

1st Place – Collin Suttle

The Graveyard Burns

Twentieth day of Autumn, final day of Yota's Festival.

The Guard didn't organize us for the clean-up, they just let us go from the main gate. I don't know why everything is so chaotic. Everyone ran off to their homeland area, even though they told us not to do that. I just walked. I was hungry. They hadn't come through with feeding us, like they said they would. They brought in bread at lunch, though.

The Ruma graves were at the front, of course. I don't know how everyone got past the monuments. Since it was rainy most of the day, everything looked sooty and dark and kind of sad. You could pretend the statues of the patrons were crying, if you want to go that far. Rumas don't leave many gifts, though. I wonder if I know why. Maybe they're all too busy whipping slaves and giving peasants strange tasks, haha. Oh, I should cross that out. And that too. Oh, jit. Okay.

Oh. It's chaotic because the burning time got moved up. The graveyard burns after the fortieth day of autumn. I found where I wrote it on my arm so I'd remember. So much for that working. I have to remember I wrote it before I can remember anything else.

It's funny because I remember everything I cleaned up, even though I didn't get many looks at them before they got tossed. There was a stuffed bear, hand-knitted. Must have been for a child. Its fur was moldy from exposure but his eyes were clean, somehow. Maybe rain, maybe someone visiting. There are always flowers - Rumas like flowers, that's why they conquered us - cross that out, too - oh - anyway - so many flowers, that's what was mostly in my bag, all dying and crumpled, but someone carved a lily out of wood. Pale wood, too. And then it lightnined when I went to pick it up, so it turned real-lily white. It was rotting in the stem, though. I wish I knew what lilies symbolized to Rumas. I know what it stands for, for us, but I don't know why you'd put a symbol of forbidden love on a grave.

And there was this toy, or a puzzle, or something supposed to torture someone... I don't know. It was at a huge monument, huge, with the Ruma patron of... something. He had an abacus, I remember that. I think that I thought it was a philosopher's grave. But he didn't have remembrances - just the toy, made out of some cheap metal. An important person, but nothing except that.

My head hurts. There were more things I liked, but those were the best. I miss them. Is that wrong? It feels like it could be wrong, wanting someone else's remembrances. But jit a stick. I liked having them, in my hands and in my brain. At least they're here, now.

Twenty-first day of Autumn.

There was no lunch this time, and a guard knocked my crutch out from under me. Ruma turd. Emperor's going to get an angry petition from me. Ha.

I cleaned up the eastern corner of the Ruma graves. I wrote that on my hand, to remember, because I forgot what I was doing this morning, cooking breakfast, and the pig seller had to remind me. Head hurt all day, still does, and I figure it was from remembering the remembrances. So I decided not to do it again.

But I found something fresh on the grave of some politician, not an important one because I was bigger than his monument, and that's saying something; I don't think it was even a patron, just one of those practice statues the journeymen make to advertise. The remembrance was a big branch of that tree with the small white berries, I can't remember, but it was beautiful, lush and green and all the leaves looked like———

Hand spasm ruined my pen. I'll have to buy more. Hope the ink doesn't bleed through the page, I can't afford much more paper, not on what they're paying me for this. I'll sleep now. I just wonder who snuck in to put the remembrance. Everything's going to burn, anyway.

Twenty-second day of Autumn.

There was another white-berried branch on that politician's grave again. The sun cleared up and the berries were so bright, they were the first thing I saw. I took

the branch back to the guards like I did yesterday, because I can't carry that in my bag all day. They swatted me with it. Ruma turds.

Spasms got worse. Hard to hold onto things. Except the remembrances, ha. Get it?

There were more stuffed animals the farther back into the Graveyard I got. I collected four whose species I didn't even recognize. Maybe they were Ruma myth creatures. I don't know. I loved them, though, especially the one with horns. It's so carefully stitched, though it had been there a long time, you could tell, because it's gray and has some mold in places. I put my bag down when I found it and just... looked at it. I can remember what it looked like now. It's not going to leave my head. It's not, I know that. I have to go back to remember the other remembrances, and that helps, but this one... I'll remember it.

I kept it. I'll have to scratch this out. We're supposed to burn everything. Nothing remains, that's the new Emperor's motto. Nothing except this stuffed animal. I wonder how the child died. I wish I could remember the headstone's carving. I'll keep it safe. It's a good thing I never have anyone to visit. No one'll see it. It'll be mine, so I can remember it. And maybe the child, too.

Twenty-third day of Autumn.

There's a day missing. I don't know what I did yesterday, but I guess I finished picking up the remembrances in the east corner of the Ruma graves, because there was nothing there, except another white-berried branch at the politician's monument. I left it there. I'll scratch that out.

I hate losing days. I haven't done it for a while, but the work is tiring me, I guess. I dropped some things today, including a glass... something. It shattered on a monument. I can't remember what it was. The shards were beautiful, though. I left most of them there for someone else to sweep up, or maybe they'll burn. I kept one shard though and my hand hurts because I kept pricking myself on it when I reached into my pocket to make sure it was still there.

The shard is in the chest at the foot of the bed, with the stuffed myth creature. I can't remember who did it - maybe some older family member, at the start of the exile - but there's a false bottom in the chest, and I keep them there during the day, while I work. At night I put them on the floor by my mattress and look at them. They make my head hurt, but it's worth it.

I tried not to remember anything else, which isn't that hard, ha. Everything else I gave to the guards to burn. They didn't notice that my hand was bloody. Ruma turds.

Twenty-fourth day of Autumn.

Didn't work today. My head would have exploded. All I remember doing today is lying in bed, holding the stuffed myth creature. I think I screamed, or remembered, or did both. There's a name in my head. Lura. Lura. Lura. Lura. Lura. Lura. Lura. It's not the stuffed thing's name but it's close. Jit everything, everything hurts. I'll try to work tomorrow.

Twenty-seventh day of Autumn.

Finally worked today. Whole body ached. I brought my own lunch in a sack that I've had since moving to the inn room. I don't know where I got it, but my matronymic is stitched into the inside. A family memento, I guess. Once I finished eating, I crammed it with remembrances. My hand still hurts from the glass shard.

Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura

Jit me for a fool.

The guards didn't even look at me when I left, guess they figured we only carry our lunches as a metaphor, not actually to eat, Ruma turds, even though the pouch was fatter than it was when I came in. I'm angry at them and I don't know why. Maybe I do. I lined up the remembrances I took, all from Ruma graves, the graves they'll burn, and I can remember every name on every monument that I took them from. The stone-carved lyrist is from a child's tomb, her name was Phella, and the piece of wood with two names etched into the bark is for Nomun, and the necklace is for Hamali, and they just want to BURN them and FORGET them like remembering is a LUXURY for th

Twenty-eighth day of Autumn.

I bought a new pen. The other broke last night, ink everywhere, all over me. I'm calmer today. I hid the remembrances, seeing them makes my head hurt, but I keep taking them out. Saying the names. I don't have to read where I remembered them. I know them, like I named these things myself. I put on Hamali's necklace, felt

the stone against my collar bone. Cried. I don't know why, don't remember.

Something was sad, I guess.

Worked today, though it was harder to walk, even with the crutch, and hard to pick things up. I took the pouch again. Three items. That's what I'm saving. Three names, even if they're three Ruma turd names. I finished the Ruma section, anyway, worked my way along the edges of the wall that blocks them off from their acquisitions' graveyards, found everything there is to find from the people who can pay for the Graveyard spots. There are seven branches over the politician's grave. I wonder if the guards will ever notice until the burning. Not like white berries won't burn.

Don't know where I'll work tomorrow. The other workers must have gutted the rest of the areas, where they're from. I don't know where I'd find our graves. If we have any. You have to pay, and we've never had anything the Rumas wanted besides blood. That burns well enough, too.

Thirtieth day of Autumn, first day of Shoro's Fast.

Fasted all day, but the Ruma turds don't know that, them and their feathered helmets. Brought my pack and worked in a new section of the Graveyard. Don't know whose, I didn't recognize the words, apart from the names. I always know a name. I saved another necklace, this less ornate than Hamali's; it's made of cord, decorated with shells. The Rumas drag their acquisitions here into the middle of a scrub territory, leagues from water. Necklace must have come a long way.

Hard to hold a pen. Gyrgy's monument had a fabric ball, Jnopl had a pair of tiny shoes. Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Left the necklace out of the trunk.

Thirty-first day of Autumn, second day of Shoro's Fast.

Fasting. I can see my blood vessels, and sometimes it looks like writing. I'm so tired. Every bag I bring back from the Graveyard feels heavier. Lura Lura Lura Phella Lura

I can't find my new findings into my trunk. No one comes here anymore, no visitors. I don't know why I hid them to begin with. I brought out Lura's creature and put it into the corner of the room, where I can always see him. I played with Gyrgy's ball to take my mind off their names and each thump sounded like their names. I can't remember other things, my head's getting worse than it has been since the whatever that made my head like this, I think an attack, some kind of attack, maybe it was Ruma or maybe not, my head hurts all the time, jit a stick.

It's better when I bring out the remembrances, line them up on the wall, look at them. It hurts more but it's a better pain. Maybe I should stop writing.

Thirty-third day of Autumn, fourth day of Shoro's Fast.

Lost my way to the Graveyard yesterday. Wandered, mostly. It was fun, including when someone gave me food. They thought I was mad. I am mad. Don't remember where I ended up -hope I was somewhere besides our ghetto, so no one recognizes me, comes to check on me. I need money badly, I haven't bought food in days. Have I eaten? Lura Lura Nomun Lura Nomun- No, the Fast. Shoro. Shoro,

preserve me from impiety and from myself. Shoro. All of the remembrances are out. I didn't put them up after the last time I wrote. I have dozens now. I thought I was bringing back only three a day. There are more now. I wonder if I go back in the dark.

Thirty-fourth day of Autumn, fifth day of Shoro's Feast.

It's the last day of the Fast. Preserve me from impiety and from myself, Shoro, but I need to eat. Maybe it'll help the pounding in my head, help me pick up things. I rescued five remembrances today. I had to pick up everything between my wrists, my hands just hung down uselessly. They're better now, I guess that's obvious.

I saved a scarf that was given to Urkla - blue, soft, I keep rubbing my face against it, it smells like herbs and a woman - and some eating utensil I didn't recognize, for Mlertil, and Hbory's cup. It's tiny, fits into my palm. Maybe it was religious. I don't drink out of it for that fear. Someone left a flute for Rdorta, who must have been a child. And a stuffed animal for Frerty, the first stuffed thing I've seen in this part of the Graveyard. I wish I knew the people.

