

Ventures and Visions: A Short Story Collection

By Kayla Hicks

and

Introducing Steph O'Connell

Dedications

To my husband and daughter who tolerate my constant writing.

To Steph. We finally published something like we always said we would!

Table Of Contents

Dedication

Kale Stone Universe:

Dan and Serena

Darren

Hemway

After the Shock

One Last Time

The Drive

Waking Up in a Cell

The Quietus

Acknowledgement

About the Authors

Dan and Serena

The smell of food and sweat wafted through the air around us as we sat at the small wooden tables. It was a cooler evening than most after a long day's work, leaving many of us in a lighter mood.

"Here, here everyone! I just want to let you all know that we appreciate you. You are the people who help keep this world alive. So just to show a little appreciation, we wanted to provide you all with a feast. Please enjoy," said the guard.

Everyone cheered as they hoisted mugs full of beer that sloshed over the edges. Dan was laughing and pulling some of the delicious food from the table onto his plate.

We were the only pit stop in the desert between the two green regions on either side of us. There were largely populated cities on one side and small towns and farms on the other. When the cities needed something, they ordered from the small-town farmers who brought what they needed across the desert.

There were some dangerous people out there as resources were scarce. One too many times had a shipment been stolen to feed the hungry mouths of those in the outskirts. To keep everything and everyone safe, they needed to stop here before going to the next town. No one was willingly going to come to the desert for resources. The sand storms and the heat made a very convincing argument.

"Serena, stop looking so grim and eat," Dan said.

I snapped out of my thoughts and smiled at him. I pulled some food to my own plate and attempted to enjoy this moment.

"Serena, you need to relax a little. Take a rest for once, we have a long day of orders tomorrow," Dan said.

"Way to spoil the mood," said Frank.

"I'm sorry, here I am telling Serena to relax but I'm talking about work. As we are on the subject however, I can't kick the feeling that something bad is in those crates."

"What are you talking about? We never open the crates," Frank said through a mouthful of food.

"Doesn't it bother you that we aren't supposed to touch them at all?"

"It's food, it's most likely melons or something that can be easily broken," said Frank.

Dan looked at me. I knew that look, I could see his mind working. His forehead gained the familiar creases and his eyes screamed suspicion. Frank hadn't known Dan as long as I had. He didn't know that Dan was usually right about these things. It was almost as if he had a heightened sense for trouble.

"Dan, it's probably just some heat sensitive food. Do I need to remind you that we live in the desert?" Frank asked.

Dan looked at the warehouse across our small compound. As usual, there were two guards posted outside the door.

I could see Frank's side of the situation. The warehouse was always under guard due to the dangerous people that roamed these parts. There was a chance that it was just food and sensitive items in the crates. Unfortunately, we would probably never know.

After the feast, people started hanging about playing music and dancing in the middle of the compound. We didn't get many chances to have fun so people were taking advantage, especially on a cooler night such as this.

Dan turned in early and I went to work on the first watch. The guards had left right after the feast so we were now on our own again until the next shipment passed through. I was armed in the watchtower overlooking our compound. This always made me nervous considering we had heard about more and more groups of bandits roaming around the towns to the east of us.

I slid the window closed and sat back, watching through the rest of the dusty window panes. We had windows surrounding our towers as the desert dunes rose in high peaks and dropped to low ditches. The better the view, the more advantage we would have.

Sand storms were common here as there was nothing to block the coming wind. Throughout the years we had been able to stabilize the tower enough so that the person on watch would be protected in the event of a fast-paced sand storm.

It was a clear night out tonight. With all the windows surrounding me, it felt as if I were up in the sky with the stars. The sky was so beautiful it nearly took my breath away.

Looking down I could see some people on patrol below. Someone was also sweeping the sand near the buildings and pathways. We needed to regularly keep up with the sand or it would swallow this place up.

There was a sharp knock from the hatch behind me. The door swung open to reveal Frank.

"You can go, it's my turn," he said.

I stood up and handed him the gun. "Don't look so grim."

"Just tired, I think I drank too much. Not as young as we used to be," he laughed.

I patted him on the back as I walked to the hatch.

“We have been out here for ten years Serena. If Dan is right, why wouldn’t they tell us what is in those packages?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Who knows. Why are you still thinking about what Dan said?”

“Not much else to do out here. Could be fun to play along with Dan, add a little mystery to our lives.”

I laughed and said goodbye before leaving the tower. As I walked across to our home I kept a watchful eye around me, making sure there were no lurking shadows on the horizon. These rumors of bandits had me so on edge, every little sound made me jump out of my skin.

I got to the door about to sigh in relief but something caught my eye. It was the figure of something just behind a home two doors down. I stopped and inched over a few steps to try to get a better view. I stood peering into the endless darkness and sand unable to see any figure. I must just be tired is all. I shook my head as if shaking it from my mind and went to bed.

~

“Serena, wake up! Something is going on,” Dan shouted.

I sat up letting my eyes adjust to the room's lighting. It must have been early morning, not much light was filtering in yet. Dan looked terrified, his hair sticking out in odd directions.

“What’s going on?” I mumbled.

“I don’t know. Someone screamed right outside the door, waking me up.”

I stood up quickly, putting on normal clothes. I needed to be wearing clothes that could store weapons. He handed me a small handgun and he grabbed his shotgun.

Dan gave me a long look, his eyes telling me things that his voice couldn’t. Upon opening the door the light outside was a little brighter than inside our home. The sunlight was only just filtering over the horizon giving everything an orange, red tint. Dan stepped out and shot a man running for us with a machete over his head. I turned to my left and saw about fifteen bandits scattered across the compound. They were taking food and anything else they could carry in their bags. My stomach twisted uncomfortably at the sight of our people lying on the ground. I quickly scanned around us seeing a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar faces.

“Look! They are trying to get into the main storage,” Dan yelled.

I swiveled to my right and looked straight across the middle clearing to see five men surrounding the entrance to the main storage. Three of our people were defending it, all shooting at the bandits from behind barrels and crates.

I followed Dan to our people. Dan shot one of them in the back and I shot two others. We ran to the three standing in front of the storage. One of them was Frank. He saw us coming and opened the door allowing all five of us to run inside.

Shots rained against the steel metal door with loud metallic thuds and clangs. Frank and Dan bolted it shut and placed boards across it in the appropriate slots. I dashed off to find the other entrance and do the same. Once all the doors had been sealed and we were secure we all came together to figure out what to do next.

“Okay, so there are roughly ten that we know about still left outside. If we are estimating,” said Frank.

“On the positive side of this, we are safe inside and have supplies to last us a while. On the negative side...they could try to burn us out if they are truly set on having what’s in here,” stated Dan.

“Alright we get it, but what about everyone else out there?” I asked.

“I don’t think there is anyone out there,” mumbled Frank.

I looked around at who made it in. It was Frank, Dan, myself, Clarry and Harold. At least if they camped out we would survive until the next shipment came. It would come in a week. Then we would get some help.

“So we just need to hang on until the next shipment guards come in a week to pick up what they need.”

Everyone nodded wearing grim expressions.

“Now the question is, do we wait until they come to unbolt the door or risk trying to open the door and see if anyone is out there?” I asked.

We all got up and moved to the door or the walls. The problem with this building was that there were no windows. We tried to keep it as decent a temperature as possible. We only stored the crates here that could withstand high temperatures. There were fans in the ceiling to pump in the air but no windows that would let in too much heat or sunlight.

I joined Dan at the door. I looked for a smooth spot between the now bumpy surface created from the bullets lodged on the other side. I could only hear muffled sounds from the other side. Possibly voices. If so, all of them might be on the other side devising a plan for us. This was getting us nowhere. I decided to search the building for any weaknesses. I tapped Dan on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow me.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I want to make sure that there are no weak spots that we need to worry about. Just wanted someone with me in case something happened.”

We went to the back room where there were shelves of our canned food supplies, a stove for cooking, a few tables, and some shelves of wood. We both walked around the edge of the room checking both the floor and walls. Thankfully they all looked good.

When we returned everyone was sitting on the floor. There was nothing we could do now but wait.

After a long time passed there was a sudden series of thumps on the door.

“Hey, for all of you in there! If you don’t come out we will start burning down your houses,” someone yelled.

None of us answered. The only leverage they had was to burn us out which could also damage the items in here as well. We were needed here, so we could get new homes and supplies. As long as we guarded these crates we would be fine.

“Don’t try to be noble! All you are doing is guarding supplies that is being unfairly distributed. If you had any real integrity you would come out and fight us for your land,” they yelled again.

Wouldn’t be a very fair fight as far as I could tell.

“Well, don’t say we didn’t give you a chance.”

After that, it went silent.

We sat there on the floor for another long period. We were falling asleep when the faint smells of smoke wafted in through the fans.

Clarry started to cry, her face buried in her hands. She was trying to calm herself when we heard another sharp bang.

“Be glad you are in a steel fortress, it doesn’t easily burn unlike the wooden houses but it sure will get warm. Maybe someone will be attracted to the smoke and come to save you.”

This made Clarry cry harder. Harold tried to calm her down and keep her quiet so they wouldn’t hear us by ushering her to the back room.

It was silent again from the outside for a long time.

“What happens if they try to test us by putting fire to the steel? It will get extremely hot in here won’t it?” asked Clarry between sobs.

Dan looked around. “No, they wouldn’t dare. It would cook everything inside turning what they want in here to mush. They don’t want to ruin whatever they came for. Besides this building is built to withstand the high temperatures and concentrated sunlight that hits

every day. They designed it with two layers of walls. The outer shell becomes warm but then there is a barrier of light padding with another steel wall.”

She seemed to relax at this, her sobs growing quieter and quieter. Although it still wasn't very comforting. That meant they would either wait this out or heat the doors to get back at us. Two options that made me sick to my stomach.

“Let's get some rest,” said Frank.

As the others attempted to get a restless sleep, I lay there wide awake for hours listening to the noises just outside the door.

~

We couldn't keep track of the days without any windows. We tried to stack crates to see if we could see anything through the fan, but no luck.

One morning we were eating in front of the door. Clarry was holding out hope to be rescued at any moment. Her eyes now seemed permanently red from crying.

All of a sudden we heard gunfire, causing us to jump. It was as if it were right next to the door. Bullet bumps sprayed across the rest of the door, some previous dents becoming more warped. There was a thud but no bump, making me think someone had died.

“They must be here, the guards for the next shipment!” said Frank. He went to the door.

“We're in here!” he yelled.

Clarry and Harold did the same. Dan and I sat on the floor watching unsure if it would make a difference.

After maybe a half-hour the sound of bullets stopped and it was quiet again. The three of us stopped yelling and listened for any sound. Something to give us a clue.

To our dismay, no one banged on the door, no one fired a gun and no one screamed from outside. We couldn't go outside or we would die. We had no idea what was going on. So we just sat there and listened.

We didn't know if it had been days or weeks. We still hadn't heard a sound. Nothing was going on outside.

“I can't take it anymore! I need to see the sun,” yelled Clarry.

She ran to the door, her hands clawing at the boards that barred the door like a rabid animal. Harold started helping her as best as he could in her panicked state. Frank and Dan tried to stop them but Clarry pulled a gun on them. As she held the gun up, protecting them,

Harold moved to the door and unlocked it. He cracked the door and a rush of cool air came in. He waited a moment and then opened the door wider.

The light from our building spilled out onto the ground revealing dozens of dead bodies splayed across the ground. They were a mixture of guards and bandits. I could feel my heart ache for our people who needlessly died for whatever was in these crates.

Blood stained the drifting sand and disappeared into the night. The weather looked as if it were about to bring a sand storm as the wind started blowing small swirls of sand.

“Look, no one is alive out here. We are going to be okay,” he said.

Clarry lowered her gun and went outside too. She smiled, looking at the sky. I saw her emotion change as she looked down at the housing area. She sank to the ground, her expression full of heartache. For the first time since we had entered that warehouse, her tears were silent, slowly sliding down her face.

“Everything is gone. Everything except for this stupid storage building and that old house behind it,” she said.

“I’m leaving. We need to find help,” said Harold.

He helped Clarry up and pulled her along behind him.

“Don’t! A storm will start at any moment,” warned Frank.

They didn’t listen. I tried to catch them as they ran off, disappearing into the darkness and swirling sand. Dan shut the door as a swirl of sand made its way in.

“Why would they do that?” I asked.

“They’re stir crazy and scared. That isn’t a good combination when making decisions. I bet we see them in a day or two when they realize they didn’t bring any food or water with them. That is if the sand storm doesn’t kill them,” said Dan.

I didn’t want to believe it but it was true. Once the sand cleared we would move the bodies and figure out another plan of action. There had to be a solution to this.

~

The next morning we woke up and opened the door to see the sun high in the sky and the bodies mostly buried. Dan and I walked around the town while Frank stayed at the door just in case. The whole compound was burned by the bandits and buried by the sand. All the possessions they looted from us were nowhere to be found. After a depressing search, we doubled back to see Frank looking through a bag.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I pulled this off that guy lying next to the wall.”

At a closer look, I could see he was holding a worn map.

“Alright, I am going to get help. I will take some provisions with me and get back as soon as I can. You two will stay here and make sure nothing else happens,” Frank said.

Dan was starting to argue, but Frank held up his hand.

“I’m going.”

The weight of being one of the last survivors to a tragedy such as this was suffocating. Someone needed to stay behind and make sure that everything was safe. Someone needed to stay if Clarry and Harold came back. The weight that suffocated me only became heavier as I watched Frank walk out into the desert.

I turned to see the crates that weren’t supposed to be touched. I walked over to them, grabbing a crowbar, and pried them open. Dan silently watched from the door. Looking inside I saw a small metal box with locks on it. I used the crowbar to open the locks too.

“Dan, come here,” I called.

He walked over and peered down into the crate next to me. Inside there were vials of something blue. Each one had a skull and crossbones symbol on them. I stumbled back and slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor.

“What is this for?” Dan asked.

“Nothing good.”

“Maybe Frank will know. He can tell us when he comes back,” Dan said.

So we waited....

Week one passed.

Week two passed.

Week three passed.

Week four passed.

Two months passed.

Three months passed.

Four months passed.

No one came.

No one.

It was only Dan and me left. Just the two of us.

