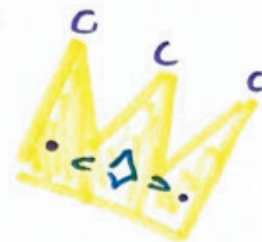


MIDDLE SCHOOL



Historical Fiction



Grades 4-12

YWYR

2025



Fantasy



WC&P



Art by Clare McInnis



Bobby Rea



Welcome, brave scribes and spellbound storytellers, to the grand unveiling of our enchanted anthology: Twisted Fairytales - Tales from the Forgotten Realm!

Over the past two weeks, you have journeyed deep into the misty glens, cursed kingdoms, and eerie halls of imagination. Guided by the flickering lanternlight of forgotten legends, you've written not just tales—but testimonies—of magic gone awry, love turned venomous, and heroes who aren't quite what they seem.

Your quills danced through shadowy places like the wailing Wraithlight Mansion, where whispers echo from cracked nursery walls and bottled screams are locked away by alchemists of old. You wandered through Deadwharf's brine-slick alleys, listened to secrets hissed beneath Hollowmouth Well, and dared to enter the Vermin Crypt—where not all bones stay buried.

Each haunted haunt was more than just a setting. It was a writing forge. At every turn, your characters were tested: by riddles in the Thornmouth Conservatory, memories trapped in the Echoing Nursery, and the haunting call of the Dirgewood Kingdom, where a twisted wedding in the cursed halls of Thornhollow Keep loomed like a prophecy carved in bone.

And ah—the fashion! Let us not forget the dreadful delight of the Runway of Ruin, where you conjured costumes fit for corrupted royalty, cursed creatures, and villains cloaked in glamour and gloom. From glittering hexed veils to blood-spattered ballgowns stitched with secrets, your characters wore their stories as boldly as they spoke them.

You even faced the mercurial whims of Fortune's Fate, a game where fate's golden coins brought both peril and power, shaping the way your tales unfolded. And who could forget the Hexed Pair challenge, where you uncovered the tangled ties between unlikely allies, enemies, and soulbound strangers?

Every tale, every outfit, every inky whisper on the page has led to this: a collection of stories that shimmer with magic, menace, and mayhem.

Together, they form a tapestry of reimagined folklore, stitched together by your courage to twist the tales you thought you knew.

So draw back the velvet curtain, light a lantern, and step into the anthology. The Forgotten Realm awaits... and its stories remember you.

Sarah Hyson

Greetings and Salutations!



Within this anthology you will discover the creative expression of the Historical Fiction Writers. Their words may transport you to Ancient Greece, the Tudor Period, the Victorian Era, the Mexican Civil War, Colonial America, the Westward Expansion, and the Gilded Age.

In our first week together, we worked on character development, genre requirements, research for creative writing, bending the rules, and historical fiction in game format. Our second week focused on feedback and revision. We explored some creative methods for identifying aspects of our writing to revise - tools that our students can continue to use with all of their writing! We played with organization and format, finishing our week with language games.

We hope you enjoy our tales,
Professor Hyson, Annalise, and the Historic Fiction Writers

Pandora

Sister, I know why you opened that box,
just as I know it was not truly a box,
as no vessel could
contain all that you released
into this world,
and despite the myth, the stories
of blame,
evil existed long before you,
and if that is so, that there was
no box - what did you open,
and what did you release,
if not all the evils on humanity,
or all the blessings
(depending on which story you believe)?
Could it be, that as your name implies,
you opened yourself, your heart,
and brought out of humanity
all the evils, all the blessings,
all that was already there,
waiting.

For the pain in the world, you
open your heart,
as we may, too,
and the question lingers,
why did hope remain,
once your heart was open,
and the evils and blessings
fled?

Did hope remain of its own accord,
a comfort to humanity,
or did you keep it behind,
knowing that,
with your heart open to the world,
you must hold on to hope.

No matter which,
we, too, can hold onto hope,
as we see the evils and blessings
of the world all around,
and open our hearts to humanity.

Six Pence for Dickens

The room was dimming as I squinted to see where I needed to place my needle to fix this button. I poked through the fabric quickly and nicked my finger, hissing in response. I studied my thumb looking for any signs of blood. When I found none, I let out a sigh of relief as I continued my work.

It was almost time for the reading, and I was anxious that I was going to be late. I read in the newspapers that the famous author Charles Dickens was going to perform a reading of his story, A Christmas Carol, and that the entry fee was 6 pence. It was a lot, however, I knew that it would be worth it. This stubborn button, though, was testing me; I could not see with the waning light. My head snapped up as I heard a knock on the door.

"Lizzie, Mrs. Wright wants you upstairs. She's having trouble putting the children to bed again."

"Okay, I'll be up in a minute," I said, quickly finishing up the button.

I put the sewing kit in my room and made my way up into the house. The home was elegant, and I always loved its polished floors, gilded frames, and velvet chairs. I was lucky to have landed a job as a housemaid; it provided me with food and a place to live. I was fortunate compared to others. As I walked down the hall, the sound of crying filled the air. The children missed their father terribly as he had been away on business and had not made it home for Christmas. Anna was a sensitive child and was the most quiet sibling, while Jacob, on the other hand, was full of energy. The children were very close and often reflected each other's emotions. Which led to moments like these. And with both under the age of 5, Mrs. Wright, due any day with another child, had her hands full. I opened the door to the room as I was hit by the sounds of amplified crying. Anna sat crying on the end of the bed, and Jacob was wiggling in his mother's arms, crying out.

"Papa! I want papa!" He screamed as tears fell down his face.

"I know, I know, honey. We all miss him." She said over their cries, struggling to hold him. I reached for Anna's stuffed animal and carefully scooped her up into my lap as I held her rocking her back and forth and started to sing.

"Silent Night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright, round you virgin mother and child, holy infant so tender and bright..." Their cries softened a bit in shock as I continued.

"Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace..." I kept singing until the second verse until the room was silent. Mrs. Wright, who was now seated on the other side of the bed, were all looking at me intently as I looked down at Anna, who was clutching the animal in her hands.

"I know you all miss your papa dearly. And I know it was hard without him on Christmas. I miss my Mother and Father too. He'll come home soon, and then you can tell him all your adventures. But for now, Jacob and Annie." I said as I playfully tickled them under each of their chins as they giggled in response. "You two are so lucky because you have a wonderful Mother who loves you so much, and you have me, and Mrs. Carlisle, and Mr. Banks. We will always be with you, and even when those we love are far, far away. They will always be with you, right? Here." I said as I used the stuffed animal to point to Annie's heart.

She let out a giggle as she snuggled up against the soft fabric. I smiled as I looked at Mrs. Wright, who had tears in her eyes, and nodded to me.

Annalise DeVito

I helped put the children to bed as I walked out of the room and down the hall, as Mrs. Wright called out to me.

I turned, and she placed a hand on her back as she walked over. "Thank you so much. The children love you so much."

"As do I. I love spending time with them."

Mrs. Wright smiled. "I do hope he's coming home soon. He wrote to me after Christmas that he would return home soon."

"He will. I'm sure he's just busy with work, ma'ma."

She sighed and looked outside at the snow that was falling gently as it came down in big, flat flakes.

"I hope so. I'm going to turn in early tonight. I need to get off my feet."

I went ahead of her and opened the door to her room and placed the candle on a table as I lit a few more lanterns. "Do you need any assistance?"

"No, I'll call Mrs. Carlisle up, you're free to go. I know that you have that reading to get to."

I looked up at her, and she had a smile on her face. I had forgotten about the reading, and by looking at the clock, it was almost time for me to leave.

"Go. I wouldn't want you to be late." She said, undoing her hair as she pulled the tassel next to her bed to call up Mrs. Carlisle.