Everything is lined up. I have nothing except for my mattress and my chest; the rest of the room is made of remembrances. I sleep in memory. It's a strange feeling for me, with memories crowding my head. Is this how people who aren't idiotic feel, echoes of their loved ones' names and the names of acquaintances and the names of enemies and names they don't care anything for bouncing around their skulls all the time? All the time, jit jit jit, but I feel like a- like I'm not an idiot, not the regrettable mad tenant in the inn's cheapest room who forgets how much rent is

every month, I feel like a priest, jit on me for my pride, a priest, for every possible nation. Shoro preserve me from impiety and from myself, but my head is full and I love this agony.

Thirty-fifth day of Autumn.

Ten! Ten items! Small things, from a new nation, all crammed into my pouch, all to be remembered. Yus, Tikim, Hoks, Koshoam, Jukas, Hilim Lura Lura Lura Lura

Thirty-sixth day of Autumn.

I remember them all, still. Got overexcited yesterday, but that's all right. I feel like I screamed again, though I didn't sleep. I didn't sleep at all, remembering. Saying the names. I held Lura's stuffed creature, kissed its horns, the whole time. I'm surrounded by remembrances now when I lay down. I can't think about being a priest - that's blasphemous - but perhaps a preacher, one of the shouting men from that one nation whose graves I haven't picked over yet. I have my remembrances to shepherd, like they have believers.

On the forty-first day of Autumn, the Graveyard burns. Nothing remains, the Emperor says. I have to clean part of every nation's graves. I have to collect their souls so someone remembers them when this empire burns itself. I wonder if any other cleaner is rescuing remembrances. Maybe. Maybe not. I can't take that chance.

Ten today, from that same nation. I have to keep from screaming again. I get excited to remember, to preserve, but I have to keep from screaming again.

Someone asked me if I was all right. No one can see my room. Nothing remains, the Emperor said. My room is full of remains.

Thirty-seventh day of Autumn.

Can barely write, with both hands. Fell down so much. Cruch not helping tday. Tenmembrnces. Say ther names, put thm with othrs. Stufd creturs eyes are aliv, jit on a stik, I swar. Tired but all right. Bettr evry day.

Thirty-eighth day of Autumn.

Ten items, some from a new nation. Hands are better today, but I can feel them going, so I'll write quick.

I have one area of the Graveyard left to get to. No monuments or remembrances in those areas, I guess they don't believe in them. There are just stone cairns. No one is there, not like in the other areas where there were always other cleaners like me. There's nothing to remember this people by but I took stones. Bag was heavy when I got done, especially since I took other remembrances from another people, but it was worth it. These stones are deep black and brigh tred, such a strange combination. Strange but beautiful. They have lines in them, like they were soldered together with silver thread. Like blood vessels. Or like writing.

I can't write the names down anymore. It feels blasphemous. They're my names now, my memories. I keep them alive, not this paper. I feel like I know them. I dream about them sometimes, when I sleep. I stacked up the stones in their own

little cairn, a collective memory. I'll find more tomorrow. My hands are going. Two days left.

Thirty-ninth day of Autumn.

A guard asked me what I was doing with such a heavy bag. I pretended to be mad. Had to make up a coughing fit to get him to leave me alone. He's suspicious, though. I recognize him; he swatted my crutch out from under me on one of those first days. He knows me. Close call. But I have to bring back more - I have almost twenty, today, to add to my memories. Animals, jewelry, a blanket, statues of gods from this last nation whose gods are fat and smiling and decadent, covered in small musty gems. They don't deserve to burn. I wonder what their names are. I can't keep their faiths alive. The ones who kept their faiths, though, I can protect. I can't remember my own gods' names. There's no room. Someone preserve me from myself. So many remembrances to hold.

Tomorrow is the last day. Tomorrow. After tomorrow, there are no memories. Only the ones I've collected. My head hurts. Hurts so much. Jit me for an emotional fool. I can't stop crying. I have to stop writing or I'll smear the ink and I need to remember this, all I remember without help is names, I'll have to keep these last days close. My hands hurt, my head hurts. Everything hurts but mostly my head. It's good, though. It's a good pain. It's a good pain. It's a good pain. Gods it hurts it hurts. Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura Lura

Forty-first day of Autumn.

Crammed my bag full of Hamali remembrances yesterday and ran when the guards Nomun shouted Gyrgy to stop. Chased but they couldn't find me, didn't catch me. I'm safe. My memories Tikim are safe. Stop writing their names, jit me!

I hear it burning. Every memory I didn't save. The Graveyard's close but I shouldn't be able to hear it but my ears are ringing and roaring. But I have enough. I saved them. I saved enough.

Can't stop crying. Someone's going to hear but——

Pen broke. I bought extras just in case this happened.

This is it. No more memories. This is my head, my room. Names and remembrances. Can I leave? Would it be right to leave this room anymore? What if I forget while I'm gone and don't remember when I come back? The fire is burning so brightly, so long. It's nearly dinner time. I wonder if the politician's white berries are ash yet.

Someone's knocking on the door. Innkeeper. What if she sees? Please don't burn these things. Please don't burn the memories. Something has to remain. Something has to remain.

2nd Place – Meredith Lundell

Dust to Dust

The dirt in the fields looks like snow. Row after row of whitish earth, mixed up with dried pieces of grass and brittle twigs, all piled over withered seeds. I dig my shovel into the ground and lean against it. Augustus is still tillin' off in the distance, movin' in slow and steady motions. We've been at it for only an hour and I feel like quittin' already. Water for the field's gone. Trains can't come in. I lick my cracked lips. But I still gotta work, even if I hate it.

When I bend down to pick up my shovel, the cathedral up on the hill catches my eye. With the mornin' sun comin' through the dustiness of the force-field above it, the buildin' almost looks like it's seated in some heavenly cloud. I scoff under my breath.

For two years now, every mornin', I've been tryin' to ignore that cursed buildin' and the ramblin's that come out of it. If I work I don't notice what Boaz says. I plod down the field to Augustus and start shovelin' the row next to his. The dirt gives way like it doesn't weigh a thing.

"Remind me why we do this, August," I mutter, drivin' the shovel in as deep as I can.

“Because we want food in the winter.” He chuckles. “Besides, we don’t have anywhere else to be.”

At the end of the day I hop back over the fence and head down the same road I always take home. Augustus goes the opposite direction, away from town. The town, if you can call it that, isn’t much more than some run-down houses in the middle of fields, and there’s even less to see once the sun goes down—except that darn cathedral on the hill. Golden light flows from the windows, castin’ shadows on the lowlands. For some reason I can’t make it leave my sight, not like I usually can. I stare up at it as I go along, rubbin’ the dust on my hands against the dust on my forehead. Always so much dust.

Except up there.

Forget it. Nothin’ ever changes with Boaz.

A while down the path, a quiet moan comes from a little shack-like house on the wayside. The light from inside is dull and amber through dust-coated windows. I slow down, a heaviness weighin’ on my shoulders. The sick ones from the wastelands keep dyin’—the last of them lives in the shack. A Loslunè woman who’d started goin’ crazy from the outside dust just a week ago. The heaviness on me turns to a fire in my gut and I speed up walkin’.

The door to the shack opens with a quiet squeak. I glance back over my shoulder.

Alouette slips out, carryin’ a canteen under her arm and brushin’ the scarf wrapped around her curly hair out of the way. She looks at me as if she’d just been caught in a crime.

“Evenin’, Alouette,” I say with as much of a smile as I can muster. Her posture relaxes and she comes over to me.

“How are the fields coming?” she whispers. “Are they growing?”

I exhale as I shake my head. “Fraid not. There’s no water or heaters to get the seeds goin’. There ain’t goin’ to be any harvest unless we let a train in.”

Her shoulders sag. “I’ve tried talking to my father but he won’t let me in now that I’ve been helping the sick. I’ve touched the dirt, he says.”

“Like you can avoid it.” I clench and unclench my hand slowly. Whatever’s been gnawin’ at me today bites harder.

The moanin’ from the shack gets louder to where it’s nearly wailin’. Alouette stiffens, the look in her eye sharpenin’. She whispers, “Llora’s dying.”

I take the canteen from her gently. “I’ll get you some water. Go on back now.”

A little smile pulls up her lips, like a little thank you, then she turns on her heels and rushes back to the shack. I head on down the path, fiddlin’ with the lid of the canteen as I go. If this keeps up, it’s the dust inside that’ll kill us, not the dust outside.

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Llora died that night. I can’t find Augustus come mornin’, so I go on and bury her at the foot of cathedral hill in a fenced-off patch we call the cemetery. There’s not much room left so I bury her real close between two other graves. One grave’s

another Loslunè woman who died last month. The other's for Vieira, Alouette's mother, my sister.

Alouette sits on the fence, singin' a funeral hymn in a hushed tone. The couple times I glance at her I see tearstains on her cheeks. Lowerin' the blackened body into the ground, shovelin' dirt over top of the shriveled shape, feels the same as plantin' the fields. I buried Vieira about the same time last year, the same blackness eatin' away at her.

"Ashes to ashes," I murmur, hastily, droppin' a shovel-full of dirt into the hole.

"Dust to dust," Alouette finishes.

Once I fill the grave, I lean against the fence near where Alouette's still sittin'. Her singin' turns to hummin'. Maybe it's the lack of sleep from hearin' Llorà's cries that's weighin' me down, keepin' me from wantin' to work, maybe it's how full the graves are, how often I have to dig them. Whatever it is, it's like my heart's throwin' itself against a wall.

Alouette rests her hand on my arm. "You all right, Newland?"

I shake my head a bit and reply, "Somethin's gotta change. We're gonna die like the rest of 'em if Boaz doesn't back down. There was that train just a week ago—didn't let it in. Shot at me from up on the hill when I tried to go to the gate."

"I know, but he's..." she doesn't finish.

I scoff and rub dirt on my hands off on my pants. "I don't care what he is. Ever since Vieira died he'd been gettin' more and more crazed, blamin' everything except himself."

“Don’t talk about him like that.” Alouette’s expression hardens. “Mom’s death was hard on him. He had to watch her deteriorate into nothing.”

I tilt my head up and look at the cathedral. “Sure. Lettin’ your wife and friends die because you’re too scared to do anything must be a hard load to carry.” An all too familiar voice bellows from the hill. Alouette startles then turns her head to look up with me. Boaz, at it again. I catch the words “dirt” and “corrupt” and “safe.” No break from his same topic, even on a day like this. I rub my forehead and look down at the fields.

