



# 2024 Winning Stories



**Les histoires  
gagnantes de 2024**

The logo features the text 'SPEAKER'S' in a large, bold, yellow sans-serif font, with 'AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS' in a smaller, white, bold, sans-serif font below it. The background is a dark, stylized illustration of three classical arches with intricate carvings, set against a black background.

# SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

## ABOUT THE AWARD

The Speaker's Award for Youth Writers was launched in 2015 to celebrate the writing talents of Ontario's youth.

Each year, students in grades 7-12 are invited to submit their short stories and personal essays to this writing contest. Original fiction and non-fiction submissions are welcome and a winner from each grade category is chosen.

## SELECTION COMMITTEE

**Erin Budra** holds a Masters of Arts in European Studies from the University of Guelph. She currently serves as the Communications and Exhibits Officer at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

**Franco Gutierrez** is a graduate of the Masters of Teaching at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He currently serves as the Page Program Coordinator at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

**Nina Zemko** is the Manager of Strategic Communications and Education Services at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. In this role, she oversees all education programming and resources, communications, and special programs like the Speaker's Book Award.



# PRIX DU PRÉSIDENT POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS

## À PROPOS DU PRIX

Le Prix du président pour les jeunes écrivaines et écrivains a été lancé en 2015 pour célébrer les talents d'écriture des jeunes de l'Ontario.

Chaque année, les élèves de la 7e à la 12e année sont invités à soumettre leurs nouvelles et leurs essais personnels dans le cadre de ce concours d'écriture. Les soumissions originales de fiction et de non-fiction sont acceptées et un gagnant de chaque catégorie scolaire est choisi.

## COMITÉ DE SÉLECTION

**Erin Budra** est titulaire d'une maîtrise en études européennes de l'université de Guelph. Elle est actuellement chargée de la communication et des expositions à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario.

**Franco Gutierrez** a obtenu sa maîtrise en éducation de l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario à l'Université de Toronto. Il est actuellement coordonnateur du Programme des pages à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario.

**Nina Zemko** est le chef des communications stratégiques et des services éducatifs à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario. À ce titre, elle supervise l'ensemble des programmes et des ressources pédagogiques, les communications et les programmes spéciaux tels que le Prix du livre du président.



# **SPEAKER'S** **AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS**

## **2024 SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS**

### **Grades 7-8**

#### **WINNER**

Sophia Zhang - *Sands of Your Soul*

#### **HONOURABLE MENTIONS**

Samantha Dionne - *Idée*

Trisha Halder - *A Rainbow After the Storm*

### **Grades 9-10**

#### **WINNER**

Victoria Sakhrani - *Ceaseless*

#### **HONOURABLE MENTIONS**

Grant Beaton - *The Give, Take and Hunger*

Natalie Naylor - *A Colourful Collaboration*

### **Grades 11-12**

#### **WINNER**

Nour Ismaili - *My Past Says Goodbye*

#### **HONOURABLE MENTIONS**

Willow Grewal - *My Room*

Sofia Minardi - *Enshrouded Within*



**PRIX DU  
PRÉSIDENT  
POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS**

## **2024 PRIX DU PRÉSIDENT POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS**

### **7<sup>e</sup> - 8<sup>e</sup> années**

#### **GAGNANT**

Sophia Zhang - *Sands of Your Soul*

#### **MENTIONS HONORABLES**

Samantha Dionne - *Idée*

Trisha Haldar - *A Rainbow After the Storm*

### **9<sup>e</sup> - 10<sup>e</sup> années**

#### **GAGNANT**

Victoria Sakhrani - *Ceaseless*

#### **MENTIONS HONORABLES**

Grant Beaton - *The Give, Take and Hunger*

Natalie Naylor - *A Colourful Collaboration*

### **11<sup>e</sup> - 12<sup>e</sup> années**

#### **GAGNANT**

Nour Ismaili - *My Past Says Goodbye*

#### **MENTIONS HONORABLES**

Willow Grewal - *My Room*

Sofia Minardi - *Enshrouded Within*



## WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 7-8/7<sup>E</sup> - 8<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Sophia Zhang - *Sands of Your Soul*

Screams rose from the blazing desert into the sky. Blood splattered across the sand. Everything was chaos as the sound of knives filled the air. Two little children were thrown onto the ground, either mistaken for dead or deemed not important enough to kill, as they held tightly their last possession, a smooth metal pen burning in the hot air.

The two siblings clung to each other on the scorching sand. Too afraid to move. Afraid that if the bandits were still nearby, and they were heard, they would meet the same ending as the people travelling with them, a crimson heap on the sand.

At last, after it felt like an eternity had passed, Reyna and Rui pushed themselves up from the ground, sand covering their clothes.

"We'll be okay," Rui whispered. It was a promise, but also a wish, the desperate wish of a young child pleading for a shred of hope to cling to.

Reyna dried the last of her tears on her sleeve. Rui held the pen to the sun, its body gleaming in the light.

"We were heading towards the city before we were attacked, so if we keep going that way, we should reach it eventually," Rui said, trying to steady his voice.

"When is eventually?" Reyna asked, shakily coming over to stand beside her brother.

"Around three days? I'm not sure." Rui shook his head. "No matter what, this pen is our lifeline. We have to use it to our advantage." Rui turned to face Reyna. "We should use this pen to travel. Since the things we draw can only become real at night, we should travel then, at night, with camels, as far as we can towards the city." Rui pointed towards the direction they would be heading. "And if we sleep during the day, we won't have to worry about freezing while we sleep."

Reyna clutched his hand. "Will we be able to eat?"

Rui shook his head, brushing sand off his clothes. "No. Any food we draw with this pen would turn back to sand in our bodies by day."

Reyna said nothing, merely nodded her head, too weak for anything else.

Rui turned to look forward. "Let's move away from here. Then we'll get some rest, and prepare to travel at night."

Their rest was filled with nightmares. Blood and darkness and fear, so much fear. It felt impossible for either of them to sleep.

Reyna awoke to Rui gently shaking her shoulder. The sun was setting on the horizon, spreading beautiful colours across the barren sky.

"It's almost nighttime, Reyna. We should start travelling."

"You're right," Reyna replied softly, as Rui helped her up. "We can't waste any time..."

Rui looked her in the eyes for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then the moment passed, as if nothing had happened.

"Our best bet would be travelling by camel," Rui said, taking the pen out of a pocket in his ruined clothes. He would not break. Not now. Later. His fear, his grief, they could all wait. Right now, their lives came first.

Both siblings knelt down as Rui began to draw. Despite Rui's shaking fingers, a camel's outline began to take shape. As Rui finished his drawing, both him and Reyna stood back. A camel sprung out from the sand, real to the touch, from its thick fur to its rounded humps. All signs of the drawing Rui had made were gone. Rui drew a second camel, and two saddles for them to ride on. But as Rui saddled the camels, all Reyna could see was the crimson blood flowing from bleeding gashes cut by merciless blades, all she could hear was the dying screams of her village people. Her small fists squeezed together. She clenched her teeth. Her whole body shivered as she pressed her eyes shut as hard as she could.

"Reyna?"

Reyna blinked. She noticed her brother calling her, gently shaking her shoulder. "I'm okay," Reyna



muttered. It was a lie, of course. But Rui knew. Reyna knew. Anyone would know. No one in her situation could be okay.

The next 2 days were a repetitive cycle. Rest during the day. Travel at night. Draw camels to ride. And when the sun begins to rise, the cycle repeats. The two children grew wearier by the day. No food. No water. Trying to ignore their fear. Keep it locked away even a moment longer, so they could focus on the present. Survival. Survival was all that mattered.

Feelings could come later. Living could come later. Later, when they were safe. If they would ever be safe.

Two little children, wracked by heat, dehydration, starvation, desperately crawling on, clinging to their last shred of life.

Lying on her camel's back, Reyna mustered the strength to whisper to her brother. "Rui?"

"Yes?"

"I'm so tired." She rubbed her eyes.

"I know, Reyna. Me, too." Rui's voice cracked, showing the little child inside him. "Reyna?"

"Yes?"

"Don't cry."

"I won't." Reyna gently covered her face. "I have no water in me left to cry, anyways."

The afternoon sun blazed across the scorching desert. Reyna lay curled on her side, a little lump atop the sand. Rui knelt, unable to sleep. Because he knew. If he slept, he would never wake up. He could feel it. He had no energy left. Nothing. The world swirled and dimmed, the earth moving in waves.

He was dying.

He looked towards Reyna, curled up on the sand. He couldn't leave her. All alone, in the desert. But he was dying. He was out of time.

With one last, desperate wish, Rui shakily began to draw in the sand. And as he faded away, he clung to his final hope, one prayer, one thought. A drawing of himself, gleaming in the sand beneath the setting sun.

Reyna awoke in the last rays of the sun setting over the horizon, spreading streaks of vibrant colour across the bleak desert sky. Rui, just as in the previous 2 days, was already awake, crouching with his back towards her. Just as before. Reyna rose onto her feet, not bothering to brush sand off herself. Rui drew their transportation, and their journey began again. Just as before.

But this time, something changed. The edge of several white buildings came into view, at first a blur, slowly revealing their form.

A city.

The city. Rhovkyle, a bustling trade city in the middle of the desert. Merchants of all countries stop at Rhovkyle to engage in trade, some for water and a place to rest after a journey through the desert. Some ran here for refuge if things weren't well back home.

Unsure of what to say, too overjoyed to even care what to say, they rushed towards the city with all their remaining might. For anyone, especially a young child, lost amidst the sands, not knowing when they'll reach their destination, not even knowing if they'll reach their destination, the sight of that very destination is indescribable, raising a gently swelling hope to bloom and burst in their chests. Everything about the city seemed to show off its power. Huge walls, tall pillars, guards at the door. Reyna and Rui snuck in behind a merchant cart, one of many entering the city.

Both of them collapsed on the ground. Reyna sucked in a breath. The city all around her was beautiful. Despite the fact that dawn was barely setting streaks of light in the sky, a slowly growing harmony of the city was humming in all her surroundings. The sound of bargaining merchants, playing children, and whistling birds began to fill the air. Reyna clutched Rui's arm, pulling herself against him.

"We made it," she choked, crying dry tears. "We made it."

Rui didn't reply immediately. "No, Reyna." He swallowed. "You made it."

For several moments, Reyna said nothing. Rui squeezed her tightly, as if steadying them both from shaking.

"I'm a drawing, Reyna." He whispered, not daring to look at her, the sister who he died and left behind. The sister who would now know that he had died and left her behind. "The real me is dead. I died. I couldn't



keep going. The me you see now is a drawing left behind to protect you.”

Reyna didn't speak.