I did a quick curtsy before walking towards the door. "Thank you, Ma'ma. Have a good night." I ran down the main stairs and then down the servants' stairs as I grabbed my cloak, gloves, and bonnet, making sure the small bag of coins was in my pocket.

As I walked outside, I pulled my cloak closer as the snow whirled around me, sticking to my cloak and hair. I walked down the streets, my shadow formed on the tall buildings, and as I walked faster, my excitement and nervousness welling up inside of me as I willed my steps to go faster. Minutes later, the Town Hall came into view as I saw a line of people waiting outside. I joined the queue of people as we all chatted among ourselves, huddling close to provide warmth. After standing outside in the cold, the doors finally opened at the top of the hour as people filed in. I gave my entrance fee to the person at the door and went inside to find a seat. I took off my bonnet as I sat down in the 2nd row, and more and more people filed into the space. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of people who were here. I looked to the stage as I saw a small wooden table with a miniature stand with a green velvet pillow with golden tassels resting on top. Beside it was a glass of water. After the meeting house was filled and people stopped coming in, the doors shut. A hush came over the audience as a tall man with a long grey beard stepped up onto the podium. The man took a drink of water and opened the book, his one hand resting on the green pillow. I watched in awe as he looked down at the book and began reading.

WC
WP



MIDDLE SCHOOL



Young Readers Young Writers

2025

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Twisted Times

Once upon a time, there was a kingdom called Cronaria, where time was everything. People earned time, spent time, and even lived or died by it. Time was currency. Power. Life itself. Every second was tracked by the kingdom's sacred guardians—The Timekeepers—who forbade stealing, tampering, or unnatural transfers. But one girl, Lira Croft, made the greatest mistake in the history of time.

Her twin sister, Mira Croft, was dying. She had severe anemia and only weeks left to live. Doctors had exhausted all hope. But Lira had not. She believed in stories. Ancient ones. Legends that said the old temples, forgotten and sunken into myth, followed different rules for time. Desperate, Lira set off for the one closest to her heart: The Sunrise Temple.

I yawned as the morning mist kissed my cheeks, sipping my usual matcha on my usual daily walk, wearing my usual hoodie and boots. But nothing felt usual anymore. Mira was dying in a hospital bed. My parents, normally on night shifts, now worked double days just to keep her treatment going. I walked the same trail we used to take as kids. My head buzzed with questions I couldn't answer. If time was so precious, who was willing to give it up? Why would anyone trade what they needed to live?

I didn't understand. As I reached the end of the trail, something caught my eye—a weathered wooden sign tangled in ivy. I stepped closer and brushed it off: "Sunrise Temple: Place of New Beginnings." My heart leapt. "Found it," I whispered. I pushed past the birch trees, heart pounding faster with every step. Ahead, the forest opened onto a hidden cove. The sea sparkled with morning light, and white pillars rose like teeth from the cliffs. I remembered this place—our place. Mira and I used to swim here. We'd hear echoes in the caves and search for rare shells. Sometimes we'd bring our little sister, Gia, and picnic on the rocks. But there wouldn't be many more memories like that—not unless I did something now.

The inside of the temple was flooded with golden sunlight. Dust floated in the air like frozen seconds. At the center of a sunlit altar lay a scroll, curled and glowing faintly.

I picked it up, and it read:

Aisha Chhetri

"Time does not wait,
but it can be persuaded.
Where wave forgets and wind remembers,
lay your hand upon the relic and whisper:
'By breath unspent and tides unturned,
I call forth what has not yet burned.
Grant her day not yet begun,
And I shall pay when time is dancing.'
Take heed...

The sea keeps no promises.
The future is not a gift—it is a gamble.
What returns with the tide
may not be what you lost.
And once the hourglass is turned,
nothing flows quite the same again."**

I stood trembling in front of the shrine. A silver-blue hourglass sat atop it, its sand perfectly still—paused in time. I placed my hand on the cold glass and whispered:

"By breath unspent and tides unturned,
I call forth what has not yet burned.
Grant her day not yet begun...
And I shall pay when time is dancing."

A pulse.

The sand rose inside the hourglass—defying gravity. The air thickened. Wind roared.
My feet lifted an inch off the ground. Then— Darkness.

I opened my eyes to the sound of waves and seagulls. Warm sun touched my face. I was back at the cove... but different. Younger trees. Clearer water. A purer version of the place I knew. I turned. And saw Mira, splashing in the water, healthy and joyful. Laughing. Alive. Then I froze. There was no Gia.

No little voice chasing shells. No butterfly net, no giggles. Just Mira and... a younger version of me. Something felt missing.

I tried to remember. I could feel the gap—like a name on the tip of my tongue.

Gia.

The memory was slipping.
Behind me, a voice whispered:
And Mira breathes because of them.

Aisha Chhetri

"You asked for more time."

I turned. A man in sea-colored robes stood beside the altar. His eyes were gray like clouds before a storm. A Timekeeper. "Time does not appear from nowhere," he said. "It must be taken. The relic chose a close thread to unravel—one with strong ties, and years to give." My voice cracked. "My sister?" He nodded solemnly. "She existed. But now her time belongs to Mira." My legs gave out. I collapsed to my knees.

"I can't remember her," I whispered.

"You won't." His voice was calm. "No one will. That is the price. She has been... unwoven."

In the distance, Mira laughed again.
And the waves rolled in.

I found myself back in the temple. The scroll was gone—turned to dust.
The hourglass was missing.

And when I looked outside... Mira was standing on the trail, smiling, fully healed. "I feel amazing," she said. "It's like I was never sick. But... I had this dream. We were little, playing by the water. And there was someone else... a girl."

She shook her head. "Weird, right?" I smiled. But my chest was hollow. We walked the trail back together—her steps light and fast, mine slow and heavy. She lived. She remembered nothing. No one would ever say Gia's name again. But somewhere, in a ripple of time, her years live on.

About the author:

My name is Aisha Chhetri. I like to write fiction and personal narratives. I'm a freshman at Downingtown East. I'd like to write a book in the future. I also enjoy playing school and club volleyball.

Emma Duke

What a Peculiar night indeed.

If I weren't so troubled by the withering water at the Wishing Well Inn, I would have maybe spared a thought to the three tattered troublemakers watching me from outside my bar window. They all wore big, baggy, and black cloaks that were lined with strips of shining silver. More aggressively apparent than that, they were all of unbelievably unnatural sizes. One was terrifyingly tall, one was shockingly short, and the worst of the warped watchers was as swollen and stout as the strawberries in Mr. Garrot's garnished garden.

I at first impulsively assumed that they were there because of my notorious notion to use absurd and abrasive alliteration, but if that was the case, why wouldn't they show a fraction or even a follicle of their fanatical faces?

I continued to clean the clear crystal cups I use to customarily serve the customers at my bar, the moon rising outside. On a side note- the water at the tavern I work in is rather poor in quality. Just as I had the tremendous thought to speak to my boss about it, I was snapped out of my thoughts by a jovial jingle of the bells hanging from the door that usually means a customer had come to my bar. However, it wasn't a troubled traveler or a patriotic patron... It was one of the troublemakers- more specifically the strawberry shaped one.

"The bar is currently and correctly closed, sir! You'll have to go to the back to rent a room to rest! Come back another terrific time to grab a dazzling drink if you dare!" I exclaimed enthusiastically to the strange stranger despite my growing unease. They didn't leave, but they walked closer to the counter I had then started cleaning, the cleaned cups resting on the rickety rack above my sink.

"I'm not here for a drink." The troublemaker's voice was as odd as they were. It was both deep and high pitched at the same time, and it made my head hurt.

"Well, then what are you here for?" I responded, trying to keep my composure. My grip tightened tenfold on my towel, which slowed to a stop on the smooth surface. The troublemaker took down their hood, revealing a masculine face obscured by a silver masquerade mask which matched his robes.