Forget it. I fight the heat growin’ in my chest.

Augustus comes up over the crest of the hill and walks to us, hands tucked away his pants pockets. Dark circles loom under his eyes. I frown.

“Where’ve you been, August?” I call to him.

He doesn’t look up or reply until he’s by the fence. “I heard something pop last night so I checked the generator. The battery’s low.”

“How low?”

“It’ll last until summer if we’re lucky. We need a replacement fast.”

I stoop and pick up my shovel. My eyes fix on the little mound of dirt that marks Llorá’s grave.

“You should’ve stopped the train last week,” he adds, crossin’ his arms.

“Don’t start,” I snap back. “You try stoppin’ a train when a mad-man’s shootin’ at you.”

“I have.” Augustus sets his jaw.

“Stop, please. Not today,” Alouette says. We both look at her. She’s starin’ up at the cathedral still, slowly hummin’ the funeral song again.

Augustus turns from us with a heavy exhale. “I’m going to the fields.”

I watch him walk off. I drop my shovel to the ground and hop over the fence, my teeth gritted together. Alouette jerks her head around and looks at me.

“Newland, don’t,” she says in a hushed voice, tuggin’ at one of her curls. “Save it for tomorrow.”

“I’ve been savin’ it for tomorrow for years now.” I head to the path up the hill. “I’m not waitin’ any longer!”

“He won’t let you in!” she calls after me.

Last year, before Boaz refused to come outside, he put a bunch of rocks on the path to make it harder to climb. Must’ve figured the sick ones couldn’t get over them and bring their disease to him. I kick a good-sized rock down the hill and watch it tumble to the bottom with a pathetic thud and a puff of dirt. Once I reach the top, out of breath, I walk up to the massive front door and pound my fists against it. “Let me in, Boaz!”

The voice inside fades away. When there’s no reply for a couple seconds, I pound against the door again. “You let me in or I’m breakin’ a window! Then we’ll see about stayin’ away from the dust!”

“Newland!” Alouette yells up to me. “Leave him be!”

Boaz raises his voice, louder this time, and keeps goin’ with his sermon. “Some have the nerve to criticize my work, when they forget to look at their grimy hands.”

I find a good size stone down by the pathway and walk around the side of the cathedral to a color-glass window. Metal encases each piece, extra precautions in case the force-field fails.

“They forget that the dirt corrupts them. And the corrupt have no business criticizing the holy for their efforts to be pure.”

I almost feel bad for ruinin’ such a pretty thing.

“Only by staying away from the dirt—”

I fling the rock at the window. The shatterin’ sound overtakes Boaz’s voice and rings in the silence afterward. Little pieces of glass clink on the floor inside. I hear Alouette gasp. My pulse beats through my head. The glow from inside catches little dots of dust floatin’ around the hole. He might just shoot me this time.

“What did you do!” Boaz growls.

“You can’t hide in there forever,” I shout back. I start to wish I’d brought my shovel with me. It can’t stop a bullet but it might stop a man.

I see Boaz run by the window, his black coat billowin’ behind him, and I know I’m in for it. But I don’t run. I walk on up to the window and clear away shards of glass stickin’ out from the frame. The callouses on my hands protect it from hurtin’.

“You get back!” Boaz yells at me. He picks up his gun and fumbles as he tries to load it up. Bullets spill around his feet. “Get back!”

I get a hole big enough for me to get through and climb inside. My boots crunch the glass. It’s like goin’ through a portal to a new world: marble tile floors, rows of polished wooden pews, archways with rose and gold pictures twistin’ up the columns, carefully carved moldin’s and statues. I stop and look all the way up to the

ceilin'. Milky sunlight comes through the stained-glass dome fixed in the middle.

Some of my anger starts turnin' into something like pity, seein' all the ruin.

Boaz cocks the gun.

I glance at him and quickly put my hands up. "Calm down, Boaz. I'm not here to kill you."

"You brought it in with you." He focuses on my hands. His eyes are wide, but not from fear. His eyes look glazed over with some kind of emptiness. No life. "It's all over you. And you dare to come in here like that? You're filth will ruin this sacred place."

I get a short glance at the pews again. Piles and piles of supplies—food packages, water jugs, bottles like medicine—line each one. All the anger rushes back.

"You remember me, Boaz?" I look at him, narrowin' my eyes. That's the first time I notice his skin—covered in dirt. Just like me. Someone might've thought he was a field-worker.

His arms shake as he holds up the gun. "I don't make a habit of keeping company with those who wallow in the dirt."

"Yeah, I know." I look 'round at the pews. "That's why you don't have nothin' but stuff to keep you company."

"Bad company spoils integrity. Cleanliness doesn't mix with uncleanness." He looks down at my boots. Then he makes a noise somewhere between a scoff and a chuckle. "If I'm the only clean one, so be it."

I clench and unclench my fists, but that doesn't do nothin' but make me want to punch him. "Are you blind? Your hands are filthy, your whole face is filthy." I take my chances and step forward. He backs up, so I keep goin', slowly. "You made promises to these people, Boaz, like our parents before us. The same promise I made. You said you were gonna help them. But all you did was turn this place into a sore spot."

"I am helping them." He backs up to the pulpit. "I'm giving them an example to live by."

"Nobody wants your lies anymore. Fact, nobody's even left to see what you've done. Your example's let them all die."

Boaz stiffens up, his arms stop shakin'. "They're all dead?"

"All but three of us."

The glass on the floor cracks. I see a little twitch in his fingers and I duck down; Boaz fires the gun once. A woman screams and another window shatters, this time faster.

I turn my head 'round to face the window. Alouette's tensed up all over, eyes widened, face pale. I exhale in relief to see the bullet didn't hit her.

"You gotta let us leave," she whispers, voice shakin'.

Boaz lowers the gun so it points to the pews, his face contorted in a confused expression. I side-step a few times 'till I'm behind one of the pews. I lower my hands and rest them on top a box of medicine. Boaz doesn't seem to notice me at this point. "Listen to Newland," Alouette steps over the glass shards and moves toward her father. "We'll all die like the people in the wastelands if we don't go soon."

Boaz glowers. "This place was safe until Newland broke in."

"We don't have time for it anymore," I interject. "The battery's low and unless you let a train come in—"

"Out of the question." He raises the gun again and points it at me. "What are you doing with the medicine? Stealing it?"

I lift my hands up again. "No. But it's not like it's doin' any good in here."

Alouette, the scared look still etched in her face, slips over to him and rests her hands over his. "Father, please—"

"Don't you touch me." His voice sounds like a hiss and he yanks away from her. Alouette's expression crumbles, but she grips the barrel with both hands and holds it steady. Boaz's hands start tremblin' again.

"You listen to me, Boaz," I begin. My voice gets sturdy again. "One day all the death you're tryin' to hide from is gonna find you. The stench of every body I laid in the ground, because you wouldn't let me get the help they needed, is gonna haunt you for the rest of your life. Doesn't matter if you kill us to keep us from openin' the gate or you let us go. All the runnin' you did to get away is a death sentence. It couldn't save you if you ran all the way to heaven and back."

He drops the gun. Alouette springs out of the way then kicks it away from his feet. I relax my shoulders and lower my hands. We stare at each other, Boaz's eyes dimmin'. Wouldn't matter if he stared at me all day, he can't see nothin' for what it is anymore. The heat in my bones starts coolin' a bit.

"I wash my hands of you," he says, empty toned.

I reply, "Me too."



We had to wait two weeks before the next train came. Nearly passed us by, too, since it's not a passenger train, but Augustus and I flagged it down and processed it through the barrier gate so it could come inside. The time it took to filter out the dust gave us time to finish double-checkin' our packs. When the train finally came through and it was time to leave, though, Alouette hadn't come. August and I down a couple canteens of water while we wait.

"How much time'd we have?" I ask the conductor after I finish my last drink.

"Twenty minutes, most, since your field is weak," she replies. She pulls the hood of her dust suit down and readjusts the band holdin' her hair back.

I wipe my mouth and glance at August. He swallows his drink. "What cargo do you carry all the way out here?"

"Usually just battery replacements, basic supplies." The conductor checks an air gauge on the side of the train engine. "Normally I charge a hefty fee but for a ghost town like this I'm making an exception."

"How big of an exception?" I ask.

She looks at me skeptically. "You need something else?"

Augustus glances at me with a knowin' look in his eye and his eyebrows raised a hair. "We need a battery. Basic type."

She pauses, then climbs into the cargo car right behind the engine car. She comes back out a minute later, carryin' a battery covered in protective wrap. "You two will owe me big time when we get to the safe haven."

I step forward, take the battery, and slip it in my pack. "I'll be back. Twenty minutes?"

"Fifteen," she says.

I take off in a sprint through the fields, back to the hill. Dust billows up behind me as I go and my pack thumps against my back. I'm out of breath once I reach the foot of the hill.

Sure enough she's there, sittin' cross-legged on the ground in front of the first row of graves. She glances up at me, probably 'cause I'm pantin' so hard, then back at the dirt.

"We got fifteen minutes," I breathe out. "Thought you said you were ready."

"I wish he'd come," she looks up at the cathedral.

Nothin' in me agrees, but I keep my mouth shut about it. I climb over the fence and sit beside her. "That's on him if he wants to stay."

"You don't feel sad leaving this place? Leaving your family behind?"

"They aren't here." I stare at the graves in front of us. "You're the last of what I've got."

She looks at me, her dark eyes shimmery with tears. "My father was your family, too."

I keep on lookin' at the ground, sling my pack off my shoulder and set it by my feet. I pull out a little water canteen and hand it to her. I keep my other hand

hoverin' near where the battery's sittin'. She takes a drink and smacks her lips when she's done.

"You know my mother didn't want you to hate him," her voice is low. "Even if he's ruined everything here."

I feel a seed of anger still inside me, and her words sting me more than I like. I want to take the battery back to the conductor. It'll cost August and I more than we've ever seen to pay it off and Boaz sure isn't worth it.

I crack my knuckles one at a time, let out even breaths. "I'll...take care of it." She looks at me and I see the same look my sister used to give to me when she didn't believe the lies I told. I sigh. I can't let it be a lie now.

"I got a battery to replace the old one. I can't leave here knowin' it'll collapse on him." I pull the battery out of my pack and hold it out so she can see it. Her mouth opens slightly and she reaches out, takin' it from my hand and turnin' it over in her own hands.

"You've...forgiven him," she says.
"Don't get ahead of yourself. I'm just doin' the right thing." I rub my hands together.
"If anything I'm just tryin' to do better than he has."