“I wanted to protect you until you were safe.” He felt as though a heavy burden had been lifted from his heart as he let the words be pushed out of his lips. Like a massive weight pressing on him he hadn't noticed until it was gone. “Now you're safe, Reyna. And it's time for me to go.”

“No.”

No? Rui had been scared of what reaction she would have. But he couldn't understand the word she spoke, a simple word, twisted into something complex by the situation. He turned to face her, to look her in the eyes. Seeing Reyna's expression, Rui felt as though his heart was shattering into countless bits of glass. Unnatural, warped, cruel. Like a limitless void, swallowing all emotion. Because you don't have to face your grief if you pretend that it's gone.

An expression living in a lie.

How wrong it looked on her face, the face of a young child. How wrong it looked on her little figure, her small, delicate features.

“You're real, Rui.” Reyna's fake smile twisted all her words into something wrong. “You're real.”

Now it was Reyna who squeezed Rui tightly.

“You're a drawing. But you're real.” Her voice was shaking. “Then I'll draw you every night! You're not dead, Rui. You're alive!” She raised her head, looking him in the eye, letting a single tear drop down her cheek. “I'll draw you every night, Rui. We'll be together, forever.”

Rui couldn't say anything as the sun rose over the sky, and he faded into sand.

“Orphanage?” Reyna phrased it like a question. It made sense, though. She took a quick look around her surroundings. Open doorways, marble, wood, sunlight. A group of kids, some younger than her, a few older, many around her age. A few adults.

“Yep!” The girl in front of her answered. She seemed around Reyna's age, a cheerful and welcoming child. “Someone found you passed out on the street, so they brought you here!”

Reyna didn't say anything.

“You'll live with us for a while,” said another young boy. “Make yourself at home!”

Reyna slowly climbed out of her blanket.

Everyone else in the orphanage was sound asleep, a few people snoring. It was completely dark outside, except for the twinkling stars and the bright crescent moon. Quietly, carefully, as to not wake anyone else, Reyna made her way to the garden outside. Gathering a pile of sand, she drew her brother's soft features in the rough grains. She sat back. Her drawing sprung to life.

She looked into her brother's smiling face. “Hey, Rui.”

They talked the whole night long, laughing, smiling, just as they did before. They talked until the rays of sun began to stream over the horizon, casting the city in a soft, warm gold.

“Bye,” Reyna whispered. She smiled. “I'll see you again tomorrow.”

And she did. They talked every night. And this continued for weeks. During the daytime, Reyna spent time with the other children in the orphanage. During the night, she snuck out to draw her brother, and they talked until the sun rose into the sky.

“Luna?”

Luna turned around as Reyna called her name. She was the smiling girl who greeted Reyna on her first day.

“If you could bring your parents back every night and talk to them, would you?” Reyna knew that Luna lost both her parents in an accident a few years ago. And yet, Luna shone with compassion, her smile as warm as sunlight, without darkness, with nothing twisted.

Luna laughed, gently, like chimes in the wind. “That's such a specific question.”

“But would you?”

Luna seemed to think for a few moments. “No.”

Reyna's shock showed on her face. Luna took her hand.

“Let me tell you a story, Reyna. It's an old tale from my hometown.” Luna's smile was warm and calm. “All our souls come from another place, somewhere very far away. High up in the sky. Every star you see at

night is someone's soul, and all the stars shine together. When someone is born, one of those stars comes down to earth, the soul of that person. And when someone passes away, their soul returns to being a star, living in peace with all the other souls."

Luna clasped her two hands together, Reyna's hand in between. "That's why I wouldn't bring my parent's back at night. I want them to rest peacefully. And one day, many, many years from now, I, too, will become a star, and join them once again."

Reyna mulled over Luna's words.

I want them to rest peacefully. She was disturbing Rui's rest. If she kept bringing him back every night, he would never be at peace, never become a star, forever trapped in between this world and the next. She couldn't keep drawing him.

She had to let him go.

For both of them.

That night, Reyna did as she usually did, sneaking into the garden to draw Rui's figure in the sand.

One last time.

One last goodbye.

As her brother came to life in the sand, Reyna immediately rushed forwards, embracing him.

"What's wrong?" Rui hugged her back, gently patting her head.

"I'm sorry, Rui. I'm so sorry." Reyna let her tears fall down her cheek, soaking her clothes. "I'm sorry. I couldn't let you go. I held you back."

Rui smiled. A gentle, sad, but also relieved smile.

"I won't hold you back anymore, Rui."

They talked together, laughing, smiling, crying, all night long. They talked until the rays of sun began to stream over the horizon, casting the city in a soft, warm gold.

Reyna hugged Rui one last time, her tears flowing more than they ever had before, her fists clinging to him as tightly as they could.

"Promise me you'll wait for me, Rui." Her voice was softer than a whisper. "One day, many, many years from now, when I join you, promise me you'll find me again."

Rui hugged her back, his embrace gentle and warm. "I promise."

His body began to fade into sand, the sun softly illuminating the garden.

"I love you, Rui." Reyna clung to the last grains of sand still taking his form.

"Goodbye."

That night, Reyna snuck into the garden once more. She prayed, vowing never to use the magic pen again, and using a stone, she struck the pen, snapping it in half. Looking up into the night sky, she felt as if an enormous weight tying her down had been lifted.

And as she looked into that beautiful night sky, she noticed one more star shining back at her, like a guiding star leading her onwards.

# HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 7-8/7<sup>E</sup> - 8<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

Samantha Dionne - *Idée*

— DuClaire !

J'ai sursauté et suis revenue au moment présent. J'ai surveillé mes environs. Toute la classe m'observait encore, et j'ai su tout de suite que j'avais manqué une leçon cruciale.

J'ai regardé l'enseignante nerveusement.

— ... 27 ? ai-je deviné.

Mme Pommebelle m'a donné un regard supérieur.

— Comme *toute* la classe semble prête, a-t-elle annoncé, nous allons commencer le test maintenant.

Mes « amis » ont bougonné. J'étais trop occupée à faire une crise cardiaque.

Mme Pommebelle m'a regardée sadistiquement tout le long de la distribution. Elle m'a remis mon test en dernier.

— Zéro bruit ! a-elle crié. Vous avez jusqu'à la fin de la période. Chop, chop!

Elle a tapé ses mains et 22 têtes sur 23 se sont baissées. J'ai regardé mon papier d'un air perdu. Que faire ? Je préférerais tellement juste m'endormir jusqu'à temps que la cloche sonne pour la fin de la journée, ou peut-être même jusqu'à la fin de l'année. Peu importe. En tout cas, dormir semble être la seule option satisfaisante. Bien sûr, Mme *Pomme-Laide* écrira une lettre à mes parents pour s'assurer que j'étudie « à tous les soirs et à tous les matins, et à chaque moment entre ! ». Mes parents y sont habitués.

J'ai envoyé un regard vers l'horloge. Deux minutes et 36 secondes écoulées. 37... 38... Ah ! Si seulement je pouvais faire des maths.

C'est pourquoi j'aime les horloges : zéro maths du tout. Je n'ai jamais entendu parler d'un évènement où les calculs et les horloges se sont croisés. De plus, le son est hypnotique. J'aimerais tellement pouvoir me laisser être emportée par le tick... tock... tick... tock...

J'ouvre les yeux. *Où suis-je ?* Je semble être entourée de couleurs étranges, celles que j'ai seulement vues dans les catalogues de ma mère, et dont les noms ressemblaient aux noms des personnages d'un anime. En tout cas... Mes yeux font mal.

— *Wap !*

Je me tourne. *Qui a dit ça ?*

— *Wap, wap !*

Ça vient de ma droite. Ou bien, de ma gauche puisque je me suis tournée.

C'est à ce moment que je réalise que je me suis endormie, puisque la créature face à laquelle je me trouve doit venir d'un rêve étrange. Il a le corps d'un dauphin... debout. Deux jambes et deux bras de lutteur, complété avec un tatouage dédié à « Maman ». Oh, et des shorts rouges de plage. Je vous le promets, je ne suis pas folle !

— *Wap !*

Il s'éclaircit la gorge.

— Ahem ! Bonjour !

C'est difficile de croire qu'il me regarde, puisque ses yeux vont dans deux directions différentes. Dans ma tête, j'ai mille et une questions à lui poser, mais les seuls mots qui peuvent passer mes lèvres sont :

— Je... Euh...

Clairement inaffecté par mon onde de choc, il se présente. *Oui, cette chose a un nom.*

— Salutations, nouvelle idée ! Je suis Barnaby, et bienvenue au monde des idées perdues, appelé... !

— ... Appelé ?

Il met ses mains sur ses hanches.

— Et bien, me dit-il, je ne me souviens pas du nom. Et bien! *Wap, wap!*

Je recule un tout petit peu.

Soudainement, je me souviens.

— Barnaby ! crié-je de joie. Barnaby, mon ami imaginaire de l'enfance ! Je t'ai presque oublié, je suis tellement désolée !

Je cours vers lui, mains ouvertes, yeux fermés, mais après un nombre suffisant de pas, je m'arrête. J'ouvre un oeil, puis l'autre. J'appelle son nom. Mon ami perdu et retrouvé est perdu à nouveau.

— Mais, où est-il ? questionné-je.

— Il n'existe plus dans ce monde, répond une voix sous moi.

Je baisse le regard à mes pieds afin de voir une petite créature moitié grenouille, moitié ogre.

— Ceci est le monde des idées perdues, là où tout ce qu'on oublie se retrouve, m'explique-t-il. Lorsque tu t'es souvenue de lui, le dauphin n'était plus une pensée perdue, donc il n'avait plus rien à faire ici.

— Donc, ai-je dit lentement, où est-il ?

— Ici.

Il a levé son bras minuscule. J'ai essayé de trouver où il pointait.

— Non, pas le ciel ! Ah, baisse-toi.

Je fais comme il demande et il saute pathétiquement sur mon front. Je comprends alors.

— Ma tête, réalisé-je. Donc, euh...

Je me lève.

— Comment est-ce que je... pars?

— Hmm... Habituellement, les humains n'entrent pas dans ce royaume. Évidemment, vous ne semblez pas très... mémorable.

— Merci, dis-je d'un ton sarcastique.

— Il me semble que pour partir, il faudra que vous trouviez la chose qui vous manque.

— Et ça, c'est... ?

— À vous de le trouver. Adios, avant que je ne devienne une mémoire réelle !

Il saute dans un buisson et je me retrouve encore seule. Quelle direction aller ? Je choisis au hasard.

Je marche pendant quelques minutes ou quelques heures, j'oublie, et j'arrive finalement à une section de route divisée en deux : À droite, un chemin éclairé et souriant, et à gauche, une forêt sombre et noire avec un air menaçant. Il y a une pancarte, mais elle est toute barbouillée.