"I'm here to take you to be fixed."

"Fixed? Good sir, I'm fantastically fine at the monumental moment which is today."

Emma Duke

“That’s the issue, bartender. Monumental moment? Fantastically fine? It’s a regular Tuesday evening, it’s raining, and there’s no way you’re ‘fantastic’ after what happened to our lord and savoir president his highness king sire his honor? LASPHHKSHH?” The stranger took another step closer, leaning against the countertop with a creepy creak. I winced as he so boldly brought up our lovely LASPHHKSHH (pronounced lasp-heh-kesh), knowing it meant he was either a rowdy rebel or a grating government official.

“Excuse me, good sir, but I wasn’t memorably made aware of what happened to our lord and savior president his highness king sire his honor. Please enthusiastically or unenthusiastically enlighten me.” I said, taking a small yet beautifully brilliant bow in case it was indeed a government worker I was speaking to. The man tapped his head in a show of half respect, signalling he happened to have a full 3 ranks in the honestly horrible hierarchy on my sorry self.

“Nevermind his loveliness’s accident- you’re an anomaly that needs fixing. This.. consistency to use the same lettered words is a problem, and a large one at that. We’ve recently outlawed any unauthorized displays of whimsey, and you are a walking violation.”

“I don’t-”

“...have a choice. You will be coming with us, and you will be getting fixed so that you won’t even mention customary customers or being fantastically fine ever again. We’re leaving in 3 minutes as per protocol. Go get your identification papers.”

I bit my lip, my hands fiddling fearfully for a fraction of a minute before forcing myself to simply smile. It was too late to back off. I swallowed sorely, before speaking softly.

“Would you like a drink to drown your duties, good sir?”

“I.. ‘spose it wouldn’t hurt.”

Well, it wasn’t the worst time I wasted my homemade vial of Wzizic™ poison on a worrisome officer who got a little too terribly close to taking me. The only poor part of this pesky process is, especially with this rather plump person, finding a hole big enough to hide the body.

About the author:

Hi, I’m Emma! I’m 13, have two birds, and love to write! I enjoy reading very long fantasy books, and I enjoy writing mystery novellas.

Ilium: Andromache

My city burns. My city burns while I stand in captivity, watching all crumble down. I always knew war would eventually leave its mark on my city, but I somehow still held onto the hope that it would leave it untouched. Hope. Something I have not truly felt in the past ten years. If anything, I feel numb. A numbness that has grown indifferent to the prickle of war.

I suppose I should count my blessings. I have fulfilled my purpose in life—to find myself a suitable partner and bear a child. But so have most. What makes me special? The title of princess plays no significance in war. High status only marks you as a target for both captivity and death. That is why I remain crowded with the other highly women of the city, merely waiting to be claimed as slaves.

It is late in the day. The sun filters through the drapes, casting a soft orange glow on the floor tiles. My infant son continues to sleep soundly, still curled up in my arms. I take the chance to set him in his cradle, tucking him snugly in with the silks. The quiet does not last long. The slamming of the bedroom door abruptly the stillness of the afternoon, a panicked palace guard barging in. He places both hands on his knees to bend over and catch his breath, as though he had run the whole way here.

"Princess, your husband... He has been defeated in battle." He finally pants out, eyes glued to the floor. I feel my body grow rigid. When sense returns to me I pick up my son and take a step forward, studying the guard in disbelief.

"Pardon?" I reply tentatively, my slowly waking son whining quietly as he yawns. The guard swallows nervously, taking off his helmet.

"Your husband is gone, princess." He repeats, his gaze meeting mine apologetically. That numbness washes over me again. I could not laugh nor cry, reality something I could not let in. Would not.

I watched each day from the tower as the Greeks, brutes as they were, dragged my husband's body around my city walls in mocking. A warning, they deemed his death. I began to accept his spirit would never rest, but on the twelfth day my father-in-law entered the city gates with my husband in tow as well as the news of a ceasefire. I could not bear to watch as he was cremated to nothing more than a pile of ashes, nor as what was left of him was placed in purple cloth and enclosed in a golden casket, temporarily laid to rest.

Claire McInnis

It was that night I reached my limit. Knowing the ceasefire would not last long now that he was resting, I had to make my move. To do whatever I could for the survival of my family. For my son. While the city peacefully slept, most drunk from celebrating the peace offering of a wooden horse from the Greeks, I snuck out of the tower with my son in my arms, down the spirals and spirals of steps, to the forest where my husband rests.

I approached the tomb slowly, kneeling before it with determination. In the place of dirt to cover the temporary casket was a pile of rocks, to which I had to move aside to reach beneath. I dusted off the leaves and dirt that had since fallen on the golden casket since his burial a year ago, and carefully opened the hinged top of the casket, the small parcel of ashes tucked carefully beside his blade. Taking my swaddled son from my shoulder, I gently placed him in the golden casket, tucking him safely inside with his head pillowed by the cloth enclosing his father. I kept the casket propped open by a small rock to allow airflow and stood reluctantly.

I stared at the gravesite for a moment, feeling a pang of hesitation strike my heart. Was it right to leave my son here to keep him safe until I could return? A mother's intuition wasn't something to doubt, yet I found myself conflicted.

My quiet moment of contemplation was interrupted by the sudden thumping of footsteps. It was then that I turned around and caught sight of my city, ablaze. Distracted by the view I forget about the rapidly approaching being behind me until I am seized by the arms, dragged by none other than a Greek toward the burning city.

Naturally I struggle and writhe in the soldier's grasp, yet to no avail. I soon find myself grouped amongst the other royal and wealthy women of my city, each bound by the wrists with rough rope. As each of our best warriors are stricken down, the women around me wail and weep. I do not know what lay in store for me. Perhaps I will be spared of slavery, set free to retrieve my son and build a new life. But the Greeks are ruthless. Do I feel the conflict is justified? A war is not something to wage over a woman. Kinder agreements exist. The cost of the lives of millions is not the price to be paid for the actions of a single man.

About the author:

Claire is a 13 year old writer, passionate about art, music, history, and reading. Her favorite genres to both read and write about are sci-fi, historical fiction, and mystery.

The Masked People

"Huh!" I wake up gasping for air. I think to myself, "Where am I?" Last night, I remember checking into the Blood Moon Inn which is known to have rumors about people experiencing weird stuff. Once I checked in, I changed into my pajamas and went to bed. Now, I'm waking up in a ballroom dress. The problem is, I didn't put on a ballroom dress or go to a ballroom dance before going to bed. I decided to go down to the lobby to ask about last night.

While walking down the stairs in my humongous dress, a lot of people started staring and whispering. I overheard someone talking about my weird dress. I forgot I still had the dress on, but I was almost at the lobby, and didn't care. I saw the front desk lady and decided to ask her about last night.

"Hello, I came here to ask you about anything unusual that happened last night." I said to the front desk lady who had her back turned clearly fixing the back shelves. She turned around slowly and I saw a mask on her that had a face that definitely wasn't hers. I got scared and ran back to my hotel room. While I was running, I noticed everyone was wearing masks with faces. I knew it couldn't be their actual faces because one of the masks had my brother's face on it. My brother is dead ☹️.

Once I got to my hotel room, I ran straight to my window where I had a great view of the city. Every person I saw was staring at me with different masks on. Suddenly, a white aura starts closing the window. I start walking away slowly, but I trip and fall onto the floor. The white glow starts closing the whole room and traps me. Once the room is all white, random people start spawning with masks of people I know. Slowly, they start inching towards me. I made a bold move and started running before the people got any closer.

After running for what seems like hours, I find a door 🚪. I looked around the door and saw more of the masked people spawning. I decided to put all my fears behind me and open the door. Inside the door was my hotel room, so I ran inside. Suddenly, my room starts turning white, and another person appears. This person was different. It had a mask on with my face, but it was also wearing the same outfit as me.

