort the mind so lavishly

Like I to be myself,
And to be free,
You hug the moon and compel,
all to live in harmony

When I am with the stars,
I can laugh in the now,
I see so far,
From the viscous clouds

I may close my eyes,
To be only with myself,
But they catch me before demise,
And get me to better health

They can come in clusters,
Perhaps far from each other,
Perhaps together to be brothers,
Yet they are all the same to me,
While my mind hovers endlessly,
They all lighten the black sea beneath
Now wouldn't you agree?

As my pupils strengthen and dilate,
I see them more and more,
And in time they interrelate,
To piece together my core

Never shall I see such beauty
Then those lights in the black sea





it was blue, that ring,
a gorgeous hue,
you know me, oh, so well;
we always clicked
from the very beginning.

you—oh, you knew how
to make me laugh,
to make me smile,
to make my eyes dance
with joy;
there was always something about you,
something not from storybooks,
or love songs,
or fairy tales,
but something else
that I knew made you just right,
a perfect fit for me.

you—
you always knew what got to me
what makes me insecure
what breaks me down
what hurts me;
and instead, you built me up.
you, you incredible thing, you—
you made me believe
in trust... y
ou showed me what a grown man was,
how it felt to be taken care of.

that's why,
when you turned on me
so swift—
so sudden—
I didn't see it coming
like those other times before.
a grown-up man no longer,

you shrunk to 3'4"
with toys that mattered more
than me
and temper tantrums thrown
at my expense.

where have you gone?
I tried to bring you back—
I tried my very best, I swear!
but you wouldn't listen anymore;
instead,
I've been forced to learn
the old you isn't there.

someday I hope
you find yourself,
the *real* you inside;
and if that ring won't fit me,
then
I hope, one day, you find
a girl who wears that ring just
right,
who knows the you I used to
know,
and never has to pay,
like I did,
for breaking down,
for sacrificing me—
in trying to bring you
back.



Sickness
Isolation
Shadows passing through
Panic rising
Gut-wrenching
Uncertainties abounding
So much so
We almost forget—

The clasp of a hand
The warmth of a touch
The laughter of those
We don't see quite as much;

But we still have each other
Standing 6 feet apart
We still have our smiles
Kind words
And big hearts.

Love has not faded
But only can grow—

Let us not forget
The good things we still know.



Mental Journey

Kenya Gordon



The journey you embark on
Will be tough in many ways
Physically, mentally and emotionally
But the hardest path you will trek

So before my final fall
I want to take it all with me
All the bad and negative energy
To be reborn in a different time and place

Is the mental path
The path where your demons come
to play
The path you face your fears
The path where reality hits you hard

Hopefully with a new path
One I can get through
This will be my end
I have met my match

That's the path I am on
Been on it for some years now
I wonder when it will end
It's taking its toll on me

I held it all in
And exploded at last
Off the edge I go
To finally be free

No more being broken,
Weakened, and
Drained
Of everything in me!

Draining me mentally
Weakening me physically
Breaking me emotionally
It isn't easing up, it gets worse for
some reason

I want to abandon that path that I am
on
For an easier path
But easy doesn't strengthen you
Like the hard does

I'm on the brink of giving up
The weight is pushing me over the
edge
I want to jump off myself
Rather than wait for my downfall

But this downfall will be my last
If I was to ever rise again
But I feel that I won't rise
Once I fall down this path again



Who Is Kenya?

Kenya Gordon



She is who once was
A young girl full of life
She is who once was
A righteous girl, knew no bounds

She is now who once was
Someone they aspired to be like
She is now who once was
No longer a bird in a cage

She is who once was
Unwavering and socially awkward
She is who once was
A girl named Kenya

She is now who once was
No longer held back by her past
She is not who once was
Blinded to the future

She is now who once was
Not lost and forgotten her way
She is not who once was
A girl who loved with no hesitation

She is me
Goes by the name
Kenya and this is
Who Kenya Is!

She is not who once was
As pure and naive as a newborn
She is now who once was
Not always trusting of those around

She is not who once was
Fragile and sweet beyond compare
She is now who once was
Not willing to let go

She is now who once was
Willing to forgive
She is not who once was
Not someone people "liked"





The path with the most merits
Seems light years away
Step after step sinking deeper
To keep going is to sacrifice it all

Step in at your risk
And drown in the abyss
No help whatsoever
Because only those brave take the plunge

And land in a world full of merits
The courage you need
Will reward you in the end
Because what seemed like an abyss

Was really the end of the beginning
Not the beginning of the end
But don't stay in too long
And get greedy

Because even the end of the beginning
Can come to an end
An end in which everything is lost
With no hopes of revival

Will you take that step?
Will you risk it all?
Once taken will you stand tall?
Or will you begin to fall?

Pretty Hurts
At the end of the day
Ask yourself
Are you happy with yourself?

With that mask you wear
To please others
Deep inside
The truth is there

When you can no longer run
From the scars deep in your heart
And deep in your soul
Can no longer deny

It's the soul that needs the surgery
The heart needs to repair
From all the critics in society
Telling you what 'normal' is

Even though you were fine as you were
Changing for those critics
Who still have nothing nice to say
Who critique you anyway

Are you happy with yourself?



P

hotography

*“For me, the camera is a sketch-
book, an instrument of intuition
and spontaneity.”*

- Henri Cartier-Bresson

AK Creations

Alby Kadavilan







Art



*“Art washes away from
the soul the dust of
everyday life.”*

- Pablo Picasso



Identity

Isabela Carlos Alberto



Morning Beverage

Taylor Blazinsky



Music

Taylor Blazinsky



Flower

Shaira Mahmud



The Self-hatred of a Narcissist

Pin Han Tseng



Saturn

Gavin Clineff



Unnamed

Catharine Mooney



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