She lets out a little laugh, handin' the battery back to me. "I...thank you." She exhales like she's relieved. "Thank you."

I stand up. "You should go on. We probably have less than ten minutes now. I'll be there soon as I fix the battery."

After another pause, she stands up and brushes dirt from her clothes, then climbs over the fence and heads off down the path. I snatch up my pack, starin' up at

my old friend on the hill. Something's changed, besides Boaz bein' quiet for the past two weeks.

Its shadow doesn't seem so big. Most of all, the place the anger in me used to be feels empty, like a newly abandoned house. It's somethin' I haven't felt in years.

"I'll take care of her," I say as I look back down at my sister's grave, lettin' my shoulders relax. "And him."

The run to the field generator box takes me another five minutes. Pantin', I take the battery out of my pack and set it on top of the box as I pry the old battery out of the terminal. The field flickers rapidly and I see the outside dust's pale billows beyond the thin layer. I unwrap the new battery, toss the wrap to the side, and stick it in the port. The box hums loudly for a few seconds, then gets quiet, and the field levels out in fluid-like waves. I grip the old battery in my hand and examine it. Each end looks like it's been burnt. I let out a small "huh" then set it beside the generator box and stand up.

I walk back at an even pace, my side hurtin' from the runnin'. I decide to cut through the fields even though it takes me a little longer. Somethin' about seein' all the rows of seeds that'll never grow makes my heart sink, but only a little. I'm ready to leave.

The station's enveloped in clouds of steam when I get back. The conductor's standin' on the engine steps, watchin' her time piece. She doesn't look too happy.

"I didn't think you'd make it," she says as I climb up the steps to the car behind the engine. I find myself smilin' a little.

"Neither did I."

3rd Place – Jacqueline Oka

The Health Benefits of Having Friends

1. No one dies.

“That one’s wrong, you know,” Scully had informed me, looking over my shoulder in that owlish way of his. “Death is an inevitable. No amount of camaraderie can stop it.” I had ignored him, of course. Ghosts are rather poor at giving life advice.

* * *

“Are you eating all alone?”

I look up at the source of the query. “Yeah.”

“Can I sit here?”

I nod, and he sits. He’s from the year above me. Konrad. Part of the foreign exchange program. He’s saying something else, but other things take precedent. There’s a shattered bottle on the ground, probably from some irresponsible senior trying to dispose of the evidence. I stare at the pieces of broken glass, shifting them a bit with my foot. Konrad is still talking. “I’ve no-ticed you always sit out here.”

They’re really quite nice looking. Pieces of unmelting ice.

Probably pretty sharp.

“Even when it rains.”

Sharp enough to break skin.

“I fancy it gets pretty miserable sometimes.”

There’s a good sized piece right there. Just sitting. Close.

I bend over.

“Do you want to come in and eat with us?”

My fingers slide off the concrete and away from the glass, up onto the rough canvas of my shoe as I fumble to tie the laces. “Okay.”

* * *

Konrad is bothering with introductions, but I already know of them all. This school is not exactly huge, and they’re not exactly the most subtle of groups. With his permanently windswept hair and bright red suspenders, Konrad would be noticeable even without his penchant for indoor skateboard use and exchange student status. Lassiter offers a shy smile, half hiding behind Kellan. His pastel sweater vests and fair locks remind me of candyfloss. He seems a few years younger than the other two, likely a grade below mine. I’ve seen him around the hallways, crumbling trainers and tattered backpack at odds with his clean outfits and polite words. Kellan stands in sober contrast to the others, hair dark and face questionably pale. He has the appearance of a mortician’s assistant, always dressed unnecessarily proper. I have yet to see him without a suit coat and necktie.

* * *

2. They make you pay your phone bills on time.

“You’re joining us for dinner later.”

“That really isn’t necessary.”

“It is. Give me your phone.”

I comply. Konrad taps on it for a moment, until the mobile in his pocket buzzes, and he shuts mine with a satisfied snap. “Good, good. I’ll see you later then.”

I slip my hand into my pocket, fingers curling around the contents.

* * *

There’s a yellow pushpin lying on the kitchen table, with a ghost sitting beside it. He fiddles with it the best someone without tangible hands can.

“This one’s new.”

“Yeah.”

I lost the other one. But Scully already knows that.

“It’s a nice color.”

“Yeah.”

There’s more he wants to say, but, as usual, he doesn’t. Articulation isn’t the issue. He just knows which lines not to cross.

I pick up the pin, pressing it into the table. The wood is already covered in little holes, previous pins having waltzed across it. Scully is watching, green eyes blinking in the dim light.

“You’re extra quiet today.”

This bit of wood looks like a small tree trunk. The pin dances along, leaving a line in its wake.

“Lovely weather we’re having today.”

There's a spiral branching off from the mini tree now, curling around a knot in the wood.

"Quinn."

A flower blooms on the spiral, then another.

"Talk to me."

A butterfly rests on the branch.

"Quinn."

I stop, looking up at him. "What would you like me to say?"

"Recite for me the Iliad. Quote some Shakespeare. Do a tango. Geez, Quinn. Just tell me about your day. What weird thing was growing in your locker. Which teacher annoyed you. Whatever it is normal school denizens do."

"I talked to some people at lunch today."

"Oh?"

Scully looks happy. Excited, really.

Another butterfly lands on the tree. "Two of them are in my AP physics. They liked my display on load bearing hitches."

There is a sudden melody, my jacket vibrating. I blink, pulling the still jittering mobile from it.

on our way, be ready in 2

Scully is already bouncing excitedly from his spot above my head.

"Visitors!" The phone vibrates again, screen flashing.

will have food

There's a knock at the door, where my ghost has already plastered himself against the peephole. I step through him, pulling it open. Konrad is there, ever present smile on his face.

"Guten Abend!"

I stand in the doorway, aware of the transparent figure watching with glee behind me.

"How do you know where I live?"

Konrad shrugs cheerfully. "School directory. I told you we were taking you with us."

With that, he's off again, already headed back towards the car, assured I'm following after. His assumption is correct, and I do follow, standing beside the open car window. It's idling by the new No Parking sign, technically not breaking any rules. My breath mists over in the cold.

"Don't you think that's a little creepy?"

"Konrad has no perception of where friendly crosses into questionable."

Kellan is situated in the back seat, an air of slight agitation about him as he speaks. He's dressed more casually than I've seen before, typical blazer switched out for a worn fleece, but still all in black. He does not look comfortable, eyes fixed intently on the car floor. Lassiter is beside him, appearance the same as this morning, but this time with an apologetic smile. Konrad is behind the wheel, watching me expectantly. I stand there a moment longer, night air filling with motor fumes and frozen breath.

"I'd have to get my coat."

“That’s alright, you can borrow Kellan’s.”

“Um, shouldn’t he be the one to...’

“He’s a gentleman.”

Kellan rolls his eyes but does not protest. Somehow I find myself in the passenger seat of a strange car wearing a strange jacket while a strange German boy drives us off into the night.

The night turns into a twenty-four hour diner, torn leather on the seats and chipped formica on the tables. Konrad has ushered us into a booth, Kellan on my left, beside the wall. Menus appear, and subsequently, food.

I don’t recall what I’ve even ordered.

The cutlery is too preoccupying.

They have knives here. Two of them. One for butter, one for steak. Forks too. Four tines. Even in the low light of the humming fluorescent, they manage to glint. One, two, three, four.

Conversation has begun, but I cannot concentrate on the words. Something else demands my attention more. My hand instinctively curls around the object in my pocket, mind seeking relief through pressured fingertips. But instead of the familiar silver jab, there’s something different.

This isn’t my coat. This isn’t my pin.

It’s a key, and the sawed teeth are suddenly more soothing than the single sting has ever been. I rub my thumb along it, slowly at first, then faster, feeling the pressure in my mind easing away as I increased the pressure of skin against metal.

“Quinn?”

I stop, hand jerking from the pocket. Three concerned sets of eyes are watching me, and I try to breathe like a normal person, fist slowly unclenching. None of them seem to have noticed this, and I realize my hand is hidden by the table. I exhale again, fingers slipping back against the key. The prick of the teeth is just as before, and I wrap my hand around it once more, feeling it bite into my palm.

“I guess we should get you home now.”

Konrad is speaking. I fold my hand tighter, trying to hear. There’s a styrofoam box in Lassiter’s hands. Kellan is standing. We’re at the car. The styrofoam box is in my hands, held unsteady by still curled hands. We’re at my house. I’m inside my house. The car is gone.

I drop the box, fingers spreading as I breathe deeply, eyes closed. Inhale. Exhale.

Clink.

Eyes open.

The key is on the floor in front of me. I took it with me. Did I intend to? I don’t remember. The jacket. Did I take that too? No. That’s gone. I slipped it off at the door. Konrad took it back to the car with him.

But the key lies there, staring up at me from the tile. It’s stamped, the brand logo thinly etched into the surface.

I need my pushpin.

“What’s that?”

Scully is floating in the doorway, peering down at the floor. I stoop down to pocket the item before he looks too close. “A key.”

“What to?”

It’s in my jacket now, fingers tightly curled, covering it further. “I don’t know. It’s not mine.”

One lie and a truth.

“Does this one work?”

“Mn. No.”

“This one?”

Scully shakes his head, stepping back from the headstones. “None of these.”

He sighs, running a hand through his ghostly hair. “Guess we’ll have to try another section.”

I nod, making a mark on the roughly sketched map we’ve created. It’s about a third covered, all in X’s. Scully sighs again, flopping back down onto the grave he had just vacated. “I am rather looking forward to eternal rest, you know? I could really go for a long, long nap.”

“Sorry about the sleep deprivation.”

He smiles slightly, fiddling with a dandelion. “It’s just as well. Gives me more time to spend with you.” My hand slips into my pocket.

3. They make you eat more than peanut butter sandwiches.

“You’re having people for dinner?”

“Yeah. Cannibalism’s not usually my thing, but I figured, what the hell, let’s try it.”

I set down another fork with a shrug. Scully is smiling, perched on the counter while his feet bob happily. "This is good. This is great."

"That's what I always say at the prospect of corpse consumption."

If he could throw a dishtowel, Scully probably would.

Konrad arrives first, twenty minutes early and with a fruit basket in hand.

"Hallo!"

He's just as cheery as normal, suspenders bright blue and hair somehow in place despite the rain. It's been a month now, spending lunches with them, but I'm still not used to such sanguine a demeanor. Especially when always observed in tandem to Kellan's reserved bearing.