"Who are you?" I ask the masked lady.

"You are not awake! Wake up!" the masked lady says in the same exact voice as me.

"First, you didn't answer my original question 😬 and second, what do you mean? I am awake!" I reply in confusion.

"No you're not! And you haven't been for awhile!" the masked lady says in a strict tone. In my head I'm confused but I also feel like I trust her. To test if I'm awake, I pinch my arm. Instantly, my arm starts turning into dust and floating away.

"Help! What's happening to me?" I scream to the masked lady.

Shraddha Poluri

"Calm down, you're going to your family," the lady said in a calming tone. For some reason, I listened to her. It felt like I was talking to myself, and I was forced to listen to this person. All I could do is pray and hope I come back to my senses. In the meantime, I was laying in a glowing room that had blurry figures all around it. After what seems like and

eternity, I start floating. I look around and spot the masked lady again.

"You're going home!" the lady screams to me.

For a long time, this is the best hope I have felt in a while. Instantly, I wake up in a hospital room I've never seen before. There are many people around including my brother who I thought was dead 🥺. They were all crying.

"Hello." I say confusingly and weakly. Everyone stands up and starts crying even harder. Except this time I think it's happy tears.

"You're awake!" my brother screams.

Doctors start rushing in and look at all the devices around me.

"What happened, why am I here?" I ask one of the doctors around me.

"You have been in a coma for almost two years now." one of the doctors says.

"Yeah," another doctor replies, "You tried to save your brother from a car crash. You saved him, but in doing so, the car crashed into you. Ever since that, you have been in a coma.

Another doctor chimes in saying, "today your blood has been going up so we have been monitoring you all day. We never thought you would wake up today though."

"Yeah," I say weakly, "I was having the craziest dream.

About the author:

My name is Shraddha Poluri and I am going to 8th grade. I love swimming, running, and robotics.

Ria Rajaram

May 25, 1962
Centralia, Pennsylvania
Mercury, Saturn, Earth

Sixteen year old Donna Terris was a dreamer. There wasn't anything else she could do but dream, for the stars, the planets, everything were thousands of miles up and away.

"Dreaming again, Donna?" her mother asked as she walked in on Donna looking up at the sky.

"It's the 25th, mother, a year from when the president proposed the goal of landing on the moon. Isn't that incredible? I'd very much love to go someday!" Donna's mother knew it was impossible, but she loved her daughter's big, bright brain, so she said nothing as they walked downstairs.

"Donna!" Donna's little sister, Maureen shouted as Donna came downstairs for dinner. Donna had shared her love of space with her sister, who had even bigger dreams than her.

"When are we going to Saturn, Donna? It's my new favorite planet!" Donna sighed, smiling.

"We aren't going to Saturn, Maureen."

"Then can we go to Mercury? It's my second favorite." "You goof," their father said while he came inside the house, finally home from work.

"One day we can go to Saturn and Mercury, okay?"

"Promise?" Donna smiled.

"I promise," she said as they finished their mashed potatoes and meatloaf. "Now let's go!" she said, and they spent the rest of their night outside, talking and naming constellations like they always did. Like they thought they would forever.

Miles away, a landfill is ready to be burned.

"I am concerned about the landfill's proximity to the mines," said landfill inspector George Segaritus. "I recommend filling it with a non-combustible material. That is all."

Councilman Joseph Tighe sighed as soon as the inspector was out of sight.

"I've had a long day. Just burn it."

The fire expanded quickly, worming into cracks in the rocks under Centralia, fueled by carbonaceous material near the mines. Finally, it leaked into the coal mines, and surrounded by pure fodder and oxygen from above, the flames roared and grew into a burning abomination and grew, and grew, and grew...

"I'm going to miss Darin and his family. To think I'll never play Twister in his backyard again."

"I'll miss them too, Tammy," Donna said to her best friend. "But the new family is very kind. They brought us cookies." Tammy nodded.

"I hope they like it here."

Ria Rajaram

The ground shook violently as a sound of blazing and rocks falling resounded through the high school's cafeteria. Apple juice ran down Donna's shirt as she and other students dodged moving tables to reach the hellish outside.

Sinkholes opened up, fire and toxic gases pouring out of the ground's wounds like blood. Screams and earth-shattering booming filled Donna's ears as children were consumed by the flames. Tears slid down her cheeks as the land caved in under Tammy.

"Maureen," Donna whispered. She ran through gaping pits of fire and blazing cracks in the ground, coughing through dusty clouds in the tan sky and covering her mouth to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning. She screamed into her burning hand as extreme heat charred her face and bare arms. She stumbled over her melting shoes until she finally found what used to be her house crumbling into the ground. Her parents were barely recognizable. Donna felt sick and quickly looked away, then saw Maureen stuck under a flaming clump of wood and rubble.

Donna tried and tried to lift her, but each time she screamed in grief and fiery pain as she let go of her sister's blazing body. Surface temperatures reached that of Mercury's, and toxic clouds of carbon monoxide made the atmosphere nearly as dangerous as Saturn's. Donna could barely go on longer.

"Where am.. I going to go ?" Maureen slowly groaned out of her melting throat.

"You're going up to the stars. Up to Saturn," Donna sobbed.

"Don-na.."

Tears scalded Donna's cheeks as she ran somewhere, anywhere in a desperate last attempt to survive. She could feel her skin peeling and the pain shook her whole body. The ground took her in but she swiftly clung to a tree root just in time.

Under Donna was burning rock and flame. She considered letting go, but what remained of her body and mind didn't let her. A hand slowly reached out to her and pulled her out.

"I did this.. one mistake...because of my laziness.. because I was too tired from sitting around all day and doing.. nothing... what have I done?" Donna glimpsed Councilman Tighe's mushy face as he pushed Donna away and stepped into the monstrous hole. Donna covered her ears with her lumpy, seared hands as Tighe screamed in pain.

But ahead of Donna was green grass. Ahead of her were reporters and ambulances and life.

Ria Rajaram

"Grandma Donna! Do you have any dreams?"

"Dreams, you say? I used to want to go to the moon."

"Why don't you want to go anymore?"

"I went to Mercury and Saturn instead," Donna said, looking down at her prosthetic leg and arm, and her scarred flesh.

"But don't you ever go there. No one comes back alive."

"But you did, Grandma!"

"No, no. No one comes back alive from something like that. Just breathing."

Donna looked in the direction of her hometown, where coal coaxed the fire to continue growing even today, as it will for the next 200 years.

Then, she looked at where the two planets would be, thousands of miles up and away. Dreaming of being with her family and friends once more was futile. But before it made her feel despondent, for a split second dreaming of the impossible made her feel like she was a child again, lying on the grass with Maureen and laughing while gazing at the stars.

About the author:

Ria lives in Pennsylvania with her two cats and three dogs. She enjoys art in various forms, space, and unique natural events that can be explained with science, such as the Centralia fire. She remembers the days when being good at writing was just an impossible dream, and knows that she will one day look back on her present self after accomplishing everything she thought was impossible once again.

Though her stories are dark, she hopes to one day write something impactful that will save someone.

"I have too much to say and express, but it's never the right time to share them, so I'll write them into something beautiful."

A Mask of Truth

I walk around the streets of Skyridge City on my way to work as a maskmaker's apprentice. This town was quite unusual, no one knew each other's true faces. Everyone wore magical masks to cover their face, each mask was perfectly made with no blemishes or marks. There were very strict rules here, you could not question the way things worked or speak out against any rules. You couldn't feel emotions that weren't positive and if there were any problems you had to report it to the counsel. Everything was always perfect, that is the way it was supposed to be. Today was a normal day, I stopped to look around the streets of the city, everyone was smiling and everything was clean. My work place called Echo Workshop was right around the corner. I opened the door and greeted my boss which was the maskmaker. "Hello, how are you?" I asked.

