



CLOCKTOWER REFLECTION BY KERRI-ANN DURAND

## **THE QUEEN CITY REVIEW**

**MANCHESTER COMMUNITY COLLEGE  
LITERARY MAGAZINE**

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# THE QUEEN CITY REVIEW

*The Queen City Review* is Manchester Community College's literary magazine, featuring student writing and art. This edition includes poetry, nonfiction, fiction, art, and photography. The vision for *The Queen City Review* is to showcase the talent, drive, and expression of students as they grow and evolve. We envision a magazine that is representative of the collective and individual voices of this vibrant and diverse community. We hope the content of this edition is thought provoking, evocative, and memorable. Each student has a story to tell – here, they are provided a platform.

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SELF PORTRAIT BY AYDEN LAUGHTON



# FEATURED PIECES

## | POETRY

“Drowning”	Emily Bell
“Two Poems”	Marvin Corporan
“Lonely Flower”	Emmanuel Deshryver
“Thirsting”	Alan Finn
“The Departed”	Alan Finn
“Cindered”	Alan Finn
“stolen hearts and thoughts”	Larissa Gault
“3 Haiku”	Jacob Hull
“Nothing Too Special”	Vivi Kane
“My Old Man”	Teagan LeBlanc
“English Class”	Josiah Lopez
“101 Words to Wake Up To”	Rob O’Neil

## | NONFICTION

“Church”	Teagan LeBlanc
“Failure”	Jennifer Madsen
“Fog”	Alex Placey

## FICTION

“The Open Door”	Scott Berganl
“Skin”	Alan Finnn
“Chapter III:A Rose’s Thorns”	Layla Neveu
“The Construct”	Layla Neveu
“Numbers”	Emily Bell

## ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

“Clocktower Reflection”	Kerri-Ann Durand
“Self Portrait”	Ayden Laughton
“Identity”	Layla Neveu
“Art 1”	Amelia Gonzalez-Hernandez
“Art 2”	Amelia Gonzalez-Hernandez
“Compositional Elements”	Kerri-Ann Durand
“Distortions”	Emily Bell
“Art 3”	Amelia Gonzalez-Hernandez
“Get Ascended Idiot!”	Cecilia Mello
“Old Building”	Kerri-Ann Durand
“Lake Shot”	Ayden Laughton
“Crumpled Paper”	Layla Neveu
“Train to Nowhere”	Layla Neveu

IDENTITY BY LAYLA NEVEU



# POETRY

## DROWNING

Emily Bell

Noise can be good when controlled

When you're holding the reins of its chaotic existence

When its voice resembles soft touches, or the sharp, sweet bubbles in soda.

But when you lose the leash on noise, it quickly becomes a dictator.

Multiplying over itself in a blanket until your thoughts no longer make any sense.

Scraping down the walls of your skull trying to escape.

When you try to speak over it, you've already drowned in it, becoming smaller and smaller.

Yes,

Noise is best contained.

## TWO POEMS

Marvin Corporan

### Time and life

Summer goes too fast  
Winter never seems to last  
The days come and go  
Even if terribly slow  
Time is ticking by  
He said with a sigh

### Goals and life

Another day out at sea  
With nothing but ocean as far as the eye can see,  
Catch and release until you catch the beast  
He's out there you know  
How far will you go?  
Till the day you die  
Or will you lie?



## LONELY FLOWER

Emmanuel Deschryver

Alone on a mountain high,  
A courageous flower against the sky,  
Its petals delicate, stem so slim,  
In solitude, it must surrender.

Alone upon a rough edge,  
Propping against the whirlwind's edge,  
As winds wail furious, and mists impact,  
The blossom grips, it can't stow away.

Alone Underneath the thunder's thriving thunder,  
It stands, an image to revere,  
It stands, as a symbol of strength,  
A testament to nature's might,

Alone to endorse each drop that falls  
For dreams of valleys a long way ahead,  
However here it stays, through wind and agony,  
In solitude, it is a strength to gain.

Lonely flower, oh so small,  
Resisting nature's fiercest call  
In isolation, it tracks down its power,  
On the mountain, solitary, yet a flower.