Darren

I could feel the sun on my skin making me sweat more than I already was. I was aware now of my heavy breathing making me feel more noticeable. My eyes darted around the area as I tried to look as if I was only taking in some shade from the wall.

People milled around talking with one another briefly as they went about their business. Some guards were walking around keeping a watchful eye on everyone. They needed to make sure that everyone kept to themselves and on track. During the day you worked to keep the city going. After the work was done, you could talk and carry on.

I heard shuffling coming from my right. I knew it was my wife, Kira. I didn't look in her direction, fearing that I would give away our secret. I could see glimpses of her moving about as she got her things together.

There was a small part of the wall that surrounded the city where you could climb over without detection.

"Are you ready, dear? I got some of those vegetables we needed to sell at the market," Kira chirped.

I let her interlace her arm with mine and we started walking back towards the middle of the city. I would drop her off at her vegetable stand and be on my way to my job at the blacksmith's station.

"It's getting worse. Every time I go out there to drop off food to those poor people there are more and more waiting at the drop spot. If there is a big crowd one of these days the city is going to notice. He told me something though, I can tell you when you get home tonight," she whispered through a smile.

A guard walked by us shooting us a glance and she laughed a little. "Oh please, I need to get to work silly! I'll see you at home, dear."

She unlaced her hand from me and lopped off to her stand through the crowd of people. She was right, we were getting close to being discovered. We couldn't let her brother starve out there though. All he had done was try to keep some of his merchandise for himself. He had also run a vegetable stand, as Kira did. He had to feed his family. And that was how you were repaid in Kale Stone, by being thrown over the wall.

Work went by as it usually did. It was hot, tiring and you knew what you were making was going to be used for terrible purposes. We made weapons, armor, common items, and such here at the blacksmith's station. When I was done I was sweaty, smelly, hungry, and

tired. The truth was this wasn't the world we used to live in. It was more cutthroat, hide in the shadows than before. A place you were afraid to leave your children alone.

When I arrived at our small home, Kira was preparing some food. She was a magnificent cook, many times creating something delicious from barely anything. She had some jars of food that she hid under the bed for her trips every morning over the wall.

"Ah, you're home! Oh, honey, you look so tired. Go shower and then come sit. It's almost done here."

I did as she said and when I came back there it was. We barely got time to eat while working all day. When you did get to eat the heat from the fire's were so warm that my stomach felt ill at the sight of food.

I sat down causing both the chair and myself to groan. Kira sat down and waited until I started eating. I could see that she was preparing to tell me something important. She probably wanted to wait until I got some food in me first.

"Go ahead, I know you're waiting," I said.

She sighed and picked up her fork, which she would probably gesture with as she talked.

"Okay well, when I saw him, he said something was happening. People are getting sick out there. He said mainly the elderly but there are rare cases that a younger person is getting sick," she informed me.

I listened.

"It's not just the flu sick either, it's fever sick. They won't eat or drink and can barely sleep. They aren't able to go on like that for long before they die," she finished.

I took another bite as I thought. We hadn't seen anything like that in here. People in Kale Stone barely got sick anymore, we were required to get regular medicinal shot boosters every hot season. Maybe it was something new that you could only get out there.

"You need to be careful when you go out. Make sure you're not touching anyone. If it's that bad then you need to make sure you don't get it. Who knows where it could come from. We dump all of our waste over the wall. For all we know, we could be the cause."

She nodded sadly. I could see in her eyes she was scared for Xavier. They grew up very close and now that he was gone, it was as if she lost her other half.

"Everything will be fine. Like you said, only in a few cases do younger people get it," I encouraged.

We finished our dinner and went up to the roof. We lay back on a blanket and looked up at the stars. On our side of the city, there weren't many lights. There was a mixture of the old and new in Kale Stone. We used candles and electricity for light. Electricity took a lot to generate so without water sources or wind power near us, we had to limit what we used.

“When are things going to change?” Kira asked quietly.

I shook my head looking at the brilliant starry sky. “I can’t say for sure. It may be after our lifetime.”

“All I want is a nice little house for us in a large green field. That way we can have lots of room to grow plants. We could have room to grow...have kids,” she smiled.

I knew she wanted kids. She always loved having a big family. I was hesitant though. Who wanted to bring anyone into a world like this? Besides, with Kira helping her brother over the wall, it was just too dangerous. I wanted to be sure the time was right.

“You would need to have some animals. We couldn’t just live on vegetables you know,” I said.

She laughed. “Fine, but you can deal with them. They’re dirty.”

“Oh, and playing in the dirt is not?” I asked.

She pushed me aside and sat up. I followed her lead and did the same. Looking over the city I could see the appeal. Kale Stone was truly a beautiful city from an outsider point of view. So bittersweet.

Far beyond the wall, it was black. Just nature and whatever else lurked out there. Like I said, bittersweet. Both sides of the wall had the beauty but also the brutality.

“Okay, time for bed. I said I would be there a little early to switch up the time. Don’t want anyone catching onto us,” she announced.

We folded up the blanket and retired for the night.

~

When I woke up the next morning, Kira was all packed and ready to go. She was just finishing putting her things into her bag when I came to grab my shoes. I quickly dressed and followed her out the door. The sun was just rising and I could see some windows just starting to burn with light.

When we reached the spot where Kira climbed the wall, the houses nearby were pitch black. She climbed the wall while I stood guard, as usual. I heard the light clinking of the glass jars in her bag as she lifted herself up the wall.

She suddenly stopped. I could see her freeze just as she reached the top. I then saw her climb down the wall at a fast pace. She frantically swiped tears away from her eyes, trying to compose herself.

“What are you doing out so early?” asked a voice.

I turned my attention away from Kira. I saw two guards standing with a lantern in my face. I froze for a second.

“My wife was checking her vegetables for her stand. She saw that one of her tomatoes was just about ripe yesterday and she was excited to get it sold,” I lied.

He cocked an eyebrow and snorted. “Mhmm. So how did she manage to grow crops on top of the wall?”

Kira came walking out then smiling. “You know I thought that tomato would be ripe. Not today.”

She stopped, looking at the guards.

“You're under arrest for aiding and abetting fugitives and criminals. The penalty is exile but we can just double check that with Jericho,” he said.

The other guard came over and cuffed Kira and started walking her away.

“We didn't do anything! We were just getting vegetables,” she stammered.

“Yeah, yeah. We have spotted you taking food over a few times now. Don't worry. They won't need it anymore. We put them out of their misery,” he assured.

Kira started weeping and it killed me that I couldn't comfort her. That must have been what she saw on the other side before she came right back down.

As they walked us down to the palace, people were shutting their windows to avoid arrest themselves.

Before long, there we stood in the courtyard surrounded by lush green foliage and sprouting fountains. The guard escorting us here said they didn't let criminals inside the palace. I had never been this close to the palace before. We seemed to wait there forever before a man finally came down.

It was Jericho alright. He was tall with dark brown hair and was dressed in light white clothing. He looked at us down his nose like we were bugs that needed to be squashed.

“You are disgraces! After everything I go through to keep all of you people safe, you repay me by giving them our food. How dare you!” he spat. “Get them out of my sight. Take their belongings and boot them.”

They took Kira's bags and my staff. They also took our shoes. They said someone else would be able to use them. They took us out of a small door near the back of the palace. When they opened the door all you could see was dirt. Brown dirt.

“I'll walk you to the grassy patch but then you're on your own,” the guard said.

He did exactly as he said. He marched us across until the grass started. He then cut the zip ties, backed away from us with his gun raised in protection until he was a good distance away before turning his back to us and jogging back. I felt abandoned.

Kira held onto my arm and I could see the tears silently rolling down her face once again.

We found a stream to drink from before looking for a safe place to hole up. We made some quick weapons from branches for protection and then moved to the jungle for cover. The first night I let her sleep while I watched for danger. I would wait to sleep when we found safer ground.

When she woke up the next morning she didn't look good. She was pale except for a flush face and a high fever. My heart immediately broke. It couldn't be that, not that fast. We needed to find a safe place. I carried her through the jungle until I found a small cave in a rocky hill. I made her as comfortable as I could.

I searched around the cave for some fruits and edible things. I found some bananas and grapefruit for us to eat. She laughed weakly when I told her I started her vegetable farm while I was out.

"When you get better we can start looking for animals for me to take care of," I joked.

She smiled. "What's wrong with me?"

"I'm not sure."

That was the last thing I would hear from her. The last time I would see her smile.

She was in and out of sleep for days. I had managed to feed her bites of food, although I knew it wasn't enough to get her by.

When it rained, I used the giant jungle leaves to collect rain water for her to drink. Drinking had also become more difficult as the days went by.

After too many days without sleep, I finally allowed myself to sleep a little. Even when I was able to sleep, however, I would wake at the slightest sounds.

Ten days later I woke up early in the morning extremely uncomfortable. It felt as if it were 100 degrees. Even in the shade of the cave and with cool stone around us, we were sweltering hot.

I immediately rolled over and dipped the cloth I had ripped from my shirt into the warm water. It wasn't the greatest but it would do. I turned back over to drip it on her in some attempt to keep her cool. When my eyes settled on her I knew in my heart, but couldn't convince my mind. She was pale.

"Wake up baby, wake up," I choked out.

She didn't respond. I shook her slightly, still nothing.

I cried. I punched the rock next to me as hard as I could until my hand bled.

Why? Why her?

I draped some leaves over her to let her rest in peace. I couldn't even give her a proper burial without anything to dig a hole. I had never felt so broken and lost in my life.

I was unsure of how long I sat there. It must have been a long time. I felt sticky and tired. I needed to move. My body ached from sitting for so long. It felt wrong, leaving her behind. When night arrived I was able to make myself leave that cave. It was dark out and I could barely see, causing me to stumble through the darkness. My arms and legs started to ache from running into trees and rocks.

I walked deeper and deeper into the jungle, unsure of where I was headed, but I needed to make space between Kira and myself. I couldn't cry anymore. My body wasn't able to. I only felt numb, as if I wasn't myself anymore.

I thought it was strange that I hadn't seen anyone. Not a single soul. I was able to hear nature and animals, though. I could also feel myself becoming weaker the further I walked.

When was the last time I had eaten?

I stumbled into a clear patch surrounded by huge trees. They seemed to reach up to the heavens. I looked up, spinning around and tripping. I felt something hit my head. The world was spinning and sideways, yet I didn't care for it to stop.

Maybe this was the end for me.

Soon darkness overcame me and I felt peace.

When I opened my eyes again I was in a well-lit room surrounded by light bamboo walls. There were white flowing curtains lazily blowing in the breeze to my left. I looked around, hoping Kira was here to greet me.

"Oh good, you're awake. You took a good knock to your head," someone said.

There was a man with glasses sitting reading a book in the corner of the room next to my bed.

"You wandered into our territory. We couldn't just leave you bleeding there. It was basically on top of our garden," he said.

I laughed out loud at how ironic it was.

He quizzically looked up at me, one eyebrow cocked. "Something funny about bloody vegetables?"

I stopped abruptly.

"Galeb wants to talk with you," he said.

The man with the glasses was gone for what seemed like a long time. When someone did come in it was a new person, a man with blonde hair. He was a little younger than I.

"Tell me how a large, strong man like you ended up being defeated by a rock," he said.

“I don’t know, was it a big rock?” I asked.

He laughed.

“Where did you come from? You don’t look like the type of person that frequents these parts,” he inquired.

“I got booted from Kale Stone with my wife. We were caught giving food to people on the other side of the wall,” I said.

I figured I might as well be honest.

“I see. Why would you do a thing like that? Aren’t they criminals?” he asked.

I could see from his expression he was curious.

“Not everyone out here is a criminal. Some people get in trouble from having the courage to do the right thing, even if everyone thinks it’s wrong,” I said.

He nodded, a smile slowly growing on his face.

“You know, I think you and I will get along well.”

Hemway

I could feel the hot sun on my skin. The wind moved my hair around, allowing my scalp to breathe. My legs were cramping from squatting in this tree for such a long time. It must have been hours now. That was the worst thing about being on perimeter duty, long hours doing nothing but watching.

Looking out in front of me I could see dirt as far as the eye could see. To my right, there were jungle trees and our small settlement. I could see our people in the distance moving about, working hard. There weren't many of us in Galestand yet, maybe only fifty. After the word about Jericho's climb to power, we left the city to keep society alive as a democracy. We weren't about to bow down to the dictatorship that was Jericho.

All of a sudden to my left I heard a noise. It sounded far off but it was there. Something was coming from the distance, surrounded by a cloud of dirt as it moved. By the sound of it, it was a horse-drawn carriage.

I scrambled down from my post as quickly as possible. I darted through the trees, jumping rocks, and ducking branches as I went. Leaves smacked me in the face and birds flew past me. When I reached our clearing I was drenched in sweat and heaving air. I tried to breathe so I could tell them what I saw. Mateo walked over to me wearing a look of concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

I took one more big gulp of air, feeling as though I could now speak.

"In the distance, there is a carriage coming. Too far to tell who it may be but it's heading our way. It is either heading for us or past us," I explained.

A look of understanding now replaced his previous concern. "Well someone was going to confront us sooner or later. It has to be someone from Kale Stone."

"What?"

The sound of hoofbeats was starting to grow louder. Mateo looked at everyone working and put his hand up.

"Nothing to worry about. How about you all take a break and go into the shade of the trees," he said.

Everyone looked thankful for the suggestion and carried their tools away with them. When the last of them were disappearing into the trees the hoofbeats were starting to slow.

There were only ten of us standing in the clearing when the carriage pulled up. The carriage was made of all brown wood pulled by four stomping horses. There were three windows and it was pulling a small cart behind it. Inside the small cart was a person sitting with their legs curled up to their chest.

The door opened and two men stepped out. They both carried guns strapped to their hips. They cautiously looked around the area assessing anything that qualified as a threat. When their eyes settled upon our group one of them reached behind him reopening the carriage door.

Out stepped a well-dressed man. He was wearing brown clothing with some light armor over top. The armor consisted of the basic chest, shoulder, and leg padding. He shielded his eyes from the sun at first. When his eyes adjusted, he smiled at us.

“You truly are out in the middle of nowhere, aren’t you?” he laughed.

None of us moved toward him or gave any light-hearted greeting.

“Mateo, we go way back. Please tell me you would rather come back to civilization than rough it out here in the wild,” he asked.

“Jericho, you are here for a reason. State it or leave.”