"I am good." He replied. This was the same answer as always. I smiled back. Then I walked to my area where I began to get everything ready for the mask maker. I got all the materials and made sure the space was perfect. Each day we were required to make 20 masks a day for new babies in the city and of course we always made 20, today was no different.

"Goodnight, see you tomorrow!" said the mask maker. "I will close down the workshop tonight." I replied back. As he left I swept everything up and put all the tools back in place. But as I did a last check of the place, I noticed something on my desk.

It was a mask. I walked over confused because all the masks we had made had been sent off to the Skyridge organization of people. This mask was different because it had a huge crack down the middle. Where was this from and who had placed it here? This was not one of the ones made here. All of them I had seen and checked to make sure they were of the best quality. I picked it up and examined it for any clues. Something intrigued me about this mask. A certain presence was calling me to put it on. So I took off my normal mask which I had never done before. No one was allowed to take off their mask at any time. I slid the new one on my face. Suddenly, a flash of light blinded my eyes, I tried to pull the mask off, but it was stuck on my face. Then memories started to play, I was seeing a vision of someone's life.

I saw a small girl fall down then water started to fall from her eyes. I saw the same girl scream at others with an expression on her face showing discomfort. I had never seen these things before and had never felt these types of feelings before. I didn't think anyone in this town felt them either before. It started to dawn on me that maybe this girl wasn't in Skyridge. Maybe she lived in another place or perhaps this was from the past when there were different rules.

A whimsical forest scene with a stream, mushrooms, and glowing leaves. The background is a dark blue forest with a stream flowing through it. There are several large, red mushrooms with white spots on the ground. Glowing yellow leaves are scattered throughout the scene. The author's name, Grace Simek, is written in a light blue banner at the top left.

Grace Simek

Then suddenly everything stopped. My vision went dark. Then I looked down to see the mask was gone. I touched my face, and there was no crack anymore. I walked over to the mirror and I realized I had no mask on at all . This was the first time I saw my real face. Then it hit me, I was the girl in the vision. I didn't want perfection any more. I wanted all those feelings and every experience even if it was bad. I wanted my life back. I needed answers.

About the author:

Grace Simek is going to ninth grade at Downingtown East high school. She enjoys playing sports and reading romance books. She likes writing mystery stories and writing about important topics that help the world. She has two cats and a dog. She is an only child.

The Watch Of Fate

I woke up this morning not wanting to go to school again. Unwillingly, I stood up and walked to the bathroom. I got ready and my mom called me down for breakfast. I love my mom but hate her eggs. After I tried to finish those eggs I headed out the door. My bus was late again this morning. Once my bus arrived at the school, I ran to my first period. My teacher was furious about how I was late for the fifth time in a row. I sat down in my chair and suddenly felt something under my foot. I slowly picked it up and it was a watch. It was a very unique watch and it had the time right in the middle with so many gears around it. It also had a small knob. I put it on my wrist and continued to watch my teacher's boring lecture. I had a huge test that I had to study for but I just never got the time to.

As the bell rang, I noticed a little beeping noise coming from my watch. It was asking me to change the time. I was confused. Why would it be asking me to change the time? I wanted to try it out. I changed the time to 8:00 this morning, a little before I woke up. Suddenly, everything froze, and I was back in my bed. I was so confused. I checked the time and it was 8:00 AM. I got up and looked at the watch. I was shocked. I think I was starting to understand what was going on. I realized that this was a time-traveling watch. I was so surprised. I could do so many things with this watch.

I woke up again and went down for breakfast and this time I had my favorite cereal instead of those awful eggs. I was so happy. Once I finished my cereal, I wanted to go back to the present. There was a small red button on the watch screen. I was positive that it was the button to go back. I pressed the button and within seconds I was back in my classroom. I jumped up and down screaming in joy until I got stopped by my teacher. I forgot that we were still in class, I then started to think about what other things I could use this for. That night as I was sleeping, I went over to put the watch on my side table, but I missed, and instead the watch dropped to the ground. A loud thunk. I carefully picked it up hoping that it was perfectly fine. The watch looked fine and I was hoping nothing happened to it. There were just a couple scratches. I put it aside and started dreaming about all the things I could do with this watch. I could go to the past, and the future. I could go anywhere through time. The morning I woke up I screamed so loudly, I had a huge test today in history. I was 100% going to fail this test. I was having a full on panic attack before I realized I had a time-traveling watch. I could definitely use this to my advantage.

Snigdha Tumuluri

I decided to go into the future and see my results and other people's tests to get the right answers.

I changed the time on my watch to 3:00 PM which was after my test. Then everything froze and I was in my history class as the bell rang. I get shocked every time this happens. Then once everyone left the class, I walked over to the stack of papers and I searched through to find mine. I saw that I got 80% without studying. I thought that was pretty good but I wanted a higher score. I looked through the stack again to find my friend's paper since she is so smart. It looked like she got a 98% so I decided to look at her answers and compare them to mine. I took a picture of both tests. I was so happy, this watch is so handy and it is so convenient. I wanted to stay for more time in the future so I went to my house in the future and saw what we would have for dinner and I just stayed in the future until I got bored. It had been a couple hours since I went to the future and I wanted to go back. The red button on my watch screen showed up. I pressed the button once, but it didn't work. I pressed it again, but it still didn't work. I was starting to get nervous. No matter how many times I have pressed this button, it still isn't letting me go back into the past.

I was beyond scared. I can't be stuck in the future forever, can I. I tried to communicate with my mom in the future but no one could see me. The watch wouldn't let me talk to the people in the future or the past. I guess I was on my own. I didn't know what to do. I guess I kind of regret going into the future and looking at my test scores, I really should have waited. What was I supposed to do now? I decided to go be productive and try to figure this out instead of moping around. I was trying to think what would help me figure this out instead of a human. Then it came to me, a library!

I could find a book about time travel watches. I ran to the nearest library. I had a chance to go back to the present and make everything right. I looked book after book, shelf after shelf and I couldn't find any books. I was losing hope, it had been three hours since I came to the future. Just as I was about to give up, I saw a sign that said "For Exclusive Members Only." "That's it" I thought. I had some hope now. I ran to the section and searched every shelf. After checking every shelf, it was down to the last shelf. As I reached over to the first book in the shelf, I saw a blue, ancient book. I carefully picked it up and it had a huge picture of a watch right in the middle of the book. "Finally" I yelled.

I started reading the book, page by page. I need to read the whole thing. I found some really good things, some very useful things. Once I finished the book. I stood up, I knew what I needed to do. I knew what went wrong. That night when I dropped the watch to the ground, it cracked and the gears were all messed up. I am the reason that I am in this mess and I needed to fix it. The book said to go find the lady in all blue because she was the only person who could see me, even in the future. I ran outside and searched every street until I found her, the lady in all blue. I ran up to her and I told her what happened. She seemed very disappointed, like she owned that watch. I was not falling for her sad jokes until she told me that she made that watch 20 years ago. She said that she went to the same school as me and everything. I was stunned. I had a loss for words. She made me realize to be responsible for your actions and to never mess with other people's things. She fixed the watch and I was so relieved. I said my goodbyes to her, though she was not the friendliest person I've ever met, she fixed the watch and that was all that I needed.

The background of the page is a vibrant, stylized illustration of a magical forest at night. In the foreground, there are several large, glowing mushrooms with red caps and white spots. A small stream flows through the lower part of the scene, reflecting the light. The trees in the background are dark and silhouetted against a deep blue night sky. The overall atmosphere is dreamy and enchanting.

Snigdha Tumuluri

I pressed the button and in the span of seconds, I was back in bed the morning of the test. I was so happy to be back in the present. I decided to never go to the future and alter it. I had some time on the bus to study for the test instead of cheating my way out of it. The results were out the next day. I ended up getting a 90% and I was very happy with that. I took off the watch and I promised myself to never alter the time.