## THIRSTING

Alan Finn

Lips dried by a careless sun, thirsting

Deprivation, consuming

What have dreams and selfishness built me

Death in sands, buried by time as old Damascus

Like a trout that has gone astray, lost

My thoughts turn to cloudy skies, can it rain?

What I would not give for fruit, do cactus have fruit?

Anything besides magenta blossoms, please

If I am lucky, it will take me from this desert,

And to an endless sea of fresh water,

Where I can become a bass, paradise

I could drink like a fish, do fish drink?

## THE DEPARTED

Alan Finn

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

We marched, we sang, and learned to fight

Rank by rank and shoulder to shoulder,

Never could we fall, too proud and bonded in brotherhood,

In the footsteps of our fathers, with all honors,

But now the sun has set, the guns fall silent,

And here in the rows of fields,

We grow quiet

No more cadence, call and response,

No more songs, no laughter,

no smokes huddled against the cold

The fields of battle where we sought glory,

Are now where we lie cold.

Winter waters blanket beached whale carcasses

Children with tarred lungs and labored breathing make angels in black sand

## CINDERED

Alan Finn

So that they could live, we have left  
I do not regret leaving behind the throne of my fathers  
This closure of pain is our final catharsis  
But yet this weight lingers  
my crown, my people, my family, my legacy  
Built on generations, are we worthy to sit upon a throne of bones?  
How many knights and warriors died for my dreams  
And now, like crying children, I must ask them to relinquish theirs  
Because my soldiers do not break, do not flee, they do not cower  
My soldiers conquered everything this world could muster,  
My soldiers, My knights, My loyal warriors,  
Our armor is no longer grand and shining, gleaming in the light,  
It has been pitted and marred, our shields splintered,  
Our spears have broken, swords blunted and resharpened,  
For the dreams of our Fathers and their Fathers, for our own families,  
Now together we must meet our end, no more fantasies to grasp at  
We are together tarnished and forsaken  
Death to be our only companion  
Brothers, Sisters, Soldiers,  
Rage with longing hearts  
Rage for lost futures  
For dreams sacrificed on pyres of desperation  
Light a candle for us, my Queen,  
If only in remembrance of what could have been.

## STOLEN HEARTS AND THOUGHTS

Larissa Gault

*stolen hearts and thoughts*

you were the last autumn of my childhood  
*if you can consider fifteen years old a childhood*

you were the welcoming chilly breeze  
after the heat of summer  
you were the falling leaves  
littering my dying yard, covering up my sticks,  
making huge piles I had to clean up

you were exactly what I needed when I found you  
but you outlived your usefulness

you were the long-lasting autumn  
full of picking pumpkins and good memories,  
brewing apple cider with happy tears,  
and photoshoots in the corn maze  
that I will never forget.

then it turned to winter  
and you became the dying leaves,  
forgotten under layers of snow and ice.

you were the last autumn I remember feeling alive.

### 3 HAIKU

Jacob Hull

I

“The tree in the yard is a tombstone”

*Persisting, looming*

*in the yard, covered in bark*

*over a filled grave*

II

“The hospital room is white cloth over the eyes”

*IVs hung from hooks*

*a long flat tone behind tears*

*the sheet is pulled up*

III

“My father is an empty box”

*Vacant and hollow*

*a box I call My Father*

*to hold my worries*

## NOTHING TOO SPECIAL

Vivi Kane

Once a chameleon, I was told to  
Be MySelf. So  
I joined a Pride Club, but  
Because I am heteroromantic-asexual, I do not have  
Enough colors for the rainbow.  
I joined a mental health support group, but  
Because my medication has stabilized me, I am not  
Mentally ill enough. (I did not  
Dare seek eating disorder support  
Because I am not  
Thin enough.)  
I attended a Catholic prayer group, but  
Because I am Eastern Orthodox,  
The priest made sure to say every chance:  
“You’re not Catholic.” (I still do not  
Know, was he trying to remind me so I’d leave, or  
Reminding himself to avert his eyes?)  
I wanted to share my academic successes, but  
Because my classmates lament their failing grades, I stopped  
Raising my hand.  
I wanted to write a poem, but  
I will be scorned for bragging, so I  
Hesitate to hit Submit.  
I will submit, because I am  
Already the Other. What trouble is  
One more reason to exclude me?  
It still won’t be enough.