Konrad has already spotted something that captures his interest, crossing over to the credenza and looking at it's occupants.

"What's all this?"

"Craft things."

"They're very pretty."

Konrad picks up one of the various plaits that lie scattered about, turning it over in his palms. "You're quite good at this."

"Thanks."

His hands wander over the table, inspecting the different knots I've created. There's a glint of admiration in his eyes, small smile at the edge of his lips. As Konrad inspects a decorative sinnet I've woven, I look across across the room, searching for Scully. He's not by the fire-place, and he's not in the armchair.

There are quiet German murmurings coming from beside me, and I look around the room one last time before glancing at Konrad again. He's picked up the loose ends of twine hanging from my tangle basket, fingers tracing the loops.

"You tie a lot of nooses."

"Yeah."

There's something else in his eyes now, but I turn towards the hallway, avoiding it. My hands curl further around my sleeve cuffs, fingers already wrapped tight. "There's... juice and things in the kitchen. If you want."

There is also a ghost in the kitchen, occupying his customary stool and observing our entrance with great interest. He waves at me, smiling because he knows I can't wave back. I roll my eyes in reply, being sure to swing the juice jug through him as I pass back from the refrigerator. Scully smiles more, floating up to hang above Konrad. "You didn't mention they have impeccable taste in fashion."

I peel off a corner of the bottle label, flicking it at him. "It's not my fault you can't change clothes."

"Are you talking to me?"

Konrad is staring from behind his glass, eyebrows high and questioning. I stop looking toward the ceiling, setting my head at a more reasonable angle. Scully drifts down to join us on a chair again, still smiling. There's a silence, filled by the ticking of the wall clock. The other two will be here soon. Maybe I should find more glasses.

"Hey, you haven't seen a key around the yard by any chance, have you?"

Konrad's voice interrupts my thoughts. "It's Kellan's. Figured it might have fallen out somewhere that one night. I know he hasn't said anything, but it's kinda important to him."

Scully is looking at me strangely, a hint of confusion in his eyes.

I stand, setting my glass down.

"I'll be right back."

Scully follows me into the bedroom, hovering about the table lamp.

I empty my pockets, loose change and a purple pin scattering across the desk while I search my jacket for more compartments. Scully rolls the pin towards himself as best he can, which is really not at all.

"Q, this one's rusted."

"I know. I found it on the ground."

All my coat pockets are empty. I check my trousers. Scully is still looking at the pin, holding it in his transparent palm.

"Tetanus is a painful way to go."

"It's not for that."

The look on his face is skeptical, and I sigh, taking the pin from his empty fingers. "I just picked it up because... it was shiny?"

A question. I need his affirmation that this is an acceptable answer.

Scully's arms are folded, eyebrows doubtful.

"Scully, I told you. I'm getting better. It's okay. It's not for that."

He sighs, relenting. "Okay. What are you looking for?"

There's a glimpse of silver beneath the paper and twine piled on the desk.

"Found it."

An opportunity arises when the juice is spilled, jackets removed to avoid the liquid. I slip it into his pocket.

4. It's easier to breathe.

Wandering the graveyard again. Scully is still searching. Half our map is covered now, tombs all trod upon, but with no difference to Scully's form. I can't tell if he's getting resigned to the fact, or if he's simply too busy still enjoying the mortal world to care.

The sound of a second set of footsteps join mine, these ones non spectral. I look up from the path.

Kellan stops walking, blinking in slight surprise.

"Oh. Hello."

"Hi."

There are flowers in his hand. Daffodils. I can see his eyes flicking about, trying to gauge why I am here. There are too many fresh bouquets about for him to guess a grave. His tie waves slightly in the breeze. "Are you... visiting anyone?"

"Not anyone specific."

"Oh."

Kellan stands there for a moment, face as reticent as usual, but mental deliberation clearly occurring. He opens his mouth to speak, then closes it. He tries again, this time words functioning. "Would you... like to join me?"

Scully is motioning quite obviously for me to accept the invitation. My hand slips into my pocket, plastic and metal tumbling about.

"No, thanks. I don't want to intrude."

"I understand."

Kellan's face doesn't change, and Scully flops back onto the grass in surrender. As Kellan walks past to continue on his way, I turn, starting off in the opposite direction. Scully floats above, keeping pace as I walk.

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"We wanted to explore the west corner today, remember?" "We coulda changed plans. Could have explored whatever that section was."

I shake my head, hand curling tighter. Scully notices, own pale hand slipping onto my shoulder for a moment. "It's okay."

Inhale. Exhale.

We're in the cemetery again, as usual. Scully has gone off on his typical walk about, my-self situated under the beech tree, book in hand. There's a rustling sound, the birds vacating their perches at any ethereal approach. I look up from the page, squinting a bit against the sun.

"Did you find your grave?"

"Not yet."

I stand, joining him on the path back towards home. "Sorry I'm not much help in looking."

"Don't be sorry. How could you know?" Scully hops unnecessarily over a stick lying on the gravel. "It's not like you were at the funeral."

I was.

Scully hops again, tapping his chin in thought. "I wonder if anyone even came to my burial."

Kellan did.

He looked different then. I didn't recognize him. His hair was shorter, face younger. He never spoke, never moved. Stiff as a board while roses and dirt mingled on Scully's final covering. Didn't cry. Said no farewell to the passed as the rest filed by, each one murmuring a quiet word of goodbye.

Then again, neither did I.

But he belonged there, and I didn't. I attended out of a twisted sense of obligation. The pin is pressed so hard against my finger now that I know blood has been drawn. It stings, and I need it to burn. Burn and bleed and make everything stop.

"Sometimes I think about how I died. How I don't know, you know?"

I know.

I know too much.

The pocket is coated in blood now, fingertips broken and the point against my palm, thumb ready to push until the skin tears. Tear like the glass did through

Scully. Shatter my thoughts like the windowpanes. Bend and break and fall to pieces as the signpost did against the hood.

The ornament had flown off. Landed in the yard. By my feet. I stared at that pattern, symbol etched into my mind as it is into the key.

They said it was an accident. There was a point where I didn't believe them. Cars don't collide that directly with No Parking signs just on a whim.

But now I do. Now I understand.

I'm alone this time. Scully is at home, attempting to move objects more than just a few inches at a time.

My hand fiddles with the pin. I've known it longer than any of them, really. The familiar sting against my skin a companion I've had since before that day Scully showed up, see-through and floating, asking loudly where I kept the peanut butter.

I fold my hand around it, but gently. Carefully.

The grave in front of me is devoid of moss, words still clear and granite still clean. Very little aging happens over two years.

Inhale. Exhale.

My hand drops, and I turn.

Inhale. Exhale.

Then I walk away, small bit of yellow plastic lying next to the daffodils.

Finalist – Jacob Buller

Three Men on Three Horses

Sometimes it was easy to think that the plains went on forever. Looking out over the swells of tasseled brown grass, Serge felt that if he tried to trace their paths, he would ride a thousand miles without seeing so much as a shrub, until the hills swallowed him up and covered him. No one would ever find a trace of him.

He didn't like the feeling. And today was one of the day she disliked most of all: just hot enough to make him uncomfortable, just dry enough to make him thirsty, and just empty enough to make him sad.

Serge wiped his forehead and then rested his hand on his flask as it bounced up and down to the tune of the horse's hooves. By the sun's mark, it was early afternoon. Almost late enough for him to turn around; he'd covered good ground today.

He was far enough that he should probably stop and record his position on the map. Serge reined in his horse and dismounted. He reached into his saddlebags and withdrew his map and writing-board. Another piece of paper, rolled up with the map, nearly took flight on the wind, but Serge caught it. He knew without looking

what it was—his letter from home. He hadn't opened it, because he knew what it would say.

Stop running from the past, Serge.

Serge shoved the paper into his pocket. Then he sat down, spreading the map on his writing-board and pressing it down firmly to prevent the volatile southern wind from snatching it too. Before him lay an exhaustive, mathematically accurate representation of southern Rassa. He traced his paths, marked out in thin red pencil lines, branching south from the three main settlements in this region. It was hard to believe that each of his explorations had functionally extended Rassa's borders. Every square mile mapped was a new acquisition in this unexplored land.

It should have been more exciting, but Serge thought there was something unnerving about exploration. His job as a surveyor was to be an enterprising man for an upstart state, but instead, he felt like a trespasser on ground that was far older than he was. There was something unspeakably ancient about the endless hills, something with secrets that had existed long before Rassa had even been an idea. But it was something to keep him busy—something to keep him distracted.

He shook his head to rid himself of his thoughts and traced out his current path in red pencil, mindlessly performing the mental calculations that had become second-nature to him. After he finished, he rolled up the map and stood.

How much further did he want to go today? He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the sun and squinted south to the horizon. At first he could only see the grass, rolling back and forth in the wind, but something caught his eye—he squinted.

There was some sort of irregular bump on the horizon, a little farther to the southwest.

It was worth a try. He had an hour before he had to turnaround and head back to the settlement. Serge tucked the map and writing-board back into the saddlebags, mounted his horse, and set off at a steady pace.

The hills rolled by him, with the lonely wind blowing at his face. The minutes passed with the rhythm of grass and hoof, and finally the shape began to form into something more recognizable. Whatever it was, it appeared to be manmade; a sort of tower, perhaps? Serge spurred his horse a little faster, and a feeling welled up inside of him. What was it—excitement? Thrill? Apprehension?

The tower was at the top of a large hill-swell; Serge's horse was lathered, but made it to the crest without slowing, just a few lengths away from the building.

Now that Serge was closer, he could see that the building made of some dark stone, darkened with age and weathered by the passing of years. He dismounted his horse and glanced around him, really examining his surroundings for the first time since spotting the tower.

The hill was unusually large; it was one of the biggest swells Serge had surveyed in his time, and it gave him a spectacular view. The browned plains rolled on before him and beneath him, like the ripples on some gigantic pond, with the golden afternoon sun to his right shining over them. Above him, the sky was of the deepest blue, with splashes of white clouds. The hills themselves were totally empty, totally bereft of anything but the ever-present brown grass, but somehow haunting

in their massive majesty. Serge had seen these sights before, but no matter how many times he beheld them, they always made him feel so small.

Serge turned back to his quarry, and he was struck by how *strange* and otherworldly it looked. It was something that didn't belong: the bleak landscape around him made the tower feel out of place, like a brush of color on a black-and-white canvas. Slowly he strode up to it, until he was standing in its shadow. The wind gusted by him, and without the protection of the warm sun, Serge felt a brief chill. He shivered.