Jericho ran his hand over his hair and sighed. “Okay, well that was fast. I want your group of people or whatever you call yourselves to consider aligning yourselves with me. I can offer you protection, maybe promote you. Hell, if you want to be out there that bad, I’ll build you a small outpost you can command.”

I glanced at Mateo’s face trying to decipher what was going through his mind.

“Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?” asked Mateo.

Jericho also searched his face before turning to me.

“How old are you? Are you ready to throw away allegiances with Kale Stone so young?” Jericho asked.

“I’m 17 and yes. If the choice is to bow to one man rather than allowing democracy to thrive, then I would rather ‘rough’ it as you put it,” I answered.

“I think you have your answer. Like I said before, state what you want, which you did. Now you may leave,” Mateo said.

Jericho stood there weighing his options. Just the look on his face told me he was not used to hearing the word no. But he then quickly composed himself and flashed a smile.

“Well Mateo, I will keep the option open for some time if you change your mind. I do hope you reconsider. I must be off to talk to the people. I have a speech today, you know,” he boasted.

He then waved his hand at the guard next to him. The guard moved to the carriage and opened the door. Jericho stepped inside, followed by the guard. The other guard walked around to the back and banged with the butt of his rifle on the back cart. The person in the back trembled in response to the sudden thud.

“If you want to go to the bathroom do it now. Be quick, he doesn’t like to wait.”

The person quickly stood and stepped over the edge of the cart revealing a girlish figure. As she darted for the edge of the tree line I saw her blonde hair spilling out of her hood. I looked to the guard again who kept a watchful eye on her.

She was quick. No sooner had she ducked than she was back out and running to the cart. Her hood fell from the wind, revealing dark circles under her eyes. She was a little younger than I by the looks of her. She glanced at me and then sat back down inside.

She was beautiful.

I looked at Mateo, who showed no interest. The guard went back to the front of the carriage and was off.

“Why is he keeping that girl that way?” I nearly shouted.

Mateo hadn’t seemed phased at all.

“Mateo, she was a prisoner.”

He hammered away at part of a roof, deep in thought.

“What do you expect me to do? I can’t go get her without starting something with Jericho. We are trying to build something here, a sanctuary away from Kale Stone,” he said.

“Oh, so you would rather let him rise to power than stop him now. To end whatever storm of chaos he is bringing with him?” I stammered.

He stood and wiped the sweat from his face. “Hemway, just because Jericho fails doesn’t mean someone else won’t step up in his place. Forget the girl, she can’t be saved.”

He turned and started hammering as everyone started coming back to work. I could only stand there with the feeling of overwhelming disappointment.

“Go finish your watch, please.”

I turned and walked back to my post.

How could I go along with this? How could I let it happen?

No, I wasn’t going to let this happen. I needed to save her. The only questions were how and what was he doing with her?

When night arrived, we ate by the fire and went to sleep. Some stayed awake telling animated stories around the fire, their voices drifting away from camp. I needed them to go to sleep so I could leave. I was going to rescue that girl.

I could hear Mateo talking with some of the others about the plans to start building the floors for the village. He was planning to build a village in the trees. It was a clever idea, having the advantage of height. Some of our people were still skeptical. What if our enemies burned the trees down or how are we going to get seventy feet up a tree to build it? But he was convinced it was the right thing to do.

The moon was high in the sky by the time everyone was asleep. There was a sentry up in the tree but his focus was on the side of Kale Stone.

I took my chance and went for it. Jerhico's group would have a considerable lead. For now, I could only follow their direction and hope they had stopped to rest for the night. We didn't have any animals so I would need to track them on foot.

I finally came across a set of carriage tracks, once I entered an area with more foliage and grass. I tracked their trail for two days, thanking the gods that I hadn't needed to track them through the sand.

When I finally caught up, they were resting on the bank of a stream.

The girl was washing some clothes at the far end while Jericho and the others sat in a nice large tent strung between two trees.

I slunk low between the trees, trying to get to a point where I could catch her attention. She sat so quietly as she dunked the clothes in and out of the water, lost in thought.

It was growing dark as she hung the clothes on some branches before entering a smaller tent that was posted near the edge of their camp. It was more the size of a small child's tent. She curled up inside and went to sleep. Jericho had already retired, leaving his guards to sit around the fire keeping watch.

I needed to get to her.

I snuck around in the darkness until I was behind her tent. I was still able to see the stream clearly and hear it trickling. I grabbed some large rocks to help me. I looked to the guards who were quietly talking with one another before looking back towards the stream, aiming. I threw two of my largest stones. One sailed over the stream but the other landed with a satisfying splash. The guards perked up at this and waited for more.

"It must have been an animal or something," one said.

I aimed again and threw two more. I again hit my mark and made another loud splash. They both jumped, looking over there. The girl was also now awake, peering from the entrance of her tent. The guards started walking towards the stream now, guns aimed.

I clicked my tongue at her trying to get her attention. She didn't hear me at first. I then whispered 'hey' and her head snapped back at me in horror.

“I was there when you pulled up to my settlement outside Kale Stone,” I said.

A flash of recognition showed on her face. She glanced at the guards who were still investigating. As their attention was elsewhere, I signaled her to follow me. She shook her head no.

“Don’t be scared, I’ll keep you safe.”

She seemed to be struggling with indecision. The logic seemed to outweigh her fear, causing her to start moving toward me. I aimed and threw another stone further to their right into the woods.

I held her hand and helped her into a crouch. We ducked low for good measure, moving away from the camp into the dark woods. I kept glancing behind us to make sure they were still occupied.

When we were far enough away, I pulled her behind me, running as fast as my feet would carry me. I needed to get her somewhere safe. I needed to hide us now, but not somewhere obvious. The darkness would only provide cover for so long. They would be searching for her any minute.

I thought back to Mateo’s idea. The trees. The trees weren’t quite as high here but they had enough leaves to conceal us. I searched for a bushy tree that had branches we could both reach. She wandered behind me looking utterly terrified.

I discovered a large tree that had a large round trunk. There was one branch that I could lift her up to and jump up to myself. When we got the branch I looked around to be sure no one was around.

“We are going to climb up.”

“How?” she asked.

I motioned her over to me and put my hands down to form a cup. “Step into my hands and I’ll lift you, then I’ll jump up.”

She raised an eyebrow looking at me as if I were insane.

“Just do it,” I said.

She did as I asked, making it up into the tree. Once on the branch, she looked at me with large helpless eyes.

“Climb up high,” I said.

She started to climb. I then sized up the branch and jumped. I missed it, falling with a loud thud. It was too high.

“Look everywhere!” someone shouted.

This whole hero bit was not going over so well.

I looked around for something to give me some height. It didn't help it was dark. I got down and started patting the ground searching for anything. I found some small rocks first.

Not helpful.

Then I reached a larger rock.

Perfect.

I could hear people clumsily moving about in the foliage in the near distance. I pulled on the rock. It didn't move. I pulled again and felt a slight movement.

"I'll check over here, you go right," a voice yelled.

My heart hammered in my chest as I yanked again at the rock. It came loose and rolled over as I fell back. I picked it up and carried it over to the tree. It could be just enough to get up to the branch.

I stood, balancing on the rock for a moment before jumping. I got up to the branch but missed it when I grabbed for it. I stood on the rock again and jumped once more. This time I got hold of the branch.

I looked up to see the girl's eyes about ten branches up looking back at me before they flashed behind me. I pulled myself up and started frantically climbing.

Whoever was coming was getting closer. I was moving so fast that I ended up hitting my head a few times. I reached the girl quickly and perched myself on the branch next to her.

As we sat next to each other we could see down below at one of the men who stood, scanning the area around him. There would be no way for him to see us this high in the darkness. We were about halfway up the tree. The thought then hit me that the climb down was not going to be fun.

We waited there long after they had disappeared, their noises fading into the distance. When we finally thought it would be safe enough to climb down it was almost noon. Our muscles were stiff from sitting in the same position for so long. We hadn't said a word in hours.

I helped her down from the branch when we reached the bottom. I would take us back to Mateo and we would sort this out.

What was he going to say when we came back? It wasn't as if Jericho would suspect him. For all he knew she had escaped on her own.

She was so thin it made me wonder when the last time was she had eaten. Once we thought we were safe enough to stop, we caught some fish to eat. She ate so fast, I doubt she tasted it at all.

"Did you taste any of that?" I asked.

She looked at the ground, avoiding eye contact. I still had only heard her speak one word.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me. Once we get back to my people you can either stay or go on your own,” I said.

She shot me a panicked look. “Where will I go? I know nowhere else.”

“Okay okay, you can stay with me if you want.”

She seemed to ease up at this. We would be back in a day or two. Then she would feel safe.

~

On the morning of the next day, we saw Galestand come into view. I didn’t like walking through the open space between us and the camp but at least we would have help if we needed it.

“Don’t worry, they are nice people,” I assured her.

Still, she said nothing as she looked around, taking in the surroundings.

As we came closer I could see everyone busily working on their tasks. I couldn’t wait to see their faces when they heard the story of how I had rescued her. I would be sure to leave out all of the clumsy parts.

I saw Mateo first. He was standing at the edge of the camp. His arms were crossed, his face unreadable. Everyone else behind him kept working but glanced at us with worried expressions.

“Where were you?” he asked in a clipped tone.

I stopped walking at the tone of his voice.

“I went to save her,” I replied. “She was a slave. She needed my help.”

He looked from me over to the girl. His eyes ran over her, assessing the situation. Maybe he was wondering if she would be helpful to us.

“She needs to leave.”

I tried to contain my shock, which was quickly replaced with anger as I thought about why we had created Galestand in the first place. To be a sanctuary.

“You have got to be joking. You made this place so that people could escape people like Jericho. Now you just so quickly turn on your word and send her away?” I yelled.

He stood there, patiently waiting for me to stop yelling.

“She’s different. She is directly connected to Jericho and right now we are too small to take whatever he sends our way.”

I couldn't even believe what I was hearing. I looked at the girl who was practically in tears. I was not going to leave someone behind who needed help.

"You should be ashamed. If she leaves so do I," I spat.

"Fine by me. If you can't think of the good of the group right now, then we don't need you."

Everyone behind him was now watching the scene unfold. I didn't feel embarrassed though, I felt only anger and shame at how easily subjective he could be. They were supposed to help those in need of sanctuary. They had left Kale Stone to keep the choices in the people's hands. I couldn't even look at him.

"Let's go," I said.

She didn't move though. She looked conflicted.

"These are your people, I'll leave," she mumbled.

"Not anymore they're not," I responded.

I took her hand and started pulling her along with me. We would make it on our own.

As we walked away I couldn't look behind me. I didn't know where I was going to go but we would be fine on our own. If they weren't going to help her, I would. I would protect her.

We were silent for a long time. I wasn't able to say anything for fear I would snap at her. She kept looking at me even long after my old home disappeared from view. We stopped amongst another cluster of trees that provided good cover. We made a small camp so I could mull over our next move.

The girl mumbled something and then disappeared from view for a while. When she returned she had a small animal that she started to quietly prepare for us.

"You are so kind. How did you manage to get intertwined with someone like Jericho?"

"He came into my small village a few months ago asking for the support of our people. When we refused he started burning down our houses. His guards were trying to get the people out. They sat them along the edge of the village so that Jericho could make his point. Either join him or don't exist. They didn't get to my family in time. The fire at our house was too big and they perished," she explained.

I had no words. How could someone commit such an atrocity such as that?

"Anyway, I only survived because I was in the stream getting water. When I came back I walked into the middle of it. Jericho singled me out and said I would work perfectly for his image. He planned to pass me off as his daughter, would say that he lost his wife to some tragic accident and paint the picture of a family man. A way to help the people believe that we were the image for the better world. It made me sick," she finished.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. I want to see that man’s end,” she said.

I nodded in agreement. We both watched as the meat before us cooked over the fire. The fire blew small embers here and there and crackled, filling the silence.

“We can start over, right? Have our pieces put back together?” she asked.

I thought about it. We could start over, build a new society. Or we could let everyone else fight it out, go off on our own. We could do anything we wanted.

“Yes we can, we can be whole again,” I replied.

She smiled and it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

After the Shock

Day 1

I pulled out my iPod and put the earbuds into my ears, ready to zone out. After visiting the White House and waiting in front of exhibits all day I was ready for some music. I could feel a bar in the seat digging into my back. The bus we were on was old so I wasn't surprised that the seats were uncomfortable.

"Wasn't that awesome? I was hoping that we would get to meet the President or something. Too bad," said Becky.

Becky was my friend in the Young Ambassadors group. It was for high school kids interested in politics and such. It wasn't exactly the highlight of my life but it looked fantastic on a college resume, which was the highlight of my parents' lives.

"I think you only get to meet the President on the TV shows. He's way too busy to come and meet us during a school tour," I said.

She shrugged and pulled out a book, settling into her seat in front of me.

I turned around and looked out the back window, watching as the White House got smaller before we turned onto the highway.

Suddenly the bus shook, the window panes rattling in their metal linings. Car alarms were going off all around us. The bus halted in the middle of the street along with all of the other traffic. We all stopped what we were doing and looked around in alarm. Behind me, over the building tops, three plumes of smoke were rising slowly. We all looked to our teacher, Mr. Gunther, who stood hunched next to the bus driver, trying to figure out what was going on.

Boom!

Two buildings away from our bus, another explosion went off, then one in the building next to us. The bus vibrated as it scooted sideways before tipping onto its side and falling with a rough crash. It happened so quickly none of us had time to react. In the process, I flew through the air to the seat across from me, landing directly on top of another student.

Once all of the explosions subsided, I found myself lying on the top half of a window, which had shattered, only leaving shards at the edges. My head throbbed immensely and I could see I had left some blood behind. I must have hit my head on the metal rim of the window.

I stood on the window looking over the seats of the bus towards the front. Mr. Gunther and the bus driver were nowhere to be seen. I couldn't see Becky either.

I tried to climb up the seat towards the aisle but found there was nothing to grab onto. I turned and decided the better option would be to walk on the wall above the backs of the seats.

The walk was difficult at first. My head was throbbing and the wall was slippery to walk on in my flats. I kept my eyes focused in front attempting to avoid the bodies of my classmates lying in the seats below me.

Once I get outside and find Mr. Gunther I will come back to see if anyone else is alive, I thought. I was going to need some help pulling the others out of the bus.