## MY OLD MAN

Teagan LeBlanc

I think about my dad a lot.

I think about his stained hands from work,  
his big heart,  
his warm smile,  
and his deep gray eyes.

I think about him installing rails,  
on the side of the highway.  
I think about his earplugs,  
muting the world around him.

I think about him on his lunch break,  
sitting in his car,  
slowly eating,  
checking his watch every thirty seconds,  
dying to get back to work.

I think about his blue car,  
his long drive home,  
silent,  
except for the hum of the road,  
and the chirp of cicadas.

I think about him waking up each morning on the couch,  
and making a small pot of coffee for us.



I think about his breakfast each morning,  
dry Cheerios and an orange.

I think about the way he leaves me a little sticky note on the fridge each morning,  
“Home at 5!!! Love you kiddo!!!”

I think about how his hands shake when we build our puzzles,  
and how wide his eyes get,  
looking for pieces he can't find.

I think about his silent stare into the TV,  
it doesn't matter what we watch, he'll fall asleep.

I think about his few words.

I think about Dad a lot.

And I think Dad thinks a lot too.

## ENGLISH CLASS

Josiah Lopez

A poet creates and shares his masterpiece for all the world to see.

Naively, he thinks the world's readers would come to enjoy it.

Instead, they over-analyze,

Trying to find something that isn't there.

If only someone told them,

Early on in life,

their opinion does not matter.

and what he's left with is something unrecognizable,

Something revolting,

a poem that has gained many unintended meanings.

Dissected and studied,

poked and prodded,

It has become something he never wanted.

## | 101 WORDS TO WAKE UP TO

Rob O'Neil

Enslaved by the lesser of me

I chase dreams vicariously through a broken shell

When all hell breaks loose it's at that I moment I can tell it's time to depart

Not my aspirations, but what I thought was myself

Aimlessly attempting to enchant the crowd

They slowly leave without a sound

And I'm left shameful

Although I still adhere to a bow

Because surrendering means defeat

And I will not be defeated

Instead, I will line up the rest of the remaining demons

Letting them know reason for reason

They picked the wrong man to plant their evil seed in

ART BY AMELIA GONZALEZ-HERNANDEZ



NONFICTION

## CHURCH

Teagan LeBlanc

Six hundred and fifty chairs face a platform. On this platform, a man speaks. Words flow from his mouth, filling the room with echos. His words bounce from the ceiling, forty feet in the air and spray painted black. Heavy metal beams run from wall to wall, studded with speakers and lights. The voice ricochets off the cement bricks of the walls, powerfully, so that each word is heard twice.

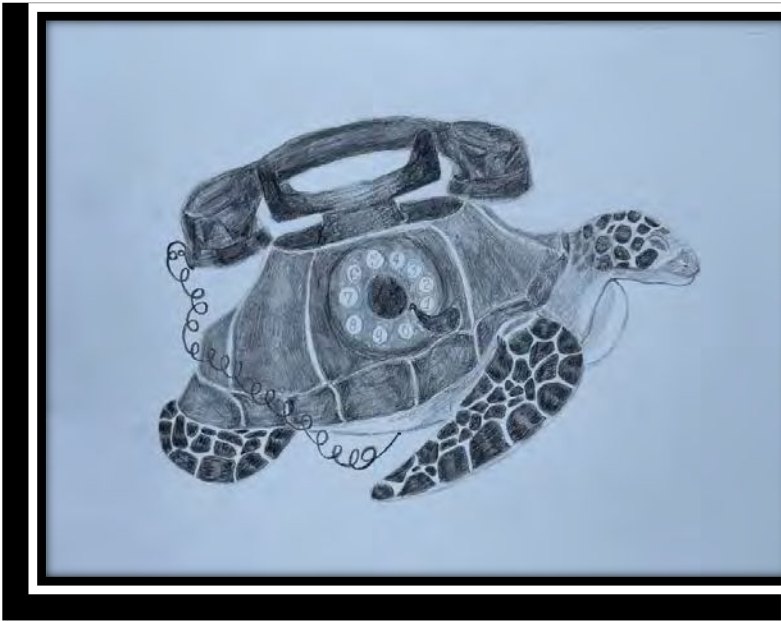
The speaker is old. Not the kind of old in which one sees vulnerability and decaying mind, but experience, knowledge, and an eerie sense of power. A bead of sweat drips from his cheek to his chin, and from his chin to his carefully pressed collar shirt. A scarlet tie is pushed back and forth as the man speaks, for his hands wave and reach with each sentence, moreover so as his pace quickens.