The tower was perhaps even more odd up close. He could see now that the tower was even older than he had initially imagined; it was smooth and worn, blackened with age. It appeared to have been fitted together with massive, irregular chunks of stone, fitting together seamlessly, reaching fifteen or twenty lengths into the sky—easily five times taller than Serge.

Serge circled around to the north side and was surprised to find an opening, a dark, shadowy doorway partially caved in with crumbling stone.

He hesitated. Dare he risk it?

Before he knew what he was doing, he was gingerly climbing through the doorway, stepping over the debris and into the dark enclave.

The cool air hit him, damp and mossy-smelling, and he shivered again, squinting as his eyesight adjusted to the darkness. The light from the doorway provided some fodder for his gaze; whatever this tower might have contained seemed to have rotted away ages ago, but Serge could make out a little room off to his right and a curving stairway to his left.

Serge stepped around the rubble and tested the stairs; they felt relatively solid. He climbed carefully up the stairs and into the darkness. Ten steps. Twenty steps. Thirty steps.

By this time the darkness was nearly total, and for a moment Serge regretted his actions. What had possessed him to climb into an abandoned tower—one far beyond the southern borders, at that?

Forty steps.

Serge began to walk a little more quickly. He felt his way forward, his hand brushing against the rough, cold stone to his left. The questions whispered around him in the cool air: where had this place come from? Who built it? What had happened to them?

Fifty steps.

And what did it mean?

The stairs leveled out beneath Serge's feet; he could see a dim light somewhere up ahead. He stepped forward and felt a wall just in front of him. He turned and followed the wall, until it looped around a corner, depositing him at the source of a light: a single, circular room lit by a window to Serge's left.

Serge stepped into the room and glanced to the ceiling; stone. The second and final story, probably. Beside him, the breeze murmured through the window, and Serge could hear the sound of the grass outside.

All of this he felt intensely, but his gaze was fixed on the room itself. For on the walls that encircled it, there were carvings, too many to take in at one glance. Some were pictures. Some were letters—letters of a sort Serge couldn't

interpret. And some were symbols, vivid, ancient-looking symbols; springs of water, effigies of tall, shapely men and women, dying suns plunging into the first sunsets at the dawn of time.

But the one that most transfixed his vision was the carving on the floor. A vast, dizzying, swirling maze drew him in; and at the very center, there was a relief of three men on three rearing horses, the mists of the First Beginning frothing at their feet.

A deep feeling overcame Serge. He sat down, slowly, at the windowsill, and his shadow was cast over the relief.

“Dear God,” he murmured aloud. His voice sounded hoarse even to his own ears. It was unbelievable, to discover something like this. He recognized the relief, barely; it was a symbol used by the ancient pilgrims who had crossed the Vandar River, migrants in search of a new home.

He couldn't remember any dates. Surely he had learned something in school. But all he could think was that this place was incredibly old. Hundreds of years old.

Something welled in his throat, and Serge swallowed hard. What was his life, compared to this? Long ago, the ancients had come this far; they had marked their boundaries with stone monuments instead of colored wooden pegs. They had carved their stories into something that would last long.

And Serge? He was carving his story into rotting wood. He and his miniscule mission for his little self-important statethought to expand their borders, to make a mark on this world, yet they had not even got as far as those who had lived before

them. And all that remained of those powerful ancients was a lonely tower, half swallowed up by the grasses of time. They had destroyed themselves in the end, falling into war, severing the Seven Realms. Their corpses had been swallowed up by the land, and the hills feasted on their ruin.

And after all this, Serge could only think of that crumpled letter in his pocket.

Stop running from the past, Serge.

He reached slowly into his pocket and drew it out, smoothing the crinkles in the paper. He opened the envelope and slipped out the paper.

Unfolding it, he read by the light of the afternoon sun. It warmed the back of his neck as he read; the breeze fluttered the paper in his hands.

After Serge had finished, he swiped tears from his eyes. Then, he looked around at the room and let out a long sigh, releasing the tension wound up in his gut. He folded the letter.

Then he stood up, squared his shoulders, and left the past behind him without looking back—striding around the corner, down the stairs, through the doorway, and across the grass. He mounted his horse, tucking the letter into his saddlebag.

Serge checked his compass—due north. And with a kick, he left the tower behind, the wind and the sun at his back.

Behind him, the tower diminished into the distance, until at last it was swallowed up into the tasseled hills.

Finalist – Sam Cooper

Steeple Chase

The gun smoke from my tenth steeple chase burned the inside of my throat. Hot air blew between the skyscrapers and burned the skin of my jaw. The last thing that burned, small in the round view of my scope, was an old man. He lay face down and painted the sidewalk crimson, his life ticking away without a sound.

Even with hot wind and acrid smoke swirling under my nose, I was calm. I was used to it by now. And the top of a church steeple, high and invisible to those below, was the perfect place to kill.

I pulled away from the scope and squinted at the street below. The screams hit my ear a second later, blurred by the distance. Then I returned to the scope. The man's leg twitched. Blood ran faster. A red light blinked in the circular window.

Flatline.

After ten steeple chases, my jaw and my throat burned more than the dead man.

I recited the man's crimes in my head.

Con artistry. Money laundering. Domestic Violence.

I stepped back from the side of the steeple. The vibrations of the force field around me rippled my jacket. A pack of bullets swung on my hip, tapping my leg after each staccato push of the wind. I swung the rifle over my shoulder as the night air carried another scream.

You, my tenth dead man, deserved this.

At least, that's what I told myself.

My watch beeped. I tilted my wrist to see the glowing green face. *Target dead*, it read. *Forty thousand dollars earned*. A long sum underneath blinked, then counted forty-thousand dollars away from the total. Only two hundred thousand until my debt zeroed.

How many more steeple chases would it take?

The watch vibrated, and a new message appeared. *Eleventh target available. Accept?* I shook the watch in conformation, it buzzed, and I prepared myself for the new death to follow.

A static voice spoke from the watch. "Steepleman 25, are you reading?"

I lifted it to my mouth and whispered, "Just fine."

"The kill is being processed. Please stand by while our men remove the body."

"Sure."

I pushed away from the vibrating, invisible wall. Arms outstretched, I turned a full circle. My fingertips brushed both sides of the force field. I made a map in my head of the invisible box, my steeple prison, and stood where I could only guess the

center was. The field wavered, blurring the sharp edge of the spire beside me and darkening the sea of empty air below my feet.

This was much better than a prison on the ground.

Perhaps it was the wind that ended the screams from the street, or perhaps it was the cleaning crew. But when I looked again, the area was clean of blood and bodies. That was all that mattered.

“We have information on your next target,” the voice from my watch said.

I breathed in. “Go ahead.”

“First, we offer you a resting period. It would be your fifth out of the ten available. Are you interested?”

“No.”

“Acknowledged. The subject description is as follows. Wanted for murder, male, average height and build, wearing black clothes and carrying a backpack. Located on the northwest corner of the roof of Christ Chapel.”

A target on the roof *with* me?

I frowned and said into the watch, “How close?”

Silence.

Then, “Unclear. The teleport location is on the opposite side of a steeple as the subject. Field boundaries are a sixfoot square. The steeple occupies thirty percent of the space.”

“Tight fit.”

“The situation requires it.”

“Are there other jobs in the pool?”

“As of now, no.”

“I might take the break.”

The voice buzzed as the connection wavered. “You have one minute to decide. This job requires speed.”

I weighed my options.

Rest at a government bunker, or keep knocking down my debt with more bullets. Breathe for a moment, or keep burning.

“The target,” the watch voice said, “is worth two hundred thousand dollars.”

I stared at the watch. I blinked. Then I said, “No target is worth that much.

“You have fifteen seconds.”

My mouth moved before my mind could. “I’ll take it.”

“Teleport will commence in ten seconds.”

I sat down in the middle of the force field and crossed my legs. Below me, headlights twinkled on the road, carrying the guilty and the stainless. All the people in the city I could earn.

My eleventh steeple chase could set me free.

Did I want to escape?

I closed my eyes and waited. A sharp ring sliced through my ears as the force field retracted. The wind and road noise vanished from the world. I fell in a dark, dark vacuum.

One more bullet. All debts erased.

I landed on a hard, vibrating field. The sounds zipped into existence one at a time. Hot wind. Distant, angry traffic. Birdsong.

I opened my eyes and looked up at the skyscrapers, the tall fence around me. Below my feet lay more empty air. The steeple beside me was carved with an endless line of scriptures, birds, and thunderclouds. I drew in a shallow breath. The air tasted grey and watery; this steeple was high enough the wind didn't carry motor oil and street filth.

Perfect.

I took a step across the force field to the steeple—it was my only visible wall—and crouched. Leaning around the corner until I my shoulder hit the field's boundaries, I took my rifle from my back and scanned the church building below me. A square roof sat fifty feet down, littered with air conditioners and trap doors. The other side of the roof was empty except for a twin spire reaching into the night.

The target hadn't arrived.

I lifted the gun and propped my elbow against my knee. Through the scope, the dark city brightened, specks of noise roaring in the digital image. I swept the edge of the roof, then trailed up the twin steeple. Halfway up, the heat detector light in my scope flashed. I zoomed in.

A long gun barrel stuck out from the side of the structure.

I threw myself behind my steeple. A hollow crack echoed between buildings. Wood splinters blew out from the side of my steeple and bounced off the force field.

Another Steepleman?

I gripped my rifle tight, breathing fast. My eyes blurred and my heart pressed against my chest like it was trying to escape. What kind of sick game was this?

Steeplemen killed criminals, not other debtors. *This* was not how we earned our freedom.

Wind blew the splinters over my boots until they piled against the field wall. My ears rung. I crouched lower and pressed my face against the carved wood, listening for anything on the other side of the roof.

A voice broke the echo of the bullet.

“I know I didn’t hit you. Haven’t got the kill confirmation yet.”

Whoever it was, he was young. His voice faded as soon as it came, and seemed closer than the twin steeple. My heart burned.

Another shout. “I’m your target, aren’t I?”

Cheek still pressed into wood, I answered with my own shout. “Yes!”

Stillness.

“Who’s it gonna be first?” the man called.

I held my rifle close, clicking the safety lever to off. “That’s not very encouraging to yourself.”

“Man, I’m just being honest, here. You’re worth two hundred thousand.”

“You as well,” I called back. “It’s got to be one of us.”

“It certainly does.”

The wind blew hard, and I only heard the panic in his reply, not the words.