I tried to step out of the emergency exit at the rear of the bus. The bumper was shaped oddly creating a difficult step down to the pavement. As I placed my weight on it, something slippery on the bumper caused me to slip, hitting the pavement hard.

~

I slowly opened my eyes, feeling groggy as if waking from a deep sleep. The ringing in my ears was almost too much to handle. I could feel small stones digging into my palms on either side of me. I tried to prop myself into the upright position to orient myself. As I put my palm down next to me, I winced when something sharp pricked me.

I turned and sat down on the pavement instead. The throbbing on the side of my head combined with my blurry vision made me feel as if I was on a tilt-a-whirl. I rubbed my temples, attempting to ease the pain to no avail. The ringing was starting to fade away but not enough to hear clearly. I could hear a muffled crunching of glass somewhere to my left and someone crying. The smell of smoke burnt my nose, making me cough. Having had a concussion before, I knew if I felt sleepy or nauseous I needed to worry.

"Is anyone alive?" someone yelled.

I tried to focus my gaze and find out where the voice came from.

"Are you alright?"

I turned to my right, seeing a woman standing above me. She had tattered clothing that bore black smoke marks. Her face had two large scratches on it.

"I saw your bus flip from my car at the end of the street. It must have been from the explosions along this street. Is anyone else alive?" she asked.

I squinted trying to look at her. "Sorry, my head is pounding and my ears are ringing. It's hard to focus."

She nodded and bent down to my level. She looked at my eyes with a concerned look. She turned her gaze to the side of my head.

“You’re bleeding. We’re going to need to look at your head.”

She stood quickly, scanning the area around us. I attempted to follow her gaze, however, as I did I could see that bodies were surrounding me. It looked as if they had been thrown from the bus and had been forced away from the sidewalk from the explosions.

“I’m going to check to see if anyone else is okay. I don’t want us to leave before checking the others.”

As she walked away from me I moved into a crouch position. Once I felt the world had stopped spinning dangerously, I stood. It took a moment for me to stand still on my own, however, I felt better being vertical. I held onto the bumper of the bus for good measure as I waited for her to return.

I could now see people hobbling around in the distance. The smoke was still billowing high into the sky. The buildings surrounding me were charred and deformed, their glass windows shattered from the force.

I started walking down the street to get a better look at my surroundings while still keeping the bus in sight. There were cars with shattered windows near the street that were lying at odd angles. I walked around the glass shards that littered the ground as best as I could.

I could hear my footsteps crunch and pop as I walked down the street. When I reached the end I looked around the corner allowing myself a clear view of the White House. I could feel my breath catch in my chest. It felt as if my eyes were betraying me. They had to be.

From where I was standing, the White House was... gone.

There were pieces of wall and various objects littered all around in its place. There must have been a huge explosion there, too.

The question is... now what?

Walking back, I felt a rush of cool air blow down the street, making me button up my coat. It was October and the nights were cold.

Once I find that woman, we will need to find somewhere to take shelter for the night, I thought.

When I returned to the bus, the woman who had offered me help was gone. Since she had disappeared, I inspected the bus but was unable to find any other survivors. Searching through the various bodies that were scattered about the ground I wasn’t able to find Becky, Mr. Gunther, or any of the other Young Ambassadors. My bag had also been lost in the wreckage, along with any chance of calling my parents, since my phone was in it.

I tried to keep my tears back as I realized I was alone. I was truly alone. I had no way of contacting my family, my friends were gone, and the people who were left were wandering around looking for their loved ones as well.

I had no idea where I was in Washington. I decided the best course of action was to find a hospital. About four blocks from the bus crash I spotted a grocery store. A sign on the door said it was closed for maintenance purposes. I managed to pry the damaged lock off the pocket folding gate and get inside. I found a safe spot in the back office and blocked the door, barricading myself inside with snacks and drinks.

I was unable to sleep that night. Afraid to sleep, more accurately.

Day 3

The pitch-black was almost all-consuming as I sat in the back office with the door locked. I holed up in the back of the store for two nights, jumping at every unfamiliar sound. I managed to find a flashlight but the dark was so intense. Who knew when the electricity would come back.

As soon as the sun rose on the third day, I felt comfortable enough to come out and work on finding a hospital.

I stopped at every bus route sign and kiosk I could, to see if I could find a map of how to get to the hospital. I tried to keep my distance from anyone I saw wandering around. I was unbelievably nervous about traveling alone but I had been able to find two pocket knives in the grocery store as some means of protection.

I stood at the corner of the street, partially hiding along the wall when I came across a line of people waiting down the next street, leading to somewhere. My worst fear was running to a place that wasn't safe with no way out. Thankfully, there were some police officers huddled in a group nearby. I took this as a cue and went over to them.

As I approached them they straightened up, directing their gazes at me.

"Excuse me, what is going on? I have been wandering around for three days trying to find a hospital. The White House is gone," I said.

One cop turned, adjusting his hat. He had bags under his eyes and there was blood on his left sleeve. His uniform had dust marks all over in various sizes turning his dark blue uniform to a lighter color.

"There was an attack. We aren't sure how bad yet. The White House was the target, but we don't know if anyone survived. We don't have any means of communication right now so we don't know how many other government buildings have been hit. We were told the military was going to move in to organize some relief stations. The hospital is here where the line is. You will be safe if you just wait here."

I tried to wrap my head around the fact that we had been under attack as I stood in the middle of the street surrounded by all this destruction. It was difficult to take all of this in.

How could this have happened?

They must be waiting for the military to arrive before they try to explore the White House wreckage.

I walked over to the line and stood behind an elderly woman. She had a small child clinging to her leg who stared so intensely at me I felt as if she could read my thoughts.

“We need to start moving these people to Memorial Park. The military will be setting up a triage center there where we can handle the demand. The hospital is saying they are full and that they are worried about supplies if they try to take any more on,” an officer said.

The lead officer ran a hand over his face and sighed. “Don’t they know that if anything else is coming we are going to be sitting ducks out there? No cover whatsoever.”

He shook his head and faced a small group of officers taking a break on a stone stairwell.

“You all are going to stay here and help with the hospital, the rest will come with me,” he said.

“Alright everyone!” he yelled. “I have some unfortunate news. The hospital is full and we need to move everyone to Memorial Park. The good news is the military will be here within the next few hours so we will be able to help everyone there.”

Someone somewhere behind me started crying. Looking around me there had to be about a hundred of us here, all of us in various states of injury. This was a large group to move through streets of overturned cars and debris. There were maybe twenty police officers, and they were going to leave behind fifteen for the hospital.

As we shuffled along the street I didn’t see another soul roaming around. Everyone that had survived in this area had been drawn to the hospital.

The walk was slow with the now narrow streets. The older woman next to me was having trouble walking. Her leg was injured badly, the small child attempting to move her along.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

She smiled weakly and shook her head.

“Please let her help you,” the child pleaded.

The woman stopped in her tracks and gave in. I lifted her arm and placed it across my shoulders. As soon as I did, her weight was manageable but difficult to carry. Her left leg was uninjured so she did her best to use that one for support when possible.

After two and a half hours of walking through debris, we finally made it to Memorial Park. The police scoured the park, searching for threats and survivors before allowing us to enter.

At the far end, the back portion of an airplane was partially buried into the grass. The originally white exterior was charred and black with a missing door and windows.

I helped the woman to a nice patch of grass and laid her down. Once off her feet, the relief was instant.

I saw the group of police officers huddled around the monument devising a plan. In an attempt to be unnoticed, I acted as if I was searching around as I walked closer to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“I have a radio now, that we were able to lift off a cruiser on the west avenue. We only need to wait to see when reinforcements will arrive. We should clear a space for their helicopters to land and follow that by creating a patrol perimeter,” the lead officer said.

“Do they have any idea who could have done this?” another asked.

“The chatter on the radio suggested it was someone that was inside the White House. The first of the chain of explosions were set off from there.”

That caused me to freeze, instantly turning my blood to ice. Had we been there any longer, I wouldn't even be walking around here right now.

“How? They have so many precautions that it's nearly impossible to do so,” another said.

“Nearly is the word to focus on here. It happened. They don't know how yet but things are about to get worse before they get better. They believe that whoever is responsible is trying to flee the city and they are locking down the city as we speak. No one in or out.”

Day 5

We had been in the field for two days by the time people finally started leaving to go home. The nights were chilly, causing many of us to huddle up, catching sleep when we could.

The military had arrived an hour after we did. They landed three large helicopters there with essential medical personnel aboard. They set up stations swiftly and started treating people immediately. Unfortunately, more people had arrived following the sight of the helicopters, making the wait for treatment longer. After people had been treated, they were sent to another closed tent for questioning and put into a separate group.

At least, that was the speculation until the rumors were confirmed when my turn arrived.

“Whoa, you have quite the nasty bump there. Let’s get you checked out here,” a doctor said.

She put on a pair of glasses and went through the routine tests for a concussion. I’d had a concussion a time or two from playing field hockey and knew that if I had a concussion I wouldn’t have been moving around so soon.

“Do you still have pain?” she asked.

“Only when I touch it. The throbbing is gone now and I don’t have any more ringing in my ears.”

She nodded, jotting down more notes.

I looked around the tent and saw ten others being treated as well, behind sheet-like curtains that barely covered a thing in the large green tent.

“I’m going to put you under observation for the next 48 hours and give you something for the pain. You also have a cut on your scalp which explains the blood in your hair. It’s shallow enough that I don’t think you’ll need stitches but I am going to clean it and give you a bandage for good measure.”

Once I was given what I needed, I was led to another large green tent. Upon stepping inside, there were cubicle-like sectors as far as I could see.

I was taken to a cubicle and sat down behind a folding card table. There was a bottle of water and a small packaged sandwich. At the sight of it, my stomach released a loud growl, having not eaten in two days. I ripped open the packaging and devoured the sandwich in three large bites.

“Good, I’m glad you got something in you,” a man said. “I’m FBI Agent Robert Parker. I have a series of questions to find out some information and then an agent can take you to get more food afterward.”

“Can I call my parents? They are probably worried sick,” I said.

“Yes, once all of this is through. We are establishing a more concrete base and arranging ways for all of you to get out at the moment.”

I nodded, taking a sip of water to wash everything down.

“What is your name?”

“Penny Herrington.”

“Are you visiting DC or a resident?”

“Visiting for a school trip.”

“Where did you visit?”

“The White House,” I said.

He paused, pursing his lips as he jotted down my answers.

“What was the purpose of your visit to the White House?”

“I’m part of a Young Ambassadors program. We visited to learn about domestic policies and politics.”

“How long do you estimate the duration of your stay was?”

“Uh, maybe an hour and a half or so.”

“Around what time did you arrive?” He asked.

I tried to think back as it was four days prior. I could feel his stare making me feel incredibly uncomfortable.

“I believe we arrived at ten in the morning.”

He jotted down the time and closed the file.

“Please wait here. I need to go speak with someone and then I will be back with some more questions.”

He stood, pushing the metal chair back with a clunky sound as it caught in some clumps of grass. As he exited I couldn’t help but feel a knot of dread form in the pit of my stomach. I thought if I couldn’t calm down I was going to look suspicious.

I had done nothing wrong. We went inside and walked around, seeing nothing of interest before climbing back on the bus to go home. If I was being honest, the tour had been rather unexciting. Before I could worry myself more, Agent Parker walked back in followed by another agent.

“Ms. Herrington, my colleague is going to sit in on our conversation and observe.”

I nodded slowly.

“So you arrived at the White House around ten in the morning and your visit was approximately an hour and a half. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me who was with you?”

I ran over the list of our group in my head. “Mr. Gunther, the bus driver, Becky Lewis, Dan Horris, Jennifer Ellis, Ben Levy, Terrance Vern, and Harrison Burns.”

“Good. Now, did any of them leave the group for any amount of time?”

“I don’t think so. The only time we dispersed was at the visitors’ restrooms at the end of the visit. Mr. Gunther was the last one out of the restroom. He said breakfast hadn’t agreed with him and the coffee wasn’t helping.”

He paused and looked down at his sheet, reading over everything.

“Thank you, this has been helpful. I am going to need you to stay here longer than we anticipated. I will have someone bring you something else to eat shortly.”

With that, he stood and his secretive colleague followed.

I sat there alone for so long that I was sure they had forgotten about me.

After all the questions he had asked, I was seriously questioning all the people who I thought I knew. There was no way that they could have suspected Mr. Gunther. He was incredibly shy and nerdy, even for a high school teacher. The man had preached about politics and influential public speakers to us for hours in the time I’d known him. I couldn’t see him as a person who would bear ill will toward someone. Yes, he had disagreements with some of their decisions but he set a rule in class that we weren’t supposed to hate others’ ideas or beliefs. We needed to see all sides of their position and argument and respect their decision no matter how wrong we thought it was.

~

Hours later, every inch of my being was screaming that it needed sleep but my mind was racing as it searched for possible answers to all of the questions I had.

After having eaten the soup they had sent me, Agent Parker was once again in my presence.

“We have one more thing we need you to do and then we can send you on your way. We thank you for your cooperation as we understand that you have been through some unimaginable circumstances.”

I nodded in response, unsure if anything I asked would be answered at this point.

He gestured for me to follow behind him. I stood on heavy, tired legs, and followed him out of the small opening for the cubicle. As we walked, two more agents came up behind me and followed us to a large black, dusty SUV.

Maneuvering through the city was slightly easier as they had moved some of the debris out of the way.

My anxiety was climbing at the uncertainty of not knowing where I was headed. I tried to appear calm; however, I could feel my heart hammering against my rib cage, threatening to burst through.

We slowed and stopped in front of a small police station on a corner near the edge of the city. It was cleaner there, untouched by some of the explosions closer to the center of the city.

I followed them out of the SUV and into the stone building. There were FBI agents stationed at the front desk and in the two back offices. Radio chatter floated from one of the back offices but was too far away to make out specific phrases. I could also see some police officers talking with other agents in a room with a glass window partition behind the front desk. There was a large map with red pins behind them as well.

“I need you to identify someone,” Agent Parker said.

He led me into one of those rooms you see on television, where the people are lined up in front of a white wall with boards and numbers.

The light flicked on inside the window revealing two people. A gasp escaped me as my brain tried to comprehend what I was seeing.