Je décide que la droite va être un meilleur choix, mais avant d'y mettre le pied, je me rends compte que quelque chose cloche. J'ai entendu parler de cette situation. C'est supposé être ironique : Le chemin hanté est celui qui va m'amener où je veux aller.

Je réalise d'un coup que les deux directions ont disparu. *Oh. Les chemins ne sont plus oubliés.* Je dois admettre que cette situation doit sembler folle, mais croyez-moi, s'il-vous-plaît. Pour la mémoire de Barnaby.

Je continue. Graduellement, la scène commence à devenir de plus en plus comme une feuille. Pas d'arbre, mais d'école. Droit devant, il y a des grosses flèches multicolores qui pointent vers un chiffre : 4. Je me rapproche. Un pas. Deux pas. Trois pas, plus un. J'étends mes mains et je serre le chiffre.

J'ai ouvert les yeux, ce qui était étrange parce que je pensais qu'ils étaient déjà ouverts. Sauf que, maintenant, j'étais en classe. Je lançais des regards rapides. À droite, les enfants normaux, et à gauche, les intimidateurs. Tout était normal. Sauf l'horloge. 58 minutes et 45 secondes s'étaient écoulées !

J'ai vite baissé le regard sur ma feuille.

1)  $3+1=4$

J'avais aussi dessiné un chemin divisé en deux avec une pancarte, et un dauphin avec des muscles humains. Barnaby !

Était-ce un rêve... la réalité ? En tout cas, je semblais avoir trouvé ma réponse au test.

— Crayons sur le bureau !

C'était Mme Pommebelle. Oh, non !

Elle a commencé à ramasser les feuilles de la classe. J'ai rendue la mienne. Je ne pouvais pas me résoudre à effacer mon ami imaginaire. Donc, mon test allait avoir une question répondue sur dix et beaucoup de barbouilles.

Pourtant, cela ne me dérangeait pas. J'ai ignoré le regard « je-vas-te-donner-un-F » de mon enseignante et je suis retournée à la maison, souriante, avec une aventure que je n'allais jamais oublier... probablement.

De quoi parlais-je?

## HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 7-8/7<sup>E</sup> - 8<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Trisha Haldar - *A Rainbow After the Storm*

Rain splashed against the bedroom window as Lindsay Stewart watched her mother's silver sedan pull into the gravel driveway. It was six o' clock; her mother had once again stayed late at work. *Typical of her*, Lindsay thought dully as she adjusted her position on her bed. Taking her rubber ball, she absent-mindedly bounced it against the ceiling, letting it fall into her outstretched palms.

The rain fell harder outside, from a soft murmur to a gradual pounding against the roof of the house. To tell the truth, Lindsay felt too miserable and tired to do anything else, let alone homework, even though she had a pile to do. This was how she felt everyday, just waiting for the hours to drag by, browsing on her phone, until she could fall asleep.

Thunder roared outside, followed by a flash of lightning. A truck drove by, splashing the driveway with rainwater.

"Lindsay? I'm home!" Lindsay heard her mother cry out as the front door swung open, followed by the sound of wet sneakers squeaking on the tiled floors. Lindsay wondered why her mother even bothered; it wasn't like she was going to reply anyways. She wasn't in the mood to talk with anyone right now, let alone her mother. Twack! The ball hit the ceiling and went plummeting down. Lindsay caught it with one hand, then pulled it closer to her chest.

She squeezed the ball hard, as hard as she could, her knuckles turning white as she did so. A strange mixture of anger and sadness welled up inside her, and Lindsay turned onto her side, pressing her cheek against the cool pillow.

Her eyes fell onto a photograph of her on the bedside table; a portrait of a smiling ten-year old girl with dark ebony hair in braids and a soccer ball in her grasp. Round, hazel eyes shining and face scrunched up mid-laugh, Lindsay looked so young and naive in that photo, as if the world was all sunshine and rainbows, and everything would always be fine. *If only*, Lindsay thought as the rain outside became a torrential downpour, soaking the hydrangeas lining the front lawn.

A caption engraved on the wooden photo frame read '*Happy Birthday, My Sweet Dove.*' The letters were intricately inscribed. Lindsay ran her fingers over the uneven edges and cried softly. Her father had given it to her on her 12th birthday, the last time he got to celebrate a birthday with her.

Tears silently rolled down her cheeks before falling onto the pillow. Wiping her eyes, Lindsay picked up her phone, which had been resting next to the photo frame. Her fingers quickly navigated to her favourite social media platform, a place where she spent most of her time watching videos to unwind and distract herself. As she slowly fell into a trance, Lindsay's previously crying eyes glazed over as she scrolled from one video to another on her phone, unblinking and indifferent to anything other than her own sorrows.

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An hour later, the bedroom door creaked open, letting in a stream of light from the hallway. The thunderstorm had subsided, although it was drizzling slightly.

A middle-aged woman with long, dark hair stood in the doorway, casting a shadow over the girl's hunched figure. Lindsay didn't look up. The woman stepped forward, revealing a pair of sunken, hazel eyes, with premature wrinkles tracing her face like roads on a map. Mrs. Stewart had the look of someone who had not slept in days, although behind those tired eyes was a flicker of the beauty she once was.

"What do you want?" Lindsay mumbled; her eyes still glued to the screen.

Mrs. Stewart took a deep breath, then spoke. "*Love*, will you please have supper with me tonight? It's been months since we've had a proper meal together." Lindsay glanced up. Her mother had changed out of the usual dark blue scrubs she wore to work into a dull gray cardigan. It matched the colour of the clouds outside, Lindsay noted.

"No." Her voice, harsh and bitter, came out stronger than she expected. "I'll eat in my room, like I always do." *Why would today be any different?*

Mrs. Stewart's shoulders slumped. Dejectedly, she sighed "Fine, could you at least help me in the kitchen?" Lindsay gave no response, not even the slightest acknowledgement that her mother had spoken. A

pang of guilt rose in her stomach, but she pushed it away.

Mrs. Stewart gazed longingly at her daughter, then turned and walked down the hall. How much Lindsay had changed since her father's death. Her previously short-cropped hair was now shoulder-length, tangled and unkempt. Her face had transformed, with dark purple circles under her eyes and paler skin. Her behaviour had also changed, lashing out often, and skipping school every other day, things she never used to do before.

Her sweet Lindsay was gone, now replaced by a depressed and aggrieved one, seldom talking to her. *Would things ever be normal again?* Mrs. Stewart simply hoped that one day things wouldn't be as miserable as they were now.

Meanwhile, Lindsay watched her mother disappear around the corner and down the staircase, then turned back to her phone, scrolling to the next video that popped up on her social media feed. It was addictive; it felt like all her worries were disappearing as she fell into the endless loop of content. *This* was what she needed to take her mind off things — not her know-it-all mother, with her meaningless comforts and remarks, always acting as if she had a solution to all of Lindsay's problems.

*Where* had her mother been the days preceding her husband's death? Those dark days back when Lindsay spent hours waiting outside the hospital ICU, waiting to see her sickly father lying on his soon-to-be deathbed. His face slack and chalky, his breath soft and laboured, and his persistent cough resounding across the room. It was terrifying, seeing him like that, a stark contrast to his former bustling self.

*Where* had her mother been, when her dad needed her support and attention during the last few days of his life? Working, working, working, her mother always seemed to be working. Couldn't she see her husband's condition? If Lindsay could see her father did not have much time left, why couldn't her mother?

"Lindsay, can you please come down? I need you to cut vegetables for the salad." Mrs. Stewart called once more from downstairs, interrupting her thoughts. Grumbling, Lindsay rolled out of bed and shoved her phone in the pocket of her jeans before slowly descending the staircase.

Photographs held in silver frames lined the hallway, each one bearing three faces: a young girl with dark curly hair and round hazel eyes, a middle-aged woman with similar round eyes and hair, and a man with thick brown hair and a beard. However, as the photos became increasingly more recent, the man's face became thinner, paler, the light disappearing from his eyes. Lindsay turned away. The last picture on the wall was too painful to look at.

It was a selfie taken about seven months ago, a selfie of Lindsay posing next to her father, who was lying on a hospital bed looking exhausted. His expression was unreadable, but his lips were slightly parted as if he was going to whisper in her ear.

What would he have told her if she hadn't foolishly chosen to leave at that moment to fetch snacks from the vending machine? What would he have told her if he hadn't fallen asleep when she returned? Lindsay wiped away a tear as the memories flooded back.

An old, satin tablecloth was draped over the dining table, various stains from over the years visible on its surface. Lindsay slumped into a chair at the opposite end from where her mother usually sat and pulled out her phone.

Suddenly, a shout erupted from the kitchen, followed by a gasp of pain. Before Lindsay could fully register what was happening, she found herself lunging for the kitchen where her mother was standing, clutching her left hand.

The cutting board was dotted with dark, red drops of blood as Mrs. Stewart raised up her index finger, revealing a deep cut that made Lindsay wince. Yet, she could not stop staring at the wound. Something unpleasant fluttered inside of her stomach, making her feel like throwing up. "Could you fetch me the first-aid kit, Lindsay?" Her mother asked her, voice shaky. Nodding, the girl ran to the bathroom and threw open the cabinets, searching for the kit.

Once she found it, Lindsay got right to work applying pressure on the wound with a clean washcloth. Then, she quickly washed the area and applied some antibiotic cream before wrapping her mother's finger with a sterile bandage.

"Thank you, love." Mrs. Stewart whispered after Lindsay was done. "You are more like your father than I thought." The words were full of love and warmth, although there was a distinct sadness as her mother spoke.



Lindsay's eyes filled with tears, recalling just how scared and shocked she was when she saw her mother's finger bleeding.

"Are you alright?" Lindsay asked, watching her. Her eyes fell onto the carrots Mrs. Stewart had been cutting. They lay forgotten on the cutting board. Cutting the vegetables was supposed to be her job, not her mother's. She would not have gotten hurt if Lindsay had been there, helping her.

"Yes, I suppose I'm fine. My mind was just elsewhere tonight."

"Where? You were probably thinking about work, like you always do." Lindsay couldn't help but add in a snarky voice, feeling bad once the words left her mouth.

Mrs. Stewart took a seat at the kitchen table and sighed. "I was thinking of your father. I saw something unusual while I was driving home today. I was just imagining his reaction."

"What was it?"

"It sounds so silly but a van with a giant plastic cockroach on top. I think it was an advertisement for a pest control company."

"He'd probably burst out laughing and say 'Wow, what've they been feeding that thing? *Fertilizer?*'" Lindsay said, smiling a little at the thought. "Probably a horrible joke like that."

"Exactly. Ah, I standby what I said earlier. You are just like your father. Although, I doubt he'd want to see us this way, so cold and distant. Your Papa would not have wanted this, you know that."