About the author:

I am the author of this short story, "The Watch Of Fate". I am from India, but living in Pennsylvania. My hobbies are to write, draw, dance, and to play tennis. I love socializing and helping people in need. My favorite genre of books is dystopian, so that theme is what helped me write this story. I like to be creative and think outside the box when writing stories. My family is very supportive in anything I do and I am very grateful for everything I have. When I grow up, I would like to be a biomedical engineer, an actor, or a writer. I have won many awards in dance and many academic activities. I enjoy writing short stories and I hope I continue to write more.

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The background of the page is a collage. At the top left, a blue banner with a purple outline contains the text 'Table of Contents' in a white, cursive font. The background features a night sky with a large, bright full moon on the left, a red hot air balloon in the upper right, and a map of the world at the bottom. The map shows continents in green and brown and oceans in blue. A compass rose is visible in the bottom right corner of the map.

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Chapter One- Phoebe

"Is it just me or has Noah been a complete d*** recently?" I ask mid-bite of my sandwich, looking across the table at Rex. His dreads are pulled back just enough to show off his piercings, and his worn yellow beanie is perched on his head like always. He's got on his usual black T-shirt layered under a flannel—classic Rex. "No for real," Rex says, rolling his eyes. "Especially with the whole bus thing? Dude f***** texts me five minutes before the bus gets there, telling me he can't pick me up."

Okay, thank god it's not just me, Noah who is supposed to be one of our best friends, has been completely ghosting me and Rex lately. I mean we are seniors and don't have access to a car, so in turn, we have to take the f***** bus, with all the underclassmen.

Loud, sweaty, disgusting children.

"Yes! Exactly!" I throw my hands up. "What has been going on with him lately? If he's not gonna drive us, fine, but at least give us a heads-up so we're not sprinting to catch it like idiots." I really don't understand what is going through his head. Maybe he's giving rides to all his popular friends? Maybe we are just not that important anymore—I get snapped out of my thoughts when both our phones buzz at the same time. My nose scrunches slightly, confused as I pick up my phone and see a text from Noah in our group chat.

Noah:

Hey do you guys think we could maybe meet up at the park? Our usual spot?

Rex and I glance up from our phones and lock eyes, sharing the same confused look.

"Maybe he's gonna finally tell us what's going on?" Rex says, raising an eyebrow at me, I bite my lip thinking then nod as I text back a simple "sure!" Hopefully he will be telling us what is going on, or he just wants to hang out—I'm thinking the latter. Noah lives the perfect life, and no offense or anything but he is always happy and perfect—never having any problems aside from the usual "Popular boy drama". Don't get me wrong—I love Noah. He is a good person when it counts. He's always stood up for me and Rex. Though Rex acts like he doesn't need it—he's stubborn as hell and insists he can handle everything on his own. Still... sometimes Noah's just a little too polished. Snobby, even. Not totally his fault, I guess. His family's stupid rich. That kind of life does things to people.

I fix my tote bag on my shoulder as Rex and I walk up to the picnic table that sits under the old willow tree. I see Noah sitting there scrolling on his phone, his blond hair hanging in his face, his outfit perfectly put together, as usual. I run up, sneaking behind him as I jump on his back, hugging my arms around his neck. "Noah!! It's been forever! I've missed you!" He jumps slightly at the sudden contact but then lets out a small huff of laughter as he pats my arms. "Hey Phee", I get off him and plop down next to him. Smoothing out my patchwork skirt as Rex sits across from us, giving Noah a short nod.

I tug my sweater tighter around me. It's colder than usual for mid-September. Leaves have already started falling, and the breeze has a bite to it. Without a word, Noah shrugs off his letterman jacket and drapes it over my shoulders. I give him a grateful smile. Okay—so maybe he is still the same sweet Noah, even if he's been acting like a bit of a jerk lately.

The background of the page is a decorative border featuring a stylized world map in shades of green, blue, and brown. A compass rose is visible on the left side. The text is set against a light beige rectangular background.

Jamie Berger

“So uh, what's up, man?” Rex says as he crosses his arms. “You finally make some time for us in your busy schedule,” he says, complete with air quotes. I kick him lightly under the table. Noah rubs the back of his neck, a sheepish look crossing his face. “Um, ya... bout that, Susie broke up with me a few days ago,” he says as he stares down at the table, and my heart sinks. Rex and I share a shocked look that quickly shifts to guilt, “Oh my gods, that's horrible.” I put a comforting hand on Noah's back. “Do you know why?” I ask as I try to make eye contact with him, and he sighs. “She said things just weren't working out? Which sucks because I really thought they were” Without thinking, I move and hug him tightly as he hugs me back, “Damn man, I'm so sorry that sucks, is there anything you need?” Rex says, leaning forward on the table, his voice softer. Noah just shakes his head and shrugs.

Great, now I just feel like the biggest piece of trash ever. What kind of friend am I? Noah just went through something bad, and what did I do? Talk badly about him to Rex? I should've been there for Noah. Does he think he can't trust me now? How can I help him? Should I apologize—no wait, he doesn't even know about me and Rex talking bad about him, if he knew that, then he might be more upset and— “Yo Phoebe? Ya there?” I snap out of my thoughts and make eye contact with Rex. “W-what?” I say as I notice both of them are looking at me. “We asked if we should go get ice cream? I've said your name like three times.” Rex says with a crooked smile, because he knows damn well I was stuck in my own head again. “Oh, ya, sure! That sounds like a great idea!” I say as I nudge Noah, “We'll get your favorite!” Noah stands and offers me his hand. I take his hand and stand up as I grab my tote bag and sling it over my shoulder. Rex comes up next to Noah and slings an arm around his shoulders while messing up Noah's hair. “Hey! You d***!” Noah says, glaring at Rex as he just laughs, “Oh, I'm sorry, did I mess up his majesty's hair?” he says with a cocky smile as he bows down dramatically, “Shall I get his highness' royal brush?” I laugh as Noah rolls his eyes and playfully shoves Rex's shoulder. This is nice, I forgot how much I missed all of us together. It just felt kinda wrong without Noah there, like a piece of us was missing almost. I slide in between, stopping their fighting for a moment as I link their arms like mine and start humming ‘We're off to see the wizard’, making both of them chuckle. My humming stalls as I see a woman outside the shops hanging up missing person posters. Noah looks over to where I'm staring and rolls his eyes, nudging me, “Come on, Phee, don't worry about that shit, I doubt he's even missing. I mean, seriously, you've heard the things about him, he probably just ran away like everyone is saying, plus we don't even know him, so why worry?”, I nod absentmindedly, I'm well aware that

Jamie Berger

I don't know Dylan Lopez personally, but that doesn't stop the ache I feel in my heart while watching his mother hang up missing person fliers. I know everyone—even the police—are saying that he just ran away, I mean, he is 18 and he is the kind of person that would just pack up and leave. But there is that little voice that thinks, 'Then why is his mother so desperately trying to convince everyone he got taken and needs help?'

I glance over at Rex and notice the brief look of worry in his eyes before he quickly masks it, "Come on, Ice cream here we come!" he says as he pumps his fist—which in turn has Noah making an inappropriate joke, which has me rolling my eyes and going faster, walking away from them. "It was a joke!" Noah yells after me as he and Rex laugh.

I grab the door handle and hold the door open for both of them, gesturing dramatically, "Ladies first." Noah rolls his eyes but walks in, Rex ruffles my hair slightly with a grin, making me slap his arm lightly. We get into line as I look over all the different flavors, debating on which to get—though it doesn't even matter because I know I'll just end up getting the same thing I get every time. "Come on, Mr. richy rich, get your wallet out," Rex says playfully as he nudges Noah with his shoulder. "I thought we came here to help comfort me! Why do I have to pay?!"