There stood Becky and Mr. Gunther. Becky looked worn, her jacket torn in several places, and her long black hair a mess upon her head. Mr. Gunther, however, looked unscathed. He wasn't wearing the same brown tweed coat he usually wore, but a dark blue one.

“That's Becky and Mr. Gunther,” I stammered. “I couldn't find them when our bus flipped.”

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Herrington. That's all we need now.”

I stopped, tugging my arms from one of the agents before they ushered me out of the room. “No, you can't possibly think they had something to do with this. You have the wrong people!”

Agent Parker pursed his lips and attempted again to steer me from the room.

“Can I talk to them?” I asked.

He shook his head in two quick movements. “We need to get you back to the SUV, they are arranging a flight out of here for survivors.”

The light to the window went dark, making it impossible to see them anymore. Before I could say anything else, I was led back to the SUV and driven back to Memorial Park. Just before I left it all for good, they asked me to sign a disclosure agreement and talked to me about what would happen if I shared sensitive information about Becky and Mr. Gunther.

As I flew home I had to come to terms with the fact that I would never see them again. That I was the only survivor from the young ambassadors trip to DC.

I would never again hear Becky prattle on about school gossip or the latest hair trend. I would never again see Mr. Gunther, the geeky teacher who always had some sort of stain on

his shirt and carried a large book with him to the lunchroom. Seeing them behind that window made me second guess everyone that I knew.

Now they're just...gone.

One Last Time

As I lay there in the dark I could feel the sweat forming on the back of my neck. The dampness felt uncomfortable causing the sheet to stick to me. I turned over on my other side feeling the coolness of the empty sheet against my hot skin. I couldn't wait until I could finally fix the air conditioning. Too quickly sheets warmed causing me to feel hot all over again. Even with two jobs, I was barely even able to cover the rent of this New York City apartment let alone fix my air conditioning.

I turned onto my back, opened my eyes and was greeted by darkness. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering from the hallway, the fan rotated, blowing strands of hair across my face.

I just need to get some sleep.

"Oh good. You're finally awake."

I stopped breathing as an icy chill crept up my back. Who was that?

"It's hot in here. Is your air conditioning broken?"

My body felt frozen. I couldn't breathe or move. My heart pounded so hard I felt as if my rib cage would break open.

"Are you going to answer me?"

My eyes slid to my right where the voice seemed to come from. I was greeted by the sight of a dark figure sitting in my corner armchair.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"You know the answer to that."

My breath caught in my chest as I remembered that day four years ago. I could almost feel the rain pelting my face as I stood there waiting for extraction.

"That's all behind me now. Find someone else to do that work for you."

The figure let a long sigh escape them. I knew this wasn't the answer they wanted but I had worked hard to turn my life around. I had managed to land a steady, honest couple of jobs. I afforded a nice enough apartment for myself. Achieving all of this meant I had made it. Made it to my own version of normal.

“If I can’t get you to come in, they will just send someone else.”

“Tell me. How did you find me?” I asked.

“It wasn’t hard. You can change your name however if you don’t change your appearance then you are asking to get caught. Technology nowadays makes disappearing impossible.”

I slowly sat up fluffing my shirt, as it was damp from sweating. I turned to face the figure.

“What’s the job?”

There was silence for a long couple of moments.

“It’s big,” they said.

“I do this and then I’m done. You guys come after me and my next job is you.”

“If you manage to accomplish this job then you shouldn’t have to worry.”

~

If I could do this last thing then I would be able to put it behind me and live my life. I had a long life to live yet, I was only twenty-five and had lived such a hard life already.

Growing up, my parents were in and out of the house until the day they never returned. I had eventually moved to live on the streets at fourteen when welfare checks started occurring. A restaurant owner saw me digging out in his garbage one day and invited me in for a free meal. Before I had even gotten to my fries, a social services worker had been called and was sitting in the seat across from me.

By some stroke of luck, a cookie-cutter all American family adopted me. I could hardly believe it myself. They had seemed wonderful until after six months when they disclosed that they worked for a secret government agency and were going to train me as well. Now here I was eleven years later, one of the highest-paid agents.

“I’m going to drop you off a few blocks down so they don’t make the connection that I’m helping you,” Derrick said.

I turned and looked at him as we drove. To my surprise, he looked exactly as I had left him. This was a job that changed you inside and out, the longer you stayed. Derrick was twenty-seven, having grown up with a hard childhood like me. You needed to be tough and smart to survive like we had, which made us perfect for a job such as this.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. How many should I expect?”

“Tonight is a light shift. There shouldn’t be that many people. Easy to bypass them until you get to the main sector of the building.”

He slowed the car to a stop at a dark corner. The dash clock told me it was two in the morning. The streets were empty in this part of the city. That was good, it meant fewer witnesses.

“Send the signal when you're done.”

I nodded and exited the car. I walked down the sidewalk and ducked through a hole in the wooden fence to my right. I could hear some music thumping from somewhere to my left as I made my way through the dark. Once out of the street lights, my eyes adjusted to the dark with some help from the light that filtered through the gaps of the fence.

One block down. Two more to go.

I peeked my head through the darkness to scan the street. About seven houses down some men were hanging out on the porch. I could see the faint red glow of the ends of their cigarettes from here. I got low and darted across the street, blending in with shadows. When I made it to the next block I scooted into the shadow of a shed.

Two more blocks.

I felt as if all my nerves were on edge. This was a rough part of town where gangs ruled the streets. Out here they didn’t have rules, only the ability to show that they meant business. However, they got that point across seemed to be more gruesome each time.

Our target was at the top of their food chain. I could only imagine how the hierarchy was going to get stirred up once he was gone. He had made the mistake of robbing several federal trucks and stumbled across sensitive information that wasn’t for the public eye. He then posted a video on the dark web offering to sell the information for a high price, putting a huge target on his back.

I heard music to my left thumping to the rhythm of my own hammering heart. I darted down the next street, feeling the adrenaline course through me with every step closer, I hopped the next row of fencing and found myself facing the rear of a large grey warehouse.

I leaned into the ivy that climbed up the side of the brick house next to me, becoming almost invisible. From this vantage point, I could see a small patrol near the sides where two sets of guards hung out near dark black SUVs.

The lights were low but I could hear the bass of a rap song from here. Looking at my watch again, I saw it was around two-thirty. From the recon information, we had gathered things would start to quiet down in the next thirty minutes.

As I waited there, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I saw a message with a link for the blueprints of the building. There were two large rooms on the main floor with a set of stairs that led up towards two small rooms on the second floor.

I leaned down and started preparing my weapons, so I would be ready for anything.

After about twenty minutes, I heard engines start-up and a vehicle drive out of the small gravel lot. I took this as my chance, seeing only one dim light in the top left corner of the warehouse.

The last intel that we had received said he was hiding out here while he waited for the buyer to contact him. If that were true, why weren't there any guards around the perimeter?

I leaned out slightly checking my surroundings for more vehicles but saw nothing except darkness. I wrestled with my options for several moments. Should I call in for more intel or charge in and get the job over with?

My needs for moving on with my life won over and I stood into a crouched walk to dart across the street. I moved swiftly through the gate, my eye on the left corner window, watching for movement. Just before the window was out of sight, there were two quick flashes of light.

I froze, my blood turning to ice in my veins. He could be taking photos of the merchandise or someone was taking photos for proof of death.

I reached the side door and silently turned the handle, squeezing in through the crack. Inside the bottom floor was dark except for the exit signs over the doors and large lights at the far end of the warehouse, hanging over a long metal table.

I backed up until I was no more than a shadow against the wall and checked my surroundings.

There were crates, boxes, and pallets to my right stacked up against the walls with large doors. To my left, there was a set of metal steps that led upwards towards the second floor. I listened for any sounds for a long few moments. My watch said it was now 3:15. I needed to move this along.

Walking on the balls of my feet, I silently ascended the steps with my weapon raised. The door to the first office was open but the room was dark. Upon closer inspection, it was a room with two couches, television, and mini-fridge.

I spun around so I could see both the stairway and the second door. The door was cracked, the light seeping into the hallway, illuminating the gaps in the metal floor.

Using my foot, I slowly pushed the door open to see him facing a desk with his back to me. There was a bottle of beer with a ring of condensation on top of the desk next to him and his phone. Scanning the room I saw no one else. I crept up until I was directly next to him looking over his shoulder only to see he was slightly slumped to the side.

Someone had already been here.

I heard a sharp quick sound just as I felt the pain that seared and radiated in my chest.

Grabbing the desk for support, I turned, shooting for my assailant, only to shatter the window across from me. I then felt another shot in my side which caused me to stumble and fall to the floor.

I gasped for air as I laid there on the matted red carpet. My mind raced through the numerous possibilities of who had gotten here first. What other agency had sent someone to retrieve the information?

Two silent feet walked to stand in front of me. One of the feet kicked my gun away from me followed by a figure kneeling next to me.

Derrick.

“Sorry, nothing personal. I liked you but you knew this wasn’t going to end well.”

I attempted to say something but only garbled sounds escaped.

He stood and turned the target so that he faced me in his chair. He put a gun on the floor to make it look as if it had fallen out of his hand.

“Two birds, one stone. I never truly understood that saying until now, you know.”

I tried to turn to look at him but my side screamed in more pain, keeping me in place.

I saw Derrick slowly walk around me and toward the door.

“You know as well as I do, they were never going to let you go.”

The Drive

Driving down the road on a cold winter night, Loretta could see ice surrounding the edges of the windows. She shivered against the cloth seat, rubbing her hands together until the heat kicked in. Mick had an old beat-up Chevy that was nearly on its last leg. The rust around the tire rims practically begged for it to be put out of its misery.

Mick had taken her to a co-worker's holiday party in the hopes of making some friends for both of them. She was glad for the effort, considering he seemed to be married to work lately. She wasn't exactly a fan of the late nights at the office or phone calls from people that she didn't know at all hours. Everyone there seemed friendly enough.

"That was fun, right?" he asked.

Loretta smiled, thinking of Mick as he told some of his jokes to everyone. He thought he was funny. He always did after a few drinks. It opened him up, made him more personable. Otherwise, he was quiet, focused, and shy. Loretta was the more outgoing and friendly one. This was how they were. This was why they fit so well together.

"Yeah, it was. Everyone there seems nice. We should try to set something up with them to have dinner," Loretta suggested.

Loretta's hands were growing sweaty now as the heater finally started to do its job, blasting warm air straight into her face. She separated her hands and rubbed them on the cloth of the seat to dry them. The cloth felt slightly rough as she dragged her hands across the coarse fabric.

"That would be nice. Did you get Kendra's number?"

Loretta held up a finger and then leaned down slightly. She reached her hand down, searching along the floor for her purse. Her fingers found the zippered pocket just inside the middle section. She ran them along the zipper line until she felt the rounded edge of the zipper tag.

"I think I put it on my phone," she replied.

"Good. You finally took some of my advice. You always write stuff on sticky notes and lose them," he joked.

Loretta opened her purse and rummaged around inside. She felt her wallet, her notepad, and her chapstick. She moved her hand to the right.

Aha!

Suddenly Loretta jolted forward, almost hitting the dashboard; the seatbelt catching her instantly, taking her breath away. Her shoulder ached from the sudden pressure of the seatbelt across her chest.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” Mick frantically asked.

Loretta gasped for air, attempting to make her lungs work.

Mick turned on the overhead light for a better look. Loretta sat back in her seat and pulled the seatbelt away from herself. Looking down in the dim light she could see a red line forming where her chest met the low cut of her dress.

“I’m fine,” she said. “How much did you have to drink? I knew I should have driven.”

Mike crossed his arms, his face growing stern. He looked to be okay. At a glance, the only thing that was out of place was his hair which now fell across his face.

“Oh please. Look out the front. I didn’t hit a tree or anything. Something shot out in front of our car. It was probably an animal,” he spat.

“What, a bear?” Loretta asked.

Loretta looked up and saw no cracks in the windshield, no crumpled hood, but more specifically, no animal.

“You are going to mock me right now? You could hit an animal completely sober,” he said.

Mick unbuckled and climbed out of the car. Loretta opened her door, looking at the ground for any evidence of what they may have hit. When there was nothing to be found she turned to look at Mick. He stood with his arms crossed angrily.

“I’m sorry. It just surprised me. I didn’t mean to yell at you. Are you okay?” Loretta apologized.

“Yes.”

As Loretta and Mick walked towards the front, they peered into the darkness trying to see what it could have been. There was a clear dent in the front bumper. Looking at the road in front of them, past the light of the headlights, there was nothing but darkness.

Waking Up in a Cell

The buzzing of an alarm pulled me out of a dead sleep. A light flickered on above me, causing me to squint into the light. I blinked rapidly trying to let my eyes adjust to the sudden burst of light. As they finally became accustomed, I found myself staring up at a flat gray ceiling.

This wasn't my ceiling.

Where was I?

I slowly sat up, absorbing my new surroundings. My head spun, causing me to slump sideways. I braced myself on the side of the bed frame.

I sat on a bare cot composed of metal and a stained mattress. To my left near the corner there was one metal toilet. Across from me, there were two beds just the same but as bunk beds. The most jarring piece of all was the metal cell door.

I was in jail.

My head pounded with a dull throb from the back. It felt like I had been knocked on the head.

"Good, you're awake. Your lawyer is here to see you," said a guard.

I shot him a look of surprise.

He sighed and used his keys to unlock the door. I could hear the key slide in and the gears clang in the quiet cell. When the door slid to the right, he motioned for me to follow. I walked over to him, seeing the handcuffs that hung loosely in his hands.

As he fastened them I looked him over, trying to remember anything as to why I was here.

He had large dark bags under his eyes, a red nose from a cold, and hair that needed to be trimmed. Nothing was ringing a bell.

I shuffled down the hall next to him. My cell was at the end of a long hallway of cells. The other cells were vacant. That would explain the silence. I must be in a small police station.

He walked me out the door and turned me right down a short hallway. The hallway contained a trash bin, a fingerprinting station, and a desk. At the end of the hallway was a glass door where a woman was posted behind a desk. She was shuffling papers around and signing things here and there. She wore a red blouse and a black skirt with her hair pulled back tight.

As the door opened she looked up, stopping what she was doing. She stood and smoothed out her skirt in quick short movements. She nodded at the police officer as he led me to my seat.