Lindsay stared at the floor, ashamed, thinking not just of her mother but all her friends and family. How rude and indifferent she had been to all of them, when all they wanted was to support her while she got through this difficult time. How she blatantly ignored and lashed out at them, as if they were all responsible for her devastating loss. How *selfish* she had been.

Her father had always been the one she could count on when times got tough. Yet, look what happened to him, the one person that Lindsay had held closest to her heart. He was gone. From a disease that no one could've predicted he would fall victim to. From a disease that would eventually take his life and leave Lindsay and her mother stranded. A horrible, vile disease called lung cancer, one to which there was no cure. *He was gone, far away where Lindsay would never be able to reach out for him, or sink into one of his giant bear hugs ever again.*

Who did she have left by her side, if not for her mother? If not for the caring, kind woman that sat across from her, the one who would still reach out for her even when Lindsay rejected her. The one who had endured so much pain over the last six months so that she could have a roof over her head and food to eat?

Lindsay looked up and saw her mother smiling at her, which lighted up her tired face. "You are so beautiful and strong, my girl. But you don't have to do this alone. We'll get through this together, step by step."

*We'll get through this together.* Her words, so tender and loving, struck a chord in Lindsay's heart, causing a twinge of sadness and regret. All those days she had spent in pain and anguish, wasting away on social media, staring in envy at how people could still live happy lives after the world had just ended for her. Instead, she should've spent that time with her mother, by her side.

Suddenly Lindsay burst into tears, rocking back-and-forth as she cried long and hard. A pair of warm arms pulled her into a loving embrace, whispering softly "*It's okay, my love. It's okay.*"

"Where were you when Papa was sick? Why were you at work, when he was clearly fading away?" Lindsay asked, sniffing as she pulled away.

Mrs. Stewart sighed deeply, running her hands through her hair. "I did what I could, baby, you need to understand that. Life was so hard when your Papa was sick, I had to work overtime just to pay the bills. I couldn't bear to see your father suffering on that wretched hospital bed, so frail and fragile. Work helped take my mind off the pain."

"It's just been so hard without him, Mama. So hard." Lindsay said, wiping her eyes.

"I know it certainly hasn't been easy but Papa would've wanted us to move on, not live in the miserable way we are right now." Mrs. Stewart blinked away the tears in her own eyes, before turning to Lindsay with a warm smile. "In times of struggle, we find comfort and solace in the people who are there to support us. I am here. Your friends are here. We all want to see you happy, not isolating yourself from the world."

Lindsay blushed. "I was so upset when Papa passed away, it felt unbearable. I didn't want to talk to anyone or seek help. I wasn't in the right state of mind, I was so horrible to everyone!"

“An apology is a nice place to start,” her mother advised gently. “To your friends, to your teachers, to your relatives, to those you lashed out on. Seek forgiveness, and don’t take their company for granted. I myself am guilty of pushing them away, when I should’ve drawn them in tighter.”

“I know I haven’t been the best mother, and I know I should’ve been there for you more.” Mrs. Stewart continued, placing her soft hands on her daughter’s cheeks. “But things were hard for me too, I hope you can understand that, my love. Perhaps we can move forward.”

Lindsay thought about it, then nodded. “Together?” she asked.

“Always together.”

Outside, the sun peeked out from behind a curtain of clouds, bathing the street in a warm golden light. In the distance, a rainbow arched across the sky.

## WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 9-10/9<sup>E</sup> - 10<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Victoria Sakhrani - *Ceaseless*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

You do not like this room. It is empty and gray, devoid of all lingering traces of humanity. Your eyes slowly adjust to the lights. You do not question why you are here. The carpet beneath you is moist, each movement pressing dank liquids onto your skin. You shiver and look around. The stillness of the room makes you uneasy. It all seems familiar, yet you cannot recall any details. Perhaps you have been here before.

A small, white mask lies on the floor beside you. It is familiar, yet your eyes do not linger. You rise to your feet as pieces of damp carpet cling to your skin like a suffocating shroud. Identical walls loom over you with each hesitant step, and the sound of dripping water from the ceiling is all that fills the room.

You turn your head. There is a door, you push it open. You are filled with uncertainty.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

It is normal. You stand and walk as the dust clouds begin to settle. Through the haze, your eyes fixate onto a peculiar corner. You hesitate, but step towards it.

White masks are scattered across the floor, pristine in quality, as if untouched in the desolation of the chamber. Each one is small and intricate, their features twisted into a grotesque mockery of human expression. They seem to stare up at you with hollow eyes, abysmal voids of black nothingness. Fear creeps up your spine.

You step back through the door.

You can no longer see. You are filled with dread.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

It is chaotic and vast, with endless halls leading to identical doors impossible to differentiate between. The air is heavy and metallic, reminiscent of old blood. Your laboured breaths echo throughout the room, the single sound reverberating off the walls and alerting your presence to the cacophony of voices in the distance. You take a step forward. They grow silent.

The floor is concrete and firm, cold beneath the soles of your bare feet. Each intake of oxygen feels longer, heavier than the last. The air presses down on you, a tangible weight forcibly pushing for your surrender to its gradual torment. You walk faster, following the yellow lights in the distance. The voices resume their symphony of madness, their whispers pulling at your consciousness, drawing you deeper into the room.

You pass by countless halls, corridors, and chambers, each a labyrinth of its own. Pillars of glass and mutilated furniture are thrown across rooms, the scent of decay mixes with something sweet and sickly. Your stomach churns. You walk faster.

Shadows flicker at the edges of your vision as you cross the room. Faceless beings donning hollow masks; they seem to move in your periphery, always just out of sight. The sounds grow louder, distant echoes of guttural noises reaching your ears from every direction.

The shadows are closer now. The voices seem just behind your ear.

You run. You are filled with desperation.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

You feel uneasy. There are no walls. There are no corridors. Nothing obscures your vision, yet nothing remains visible. It is swathed in darkness and terror, the air is thick and suffocating. The room is endless, expanses of shadow in every direction.

You look down. There are insects buzzing at your feet, tingling every nerve and sensation as they crawl up your skin and burrow homes within you.

You look up. The masked beings are now around you. None of them are looking at you. A pit of dread

begins to gnaw in your stomach. There is something wrong. You cannot understand the words they speak. You walk forward. One by one, they turn to stare.

You pick a direction and run. They chase after you. You scream, but no sound escapes your lips. The room stretches on endlessly, mocking your futile attempts to flee. They are closer now, movements swift and unnervingly silent.

You cannot see where you run. You are filled with terror.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

It is fake. It is a fib, a lie carved in deeper, and deeper, and deeper. You do not trust what you see. The sky is visible now, spring trees covered in a honeyed shade of pink, sugary sweet and deceptive. Petals fall from their branches as angels falling from grace, painting the dewy grass with clusters of white blossoms. The air gets warmer as you turn your head. Heat is all you can feel, the teal expanse of the summer sky turning a vibrant blue hue.

You spot a door at the end of a bridge. You feel oddly at peace. But it is a lie.

You walk forward. The room changes as you inch closer.

The vibrance fades until the powdery petals are ripped away and fall heavily to the ground, almost as if gravity itself had discovered a new nemesis. The room is engulfed by the phoenix of fall, sprinkling across the trees like a virus until they burn with glowing oranges and reds. You are uncomfortable. Something is wrong. The trees seem distorted, outlines of masks engraved on each trunk. You try to walk faster.

The sky grows pale and hueless. The wind strips the trees of all foundations, hurling without a single hint of pity in mind. White beads glide down from the sky and coat the room in labyrinths of ice. The terrain hardens with the arrival of winter, colours massacred and driven off into the depths of the unknown.

Everything is white. The door is no longer visible. Outlines of shadows linger in the distance, unmoving. You glance nervously over your shoulder, there is no hint of a path. Droplets of red begin to pool at your feet. Whether your own blood, or that of another, you do not know. There is no sense in any of this, but you run. You are filled with a sense of disquiet.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

You do not remember the bruises that litter your limbs. The blood that drips through the cracks in your skin. You stumble forward.

You are falling. You do not know why. This ceiling suffocates you, the shadows peel and unravel your skin until you feel as though you have lost yourself. Down once. Down twice. You are falling deeper into the unknown. You close your eyes.

The splatter of dripping blood echoes in the distance. You are filled with weariness.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

Your footsteps echo strangely as you walk, creating an illusion of company where there is none. The floor beneath you is uneven, scattered with debris and the remnants of what once might have been furniture. The walls are lined with rows upon rows of shelves. Each shelf is filled with masks, hundreds of them, each more grotesque than the last. Their hollow eyes seem to follow you as you move. It is silent.

Your eyes strain to see, but the darkness is impenetrable.

A sense of dread settles over you. The masks are not just sitting on the shelves— they are worn by figures, standing silently in the shadows. Watching.

You quicken your pace. They follow.

Your hand finds a door. They follow.

You tremble as you push it open.

They follow, not far behind, as if tethered to your very existence.

You are filled with fear.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

You no longer look around. The comfort of your shadow has abandoned you, the masked figures in the distance filling the void of emptiness. You speak, but your voice is seemingly nonexistent. Perhaps it was never there to begin with.

You stare down an empty hall. You are alone. You do not know how long it has been. The skin you wear is beaten, too broken to take another step. But still, you walk.

The corridor splits into three halls, devoid of any features -- left, straight, or right. You wonder what the point is. If each leads to the same outcome, promising eternal solitude in an isolated realm where choice is simply a facade.

You turn right. Do not look back. You are filled with regret.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

It is nothing but water. You cannot see the depths below you. Water trickles down the walls around you. It rises swiftly, the cold stinging your skin as it pools around your ankles, dragging you into the abyssal waves until you have melted into this world that confines you.

You watch as it breathes and heaves itself into layers of thick mass, an ocean bare of any life and magnificence. You do not notice when your body is submerged. You do not notice the swirling embrace of the water, coaxing you into momentary darkness.

The surface churns with unseen currents, pulling you deeper into the madness of the room. You do not notice the white masks sinking beside you, shoved into the deep pits of hell, descending toward the abyss.

You swim. The water grows colder, your body sinks as it loses velocity, plummeting into the sea. You dive. The water presses into you. The grasp it has around your neck remains steadily unwavering. Your lungs scream as a living, writhing thing caged within you.

You struggle. The salty water seeps into your eyes as you sink, ripping the skin off of your tongue until your senses are clouded. Each movement an anchor to the weightless terror consuming your thoughts.

You sink. You are alone in the abyss. The only escape is to embrace the depths.

You are filled with loneliness.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

Your body has reached its limit. The halls are narrow, too close. It is small, claustrophobic, with mold covering every inch of the room. The floor is soft, almost spongy, as if you are walking on something organic.

You lay down, the journey must end here.