Noah says, whining slightly.

I quietly reach into my tote bag and sneak past them, going up to the counter. "Hi! One small cookie dough, one medium strawberry, then one medium mint chip, please!" I say with a smile as I reach into my bag, grabbing my wallet—the two children are still too busy arguing to even notice I walked away and ordered. When I look up, my eyes widen slightly, "Oh! Hi Robbie! Sorry, I didn't even notice it was you," I say with a small, anxious laugh as I make eye contact with his green eyes. Robbie has brown, shaggy hair and is one of the more popular guys at my school. "Nah, no problem, don't mention it." He says with a small smirk, "That'll be \$14.26." I hand him some cash, "So uh, Phoebe...I was thinking, ya know, it would be cool if maybe we went and saw a movie sometime?" He says so casually, I have to do a double-take, I take my change, and bite my lip. "O-oh, um...ya for sure!" he smiles and nods as he grabs our ice creams, putting them on the counter. "Cool, then it's a date, I'll shoot you a text later and we can talk more bout it." I give him a small smile as I grab the ice cream and walk over to where the guys are now sitting.

I put the corresponding ice cream in front of them as I sit down, and Rex looks at me disappointed as he crosses his arms. "The f**** was that bout? You told him yes?" I shrug a bit as I stare down at my ice cream, mixing it up slightly. "I didn't know what to say...I felt bad saying no."



Jamie Berger

I say quietly, still not looking at him, “Like hell you should, Phoebe, you don't even want to be in a relationship, let alone go on a date.” he says, glaring slightly, Noah leans forward copying the look on Rex's face—Great, him too? They just don't get it, I mean, ya, I don't really want to be in a relationship or anything, but it's not like I could just say no, right? What if he was upset or offended? “Phee, you gotta stop doing everything other people want,” Noah says, pointing his spoon at me, and I huff, rolling my eyes. “Okay! Okay! You guys don't have to gang up on me! I'll text him later, telling him that I don't want to go.” I say as I take a bite of my cookie-dough ice cream. Now, will I in reality text him saying that I changed my mind and I don't want to go on a date? Probably not, but they don't necessarily need to know that. Rex narrows his eyes but nods, then starts to eat his ice cream as well.

I let out a small cough when smoke blows into my face, “Rex! Walk behind us if you're gonna smoke!” I say, narrowing my eyes slightly, “Ya Ya, my bad, sorry Phee.” Rex says, holding up his hands in a mock surrender and slowing down his pace considerably so he's now walking behind us. I shake my head slightly as Noah lets out a small laugh—Wait, what was that? I quickly turn around and backtrack as I look at a sign that says ‘Caine's Antiques’ and look in the window of the antique store that was very much not here before. I catch Noah's eyes, and he seems just as confused as I am. “Uh, this was not here yesterday, I don't think,” Noah says, peering into the window. “What the f****..?” Rex says as he puts out his cigarette and comes up behind me, putting his hands on my shoulders. “Let's go in!” I say as I bounce on my heels slightly and go to walk towards the door—but I'm of course stopped by the two big hands still on my shoulders. “Absolutely not, this place just showed up out of nowhere, and you want to just go in?” Rex's hands tighten slightly like he's afraid I'll disappear. “Come onn, where's your sense of adventure, dude?” Noah says, and I nod immediately as I gesture towards him, “See, even Noah agrees! Now we gotta go in!” Rex sighs, then reluctantly lets go of my shoulders, and I quickly go to the door.

Walking into the antique shop, I can't help but look around in awe. The place is packed floor to ceiling with stuff. Old clocks, cracked porcelain dolls, worn books, dusty record players. Basically, anything you can think of is in here. And yet, nothing feels random. It's like everything was placed here for something. As I walk between cluttered shelves, something catches my eye. A handheld mirror. I stop. For a second, I don't even realize I've turned toward it—my feet seem to move on their own.



Jamie Berger

I step closer, drawn to it without understanding why. The mirror is silver, its frame wrapped in delicate vine-like engravings. Along the back, strange symbols are etched—runes, maybe? Ancient-looking and unreadable, but... familiar, somehow? It feels like it's calling to me. Like I need it. Like it already belongs to me. I reach out, fingers just brushing the handle when— Wait. Was that—? I freeze. In the reflection, for a split second, I swear I saw—no. No, it can't be. It was nothing. Just a trick of the light. I shake my head hard, trying to clear the strange pull in my chest. I look up, suddenly needing to find Rex and Noah.

About the author:

I'm Jamie, I'm 17, a senior in high school, and I'm planning on going into writing and publishing.

The Fortune of Death

A crystal ball, a screw, a knife, and a roll of cash.

Those four objects are all that was left within a six-foot radius of the place where

Sablea Wyrmtree once sat before the shine left her eyes and the shimmer left her ivory skin.

I stand directly on the spot where Sablea's body previously lay cold, hunched over a slightly-cracked crystal ball, perched atop a stool on a sage green polypropylene rug.

"Excuse me, Miss." grumbled a tight voice directly behind me. I turned toward the voice to see a middle-aged squat man with a pot belly and a rotund face. Before I could open my mouth to speak, I was cut off. "We are requesting you leave," he barked, "This is a crime scene, and unless you are of any royal or enforcement power, then you are violating this space."

I had no remark to explain myself, other than "I am investigating the death of Sablea Wyrmtree. My name is Ivy Maelin, and I was hired by her sister-in-law, Ivory Lavina."

"You are of little importance at the moment, Miss Maelin. We are working for the queen herself." the stubby man bit out. I felt poison in his words, but not the urge to walk out the door.

"I was paid by someone of close relation to Ms. Wyrmtree to look into the cause behind her tragic death. Surely that must have some form of leverage in this situation, does it not?" I managed to provide.

"You will leave, or will be pushed out forcefully by the authorities." His rough voice spat out in a strangled manner.

I felt no desire to cause more trouble than I already had, so I gave a quick nod and a smile before walking down the four steps I once used to enter the Flora Boutique.

One brisk morning in August, Sablea opened her door to customers, read several fortunes, and accomplished makeovers all before noon. The shop closes for an hour, then reopens around one in the afternoon. Sablea had opened the door, sat down on her stool atop the green polypropylene rug, read a single fortune, and promptly lost consciousness forever. Her customer, who had happened to be her friend Yasmin, was her final customer.

Sage Rosenfeld

Yasmin told the local newspaper that she had watched Sablea's eyes roll back into her head and her chest hit the crystal ball before she yelled for help down the street. Several citizens from nearby shops ran into the Boutique, but it was far too late. Sablea's soul had disappeared from the world forever, leaving her body behind. Sablea had owned the Flora Boutique, which specialized in makeovers and fortune telling, and Sablea had taken personal care in accomplishing. Her store was successful, and everyone who had ever entered or left was granted the ultimate happiness of external beauty for a short period of time. The information I had gathered thus far had led me to the conclusion that Sablea had a large family and several relationships, even if not related by blood.

Her mother had married the father of Sylas and Aurelia Avianna, a pair of twins who are currently at 33 years of age. Sablea had one older brother named Orion Lavina who was seven years older at 33 years of age. He had taken his father's last name during their divorce while Sablea had taken her mother's maiden name. The split was caused purely off of a struggling relationship that had lasted 12 years. Unfortunately, both parents had lost their lives through poisoning which, still to this day, has no culprit. The authorities had lost the momentum to continue with the investigation that had already lasted three years. This event was created five years ago today.

Orion had married a soft-spoken woman by the name of Ivory Lavina. Sablea had a tight-knit circle of friends, most of whom were long-term customers of hers. Known friends of hers included Nyx Odette, Eudora Gaius, Margold Enid, Yasmin Winter-Custonere, and

Guineck Morvyth. All were the same age as Sablea, with the exception of Nyx, who was two years older than the rest. Citizens who witnessed this relationship had noticed that Nyx stopped appearing with the women just months into the investigation and grief stages of Sablea's parents.