When he was gone she took her seat and sat still. Her eyes scanned me over, making her initial analysis.

“How are you feeling? Are they treating you alright?” she asked.

“I think so,” I replied.

Her eyebrows knitted together at my reply and she frowned slightly.

“Okay, well first things first. Do not talk to anyone without me present. You don’t want anyone twisting your words or using them against you,” she explained. “Secondly, if they question you on their own, you just tell them ‘I want my lawyer present’. They can’t make you talk.”

I nodded, which caused my head to throb even more.

“So let’s start with your statement. Did you tell them anything yet? I need to know what I’m dealing with,” she continued.

“I can’t remember,” I said.

She paused and eyed me. “What?”

“I can’t remember. All I remember is waking up in my cell a few minutes ago. Why am I here?” I asked.

“They did say you were struck on the head. Possibly short term memory loss,” she mumbled as she jotted down notes.

“My head is throbbing,” I mumbled.

She nodded still writing.

“Why am I here?” I repeated.

She put her pen down again and folded her hands together.

“According to the police report that I was given, you were found inside the bank on Fourth Street yesterday night. You were wearing a black mask, black clothing, and had on black gloves. When the alarm was sounded, police arrived to find you on the floor with a

pistol in your hand. The money was gone and all the tools were left behind to open the safe," she said.

"Did I rob a bank?" I asked.

She shrugged. "That we won't know until your memory returns. I will see what I can do for your head. I will also see if I can get a doctor in to see you."

"Did I call you?" I asked.

"I don't know who paid for me. All I know is that there was an envelope of cash left at my office with a note containing your name and location. I was on my way immediately."

I stared at the table. It was a wooden desk with scratches deep and thin over the years of use.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Hummelstown," she replied. "Well, that seems to be all I need for right now. If you need anything ask for me. Otherwise, we will be in touch."

I nodded numbly.

"Wait, what's your name?" I asked.

"Jessica Worthington."

The police officer opened the door, the rusty squeak grabbing my attention again. The keys clanked at his side as he approached the desk. It felt like a giant stomping on my head. I cringed as I stood to go with him. The lawyer didn't look up from her papers, just kept writing.

So just as we had come before, the police officer walked me back the way we'd come. When he brought me back to my cell I felt an empty feeling inside. Why was I here? Why had I been in a bank? Why would I have a gun? Why did someone pay for a lawyer for me?

Slowly my mind churned with questions and throbbed with pain. The day passed this way. It was hard to sleep so I propped my back up against the wall to lie on the side that didn't hurt.

The next morning the police officer was back at my cell door. He brought me a tray with some food to eat. I scarfed it down quickly. He informed me that a doctor was here with my lawyer.

When I approached the room I could see a nicely dressed doctor talking with my lawyer.

Upon entering the room they stopped talking and watched me until the officer left.

"This is Doctor Connelly, he will be doing your exam," my lawyer introduced.

He smiled and motioned for me to sit down. I did as I was told. He checked my breathing, my reflexes, my pulse, my throat, and then my eyes. The light was painful to look at, much less follow.

“His eyes are a little bloodshot. Could be from lack of sleep. Could be from the head injury he sustained,” he explained.

He then prodded my head from front to back. He touched the wounded area making me yell out in pain.

“He has quite a lump here. I would say about the size of a tangerine. That could be the cause of this, although it is uncommon. I don’t want to rule it out. I think we would need a cat scan,” he said.

“Alright. This could be good. I could make a case for medical circumstances or even actions while sleepwalking. That kind of crap happens all the time,” she said jotting down more notes.

Before I knew it, Jessica was telling me she would be in touch with me and I was again sent back to my cell.

I wasn’t sure how long I was sitting there but it felt as if time froze in here. With nothing to do and no one to talk to it was starting to drive me crazy. I needed answers.

I had been hopeful that I would receive a visitor or get a phone call at some point. Truthfully though, I wasn’t sure what bank was on Fourth Street. I wasn’t even sure of where I was. I had never even been to Hummelstown. I was from New York City.

I heard footsteps and walked to the cell door, hopeful I was about to receive some answers.

“Your lawyer is here.”

I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm my every nerve. I felt as if I was on the edge of a cliff with a fifty-fifty chance of falling or being pulled to safety.

I walked down the hall drawing closer to the small room that contained my future. This time through the window I could see Jessica and two other people with her. One was a woman in a grey pantsuit and the other a man in a dark black suit.

I almost tripped over my own feet as I felt my stomach and any hope that remained fall straight to the floor like a sack of bricks.

I entered the room and sat in my usual seat. All three of them were staring intently at the small screen of a tablet.

“Hello,” I managed.

All three looked up at me with confused expressions as if they hadn’t heard me enter the room.

“What?”

Jessica turned off the screen and clasped her hands together in front of her.

“Well, I’m going to be frankly honest with you. As of right now, we are between a rock and a hard place with your case. I have pulled some of my colleagues to assist me.”

I looked between all of them and back to Jessica.

“What’s wrong?”

She pursed her lips readjusting her position in her seat. “Thankfully the bank you were found in had cameras however the footage that we pulled still leaves us with no answers. Now we have more questions than we did before.”

“Okay...”

“The footage revealed someone pulling you into the room unconscious and leaving the items around you, however, the angle of the camera doesn’t allow us to pull any substantial profiling details to find the person who did this. They were good at keeping their back to the camera while wearing black clothing. Besides that, the camera angle is all wrong, making it difficult to say their height,” she explained. “What gets more interesting is that in all the other cameras, there isn’t any other footage of this person dragging you there or of them exiting the building.”

I stared at her absorbing all of this.

“So what does this mean?”

“As of right now you are the only suspect and the DA wants to hold someone accountable. He is willing to make a deal, however without any recollection of the events that took place you are going to take the fall for this.”

The Quietus

By Steph O'Connell

Sophia

Death is often described as a tall black-cloaked figure carrying a scythe, looming over his victims and ending their lives when the time has come. Many claim to have even seen him. Those people are telling the truth.

That description fits me pretty damn well, except that I'm not a man, or all bone, no flesh. And also, I'm not the one that kills them. I'm the one who was watching over them during their deaths, protecting them from the wingéd things that seek to carry them off across the Styx. I keep them safe from my namesake, that is, until the day I fail.

Truth be told, I'm only one of many. Death is more of a job description than a name. And not all of us dress like this or carry the same weapons, but I love wearing all black, I love the classics, and I may have a flair for the dramatic.

It used to be a pretty good gig, I've been told, but that was before the plague when everything changed. Nowadays, we Angels of Death live in The Witching Hour, which is not a time but a place - actually, more like a dimension. That's the shadowy realm where the land of the living and the land of the dead overlap. It's a crazy, messed up place full of monsters, much like a dystopian wasteland. But hey, it's home.

I don't know if I mind the bum rap of our murderous reputations or if I prefer it. Don't get me wrong, it sucks to have the people you're out there risking your life for (well, ok, "life" in our case is a complicated term, just take the word at face value for now. Thanks.) turn around and blame you for their deaths (although, in a way, I suppose they're kinda right). We did everything we could - give us a friggin' break. So yeah, it'd be nice if they knew we were the heroes and not the villains. But on the other hand, I'm kinda glad they don't know what complete and utter failures we are. Like, we may save more lives than we lose, but they don't know that. There's still so many dying despite our best efforts, that they wouldn't be impressed anyway.

Worst. Superheroes. Ever.

So I guess I'm just saying that it's better that they think we're the best supervillains ever instead. Especially nowadays, when villains are trending upwards. People love villains.

Ok, I'm getting off-topic here. It's a little hard to have a straight line conversation with someone when you often go years without talking to anyone. Which is one of the reasons why I end up ranting on and on when I finally do get to talk to someone like yourself.

So you're probably wondering how the whole Angels of Death or Grim Reaper thing started in the first place, right? No idea. Or how someone is chosen to be a grim? Now that I can answer:

The job is always given to the first person buried in a new graveyard. They wake up with the moon that first night and become spirit guides, shepherding the newly departed souls across the River Styx and into the Underworld. Somehow this became common knowledge to the living (I mean, that I'm curious about too. How did they know? Who told them? Resurrection? Zombies? Psychic?). Obviously, people wanted their loved ones to cross over into the next life (and join the rest of the fallen family), not spend eternity helping others cross over instead. So people started insisting that dogs were buried first so that they'd get saddled with the gig instead. Thus, the Church Grim was born. And the tales of the giant black dogs that guarded cemeteries became their own legend.

But superstition has a very short shelf life. People stopped believing in all that, so then people became Grimms again. And here we are. Here I am. Trapped, presumably forever, in the most dead-end job ever.

"Wait, so, you're not the one who killed me?" The boy in the dinosaur pajamas asked, interrupting - speaking - for the first time since he died. Normally, I'd make some sort of wisecrack about losing the death-silence virginity (pretty much everyone gets it), but he was too young.

"Nope. I couldn't protect you though, so I might as well have. But anyway, now I'm just your guide to the next life."

"Next life?"

"That's actually the one topic I don't know anything about. I just get you to the River Styx and then you're off onto your next adventure. I've never crossed to the other side of the river, so I have no idea what's beyond. Good place, bad place, medium place: I'm not sure. Though I suppose they always seem very peaceful when they cross."

He was handling the news surprisingly well for a wee thing, but you can never tell with kids. He seemed to be taking it all in anyways. Death has a way of maturing everyone right quick. They all grow up so fast.

#

Arabella

I stayed after I died. It didn't feel right to leave them behind like this. Not that I was really helping anyways. Mostly I just watched it. I watched them at my funeral, crying over my body, or crying whenever they thought they were alone. I watched the seasons change around me, while I stayed exactly the same.

It took me longer than I care to admit to come to terms with the fact that I was dead no longer alive. I tried to get them to see me, to hear me, to tell me what was wrong with me. And there was nothing so terrible as being unseen and unheard.

After I finally got used to my body being gone, I started living out of habit. I pretended to eat with them. I pretended to sleep. I even pretended to go to the bathroom. I would find myself reflexively jumping into conversations and getting indignant that people interrupted me. Since they didn't know I was even there, I had to forgive them for it.

It's amazing how comfortable boring is.

I got to know my family better, and I wished I could be there for them in body (and not just spirit) with the knowledge of their struggles. I learned that Mom was writing a novel. She kept it hidden from all of us, never thinking it was good enough to share or even finish. It took me to be disembodied to finally read it.

My sister stopped smiling. She used to be happy, obnoxiously so, but now she shuts herself up in her room and wears only baggy sweatshirts. I don't know for sure what happened, but it started after that frat-jerk's party. I wanted to tell my parents, someone, anyone, but no one could hear. I yelled at the top of my lungs. I tried to throw things. I even tried to haunt them like in the horror movies I used to love. It didn't work. But I guess the secret is that living people are already haunted.

Sometimes I felt better knowing they weren't truly alone. But mostly it was torture. Watching without helping. Noticing things I never noticed when I was alive. I told myself that I only noticed now because I could walk through walls and hide in plain sight. But in my heart soul, I knew that I just never bothered to notice. I was so caught up in my own life, however, that wasn't a problem anymore.

I couldn't stay forever; it was too painful. After watching, I wandered. I traveled to all the places that I wanted to see. I got to see museums and movies for free. I learned all the things I wanted to learn. I even attended classes for fun. I got to watch my favorite authors writing new books. I got to experience so many things I would have never had the opportunity to experience. And it was more than I ever dreamed. But the splendor only lasted so long before it grew stale.

I don't know how long I wandered. I lost track of time. It slips through your fingers like grains of sand, returning to the deep. After you're dead gone, there's nothing so insignificant as time. And I would laugh to myself, remembering how often time seemed the most important thing: being on time, having enough time, not wasting time. But time has lost its allure now. I've even begun to think of it as a curse. The final be-careful-what-you-wish-for middle finger from the universe.

Everyone wants more time, but it's not time that we truly want. We're all searching for something to fill the inevitable void in our lives, and we think that if we only had enough time, then we could find it. Even monkeys with enough time could typewrite the works of Shakespeare by accident, or so Chaoticians say. But we are so blind as to the shape of that

void that we wouldn't know what to fill it with even if someone wrote the answer down sixty-six different ways, bound it in leather, and threw it at our faces.

The same could be said even of the dead. I have met others like myself. I'm not the only one whispering around here. But the others are few and far between. Rare. And most of the ones left have lost their minds. Some of them waited for their lover to die and join them here. They watched them die, but they never came. Then they watched their children die, then their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren. Until they went mad from it. Perhaps those are the ones from stories who haunt the moors and lure travelers to their deaths. Hoping to make someone, anyone crossover. Hoping, in their insanity, that knowing how/why someone crosses over could help them solve the riddle. Then perhaps, they think to themselves, they could cross back. Or beyond.

That's why most of us wander. In search of sanity. In search of escaping the need to search for something at all. I found myself sitting and thinking for days (years?) at a time. Mulling over all the questions that have plagued and poisoned philosophers for centuries. From Plato to Shakespeare, "...The undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of?" From Shakespeare to Douglas Adams: "The answer to life, the universe, and everything is 42." But that too could only last for so long.

Then the world turns grayscale. Or rather - a watercolor bleeding into a disaster. As function and focus disappear from life, the lines disappear and colors smudge together. Like the world whipping by when you're on a scrambler ride or merry-go-round. Unable to see anything clearly. I find myself getting nauseous and dizzy on a regular basis. Strange, considering that I don't have a stomach or eyes. But somehow, although the organs themselves have long since rotted away into dust, their muted sensations linger.

Moving through time gives me motion sickness, and I begin to wonder how I ever bore the passage of so much time. It was bad enough when I was stuck in that skeletal cage, but now I drift through time like a fog. No anchor to earth or her inhabitants.

How long can I possibly continue like this? Eternity must surely lead to insanity.

The truth is, I felt like a ghost long before I died my life-as-I-knew-it was over. I felt as if no one really could see me. Like my actions and choices didn't ever seem to change the outcome of the world around me. Like I was drifting unmoored through my life in some weird out-of-body experience. I couldn't take action at the moment, but I was still stuck living with their consequences. Stuck watching myself flounder every minute.

Now that I actually am a friggin' ghost, I realize how dead wrong I was. How much control and power I had, not only over myself but of those around me. I mattered to the world in a complex way that I never could understand. Not until I saw the gap my life left with my own eyes (figuratively speaking).