You turn your head to see small, white masks laid on the floor around you. They seem to leech the light, their hollow eyes boring into your skin, tracking every subtle movement.

You wonder if there is an end. Perhaps the cycle is endless. Perhaps you will never know. Your body can go no further. Yet you stand. And you walk. Your hand reaches a door.

You must continue. You are filled with emptiness.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is a room.*

You do not know how long it has been. Gone is your shadow. Gone are your yesterdays and your tomorrows, gone is the self that once defined you.

The person that you were at the beginning of this journey is no longer the same. You have been stripped bare, your identity shattered and rebuilt countless times. There is no further to venture.

You close your eyes. You are filled with resignation.

\* \* \*

*You wake up. There is another room.*

It is empty and gray, the carpet beneath you is moist, and dank liquids press onto your skin with every subtle movement. Pieces of the damp carpet cling to your skin like a suffocating shroud as you stand. You walk.

You have been here before. Though you cannot recall when.

In the center of the room lies a small, white mask, its features twisted into a grotesque parody of humanity. It is familiar, and your eyes linger.

You turn your head. There is a door, yet you do not approach it. You turn your head again, facing the mask on the floor. You reach out, your fingers grazing its cool surface. It calls to you, beckoning you closer with a silent promise of salvation.

It is a choice you have made before, each time hoping for a different outcome. As you place it upon your face, a familiar sense of numbness washes over you, the weight of your own identity slipping away once more. It fits perfectly, as if it was always meant to be there.

Yet with each breath, you feel a piece of yourself slipping away, lost to the void that lies beyond. The room begins to fade, the walls melting into darkness as the cycle begins anew. You wonder if the journey concludes. If hope was truly an option. Tears well in the corner of your eyes.

You scream, and no sound escapes. A primal noise of agony and despair echoes through the room, yet it falls deaf upon your own ears. No one hears. No one cares. Your blood is only one of many scattered upon walls already stained.

No will to break, nor voice to cry. The mask covers the faceless, the shell of a former being. It defines a self that has lost its own definition. Lost to the reality of the nightmare you forgot you were living.

You drag yourself no further.

You have weakened, and the journey must end. But should you continue?

You reach for the door. The body you control trembles with anticipation and dread. As your world fades dark, the door creaks open. Your eyes close shut.

You are reminded of your shattered self, hollow.

You are filled with acceptance.

\* \* \*

*You awaken, and there is a room.*



## HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 9-10/9<sup>E</sup> - 10<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Grant Beaton - *The Give, Take and Hunger*

Silence.

SPLASH!

The water erupts, and a screaming, bizarre-looking creature is dragged out of the dark, filthy mire by a human man. This frail human, covered in muck, looks around 30 years old. Swimming past the drooping leaves through the murk, was Dignan, the only lifeguard in the large swamp planet of Zazumba. His job, and a hard one at that, is to guard this place that is full of savage creatures called Waggamuffins.

Waggamuffins populated this planet, and have a dark magic infused within their hair. They have intense knowledge of the universe, but minimal knowledge about how to swim. To Dignan, they look like little gnomes with hair longer than their whole body. This hair consistently and constantly gets tangled around their stubby and feeble limbs. Just like right now, Dignan has to constantly jump into the vile water and save these filthy creatures to bring the Waggamuffins to shore and cut their hair.

However, when their hair is cut by Dignan and a rock that he'd sharpened on another, their dark magic is released into the atmosphere.

As each strand of inky hair falls to the ground, a violet, ghostly spirit of that follicle floats up into the clouds. These clouds begin to worry Dignan, as a deep purple rain falls more and more often over the region. When what he hopes are just simple raindrops, although he knows they aren't, lands on a Waggamuffin, their hair grows at a rate that Dignan can't even describe. The hair practically shoots out of their head, and within minutes, they are back to their eternal struggle for life in the goop.

This rain was Dignan's only source of food.

It was a constant struggle for Dignan, as he needed the rain to live, but it also made him very nervous and uncomfortable, he didn't want to keep adding these apparitions to the clouds, but he had no other choice.

Today, however, Dignan noticed something he hadn't noticed before. He's carrying this exceptionally loud and agitated Waggam, which he's begun to refer to them by, he sees what looks like words scratched into a rock. Dignan thought he'd been the only human to step foot on Zazumba.

Dignan subtly waded his way, with this screaming beast holding on to him, the numbing shrieks in his ear. Once he got to this rock, which he'd swam past before, but this was the only time he'd noticed these strange, scrawled words along its surface.

"Do not feed the Nert ..."

As Dignan gets closer, he reads the few words scratched onto the rock, but what he didn't notice before was the splatter of blood that erased the last of the letters. It looked like whoever was writing this... was killed mid-sentence.

Now Dignan had a name for it. He'd seen a Nert, but only once, and it was something he'll remember for the rest of his now possibly much shorter life on this planet, he thinks while staring at the maroon stain. It was something Dignan couldn't even describe. The best description he could give would be if a dragon fused with a rake and was made of lava.

It had happened on an exceptionally gloomy day. It was one of the days in which Dignan felt his life would never change. He'd shaved, saved and saved again the Waggams until it felt like his arms would fall off, but he had to keep going. Dignan decided that he'd just take a quick walk to take a break from the constant rescues, and that was when he saw it. Dignan left his crudely made lifeguard chair and shelter of leaves and rocks and went on a brief, but strenuous slog through the swamp.

Taking large steps through the goop, Dignan was suddenly stricken with panic, before he even saw it. Dignan instinctually ducked and looked to where he could sense it. He saw the monstrosity for maybe less than a second, eating a Waggam and moving through the swamp at an inhuman speed. Dignan ran as fast as his skinny legs could through this terrain and went right back to his shelter. Dignan hid in silent terror for maybe an hour.

Dignan looked at this writing, and the dried remnants of blood on this stone, that looked anything but

fresh, and his fears of the Nert were confirmed.

This introduced another problem in Dignan's simple yet awful life on this marsh. Not only did he need this magical rain from the Waggams as food, but he definitely didn't want to let the Nert eat any more of them. All Dignan could do was guess, and it was hard not to assume the worst about the Nert. Feeding it would not make it like him, if anything, just like this last human he'd discovered, it would do the opposite. Now he was certain he would keep shaving and saving these Waggams, and even more so, out of terror of this mythical Nert.

At least there was someone else on Dignan's side, that being Mesqueak, his "sidekick" of sorts, who looked like a mouse but about the size of a skyscraper. Not that big, but that's how it felt to Dignan.

SQUEAK!

Here he comes now, Mesqueak, lumbering through the brambles and weeds, unable to communicate with Dignan other than the fact that they both want to survive, and they both don't belong in this place.

Dignan gave a nod of acknowledgment to Mesqueak, as Dignan knows he's been working hard at his job. While Dignan works as the lifeguard, saving all of these stupid, shrieking annoyances that are necessary for his survival, Mesqueak has something else to do. His size and strength make him almost useless at swimming, but Mesqueak makes for a great defender and defends them both from the one other creature that they know about on this planet.

Here one comes now... Mesqueak turns his head and sees it, a Crammy-Grammy, as Dignan calls them, but to Mesqueak, they are just enemies. Shooting through the magical clouds on some kind of floating leaf, an ugly, hairless creature that might be a human if it was thrown in a radioactive vat of orange soda.

The worst part about the Crammy-Grammys is the small leaf that they hold, which can shoot a wire of rope that burns anything it touches.

The Crammy-Grammy makes a low humming sound and points out the two of them standing amongst the trees. One thing that Mesqueak has learned is that they always travel in hordes. This conflict has become almost trivial for this massive mouse at this point.

To fight them, Mesqueak rips off one of his arms, and throws it in the water close to himself. The Crammy-Grammy gets distracted by the splash and the scent and dives to go attack it. Mesqueak then jumps and launches himself with extreme strength and lands on the back of the Crammy-Grammy, shoving into the mush of the swamp scum.

"Thanks."

Even though Dignan knows Mesqueak can't hear him, he can't help but thank him, because in reality, Dignan knows he could do nothing to kill that beast, and without Mesqueak, Dignan knows he'd surely be dead.

Mesqueak looks at him with his pale, but strangely kind eyes, and although Mesqueak doesn't understand what Dignan is trying to say, he sees it on his tiny, strange face.

The rest of the Crammy-Grammys are now flying over and firing their magical binding ropes at them. Dignan dodges them, watching the trees and plants be set alight by a strange purple flame all around, while Mesqueak goes back for his arm. This time, Mesqueak uses it as a boomerang, bending the elbow, making it a C-shaped weapon. He throws it at Crammy-Grammys one at a time, knocking them off of their leaf where they land in the water and are swarmed by the Waggams that gnaw them to pieces.

Dignan can only watch in awe, and is at the same time, pants-wettingly horrified.

They hear the exasperated shrieks and screams of the Crammy-Grammys, along with splashing and tearing from the Waggams. Dignan can only sit and watch, having never really seen Mesqueak kill them in this way. Mesqueak then grabs his arm and brings it to Dignan. Dignan is able to grab a vine of some sort and make some kind of loose knot attaching his arm back on, something he's done almost hundreds of items at this point. Dignan knows it will only be a matter of time before Mesqueak rips it right back off, once the next horde comes their way.

After the Waggams finish their struggle for nourishment, they go straight back to the struggle with their follicles. Dignan notices this and decides to get right back to work, and jumps right back in the water to get back to his never-ending journey of saving them.

Empowered by his newly developed fear of the Nert, Dignan works the hardest he's ever worked,

swimming and throwing branches and leaves to any Waggam on site. Dignan feels like he's finally found what he should be doing, and nothing's going to stop him now. He and Mesqueak make a great team, and Dignan is finally starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, that maybe being here isn't as bad as he once thought.

Dignan gets right back to saving those little creeps, at a rate faster than he ever has before, until he realizes it's been many hours and it's time to hit the sack.

CRRACKRT! SPPSH! CRAAAR!

Dignan knows what it is immediately.

Dignan shoots out of bed so fast, he slams his head on the log he uses as support for his little makeshift shelter. Dignan can't believe it. Just when he said his life was going well, it now feels like he's within his last minutes.

Dignan can barely move, his whole body feels paralyzed, all he can feel is the throbbing in his head and the beating of his heart, louder than everything but that creature out there, on the hunt through the water, breaking through everything in its way.

Dignan hopes that if he stays still, it won't find him, but knows that he's just delaying the inevitable. It will find him.

It takes all the strength that Dignan can muster to bring himself up to a sitting position, and he brings one leg over the other and onto the soggy ground. Dignan's used to the usual sinking into the mire, but right now, it feels like quicksand, dragging him indefinitely to his death. He walks slowly, feeling around in the dark and taking one step out of time. Dignan is in no rush, he doesn't want to see it, but he knows that it has to happen. Dignan creeps his way over to Mesqueak's similar, yet much larger tent and pulls his tail to wake him up. Mesqueak looks at him, sees the solemn and terrified expression on Dignan's face, and senses the danger afoot, although Mesqueak wasn't sure if the creature had any feet.