Nobody had bothered to question her disappearance, only noticing that Sablea had begun to seem slightly distracted at work on the daily. Marsh Fay was the ex-husband of Sablea. They had married at 20 years old, and divorced three months before Sablea had celebrated her final birthday. Sablea was reported complaining about Marsh using her for her money and success, while Marsh was reported repeatedly denying the allegations. After the divorce, the two would never be seen speaking to each other in person again.

Sage Rosenfeld

I was hired on the 14th day of Emberlight, the year 847 of the Solstice Calendar. Ivory Lavina, pale and trembling, found me at my small study above the tannery in Ravencairn.

"Yasmin was with her," Ivory said, wringing her gloved hands. "She swears she saw nothing unusual. But something is wrong, Miss Maelin. Sablea was afraid. She told me so, just days before."

I agreed to help. The boutique was closed to the public, but I still had the opportunity to meet with Ivory, Sablea's sister-in-law outside.

Yasmin would become the first suspect I would meet with. Our conversation was brief, and Yasmin was stricken with grief.

Four objects lay around Sablea: a crystal ball, a small iron screw, a knife from her herb prep tray, and a roll of currency. Yasmin Winter, wide-eyed and silent, waited for me in the adjoining café to the boutique.

"Did you touch anything, Miss Winter?"

"No," she whispered. "I was... I was just asking about love. She stared into the ball, blinked twice, then gasped and fell."

I sit at a circular table, holding a notebook with nothing but a list of connections to Sablea.

1. Yasmin Winter - Witness and friend
2. Sylas Avianna - Step-brother
3. Orion Lavina - Brother
4. Nyx Odette - Former friend
5. Marsh Fay - Ex-husband
6. Guineck Movyth - Member of the friend circle
7. Marigold Enid-Custonere - Friend
8. Eudora Gaius - Close confidant
9. Aurelia Avianna- Step-sister
10. Ivory Lavina - Sister-in-law

Within a day, I had ways to access each person on my list of relations. I had summoned each one to the juxtaposing café directly next to the Flora Boutique at different times in the day to avoid direct conflict. I currently have my pencil ready to write down everything the relations would say.

Sylas became my next interview after Yasmin, and he arrived cautiously into the café.

Sage Rosenfeld

"She was my sister," he said smoothly, eyes sharp. "We weren't close. She liked fortunes. I prefer numbers. Business. You know our parents died years ago. Sablea was always... delicate. Sensitive. She blamed my father for things no one could prove. And now people whisper about me like I'm some villain from a bard's tale. I hadn't seen her in weeks. Why would I kill her? To keep her quiet? If she knew something, she should have said it. Not let it fester."

Orion Lavina- "Sablea had been moody of late," Orion said, seated beside a cold fireplace.

"Talking about fate. About betrayal. She never forgave Sylas for our parents' end, though there was no proof. I don't think she let it go. She wrote in journals a lot, hid them in odd places. I believe she was searching for some sort of justice—or revenge. Either one can get messy, especially in our family. I loved her, but she wasn't well as of lately."

Nyx Odette- "We drifted apart. She started acting superior," Nyx said, her mouth tight. "You know, ever since she opened the shop and started making cash. We used to talk about everything—lovers, dreams, the future. Then she stopped replying to my letters. I asked around. Heard she was getting paranoid. That she thought someone was watching her. I showed up to visit last month and she wouldn't even let me in. Claimed my aura was wrong. What does that even mean?"

Marsh Fay- "It didn't end well," Marsh muttered, pulling his cloak tighter. "She said I was too ambitious, too quick to leap before thinking. Maybe she was right.

But I still cared. I visited last week. She barely spoke—just asked strange questions. About poisons. About spiritual debts. I thought she was researching for her readings, but maybe... maybe she was saying goodbye. Though we fell apart, her death wasn't something I was ready to hear of."

Guineck Movyth- "Sablea helped me once," she said softly, her voice barely louder than the wind. "With a charm to stop my night terrors. I owed her. We all did. I saw her two days before she died. She looked tired. Scared, maybe. Her skin was pale and sickly. She asked if I believed in ghosts. I said no. She smiled and said I would soon. I thought it was a joke, but now... it gives me chills."

Marigold Enid-Custonere- "Sablea was brilliant. But I think she knew something terrible." Marigold said, dabbing her eyes, "She looked over her shoulder a lot. Told me never to trust anyone wearing navy gloves. I thought it odd. Then I saw Sylas wearing navy gloves at a family dinner she had invited me to. She was trembling that whole evening. Said the past had teeth. I didn't press her. I wish I had."

Sage Rosenfeld

Eudora Gaius- "She said the past had caught up to her," Eudora told me, fidgeting with a ring. "She never said what it was. Just that she needed time. She was reading a lot about plants lately. Deadly ones. I asked her why and she laughed—said she needed to understand every path fate might offer."

Aurelia Lavina- "She hated Father. Thought Sylas was like him," Aurelia said quietly. "I don't know. Maybe he was. Maybe not. All I know is she said she'd found something."

Something to expose Sylas. She wanted to give it to Ivory, but she was afraid. Said Sylas had ways of knowing when people talked. I didn't believe her. I thought it was grief. But I think she was right."

I had the opportunity to get ahold of the four objects that had surrounded Sablea when she died. Ivory had snuck me in after we met in the middle of the night. The crystal ball was shattered on one side. Under a magnifying glass, I saw etchings and tiny runes, markings for truth-binding. Poison detection. The knife had dried sap on it, from a root known as Ghoulishade, a plant poisonous when refined. The screw? Rusted, threaded in a way common in older apothecary drawers. One such drawer in the boutique had been tampered with. It was hanging out of a cabinet. I reached under the side of the drawer that was hanging out. I felt a piece of paper carefully tucked under the drawer. I pulled it out and straightened when I read the writing on the sheet.

I confronted Sylas once I found him inside of a bar.

"You poisoned her," I accused with force. "She discovered your father's crime. He was blackmailing Sablea's previous father. He married Sablea's late mother to get closer to him so he could poison him and his ex-wife. Sablea saw him poison her mother in her sleep. She thought she was hallucinating, she was using drugs at the time. You poisoned her because she knew."

He laughed. "I hadn't set foot in that place in months. My father handles business affairs strictly verbally. Try again, Miss Maelin."

Ivory begged me to look deeper. "She left something for me," she said. "A message. I just don't know where. That was the last thing she said to me days before she died." Back in the boutique, I searched for hours. I looked back under the drawer, but on the side still inside the cabinet. A scrap of parchment stuck beneath the table drawer. Hidden once again.

Sage Rosenfeld

"I couldn't live knowing. Not anymore. This world lets monsters hide behind family names. But I'll leave them tangled in my death. How odd it is to be haunted by someone that is still alive. He'll suffer. He did it. They all will."

Her greenhouse was locked, but the back window was loose. Inside, tucked beneath a patch of Sablea's favorite foxblooms, I found a vial and a rare plant.

"Shiverblossom," I whispered. "A tranquil deadly poison. Leaves no trace unless you know the signs." She'd done it herself. With careful deliberation.

The ball? Used to detect poison. The knife? Used to harvest the root.

The screw? From her old cabinet—possibly shaken loose in preparation.

Only the roll of currency confused me. I cracked it open and found a note wrapped inside:

"Let them think he did it. He deserves worse than death." She had staged it all—to frame Syllas.

I reported my findings to Ivory. She wept. "She wanted justice. And vengeance. And... peace."

Sablea Wyrmsroot saw too much, bore too much. Her last fortune told a lie to reveal a truth. I closed the case, but her death, like her visions, left a shadow on my soul.