When you live forever, you see everyone for who they really are. Good and bad do not balance out action for action, but rather blur grayscale. One action - small or large - dissolves into a history of movement. The action loses value and even vivacity. You begin to

see people, not as a sum of actions or attitudes but a whole and complete humanity: with ups and downs, right turns, and wrong ones.

Time takes on the role of judge, jury, and executioner. Through it, you see enemies become allies and allies drift into darkness. Light and shade chase each other around lampposts, skipping in time with the rising sun. And yet, here we stand, in the sunshine and in shadow: taking what we can handle as the moment comes our way. Rising not to triumph or failure but simply, like the sun, to stand our ground once more as the Earth moves around us.

#

Sophia

“So, we’re heading to the river sticks now?” The boy said.

“River Styx. S-T-Y-X. Named by some Greek man who traveled there long before my time. He named it after a river from his writings. The hubris, huh? But it stuck, so we’re stuck with it. That’s how all names work, I guess. I certainly didn’t pick mine.”

“My name’s Toby. They named me after a kid in some old people movie.”

“I always wanted my name to be Sarah. Sophia sounds so pompous. I’m not smart enough to live up to my name anyways. Lots of Sarah’s when I’m from. I wanted to blend in, not...” I trailed off and felt Toby’s little hand wriggle into mine.

“Who’s that,” he whispered, “is she like me?”

“She’s not supposed to be here. Stay close.”

There was a girl - a ghost girl - lying on a park bench staring up at the night sky. Unlike the grayscale living, she was in full color. But she was alone. Where was her spirit guide? When you’ve worked a job for more than a decade, it’s hard to be surprised by anything anymore. But I admit, this was something new to me. New and strange.

“Hello? Are you alright? Where’s your guide?”

She sat up slowly and stared at me (past me?). Her eyes were glazed over like she wasn’t sure what she was seeing.

“Are you - you’re talking to me?”

“Yes...I was just asking where your guide is?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s just me. It’s always been that way.”

“Always? How long have you been alone?”

I’d heard of spirit guides being taken away by the wingéd things before; heard stories about guides who never return, but no guide ever? Had no one been there to receive her?

She shrugged. "I'm not sure how long I've been dead. Time is funny here."

"Yeah, we usually call it the Slip. Although I guess that makes it sound too sexy when it's just the frustrating way that time digests us." I smiled a crooked smile, but it didn't take. She looked...dead - well, I mean more than normal.

"Look," I said, sobering, "I'm not supposed to take anyone who's not in my charge...It's regulation. I'd get in trouble. You understand...Otherwise, I'd take you with me."

Her eyes focused, and for the first time, she seemed to be actually looking at me. "Take me with you where? I thought this was all there is? All there would ever be."

The dead are a strange breed. Most of them look healthier than when they were alive because they no longer have unmet needs. They don't need to eat, drink, breathe. They can just be. But this girl - she looked hungry - like she would waste away into nothingness if the breeze got too strong. I bit my lip and grappled with myself. How could I leave her here? What had she done to deserve this fate? Abandoned by the one supposed to protect her? Was I supposed to let her wander the Earth alone forever until she dissolved? I couldn't. I wouldn't.

"Look...I'll take you with us, but I can't promise I can protect you both...It's a rough journey, you understand?"

She breathed a sigh of relief, breathed for the first time since I saw her. What's that they say about old habits dying hard?

#

Arabella

As soon as you get used to things as they are, they change. A phenomenon and sensation I became familiar with over and over again after death in this new way of life. I couldn't get used to the idea of another place, another phase. The questions raced through my mind and crashed against each other until the waves drowned me. I couldn't think where to start, and I didn't want this - guide? - to change her mind about helping me.

"Where are you taking me?" I ventured.

"To the underworld, the afterlife, but we'll have to travel through the Witching Hour to get there. I'm what you might call a Spirit Guide or Grim Reaper or Psychopomp or - well there are all sorts of names for it. It's a long and difficult journey, which is why I'm here to guide you through." She seemed to hesitate. "I'm sorry that no one was there with you when you awoke after you died. It's not something you should have to experience alone. Maybe the wingéd things took your grim away before you could wake. I can't imagine they'd willingly abandon their duty."

I got the feeling that she was more used to reciting something familiar than responding in her own words.

"What about the others?"

“The others?”

It was so strange walking down these streets with people beside me, rather than wandering alone. It felt less...haunted. More real. Not a ghost town anymore, but like walking to school with friends. When you're alone for so long, you think you'll never get used to being around people again, but it's amazing how quickly you adjust. Like waking from a bad dream, back in your bed at home. Almost like you'd never left at all. Only the dark haze remains around the edges of your mind, not fully dissipated.

It occurred to me that Sophia had stopped walking and was staring at me like she'd seen a ghost (I guess that's a poor choice of words since she technically had).

“What's wrong?”

“You said there were others? Others like you?”

“Yeah, there are others like me wandering around without a guide.”

“There shouldn't be any others. This doesn't make sense. We're all assigned to care for certain people. It's - it's our job. We protect them. Then, when they die, we guide them to the afterlife. No one is forgotten. No one should be.”

“Well, there are. I've seen them. Most have lost their minds. I probably would have too, if you hadn't found me in time.”

Sophia started walking again, lost in thought, so I gave her some space.

“So...you're a ghost too, huh? What's your name?”

“Toby.”

“Arabella.”

After that, the conversation joined the ranks of the dead. We walked in silence. I felt like I would burst from all the thoughts bottled up inside for so long, but I couldn't seem to say anything at all.

The streets became rivers, and the buildings became trees. Leaving behind the hustle and bustle of the city made me feel more alive than I had in a long time. Like I was surrounded by living things and a world I could be a part of, not separate. Everything here breathed as one.

Sophia moved with a purpose, clearly sure of where she was headed. I guess she's walked these woods enough to know the way by heart. It all looked the same to me, each tree like the next. But how did she learn the way? Did someone teach her how to be a grim? How to use a scythe?

As I mulled over which question to ask first, I saw it. It must be the door to the Witching Hour because it couldn't be anything else. An archway of stones stood solitary, with a waterfall for a curtain covering the gateway it created. The water seemed to flow from

nowhere in a continuous cascade. It was impossible to see through the misty falls to the other side, but I didn't need to.

Sophia turned to look at us - her two charges - and asked if we were ready. I didn't really hear her, but I knew that's what she must have been saying. I forced myself to shift my focus to her.

"Toby, are you ready?"

The little boy looked fearful but determined, he gave a firm nod in response.

"Arabella, are you ready?"

"I think I've been ready for longer than I realized."

"Then welcome to the Witching Hour." She gave a silly bow to make Toby laugh and winked at me. I reached out and took Toby's hand, and we stepped through the water together, into the unknown on the other side.

#

Sophia

My memory of walking through that gate into Witching Hour for the first time has all but faded away. Looking at their stunned and somber faces made me wonder what I had been thinking at the time. Now I'm thinking the Witching Hour really is a crap hole.

Ruins of old civilizations speckled the landscape, hedged in by large expanses of deserts and marshes. Ecosystems that shouldn't butt up against each other naturally, struggled for dominance. A far off memory invaded my mind: "a heap of broken images," "fear in a handful of dust." Words from some poem or other I was forced to memorize as a child.

Funny how even the most bizarre places become commonplace if you visit them enough. Looking down from the cliff over the whole scene, thinking about walking those well-worn paths was just another Thursday for me. Not that I know if it's actually, calendricly Thursday - it's just always Thursday in my mind. One of those time Slips.

"Come along, children! We're off on a harrowing adventure! I'll take you over desert peaks, canyons deep, and marshes as old as time itself. On your left, you'll see some provincial rocks. Yep, the Witching Hour is nice this time of year."

I waited for them to start walking. Usually, it took a little while; nobody ever wants to start the journey once they know what's ahead.

"Are there different seasons here?" Arabella asked though she didn't really look like she cared what the answer was. Just a habit of life to ask questions.

"Not really, no."

Toby turned and looked back for the door we had come through.

“Wait, where’d the door go?”

“You can’t see it anymore, Toby. The past is the past. There’s no way to go backward. Not for you. Only grims can go both ways through the door. It’s ok. Ahead is better anyways; you just can’t see all the way there.”

I held out my hand and he hesitated before taking it. We set forward on our way. I noticed that Arabella never looked back. Some people can’t.

I fell back into tour guide mode, more out of habit than anything. Nobody really cares what’s here anyway, the dead don’t stay here long and the grims already know. I keep my voice playful and informative but my eyes peeled for danger. The wingéd things are much more prominent here than in the world of the living.

They drain the life out of the living, and the dead they whisk away to lands unknown. No one knows why they take them, and I dread to imagine it. They don’t usually have a taste for grims though, not sure what makes us different. Are we like dried fruits instead of fresh from the vine? I know I should feel much safer being unwanted prey, but instead, I feel cold dread at the idea. Have I lost entirely what made me human? Am I an empty husk? Not that it matters anyway, I tell myself, no use crying over soured milk or whatever.

After we made it down the out-of-place emerald green hill, we began to cross the desert. The only thing I love more than the feeling of the sand between my toes and under my bare feet is wading knee-deep through the warm marshes or swimming in the Styx. Sort of like a mini-vacation for me. Just gotta find the simple things you can enjoy and learn to love them with all your heart.

“It’s weird.” Arabella’s voice brings me back from my reverie.

“What’s weird? I mean, besides everything.”

“Feeling the sun beat down on you, but you don’t get thirsty. Walking forever without getting tired. Bored yes, but not really tired. It feels wrong.”

“Like how you get hurt in a dream but don’t feel it,” Toby chirped, speaking for the first time in a while. He was a quiet boy, reserved. Though the wee ones usually are.

“Can we? Get hurt, I mean?”

“Yes, grims and ghosts alike can feel lots of things. It’s just that you don’t need anything. You’ll start to feel things eventually. It will tingle like Novocaine wearing off. You kinda gotta get used to your new skin. Come on, we can’t slow down yet.”

“Why? Don’t we have all the time in the world?”

“Yes, but we’re not alone. And the desert has no cover, no hiding places.”

Toby reached for Arabella’s hand, and they pulled each other close.

The sun was setting and the sky caught fire, filling up with color instead of smoke. Streaks of red, pink, purple, and blue stretched out in both directions along the horizon.

“I thought you said there weren’t seasons here; that time was funny here.”

“It is. There are no seasons, but the sun still rises and sets. I’m afraid I don’t know why. I guess because we need it to.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, if you want sense and logic, don’t come to the Witching Hour to find it. There’s no -”

“Look!” Toby cut me off and pointed up at the sky with fear twinkling in his eyes. Black splotches were growing - getting closer.

“Here we go,” I whispered to myself, then loud enough for them to hear: “get behind me!”

Surprise - for the second time on this journey, the second time ever maybe - hit me straight between the ribs and knocked the wind out of me. There were five. Five wingéd things in the sky headed right for us. I’ve never seen five together; they’re not pack hunters. I don’t think I’ve ever seen more than two together, and even that was rare.

“Stay close! Don’t run!” If they did, they would follow them instead, and I wouldn’t be able to protect them.

They ducked down, and Arabella wrapped her arms around Toby and covered him with her body like a shield. I threw off my cloak and raised my scythe high.

It was a storm of black wings rushing around me in circles, talons ripping into my skin. I jumped and spun, bringing my scythe around in a wide arc. I felt it connect and heard a piercing shriek from the creature. But there was no time to check if it was dead. The other two were still attacking. I felt the hot, slick flow of blood down my arm. I didn’t need the blood, but it still made me feel sick and weak. I swallowed hard and ignored the pain. Drawing on the memory of numbness.

I used the bottom end of the scythe to jab the one behind me, then quickly twisted the front to slash at the other. I heard Arabella scream from behind me, but I couldn’t break free from the attack. I cried out in rage and felt the strength well up inside of me. I swung hard, bringing the slice right through the wing of the one in front, then I pivoted my back foot and used the momentum to bring the swing over then down into the center of the other one’s back, pinning it to the ground.

I only had a second to get my bearings. Arabella was bleeding and pinned to the ground under the talons of a massive creature. It seemed to be just staring into her eyes. Toby was fifty feet up in the air, carried off by the fifth and final creature. There was nothing I could do for him. Cursing, I ran to Arabella’s aid. I hooked the blade over its shoulder and yanked it backward, driving the tip of the blade down into its abdomen.

I fell to my knees amidst the bodies of the four wingéd things. Gasping for breath that I didn't need. Arabella jumped up, despite the claw marks bleeding down her back (they must have torn her off of him), and began to run after Toby. I let her. I put my face in my hands and blocked out the world.

Arabella ran after Toby until he disappeared into the blackness of the night sky. She finally sank to her knees. I walked until I caught up with her. I tried to put my hand on her shoulder, but she smacked it away. I hadn't just failed Toby; I had failed her too.

#

Arabella

We left the desert and marshes behind in the wake of our silence. Before us, a forest grew up from the horizon. It extended out both directions, as far as I could see in the gloom. You couldn't call it darkness, because although the sun had set and there was no glowing moon or bright stars, there was light from somewhere. A faint eerie glow that didn't seem to come from anywhere at all. It just was.

I knew that I shouldn't be mad at Sophia. It wasn't her fault; there were too many. But every time I thought of Toby's hand being wrenched out of mine, a wave of acidic anger burned in my veins. I was angry with myself too, but I deserved that, so I let it eat away at me from the inside out.

I started forward through the woods. There was a faint waft of rot discernable beneath the crisp smell of cold; it seemed to emanate from everywhere. No trail. No animal tracks. Nothing for me to follow or avoid; instinctively, I followed a little closer behind Sophia.

The trees seemed unnatural – I mean more than the usual amount that I'd come to expect from this place. And I mean other than that eerie internal glow too. They seemed arranged, placed in patterns, and even grids. The other completely unsettling thing was the silence. It was perfect. No wind to rustle the trees, no distant bumbling brook, no chirping crickets, or hooting owls. The only sound was my own breath and soft footsteps. I was afraid of breaking the silence, but I was also afraid of letting it grow. In the end, not being able to think of anything to say made up my mind for me.

So I got lost in my mind. Trying to pretend that I was anywhere but here. I'd even take a dentist's chair. I felt claustrophobic (agoraphobic?) in the inescapable expanse. If I got separated from her, would I ever be able to find my way again?