They walk out of there determined, but absolutely cluelessly petrified as to what they may see. Mesqueak leading the way, and Dignan right behind him, head flinging and looking around so fast he's scared he'll get whiplash.

There it is... the Nert.

It's just like Dignan remembered, although somehow so much worse. It's brighter than anything else on the planet, but not in a welcoming, campfire way, but in a holy cow, that thing is made of lava and it is going to eat me way. The Nert had its back turned to them, and they could hear the blood-curdling sound of a Waggam being eaten. The Waggam is flung up into the air, and the Nert swallows it in one swift gulp.

Dignan watches, not believing his eyes, as he watches the Nert grow as the Waggam is eaten. It gets larger and brighter in front of him, within an instant.

The warning on the stone comes back to him, and now he knows why not to feed the Nert.

Mesqueak, like always, rips his arm clean off, the vines falling to the ground, and bends the crook of the elbow. He throws it before Dignan can stop him. Mesqueak rushes right at the thing, and to Dignan, it looks like a tiny mouse running straight at a crocodile. The Nert is hit right on the wing, and turns around, looking for the cause of what felt like a little fly bite on its back.

Dignan sees its eyes, creepy and dark, finds Mesqueak in all the sludge, tripping and slipping his way toward the beast.

Before Dignan can warn Mesqueak, the Nert attacks.

The Nert swings its clawed, spiny wing at Mesqueak, who just barely manages to duck before it flies straight over him. Where Mesqueak stood, the trees and vines were cut like they were made of glass, and he would have surely been ripped in half. Mesqueak, fearless and courageous, jumps right at the Nert, onto its back, and tries to punch and rip at its molten skin, burning himself in the process.

Dignan realizes he's just been standing there, and decides to make himself useful. Dignan grabs an enormous vine and drags it slowly to the closest tree he can find. It takes him a while to tie it around the tree while trying to watch the fight, which Mesqueak was definitely losing. Dignan then drags it and walks across to the next tree he can see, and does the same thing. He's made a tripwire.

Somehow Dignan has to distract the Nert enough to make it come this way and take a tumble over this thick plant, and hopefully, that will give them the opportunity to win. Dignan looks back at the brawl and realizes that it's over

Dignan watches as Mesqueak, burned and exhausted, just like a Waggam, is flicked up into the air and swallowed by the Nert, which then grows even larger.

He's gone.

The shock of Mesqueak's death hits Dignan like a hammer, but he knows that it is not the time to grieve. He channels all the anger and courage that he can and yells. "HEY, you big lizard thing, come and get me!" Although it can't understand the words, the Nert can understand the idea behind them and turns towards him.

Now it's the moment to see if his trap will work, as it runs right towards him. Taking steps longer than a school bus.

Three steps.

Two steps.

One step.

It's time.

It bursts right through his tripwire, and doesn't even falter. Dignan knows that it's over, his plan didn't work, and all he can do now is accept his death.

The Nert stabs him with a talon and flicks him right into the air. Dignan looks at its rows of teeth as he falls, right to his death.

BRINGGG! His alarm sounds.

Dignan is late for work.

## HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 9-10/9<sup>E</sup> - 10<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Natalie Naylor - *A Colourful Creation*

The Crayons sat in their cramped box. They were all put together for one purpose: to draw. Red, Yellow, and Blue were the most experienced, and wisest of the group. They are shorter now after having been used so many times. They knew their purpose and often had to guide the other Crayons in the right direction, mixing together to make an even better picture. Having been in close quarters for a while they all became a great team, drawing all sorts of landscapes, foods and whatever you can imagine.

They all patiently wait for their turn of use. Will Red need to draw another apple today? Will Blue need to transform a blank page into a roaring ocean? Or perhaps, Green will grow the leaves from the bare trees of Brown. A picture needs to be drawn today, and no one knows yet what it might be.

“I hope it will be a cute little piggy,” said Pink, hoping she would be of value today.

“No, it will definitely be a sunflower” declared Yellow, excited of the hard work he had ahead of him.

“You guys are both wrong,” stated Orange, “I will be drawing a beautiful monarch today and you two won’t even be needed”. Yellow and Pink both scoffed at this comment from Orange.

“It’s not fair!” exclaimed White, who doesn’t often get picked and is almost as sharp as he was on his first day. “I never get the chance to draw! It’s my turn!”.

The fighting continued. Names were called and feelings were hurt. Yellow was comforting a crying Pink after something Purple said to her. Brown and Red were yelling at each other at the top of their lungs.

“I swear I will snap you in half!” yelled Brown. “You wouldn’t dare, “ replied Red! Orange and Green almost got into a physical fight before Blue held Green back and shouted to the group.

“Everyone stop! We’re Crayons, and right now we’re all acting like Chalk.” All the Crayons stopped in their tracks and stared at Blue. It was dead silent in the box. Crayons being compared to chalk was like telling an adult they were acting like a child. Either way, Blue had gotten the attention of the group and they finally stopped fighting.

“We won’t get anything done if we act like this. So you can kiss your pigs and sunflowers goodbye if you keep up this fighting” explained Blue. Pink and Yellow shied away at the subtle comment made towards them.

“And Orange and Green, why are you guys trying to hit each other? What would an orange tree be without its green leaves? You guys need each other” Blue said. At that, Orange and Green looked at each other and said sorry, coming together in a hug. Tension still hung in the air, but any lingering hatred towards each other was slowly dissipating . Blue knew they needed to work together in order to become the happy box of Crayons they once were. He got an idea, and began planning.

Blue announces to the group, “Alright Crayons, we need some team bonding, and what better way to do that than an activity we all love: Drawing! So get up and get ready to draw.”

In unison, the Crayons got up out of their box and made their way to the blank page awaiting their turn of use. It seemed impossible to the Crayons that they could fill this page with all their colours. How could they make one drawing while including everyone?

Blue started directing the group. "Okay everyone, I will be the base and you can build off of me." Blue says, taking everyone on his back. He works fast and efficiently, just as he always has, filling in his part.

"Green, can you help me out a bit?" Blue requested and Green got right to work following Blue's instructions. The rest of the Crayons stood waiting patiently for Blue to ask for them. They all trusted his instructions and knew what he was doing would be best for the whole group. Blue has always been able to help the Crayons. He was one of the wisest and most experienced so they all looked up to him and often looked to him for guidance.

"White, can you come over here to help me make the clouds?" Blue said, looking up at White. White grew the biggest smile, excited to finally be used. He joyfully made his way to Blue and did what he asked, feeling overjoyed and accomplished.

The drawing was almost complete, everything was coming together. Blue had one more instruction for the group. He began to call out the colours needed to finish the drawing.

"Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Purple, can you help me finish this off?" They all smiled, nodded, and immediately got to work.

In the end they all stepped back and looked at the beautiful drawing that captured all their colour. A drawing of tall oak trees, a fresh grass field full of sunflowers, a scorching sun sitting in a bright sky with the fluffiest of clouds, a little piggy in the corner with a Monarch butterfly on its nose, and of course, in the middle of the Crayon's drawing, sat a perfect, colourful, rainbow.



## WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 11-12/11<sup>E</sup> - 12<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Nour Ismaili - *My Past Says Goodbye*

I was diagnosed with Pancreatic cancer 9 months ago. Since then, I've been living in a nursing home. I spend my days here reminiscing and mourning my youth and fatherhood. My daughter died when she was eleven. She was the biggest blessing I've ever known, and simultaneously, the hardest loss that I could never forget. She was kind and compassionate and even wanted to be a nurse or a doctor—she couldn't make up her mind. She was bright; her smile was like a bonfire, enough to keep the soul warm when all else is gone. Sometimes I imagine her sitting with me, star-gazing in the cool night air like we always used to do. Even now, as I lay in my bed, a book in my hands, a banal television program playing in the background, I imagine her sitting with me and lifting the mood.

I'm waiting for my nurse, Sarah, to show up for our regular check-up. My door creaks open and a young woman walks into my room.

"Uh... Hi there," I mutter, confused.

She smiles and closes the door behind her. "Hi! My name's Sabrina, I'll be covering for Sarah for a while. I'm here for your weekly check-up."

She makes her way to my bed frame and sets her bag on the bedside table. As she gets closer, I notice her green eyes, dark hair, and freckles. I feel as though I've been transported back into the past— she has an uncanny resemblance to Azra, my daughter. She smiles, and it feels like a portal into heaven has opened, and I'm seeing my dear girl for what feels like the first time in forever. I swallow and force myself to get a grip because I'm staring at the poor lady. I can't help it though - my heart just stopped.

Over the next few days, every time I saw Sabrina around the nursing home, I felt like ice water was being poured over my head. Today, she shows up in the morning and tells me that we have to go to the Treatment Center to see my doctor.

During the appointment, he's talking and boring me, so I'm lost in thought until I hear, "Mr. Aydin, I have some bad news." Time stops and it feels like my heart does too. "Your cancer has been spreading and we haven't been able to get it under control. I'm so sorry but you—" His pause almost feels theatrical—rehearsed. "You only have a few months left. Maybe 4 months if we're lucky."

The office is starting to feel like a dark, suffocating tomb and I'm trapped. Dr. Weston excuses himself and leaves the office. When Sabrina comes in to escort me back to my room, I ask her if we can stay for a few minutes, and she softly obliges.

There's a long moment of silence until—

"Do you have any family you want to call?"

It's a simple question but, for some reason, I launch myself into a life summary and we delve into a conversation about the difficulty of loss. She listens to me ramble on about Azra— something I haven't done in very long. "You know... There is nobody else I wish to see other than her. I would call my last days a blessing, a *gift* actually, if she were to accompany me through them." At some point, I get scared that I'm boring her but, every time I look up to see Sabrina's expression: it's warm, empathetic, and reassuring.

We're lost in conversation about death, loss, pain, and love when a knock on the door interrupts

us. Dr. Weston has come to tell us that we must leave. Back in the nursing home, I'm left alone to absorb the punch-in-the-gut Dr. Weston threw my way.

It's been a week since I learned that I'm dying soon. This morning I'm having my breakfast alone, on a bench outside. My mind is blank as I watch squirrels climb trees and ants crawl by. I hear a cheery voice and look behind me. Sabrina is walking towards me with a notebook and a bottle of water.

"Mr. Aydin, hi," she says.

"Call me Kerem, dear," I reply with a smile. She sits beside me on the bench and opens her notebook.