I held my rifle past the corner of the steeple where the first bullet hit. The end of the scope swiveled toward my face and the screen flashed to life. I tilted the gun until I had a clear view around the corner. Midway up the steeple, the other man’s gun pointed straight at mine. An inch of his face poked around the corner.

I could shoot him in the eye.

What would it feel like if his blood paid the last of what I owed? Would it feel like another debt, another burn in my chest, or would the sight of my final numbers disappearing be worth it?

I called, "How many chases does this make for you?"

"Eighteen."

Slipping a magnetized bullet into the chamber——the gun clicked and flashed blue——I said back, "They gave you all the low price targets."

"No, man. I owe . . . a lot."

The desperation dripped from his voice. If he was on his eighteenth chase and he'd already shot once here, he had two bullets of the standard twenty left. And, unfortunately, he wasn't afraid to shoot them. I had ten left, and I wasn't sure I needed them.

Keeping my gun steady in my hands, I leaned away from the scope and glanced down the side of the steeple. A service deck sat ten feet down. If I could free myself from the force field, I had an option other than *bullet to the eye*.

I would still owe two hundred thousand.

But I would bring hell to whoever turned two steeplemen against each other. *Wanted for murder*, the readout on my watch said. As the wind blew my string of bullets against my leg——tap, tap, tap——I forced myself to breathe. I could shoot my foot. The magnetized bullets were the only things strong enough to break the field. Would one inside my body be enough to be enough to let me pass through? Even with my foot useless, I could crash land on the service deck and escape.

Only one bullet. Perhaps no burn.

It'd never work.

"What've you got waiting for you when this is done?" the man shouted. I bit my lip until hot, dark red iron dripped onto my tongue and chin. "You?"

"I asked first."

"Doesn't matter."

"It damn well does."

"Aren't we killing each other?"

"I'm working it out!" In the scope, I saw his head move farther away from cover. This chase could be the end, if I wanted.

"I keep thinking how funny this is," I called, "that we're equal value targets."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We're wanted for what we're supposed to do. They gave us to each other for——"

Red flashed in my scope. The steeple beside me exploded and something hot ripped through my side. I felt the gun leave my hands and the force field dissolve. I fell. And as the city wind wrapped around my body and blood filled my eyes, I saw my debt numbers frozen on the watch.

But it didn't matter, because we were both free.

Finalist – Harpley Summers

The Strains of Music

Thirty dollars for a Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra ticket meant that I'd live off ramen for the rest of the month.

I worked out the math again and again, scouring my brain for odd jobs I could do to beef up my pitiful excuse of a bank account. I picked open the stitching of my flannel jacket just to remember that I'd spent those two emergency twenties on groceries three months ago. Now I sat faced with the budget I'd scratched out. Do I even have enough for ramen?

Not exactly a question I wanted to be asking myself.

The \$500 in my savings called to me like a siren song, but I didn't dare touch it. If I dipped into that once, I'd do it again, and once that money was gone, I'd have to go back to Mom's filthy hole in the wall, sleeping with the scent of smoke and beer in my nose. My bare apartment wasn't much better, but it smelled like mold, not booze, and anything that didn't reek of alcohol smelled like freedom to me. Never going back.

Tapping my fingers against my cheek, I stared at my budget and willed the numbers to change. I reworked the math one more time, my stubby pencil spitting out dollar signs and deficits. There was enough for ramen. It wasn't like that was the healthiest of choices or anything. But the thought of Brahms and Bach and that beautiful harp concerto the website said they were going to play...

My pencil hesitated, then marked down the thirty dollars for the ticket. I'd pay dearly later, but tonight - tonight was mine.

"You're seriously going?" My roommate Ella raised an eyebrow at me from behind her 1999 Dell laptop.

I buttoned my good sweater. Thank goodness that hole I'd found in the elbow wasn't too noticeable. "They're playing Mozart's flute and harp concerto." The words made the hairs on my arms prick.

"Thirty dollars to hear a harp." She tilted the screen down, frowning. "You realize rent's next week, right?"

"I've got enough." Glancing at the mirror, I fluffed my hair. "I gotta get out of here and be a freaking person for one night."

"Okay..." Doubt lingered in Ella's voice.

I flashed her a smile, grabbing my purse. "Seriously, it's just thirty bucks. I've got the rent money."

She leaned back on the futon, the lines on her forehead smoothing out. "Okay. Have fun."

I locked the door behind me and hopped down the stairs in my old heels, a smile fighting its way on my face. As I emerged out onto the street of neon signs and taxi cabs, a breath of evening air blew my bangs out of my face. My chest felt like it was filled with helium. The whole night ahead of me.

By the time I'd walked the two miles all the way to the concert hall across busy intersections blaring with car horns, I was wishing I'd worn flats. I got inside two hours early. Only five people stood in line at the ticket stand, but the sight of them made my stomach roll in nerves. What if they're sold out? I got in line, shifting from foot to aching foot. Opening my purse, I took out the crumpled tens and fives, recounting to make absolutely certain that I had enough money.

When I got to the counter, the woman took my hard-earned cash and pulled out a small rectangle of paper that was my passport to musical paradise. I took it and walked away, holding it tight. As soon as the doors to the concert hall opened to the crowd, I handed my ticket to the usher. He directed me to my seat, way in the back. I hurried towards it through the other concert-goers. As I reached my row, my gaze caught on the glitter of gold on the stage, gleaming for all the world to see. The harp.

The air left my lungs in a whoosh. I goggled, easing down on the red plush seat. A giddy smile spread over my face, and I pressed my hand to my mouth to hide it. I watched the musicians trickle onto the stage, settling and scribbling last-minute notes in their scores. They looked so at home - so comfortable in their world of music. It was like staring into a universe that I couldn't touch.

The lights finally dimmed, and a hush fell over the crowd. The conductor walked out on the gleaming wood of the stage, followed by the two soloists. I clapped with everyone else, pressing into the back of my seat and trying to quell the urge to bounce my knees. One woman stopped center stage with a flute. The other walked up to the harp and slipped behind it. A stab of envy knifed my stomach. I eyed her hungrily.

The conductor stepped onto his platform and turned to the orchestra. The applause ceased; a pregnant silence fell. Every instrument held at the ready, waiting.

I tightened my grip on my purse.

The opening chord burst from the strings. It began.

The music took my gut captive, made it fly up and down the arpeggios. I couldn't breathe for the feeling of weightlessness. The flute glittered under the stage lights, and the harp – I leaned forward, staring as the musician's hands ran up and down the strings, making the instrument sing as if by magic.

It was magic.

My breath shallow, I tried to close my eyes, but my gaze stayed fixed on the glittering gold.

Thirty dollars' worth of music ran through my fingers like cash during tax season. Crushing silence fell as the last notes faded. My gut slammed firmly back into my seat, anchoring me once more to reality. I tried to suck at air that wasn't there, staring at the conductor. *Please don't stop.*

The crowd thundered with applause. He turned and bowed, gestured to the flutist and harpist. I swallowed hard and clapped, forcing a smile onto my face.

The thought of my music-less apartment held no attraction to me, and there was a reception after the concert with cupcakes and actual vegetables. Might as well eat while the eating didn't consist of instant-cooked noodles.

I loaded my paper plate with veggies and a brownie, then retreated to hang on the outskirts of the crowd, near the door to the hall. Biting into a cucumber slice, I glanced back in the direction of the auditorium.

It had been worth it.

"Little Madeleine Peters, is that you?"

An elderly voice jolted me out of my reverie. I whirled. Mr. Lee held his own paper plate, smoothing down his impeccable suit jacket before offering a pudgy hand and a smile. "You've grown so much!"

I smiled back and squeezed his palm. "Hello, Mr. Lee. You must be so proud; the concert was amazing. It -"

"I know, wasn't it just?" He chuckled, switching his plate to his other hand. "Daniel is a superb conductor. He has such a feeling for music, such passion - he leads the musicians to heights we can't believe."

I nodded, unsure if he would let me get a word in. When he paused, I interjected a response. "He's talented. The musicians are, too. Especially the soloists -"

"Oh, yes, wasn't that harp beautiful?" His voice ran like warm caramel, his hand going to his heart. "I nearly wept, the music moved me so."

I had cried, but I wasn't about to admit it. I smiled. "She's incredible." My fingers tightened on my paper plate. "I'd give anything to be able to play like her."

Mr. Lee's eyebrows rocketed to his thinning hairline. "I didn't know you played!"

I furrowed my brow. "What?" Realization of what he meant dawned on me. "Oh, no -"

"What a surprise! You should've told me! Actually, this is quite serendipitous, if I do say so myself." He laughed.

I cringed; he was on a roll. I had to correct him while I had the chance. "No, Mr. Lee, I don't -"

"You see, Lydia - our harpist - is moving away. We're holding auditions next week to find her replacement, and I've been quite concerned with how we'll find a girl as sweet and musical as she is. But you've had a love for concertos ever since you babysat my granddaughter." He chuckled. "Do you remember?"

My stomach clenched as I tried to cut in. "I don't play -"

"I didn't know you played anything, that's stupendous. Would you like to try out for auditions?"

"I -" My throat closed up. I stared at him. "Try -" The plate dipped in my fingers, spilling broccoli on the floor.

"Whoops!" Mr. Lee chuckled, bending down to pick the food up with his napkin. "Let me get that for you."

I stared at the back of his head, trying to find the words to tell him I didn't play. Movement caught my eye through the hall doors. I glanced out to see the harp,

covered in a protective black casing and perched on a dolly. The harpist wheeled it towards the exit, high heels clicking. My heart gave a painful thump.

The angelic instrument slunk out of sight.

Mr. Lee straightened in my peripheral vision, dropping the broccoli onto his plate. "What do you think?"

I took in a shallow breath. Turning, I looked at him, gripping my plate. "Yes."

He beamed. "Excellent! I'm so glad I ran into you. This will be fantastic. No need to send in an application, I'll just put you in the line-up. I'll email you the music and what time you need to be here."

What are you doing? my mind screamed. I forced out an answer. "S-sure."

"Marvelous!" He patted my shoulder, smiling. "I have mingling to do. I'll see you next week!" He winked and withdrew his hand, walking away.

Ella's plastic bowl of SpaghettiO's dropped to the floor, splattering liquid across the linoleum. She stared at me, spoon in hand. "You *what?*"

"I don't know!" I wailed, throwing my purse to the table and sinking into our stained armchair.

She ripped a wad of paper towels from the roll, pressing them to the spill and never taking her gaze off me. "Why did you tell him you played the harp?"