I told the fear to feck off. I was busy. But fear's not a very good listener.

It was easy to lose time here. No markers to show its passing. And fear distorted my internal clock. I let my curiosity distract me.

Examining the trees a bit closer, I noticed that the bark was peeling off like paper, looking sort of like a luminescent white birch tree. It looked almost smooth, more like a sanded table than natural wood. I reached out and touched my hand to the trunk.

The response was immediate. The tree lit up like a white glow stick, its internal luminescence kicking into high gear. I took a quick step backward. Sophia stopped and waited for me, but didn't seem phased by whatever was happening. Some sort of mist or bluish-white smoke began to drip down to the ground around me, like rain dripping off the leaves.

Then the mist began to form. No, that can't be right - but it was. It formed into discernible shapes, surrounding me with moving mist creatures, dancing into being. There was a woman, a man, and a dog. I watched in stunned silence, afraid that if I moved or made a sound, it might break the illusion. The three played tag together, running around and laughing like school children. Then the man caught the woman around the waist, and they tumbled to the ground together. She stroked his hair, and he leaned down and kissed her. The dog gave them a moment before nuzzling its way between them. And then they were laughing again. Slowly, the mist began to lose shape and was drawn back up into the tree - sort of like rain falling upwards and becoming a cloud again.

I stood there a moment longer, speech still alluding me.

"This is the memory grove."

I turned and stared at her, waiting for more.

"Grims don't have infinite memory, although we seem to live forever. As the memories begin to fade, grims will plant their memories in the ground. They grow into these trees, which keep the memories safe. Then we tend our trees; you have to take good care of them or else they die. Their cores are very strong, yet their lives are so fragile."

"Could I plant some memories here?"

"No, only grims can plant their memories here. But you wouldn't want to anyway. First and foremost because where you're going, there's no coming back from there. You'd never get to see them again. You see, when you plant them, you no longer hold the memory in your mind. It's gone. And as you saw, the memory isn't nearly as vivid as it would be in your mind. But it's better than losing it altogether. Usually, grims try to wait as long as they can, then plant them before the memory fades for good. You'll have the memory of seeing the tree's mists, but not the memory itself anymore. So we tend them every day so they never die."

"But you've been with us more than a day. Does that mean your trees have all died?"

She smiled kindly at the fear in my voice. "Not to worry. We always tend each other's trees while we're gone."

"Really? That would never work with the living."

"Well, no one wants anyone to lose their trees. That would be horrible. And if we all do it for each other, then no one needs to worry about what will happen to theirs if they're delayed. And also, it's oddly self-serving to help keep other people's happy memories alive."

You see, then we get to share them. Otherwise, there'd be too much doom and gloom nonsense around here. You know, with it being an undead wasteland and all."

It was strange to think of dead people like me coming here to plant memories. Strange to think of them coming to visit these trees like the dead might visit gravestones. Why do we look to these unfeeling bits of earth to remind us of our far-off loved ones? None of it really made sense.

"So, if there aren't any dead trees, then where is that rotting smell coming from?"

She made a face somewhere between awkward and weary. "I'll show you."

When we came to the edge of the forest, there was a small patch of neutral ground before the forest began again - but this time as a swamp. Instead of a well-ordered grove of beautiful thriving trees, it was a swamp full of rotting trees clumped together with interweaving vines and weeds. The water was dark as ink and as slick as oil.

"What's wrong with those trees?"

"Those are bad memories. Grims plant them to get rid of them. They never tend them, so they have run wild and infected each other. They grow off of each other's rot."

"I thought you said that trees that aren't properly tended die completely? These trees are sick, but they aren't really dead."

She pursed her lips. "For some reason, the bad ones never die. But they do run wild since no one takes the time to tame them."

I took a step towards the closest tree and reached out my hand. Sophia caught my hand and stopped me. "Don't. What you see can never be unseen. It's not worth it." She kept her hand on mine until I lowered it. Always protecting, even me, even now.

She led me back to the memory grove, and we walked through to the other end of the forest.

"We're almost there now. Just down the coast and across the Styx. Soon you'll be home sweet home."

I didn't bother to correct her. To tell her that a place I'd never been could never be home sweet home.

"Can I ask you something?"

"It wouldn't be your first question, and it won't be your last." She smiled like a customer service rep, practiced, and with a happy-go-lucky facade.

"Why haven't we seen any other grims? There has to be a ton of you."

"We always take different paths because groups of people tend to attract the winged things. It would draw too much attention to walk together."

“But we’ve never even seen one walking far away. On the cliff, in the wide-open desert and marshes. Shouldn’t we have seen one from a distance at least?”

She hesitated, clearly flipping through some mental manual for the answer.

“I - I don’t know,” she admitted at last.

“Huh,” I fell silent for a moment, not daring to acknowledge what I was thinking. “And how did you learn all this stuff about being a grim in the first place?”

She shrugged, “It was all sort of intuition, I guess. I just woke up from death and knew that I was one. Knew what to do.”

#

Sophia

I didn’t like the look in her eyes. Her restlessness had only intensified during the journey; usually by this point, most of the dead were, well, at peace. Even the wonder in her eyes from the forest had almost entirely faded, and she walked through the woods as though these trees were normal, everyday birch trees - and not, you know, glowing. I put a little pep in my step to encourage her.

“We’re at the home stretch now,” I told her, and let myself fall back into the familiar monologue. I prattled along as the underbrush trickled into sand, and the coast became visible through the dissipating tree line. “Ok, so it’s more of a sea than a river - but again, we’re often stuck with names.” I couldn’t remember if I gave that spiel to Arabella too, or only to Toby. But she didn’t ask.

This was my favorite part. Though I’ve lived many lifetimes over, I have yet to get used to the simple beauty of it. Ever since I was a child (and you know, alive), I had always loved spending our summers by the sea. Something about the way the water drowned the sand, the peaceful and constant lapping of the waves on the shore. The very soul of the earth breathing in and out - powerful, eternal, reassuring.

Here it was always night. And the moon, which hid from the rest of the Witching Hour sky, kept an ever-watchful eye over the Styx. The moonbeams skipped across the surface of the waves, lighting the path we were to travel, so no one ever got lost.

“How do we get across?”

“Well, it’s rather simple. All we need is a tear.”

“A tear?”

“Yes, it calls the boat. That way, nothing inhuman can ever cross. I suppose that’s where they get the saying about paying the ferryman. It’s not a coin in the mouth, it’s a tear in the River. To feed the sea. What use would I have for coins anyway? I got nowhere to spend it, am I right?”

She gave a half-hearted chuckle, which was less laugh than I thought the joke deserved or than I was used to. Oh well, I'd just have to grim and bear it. I thought about making that joke aloud too but decided against it. Maybe she was trying to cry.

"Don't worry, we've got all the time in the world," I told her reassuringly, sitting down on the soft sandy beach. She sat down too.

I'm usually a good judge of character, able to tell who is going to cry pretty quickly, and who will take a little while. So I made myself comfortable on the sand, making sure that I was out of her field of vision, giving her what privacy I could.

And this was my least favorite part. It was so boring - I mean, don't get me wrong, it was sad too, sad watching people cry - but mostly it was boring. Having never paid the toll myself, I often wondered what people were thinking about. Did their thoughts drift to being dead and all that, to missing their families, or to their saddest memories? I thought about Arabella and what she might plant in the morose swamp. What dreadful memories kept her up at night.

Goosebumps traveled up my legs from the cool breeze over the water. I pushed heaps of sand over my legs to keep them warm. Eventually, I shaped the heaps into haphazard sandcastles, then wiggled my legs like a small earthquake and watched them tumble down to ruin. I drew little pictures in the sand next to me, then wiped them away like a blackboard.

Arabella sat with her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them, staring out over the sea. It occurred to me that she might be thinking about Toby. The younger they were, the harder it was to deal with failing them. I thought about his dinosaur pajamas and his goofy but shy smile. He hadn't said much, but I could tell he was kind and bright. All lost, because of me.

I wiped away the salty drop from my cheek - the breeze must have sprayed a bit of sea mist at me. Arabella was taking forever. I lay back on the sand and stared at the sky. There were no stars, but you could still get lost in staring at the inky blackness. After a while, you fancy that you see shapes and movement and swirls of darkness - kind of like closing your eyes at night before bed.

Arabella stood. I sat up and saw the boat float up to us, riding a wave further up the beach than would be natural. Arabella caught it but didn't get in. Finally, I thought (though not unkindly). I pushed the boat out to shallow waters and waited for Arabella to climb in. Then I shoved off and climbed in too. The look on her face was strange to me, and her eyes looked clear.

#

Arabella

It was daunting, staring out over that open sea. Just me and Sophia and the whole expanse of the Styx surrounding us. And the unblinking moon. A large great eye staring down at me. Its scorching gaze singed the surface of the water, and we were headed straight into its line of fire. But I couldn't turn back now; I had to go the whole way.

The silence between us felt wider than the sea. And I know it couldn't be easy for Sophia to sit there in it, feeling like I was mad at her, feeling like a failure, but I couldn't find any words to comfort her. I wonder if she could have chosen this life, would she have made a different decision? She seemed happy, like she enjoyed her job - but could she really be happy with an eternity of this?

She was the ideal grim: playful, easy-going, protective, comforting, calming - exactly what the newly departed needed for a long journey through a wasteland to their final resting place. Not a pessimistic, sardonic, unfeeling mess of a person - what could that kind of person really do to help anyone? Other than make things worse?

We slowed to a stop, and Sophia let the boat list to the side. On my right was the end of the path, where the sky and the sea finally touched. Under the clear water, I could see a sort of sandbar, about knee-deep, that led to the great beyond. On my left was the way back to the Witching Hour shore.

"You just have to walk the path, and then you'll crossover."

Sophia's voice startled me; I had almost forgotten she was here with me. Although I don't know how, since she's the one who rescued me from my terrible fate. I don't know what consequences, if any, she would face for helping me, but she had made the choice anyway. I could have told her I wasn't worth it, but I came with her anyways. I couldn't stop myself from thinking it, though I tried: it should be Toby sitting here, not me. Toby who should be sitting across from Sophia, heading to safety and peace and warmth. Toby who should have been walking down the sandbar now, waving goodbye with his little hand and his shy smile. And still, I could not cry.

"Would you walk with me?" I don't know why I asked her, why I let the words escape my mouth.

"I'm sorry, Arabella. Grims can't stand there. It's like an illusion; we can see it, but we can't touch it. If we tried to swim the path, it just goes on indefinitely."

I didn't bother asking her how she knew.

Ok, get out now, I thought to myself. But my brain didn't send the message to my limbs.

"It's ok, I'll wait as long as you need."

Somehow her reassuring sentiment annoyed me, and I got out and stepped on the sandbar. The water was much warmer than I had imagined. And it soaked my ripped jeans up to my knees. I stared up at Sophia and she smiled encouragingly, which made me realize why she was bothering me. She was kind and comforting, and I wanted to be uncomfortable.

"Well, if I have to do this bit alone, I'd rather be alone. Is that ok?"

There was a flash of hurt on her face, but it was quickly replaced with the kind smile I'd come to know so well. "Of course it is. It's been a pleasure getting to know you, Arabella. Enjoy the best rest of your life." She gestured like a tour guide, then gave a friendly yet awkward wave, and she was off. It must be odd to meet so many people, get to know them - over and over again - then say a quick 'bye forever,' knowing you'll never see them again. It was certainly unenviable, and yet.

I stood there and waited until the boat faded from view. I turned and my eyes walked the path ahead. Then I let the thoughts - all the thoughts I'd been holding back - surge and crest over my mind. I let myself follow every thought to its conclusion, every train to the end of its tracks. Every thought, until my mind finally cleared, leaving one thought in its wake.

I could not let the other deserted souls, Toby, and all those like him, wander lost with no one to guide them. I was no longer living dead. Just dead. And maybe I'd be lost forever. And that was ok. But they didn't have to be. I could not abandon them.

I sank through the sandbar and began treading water. I turned and swam, following the moonlit path to the shore.

Thank you for reading this Short Story Collection.

If you have time, please feel free to leave a review. We would love to hear your feedback.

About the Authors



You can find Hicks outdoors with her husband and daughter, her nose in a good book, or playing video games. Some of her favorite books include *Under the Never Sky*, *28 and Half Wishes*, and anything by Colleen Hoover. Writing however is her greatest passion and has been since high school. Hicks is also the author of *Kale Stone: An Outliers Tale* available on Amazon.

[Kale Stone: An Outliers Tale is available on Amazon](#)

Connect with Kayla Hicks at these places for updates on upcoming projects:

[Kayla Hicks Website](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)



Steph O'Connell is a whimsical spirit who haunts the corridors of libraries and bookshops. Always found with her nose stuck in a book. While her interests are as eclectic as they come, she feels most at home among the fantastic: fantasy, science fiction, tabletop games and RPGs, the gothic, and all things weird. She teaches college writing and literature and writes copy for her local theater. Her short fiction has been featured in *The Fine Print* and *Red Hyacinth*. Perhaps her dreams of being a Ravenclaw, Water bender, or Rivendell elf are a bit unrealistic, but every good Book Wurm knows that some worlds are more than real.

Connect with Steph at these places:

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Kim Bell for editing these stories for me, you are the best!

Thank you to Cix Zander and Ben McQueeney for helping me make the story After the Shock so much better with their advice.

Thank you to my writer group Marios Eracleous, Karen, Sarah Erikson, Samir Karam, Kelly Barr, Melissa Rodgers, Peter James Martin, Demi Jae, Katy Dyers, C. S. Wachter, CJR Isely, V. M. Fuentes, Bel Empath, and Siobhian Hodges. You guys inspire me daily.

And lastly thanks to my husband for giving me the final push into writing I needed.

Book Club Questions

1. What do you think hit Loretta and Mick's car in "The Drive"?
2. Do you think that the main character in "Waking Up in a Cell" will be charged for the robbery? If not, what theories do you have as to what would happen?
3. In the short story about "Hemway", would you have made the same choices as Hemway?
4. Do you think the main character in "One Last Time" made mistakes that they normally wouldn't make?
5. What is the significance of the title "The Quietus"?
6. How does the story "The Quietus" portray mental health?
7. What is the psychological significance of Memory Grove in "The Quietus" and what lessons can be learned from it?