"I can't stop thinking about what you said. About wanting nothing but to spend your last days with your late daughter. I... wanted to do something. Make this all easier for you. I know this may seem weird but, I was wondering if you wanted to plan some things we could do. Or you could, alone. During your last weeks, that is."

I turn to face her and I nod slowly, smiling. "That would be a wonderful idea."

Our list is long—full of memories I made with my daughter that I want to recreate. I'm feeling good because I haven't had anything to look forward to in months.

Two weeks have passed since Sabrina and I made our list and we've visited many of the places Azra and I used to adore. Now, we're on our way to the house where I used to live with my daughter and ex-wife. I used to think about stepping inside and seeing the rooms that moulded my fate, watching the buried memories of my past come back to life.

Once we get to the house, I step out of the car, and nostalgia washes over me like a wave does to a nearby sandcastle. A slow, melting, and destructive pain. I notice all the little changes— things the new owners have added to make the house their own, like the swing hanging from a tree on the front lawn. So, they too have children. They, too, have bedtime stories to tell and school lunches to make. I spend a few minutes reminiscing and staring when a realisation strikes me like lightning: everything and everyone moves on. Time moves, and it does so quickly, even if for me, it has felt frozen ever since my sweet little girl left me. While time was stuck for me, these people found peace in this home that once kept me warm.

Life goes on. It always will. With or without Azra, with or without my ex-wife, with or without *me*. No pain or loss can entrap us. You'll wake up one morning and no longer be mourning. That is life. The world seems to be so good at moving on, so why can't I?

I simply stare at the red bricks, the shaded windows, and the green grass, deep in thought. Ten minutes pass before I join Sabrina in the car. I turn to her while she's driving and say, "I know what I want our last activity to be."

I've been bedridden for three weeks, unable to do anything but vomit and twist in pain. I had a doctor's appointment this morning. I was told that I only had about a few days left. My symptoms have worsened exponentially, so I'm not very surprised. Still, I have a feeling that today will be a good day— I'm sure of it. I'm looking forward to seeing Sabrina.

When she gets to my room, she sits at the end of my bed and we make small talk for a bit, as usual. I tell her about today's symptoms. Before replying, she pauses for a long time.

Her breathing quickens and her eyes water before she says, "I'm sorry we didn't get to do everything on

the list. I'm sorry we didn't get to stargaze. I'm so sorry. I was looking forward to it too, you know? I have been cherishing everything we've done. It has been... therapeutic, watching you get to connect with the memory of your daughter. I haven't given up though. We will stargaze! I'll make sure of it."

She giggles as tears fall on her cheek, and it's a soft, childlike sound that transports me right back to my days of pushing Azra on swings.

I smile as my heart tears and I say, "You've done more than enough for me, my dear. Don't you worry. Just promise me that you won't ever lose your spark or dim your light. No matter what happens. Promise."

When I wake up, it's dark in my room, save for the soft light filtering through the door. I hear noises coming from outside my room.

"Who's there?" I say weakly.

Sabrina rushes in and smiles when she sees that I'm awake.

"Kerem, I know you wanted your final activity to be star-gazing like you used to do with your daughter. I know how much it meant to you. So I decided to bring star-gazing to you," she says excitedly, like a child who's been waiting by the door for her mom.

She grabs what seems to be a remote from her pocket and presses a button. Green, yellow, blue. Stars all over the ceiling. It's a bit childish, but I'm moved and touched and think of how much Azra would've loved this kind of surprise.

"How did you think of this? I..." The words are stuck in my throat because right now all I can think about is how lucky I am, how blessed I've been to know the kindest souls. She walks towards my bed and sits near me. I blink the threat of tears away. "I don't know how to thank you for this, for everything, for all of it."

She smiles. "You wanted to star-gaze, so let's star gaze." We sit in silence, enjoying each other's presence while I stare at the faux sky. I feel myself drifting off, and as much as I want to be present and enjoy this, I can't stay awake much these days.

"You know, Sabrina, I never really told you but, you look so much like Azra. You've got her hair colour, her eyes, her smile, even her freckles. Her kindness, compassion, warmth, uniqueness, authenticity. It almost felt like all the time we'd spent together, I was spending with her. Not just because you're so much like her in your mannerisms and the way you look, but also because you're a special person, and I feel so lucky to have gotten to know you. This is the closest I ever could've gotten to my ideal— how do I say this... Well, death. So thank you, my dear, for deciding to give your time to me. You've given me peace."

I stop there because exhaustion has gotten the best of me. I hope she feels my sincerity, but I can't tell because my eyes are half-shut. I can still, thankfully, feel her warmth, and hear her sniffles. It feels as though my time with Sabrina was my past coming to bid me farewell. Knowing that I've said goodbye to the past and present, I'm ready to say goodbye to the future too. My eyes close and the world goes dark.

## HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 11-12/11<sup>E</sup> - 12<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Willow Grewal - *My Room*

My room is a special room. It's a room I share with my sister Sarah. She takes the bigger bed in the corner by the window and my bed folds out from under hers. It has my Snoopy blankie and squishy heart pillow. When we sleep, her hand dangles in front of my face. Sometimes I pretend I'm a shark and snap at her pretty pink-painted fingers.

"Jane! What is wrong with you?! Just go to sleep for once." She would roll to face the wall with her nails leaving a flashy sparkling trail in the dim night light, like a shooting star descending to her side. She always tells me what to do. Make your bed. Put your mitts on. Clean up the LEGO, *we don't want Chuck choking on it*. Chuck doesn't even go in my room, he doesn't know how to walk upstairs on his own so he only scampers in the kitchen. Sarah pretends to be an adult but she can't even drive yet. And she always calls her very important friends on her very important phone in my room.

"Jane. Jane, get up." As I flutter my eyes open, Sarah's silhouette looms over me. She's taller and her hair, which is usually crisp and short, is strangled into a messy bun. Oh, it's Mom. Bones on bones make her lack a figure, haphazardly strung together by tendons like a cruel wooden puppet. Her eyes whittled onto a flat face, staring past my own. Before I've even managed to drag my heavy body out of bed, it's swiftly made and tucked under Sarah's as Mom moves on to her next victim: the blinds. She cranks them open and light streams through her hollow limbs as she glances back at me. "Don't you want a big girl bed? You don't have to use the trundle anymore."

Silly Mom. I look up, eyes meeting eyes, "Then Sarah won't have a place to sleep."

This knocks whatever air wasn't already sucked out of her vacuum-sealed body and she folds over. I flinch as she places a few straw fingers on my shoulder. "Look Jane, I'm trying to make this easy for you. We're not at Disneyland anymore. It's time to clean up," she hisses.

No.

My room is the best room. It's a room I share with my sister Sarah. She takes the bigger bed in the corner by the window and my bed folds out from under hers, it has my blankie and squishy heart pillow. When we sleep, her hand dangles in front of my face. Sometimes I stare at her glittery fingers hanging like a mobile, and I reach for them. When she wakes she drifts around the room in a sleepy haze; opening the blinds, turning the room from purple to pink. She likes to tell me what to do. Put your mitts on, it's cold out. Go grab Chuck's applesauce, he's hungry. Sarah pretends to be an adult but she never will be. And her fervent voice echoes against the walls when she calls her very important friends in our room.

"Why don't we fold your clothes and pick a nice outfit for today?" Mom strides to the dresser in response to her own question. I stare at my socks, my favourite pair of a famous beagle and his yellow bird friend both atop a red dog house. Past my socks lay the remains of outfits, shirts and blouses and shorts littering the carpet in a pattern of their own. A kaleidoscope of colours paling in comparison to the bright pink walls.

Mom organizes and sorts, and I watch while sitting on Sarah's bed. Mom wanders around the maze of clothes and toys mingling among the linen kingdom. I try not to look at them, but two round ears stick out. Grey and soft, worn and old. Red striking an ear in the flash of a ribbon, white dots splattered on top.

I got Minnie back when I turned 10. Sarah bent down and placed her in my hands. "Minnie wants

to go home, do you know where that is? Disneyland!” She quickly scooped Chuck into her arm, her free hand grabbed mine, and her back leg slammed the front door shut. We ran to Mom’s rusty Sedan, sliding in seamlessly. Our suitcases were already packed and tucked in the truck. Sarah gripped the keys in her shaky hands, then jammed them into the car; we rolled down the driveway.

Together, our words melded into the resemblance of a song as we shrieked the lyrics of *Almost There*. I’d never been in the front seat before and the windows were bigger. I could see so many more trees and cars and buildings! But Disneyland was far, and only so many songs could fill the gaping time ahead.

At last, we stopped at a highway gas station. I did a very good job watching Chuck while Sarah used the washroom. I kept a firm grip on his hand and played I-spy until she came out. Then Sarah was back to business, constantly checking her phone and casting quick glances. She herded us back to the car, and we resumed our karaoke, songs stacking on songs stacking on songs. Eventually, Chuck joined our hoarse singing with cries of his own. I peeked over and saw he wasn’t even buckled in his car seat. When I looked back, Sarah was white-knuckling the wheel.

“Sarah, Sarah, Sar-ah!” I pestered, but she didn’t reply. Oncoming traffic demanded her attention, but I needed it more. I tugged her shirt once, then twice, and she finally glanced back at Chuck. A loud screech pierced the air and my shirt started to float. The world tipped upside down and the car walls crunched in. Glass on skin. Heat and smoke. I managed to crawl through the gaping absence of a door and peered into the wreckage. Chuck lay limp as a doll, blood hanging from his mouth like a loose thread. Sarah was an artistic combination of metal and flesh. Minnie lay fully intact, with superficial bruises a good wash could fix.

My room is a big room. It’s a room I shared with my sister Sarah. Her bed lays in the corner, my squishy pillows and blankets adorning it. When I try to sleep, I stare at the barren ceiling. My toes don’t even hit the end of the bed. I’m not meant to be in it. I squeeze my eyes shut, but the dim night light still peeks through, eventually followed by the rising sun. The night bleeds into day. Your words hang in my mind and imprint my routines like a thumbprint marring a blank slate. Make the bed. Open the blinds. And though I sometimes forget these simple instructions, the walls remember. They echo your voice, whispering the hints of you left behind, the promise of adulthood never fulfilled.

My room is empty.

## HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 11-12/11<sup>E</sup> - 12<sup>E</sup> ANNÉES)

### Sofia Minardi - *Enshrouded Within*

*Caedes.*

They called me.

*He who slaughters.*

It was not my given name, but rather the name given to me.

A title I sculpted during the countless years I spent imprisoned in this subterranean hellscape – the passage of time marked only by the length of the mud-stained hair I kept tied and tucked away.

Rows upon rows of shouting spectators surrounded me, each pounding their leather-laden boots against the escalating levels of andesite floor encircling the pit in which I stood. Each one was greedier than the last to witness the fruition of the Harbinger's artistic gaze.