"I didn't!" I snapped, pressing my fingers into my forehead. "He just assumed, and then he asked, and I just - I just -" I cupped my hands around my mouth, blinking hard as my eyes stung. "What am I gonna do?"

“Email him. Tell him there was a mistake,” Ella said, raising an eyebrow as she dropped the stained towels into the trash.

The thoughts of me playing vanished beneath her suggestion. My stomach balked. “No!”

She crossed her arms. “Mads, he’s gonna figure it out. Either from you or by hearing you try to play on Saturday.” I hunched over, pulling at my fingers and biting my lip.

The next day dawned with ominous clouds and a downpour, as if the world was congratulating me on my idiotic decision-making skills. I didn’t work on Sundays, but I woke up early anyway, sneaking out of the bedroom to grab a shower while Ella slept. When I opened the Dell to check my email, the first one that popped up was from Mr. Lee, giving me the time and place of the audition and a PDF of the music. I hesitated, then opened the doc. Two pieces were inside, both covered in music notes and complicated-looking symbols that I had no idea how to read. My throat stuck. I pressed my fist to my lips, trying to breathe.

Email him and tell him there was a mistake.

My heart pounded. I dropped my fingers from my mouth to the keyboard, clicking ‘reply’. I typed. ‘Mr. Lee - I’m deeply sorry for the confusion, but I can’t play the’ –

My hands stopped. I stared at the message. The ache in my chest intensified. For a second, I sat still.

Then I pressed my lips together. Highlighting my response, I deleted it. 'Thanks so much! See you Saturday!' I hit send. The satisfying whoosh sound echoed from the speakers. I closed the laptop and slipped it into its case, grabbing my keys. There was a free printer at the library - I could run off the music there.

Through the internet, I located a harp teacher at a college not far from home. After calling her, I caught the bus to campus. I found the music building and slipped inside. Hugging the music to my chest, I knocked on the door of the harp instructor's office.

"Come in!"

I steeled myself and opened the door. A woman, who I assumed was Mrs. Beige, stood up from behind her desk, her brown and silver hair swept back behind in a braid. She smiled. "Madeleine?"

"Yeah," I answered, forcing a grin and closing the door. I walked up and shook her hand. "Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice."

"Well, one of my students cancelled at the last minute. I'm glad we have the opportunity to chat!" She gestured to the chair behind me and sat down. "So you need to prepare for an audition with the Philharmonic?"

And get a CAT scan. "Yes." I sat.

"Well, this is pretty late in the game to be preparing. Most people practice weeks in advance." She tucked a loose hair behind her ear. "But if you're really invested, pushing yourself to do this will be good for your music career. Have you played through the pieces at all?"

I swallowed. "Well, actually - I can't -" What were words? How exactly did I plan on telling her this? Idiot, Maddie! "I don't play the harp."

Her smile still in place, she furrowed her brow. "What?"

"I - I know a guy on the board. He got mixed up and thought I could play and offered me an audition."

Her smile vanished. She eyed me. "You told him you could play the harp?"

"No." I squirmed. "He assumed. I couldn't cut in and correct him. He offered me the audition and I took it."

"I see." She raised an eyebrow. "Do you have any background in music? A degree?"

I'd never even gone to college. "I took piano lessons when I was little." Why had I thought this was a good idea?

"Why did you take the audition?" Her tone came across less kind and more 'why are you wasting the time of the Phil?'

I gripped the music tighter. "I - I want to play."

She frowned. "The harp is not an instrument you can master in a week. It takes years, decades of work to become experienced enough to make it into the Philharmonic. The audition is a waste of time."

I cringed. "I just - I just want to try." The music crinkled against my chest, and I relaxed my grip, not wanting to crease it. "Please."

She scrutinized me, her lips pursed. I grimaced. Man. I've gotta find somebody else who will teach-"My rate," her words came out measured, "is fifty dollars an hour." She eyed the patched elbows of my jacket. The lines in her face

softened. "However, if you stay at my studio practicing for the rest of the week, I will count it as one lesson. You will be here from eight to six, every day. I'll work with my other students, but you'll practice non-stop to get ready."

I stared at her. "Uh, I - I have a job." Which I would get fired from immediately if I took the week off.

She raised an eyebrow. "How much do you want this?"

My heartbeat pounded in my ears. The memory of an apartment stinking of alcohol made the hair on my neck prick.

There was no way I'd get in. But if somehow - if somehow I landed this - My fingers dug into my sleeve. "I accept your offer. Thank you."

Mrs. Beige grimaced and stood up, gesturing to me. "Well, we might as well start; my next student doesn't arrive for thirty minutes. You can bring the money tomorrow."

I scrambled to stand, clutching my purse and the music, and followed her. She left the office and led me down the hall. Unlocking one of the doors, she pushed it open to reveal a tiny practice room, and -

My purse thudded to the floor. I stared at the honey-brown wood of a harp.

"You can use this for your practicing." She walked to music stand. "Let's see your pieces."

I reached down for my purse without taking my gaze off the harp, stumbling. Edging into the room, I closed the door, handing her my music.

"Come on, sit." She gestured to the bench behind the harp.

I maneuvered towards it, pressing against the wall so I didn't accidentally brush the angelic instrument taking up half the room. I slid onto the bench, my hands sweaty.

Mrs. Beige flipped through my music, nodding. "They aren't as difficult as they could be. How much music can you read?"

I blew out a nervous breath. "Some?"

She grimaced, setting the music on the stand. "Well. We're starting from the beginning, anyway."

I had no idea how much fingers could hurt from just plucking strings. They throbbed, each developing blisters that then popped, leaving red, raw skin that made me want to scream. When I couldn't take it anymore, I curled up in the corner to memorize notes and rests, struggling to remember the different clefs.

Mrs. Beige made me learn by rote. I played the same tiny bits of the pieces over and over and over again until I knew them by heart, so I didn't have to read them. Every time she checked on me, she corrected my posture. She gave me bandaids to cover my raw fingertips, but the dull thwacking sound they made when I practiced distracted me more than the pain did. I pulled them off and kept going.

When I stumbled back to the apartment, I wanted to cry. My neck ached like fire, and my fingers throbbed with heartbeats of their own. I shoved a bowl of ramen in the microwave and collapsed against the counter.

"You can't quit your job!" Ella shrieked.

I cringed, clutching my empty bowl as I hunched lower in the armchair. "It'll be okay -"

"No, you can't! I can't make rent without you, and I am not going back to my dad's!" Her arms shook, as if she was remembering the blows and abuse she'd told me about.

I held my palm out, trying to placate her. "You won't go back. I've got \$450 in my account after I pay the harp teacher. You can use it to pay my half until you find a new roommate."

"What if I don't find one?" She snarled at me. "What if the money runs out?"

I swallowed. "You'll find one."

"You're not making me go back there!" She shoved her finger towards my face, flecks of spit hitting my cheeks. "You're not a musician, you'll never be able to fool them. They'll boot you out and you'll have no money and you'll leave!"

My hands shook. "You'll find someone." She drew back, ice covering her countenance. Spinning on her heel, she stamped to our bedroom, slamming the door. The plates in the cabinet vibrated. Heat pooled behind my eyes. I swallowed, then curled in on myself.

Every day, I went to Mrs. Beige's. My fingers stopped hurting and just became sort of numb and ringing. I worked the measures over and over, willing myself to remember which note meant which string. I stared at the black dots marching across the page until I could see them under my eyelids.

On Wednesday, I made it through both songs for the first time. Mrs. Beige pushed me to keep going, stopping me every time I messed up and making me work my mistakes again and again.

The harp got warm between my knees, a constant presence even when she went to teach other students. The weight of it against my shoulder became familiar and comforting. When I couldn't take it anymore, I leaned my head against the wood, just breathing against the smooth sheen.

Saturday dawned. I walked the familiar hall to the practice room to get some last-minute work done, my stomach flipping. I tried to smooth out the wrinkles that still existed all over both pieces. The more I played, the more I messed up. I tripped over measures that I'd always been good at. Each song turned into a train wreck. Images of Mom's apartment hovered over my head - my destination if I didn't win. I hissed through my teeth, practicing more and more aggressively. Every note fell flat. I yanked an angry arpeggio from the strings.

A sickening snap echoed through the instrument. I jolted back.

One of the strings bounced from where it hung, frayed at the end.

My breath shook. I shoved the instrument off my shoulder and on its feet. My forehead dropped against it, and I cried. Fat tears rolled down my cheeks and splattered on the wood flooring.

That's how Mrs. Beige found me when she opened the door. She stood silent, then came around and pulled me to my feet.

I wiped my nose, a half-hearted sob escaping my lips. Blinking back tears, I looked up at her.

She gathered the music off the stand, then handed it to me.

“It’s time for you to head over.” Her hand touched my shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

I shifted from foot to foot, waiting in the room with all the other harpist hopefuls. I scribbled last minute notes on the passages that tripped me up the most. Trying to breathe past the panic, I closed my eyes, imagining the flow of both the songs, the beautiful way the music twisted around me and made me feel like I could fly.

The door opened. “Number Seven, Madeleine Peters.”

My eyes snapped open, heat rushing to my face. The music crinkled under my grip. I forced myself towards the woman with the clipboard, licking my lips.

She led me backstage to the auditorium, stopping just shy of the curtain. I peered out, my lips parted. A screen blocked me and the stage off from the audience. A harp sat in the bright lights; not warm honey wood like mine, but glittering gold. I stared at it.

“Number Seven is here,” the woman called, the sound making my skin prick. I glanced at her. She gestured for me to walk forward.

I took in a breath. With quiet steps, I walked up to the harp, not touching it.

“Thank you for coming, Number Seven.” I jumped at the voice from an unseen man beyond the screen. “You may begin with the Grandjany whenever you’re ready.”

I licked my lips. Spreading my music out on the stand with shaking hands, I sat down on the stool. Sweat made my fingers sticky. I rubbed them against my skirt, then swallowed. Reaching forward, I pulled the instrument to my shoulder. It felt cold.

Taking a deep breath, I hovered my hands over the strings. My fingers shook.

I left the concert hall and walked to the exit, the music loose in my hands. Staring into the distance, I took in a breath. The sound of my footsteps came muffled to my ears. I fumbled for the door handle, then stepped out into the sunshine. It was done.

I stood still, basking in the soft warmth on my face. A breeze fluttered the sheets of music against my chest. I held them closer, closed my eyes. A smile worked at my lips. After a moment, I wiped at my lashes. I couldn't stand here forever. I had to go pack. Mom's apartment would be waiting.