The whole display was sickening. They filled inside the amphitheater like anxious mice, squirming and shoving over each other in a frenzied hurry to reach their seats before the performance commenced. They were all nameless, faceless figures, marked only by the silhouettes of their ebony cloaks and the steel of their masks. A false face paying tribute to The Fallen peeking through the bottom of their hoods.

I forced myself to look away from the blatant display of bloodlust before loathing consumed whatever semblance of humanity I still possessed, instead choosing to focus my attention ahead.

The circular stadium was dark, illuminated only by the sporadic array of torches emitting an unearthly fluorescent glow, and with each step I travelled further, the shouting grew louder in volume. My reputation preceded me, its presence akin to a living beast slithering in my shadow, leaving oily trails of carnage in its wake. The clatter of my scaled armour was barely audible as I approached the stone figurine in the center of the circular pit.

A winged woman flew desperately overhead, her wrists and ankles bound by an iron chain which constrained her to the rough granite ring. Yet she battled her unyielding opponent all the same. A cloth was wrapped around her right eye, which bled crimson, and still, she persisted. This inanimate being fought against her restraints towards a sky she would not find, a freedom she would never reach. She had been made to fly, to explore, and instead was confined to the interior of a mountain abattoir for all eternity.

Maybe in another life I would have felt greater sympathy for her.

Instead, I wordlessly unsheathed my blade, its elaborate surface gleaming in the white flames around me. I dragged it across my palm and made my swift offering to the Harbinger.

Turning to address the crowd who had fallen into silence, I paused for a moment to watch them as they watched me. Each one of the animals stood rigid, vibrating with palpable fervor as they restlessly awaited the moment in which their notorious champion would emerge victorious, or meet his long overdue end.

Doubting me would prove fruitless, however, as no man would ever find himself worthy enough to take my life. I did not earn my name, stand where I am today, because of chance or divine intervention. I am here because I carved my place through each person who stood in my path until all that remained in my wake were carcasses.

I live because I earned the right to do so.

A piercing screech interrupted the deafening quiet surrounding me as metal was pulled against stone, the incoming footsteps of my opponent reverberating throughout the underground stadium.

I extended my sword upwards.

"Death," I vowed, "Will not have me here."

The ensuing roar of the crowd shook the very foundations of the pit. My opponent's scream was only one among the many chorus of voices synchronizing the sirens of death.

I only ever faced corpses, after all.

The man charged straight for me, beating his chest like a beast as he roared to the crowd's melodic shrieks. The act was suicide, he just had not realised it yet.

The aftermath that followed was a blur. I could vaguely register the warm caress of blood seeping through my gauntlets, soaking into my hair. It was a familiar feeling, yet foreign all the same. Each person



was different, yes, but once you stripped them of their identity, that's all they really were – people. No more significant than cattle.

Thinking of them that way made it easier, at least.

“Quite the show you put on today, Caedes.”

That voice was like a sobering splash of cold water, dragging me out from the comforting depths of my conscience and back to the present. I remained motionless, my back pressed against the rough obsidian behind me, my gaze trained forwards as I spoke. “What,” I began, disinterested, as I watched the wisps of breath disperse into the frigid space before me, “Do you require from me?”

“Your aid in escaping this place.”

It was difficult to keep an indifferent front when she was throwing around such ridiculous requests, and so I could not help but snap my head towards the source of her voice, only to be utterly transfixed by the sight of her.

Her porcelain white hair stood out in stark contrast to the lifeless cell around her. It was cropped short, the straight ends shorn haphazardly around her shoulders. She wore the same variation of armour as the others I had encountered here – boots, leather trousers and a loosely fitted tunic, all of it an inky shade of onyx to obscure any traces of blood. Though it was her eyes which ensnared me.

They were a vivid array of blue hues, a shimmering canvas which stood to rival the sky in their beauty. Looking at her felt as if for a single, breathtaking instant, I was able to catch a glimpse of the world outside of this cage, towards a place I would never quite grasp. It was as if her eyes were a window to another life itself.

“Who,” I rasped the only discernible thought I could, “are you?”

“Inara Vurzhar,” She replied without missing a beat. “And you are?”

“Do you not already know the answer to that?” I replied, perplexed.

She tilted her head at an odd angle, observing me as a predator would its prey.

“I asked for your name. Not the one they gave you.”

I hesitated. “No one has ever asked for that.”

“Then allow me to be the first,” Inara grinned, her expression lopsided.

It was the fact that she was able to smile that threw me so off-balance.

“My name was Aeron.” I spoke quietly, holding the words close to my chest as if the empty air of the cell would take them from me. Despite the sound feeling so foreign to my lips, there was an odd intimacy to hearing them be spoken aloud.

“You're from the East?” Inara sighed wistfully, a phantom wind rustling her white locks as she gazed upwards, past the natural barriers into a memory only she could see. “So was I. Though I prefer not to fall victim to the past.”

Inara walked over towards the iron bars separating our cells, looping her pale arms through the rusted spacing. “I'd like to revisit my previous proposition. Have you given any thought to it?”

In that moment, I could do nothing more than perceive how closely she resembled the winged woman from the arena. They resembled each other in their blazing passion to achieve the impossible.

The faithful would commend her for that kind of resolve.

The wise would condemn her for it.

“Forget it and focus instead on surviving.” I scoffed, turning my gaze back towards my scarred palms.

“Caedes is more than just a symbol to the spectators, you know,” She persisted, “He means something to us competitors, too. The superhuman legend, the one who defies the very existence of this place only because he lives— because he refuses to die in a place like this.”

My calloused hands tightened into fists. “I am not responsible for the way others choose to see me.”

“Maybe not,” She shrugged, “However, you are responsible for your own fate, would you not agree?”

Her question was met only with silence.

“At least answer me this, Aeron,” Inara removed her hands from the bars separating our cells and crouched level to where I sat. “What do you have left to lose?”

I opened my mouth to respond only to find that I did not know the answer. I lived for absolutely no reason other than to spite those who stripped me of the chance at a life of my choosing. I did not have a sense of who I was but rather only an understanding of what I had to do. I was in a constant state of limbo.

Perhaps it was that realization which drove me to accept. That, combined with emotions of conflicting impulse, desperation, foolishness, or even hope. All I knew for certain was that I was exhausted from this endless cycle I couldn't seem to escape from.

I was too stubborn to die and too weak to rebel.

Inara had presented me with an opportunity to do more than just survive. With this request, she had given me a reason to live. To deny her request would be to admit that I had accepted the life I had been given. And that, I refused.

Afterwards, time seemed to lose all relevancy of any kind. Days, months or years could have gone by and it all could have passed in the blink of an eye. It was during this period in which I began to understand Inara, to learn about who she was and why she fought.

And despite this, I felt that the more I discovered about her, the less I knew. Inara was like a streak of lightning illuminating my eclipsed world; constantly vibrant and entirely unpredictable, yet welcome nonetheless.

It was for this reason that as we ran desperately through a labyrinth of tunnels towards our freedom, I knew without a shred of doubt that it was worth it. That everything I had done, the person I had become, it was worth it because it had brought me to her.

As we emerged victorious through the end of the final cavern, I turned to tell her as much only to find Inara pointing towards the view above us. Millions of stars burned bright in the endless night, flecked aimlessly across an unending expanse of darkness.

I nearly laughed.

All this time, I had been inside a mountain – not so far from the sky after all.

*"Have fun, did you?"* An eerie voice purred.

A cold sheet of sweat appeared across my brow as icy terror bled through my bones. My gaze immediately shot towards the space where Inara had been only moments before– only to find that nothing more than a stain of blood remained.

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I was on my knees, my body trembling with an inexplicable intensity. I could hear my heart pounding through my ears as my mind went blank save for a single realization: *It was here.*

Nobody knew who, or what the Harbinger was, where it had come from. The legends that surrounded the creature could not even determine whether it was human or not. All that was known about this otherworldly being was that it made itself apparent through the shape of its victim's demise.

I always wondered how that was possible, how one would know they were in the presence of such an intangible concept.

Now I knew.

There was no doubt in my mind that the thing standing before me was the Harbinger in the flesh. My senses were overwhelmed by indescribable dread, my body frozen in place, helpless to do anything but watch as the shadows around me took shape, wrapping a pallid hand around my throat to raise me into the cold winter air.

*"My champion has made a mistake,"* An eerily familiar voice crooned. *"I thought we did not make mistakes."*

As the edges of my vision began to succumb into unconsciousness, I was left paralyzed in terror to watch my own face smile back at me.

...

I was roused by the clamour of a restless crowd, which meant that I was back and Inara was gone.

*Why had I been spared from the same fate?*

Before I could begin to understand, I realised that I was not alone.

A figure stood perched atop the statue of the winged woman at the center of the arena, holding a kunai between each knuckle.

I immediately jumped to my feet, allowing myself to fall back into the rhythmic patterns of Caedes. However I could not shake the unsettling feeling that something was amiss, again plagued by the same inexplicable question: *Why was I still alive?*

The figure had every opportunity to kill me while I was unconscious and yet here I stood.  
It was irrelevant. I would not make the same mistake.

The moment the masked figure landed on the granite floor, I launched towards them, the sword previously sheathed at my hip drawn and poised to kill. It was only when I was inches away, my blade pierced through the chest cavity, did I notice her eyes.

Horror consumed my senses as Inara fell to her knees, her hands clutched around the hilt of the sword protruding from her chest. She looked up at me, her vivid gaze dulling with each passing moment. "I suppose Caedes was who you were...after all."

Her last words to me were a harrowing truth.  
One I could deny no longer.

The joyous shrieking of the crowd seemed to amplify tenfold as I lifted my gaze from her slain body to view the masks of The Fallen – the hardened faces of previous competitors who had embraced early graves – and collapsed.

Every spectator wore a steel imitation of Inara's face, sapphires in the place of her once-radiant eyes.

I had not been willing to accept who I was, but my captors did not share the same difficulty. They acknowledged me for what I was, worshipped me for it, even.

Only now, after murdering the only person who ever mattered, did I finally realise this.

*What do you have left to lose?* Inara had asked me.

I did not have a proper answer for her then, but I did now.

Nothing.

Except she had given me everything.

She gave me a reason to do more than just survive, but to live.

And I had repaid her generosity by taking from her that which she had given me.

I truly was the monster they said I was.

Caedes, the Harbinger's champion of slaughter.

So when I brought her discarded knife towards my throat, I did not hesitate. It only took a single, sure press, and the metallic taste of blood flooded my mouth as breathing became a distant thought.

Feeling my soul slip downwards into a new pit of despair, I looked up towards the winged woman and smiled. I had lost my freedom, but my will remained strong in its place.

*Caedes!*

They screamed.

*He who is slain.*

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