A nervous foot taps the ground rapidly, the wood floor absorbing the sound. Hundreds of feet rest on dull brown planks, striped with blue lines, white lines, red. A baby cries out, immediately drowned out by the preacher's constant abrade of words. Thin pages flip suddenly. A man coughs, a head turns.

The air is filled not just with sound but with dust. It falls slowly, tiny particles floating in beams of white light. There are four of them, massive stage lights welded to the beams on the ceiling. They point, one at the pastor, three at us. Its glow puts the stars outside to death.

A woman sits alone, leaning forward, trying desperately to catch every word. A child pokes his brother, their faces radiating silent laughter. A husband twists the ring on his finger, around and around. An older man sleeps, a green hat covering his eyes, its airplane metal glistening.

ART BY AMELIA GONZALEZ-HERNANDEZ



## FAILURE

Jennifer Madsen

I am a failure; worthless, incapable of accomplishing anything, callous, unconscientious, and disordered. At least, that is what my brain tells me. I know my brain is lying to me, but at that moment, the feeling is so enveloping that it casts me into unfathomable melancholic spirals. *Another missed deadline.* Two brown business-sized envelopes sit atop the kitchen island, one already ripped open. The other awaits my partner—I forgot to pay the car payment, and this time, the penalty is more than just a late fee. Once you hit thirty days, late payments get reported to the credit bureaus, hence the matching envelopes, as laws require them to disclose this in written correspondence. *His and hers*, I thought. *Not the Valentine's Day gift I wanted; I can't do anything right.* The amount of money we spend on late fees makes me sick.

Feelings of failure often cause missed opportunities. Recently, I slept through three alarms and missed an open house at the University of New Hampshire. I curled up in bed as “The Circle of Life” played through my Amazon Echo Dot as it does every morning, this time at 8:30 A.M.—the open house to begin in thirty minutes. As Rich from “ADHD\_love\_” on Facebook says, I like to think I am a time wizard that can magically bend time to fit my will. Except I cannot warp time; I am no time wizard, and there was no way I would make it there before the presentation began. Travel and parking time alone would prohibit it. But did I try even though I would only be a little late? Nope. I rolled over and curled into the fetal position, pulling the navy-blue cover sheet and light quilt around my shoulders. Quiet sobs emanated from my chest as the soft purple cotton pillowcase grew wet under my face. Our sheets did not always match; I never cared enough about that. I spent hours in bed, my partner peeking in on me occasionally. Every time I was coherent, I told him to go away. At that moment, it felt like I failed for being incapable of getting somewhere important. Hearing I could go another time was *no*

consolation; it did nothing to make me feel better about myself. The pain felt like a thousand knives twisting deep within my heart; I was crestfallen, once again, the familiar tsunami of failure hitting me all at once, and I grappled to reach the surface.

Why do I feel this way, though? I have no concept of time at all. Time is either *now* or *not now* (with *now* typically being about *five minutes ago*). This skewed version causes the frantic toil against deadlines or the complete eclipse of them altogether. I fail to arrive nearly anywhere on time, not because I do not care and value others but because I genuinely underestimate how long it takes me to accomplish tasks. Not to mention, transitioning from one thing to the next is difficult, especially if I am “in the zone” or “hyper-focused” on something. I often sleep less, finding my flow later in the evening, making early mornings my enemy because I always burn the candle at both ends. Who can sleep when their mind is racing with creative ideas? I also miss steps, forgetting to do things along the way, putting me broadly behind. Not to mention I frequently lose and forget things needed for the next task, and that is if I even *know* the next assignment. I am even late to virtual meetings. It is awful and indisputably reinforces those feelings of failure.

However, I must remember one thing: I am not a failure. Of course, I know this, but my brain plays tricks on me. If only I could give myself the grace that I give others. I have ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. So, while I might feel like a failure, I am not—my brain just got wired differently, but that is a topic for another paper.



COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS BY KERRI-ANN DURAND

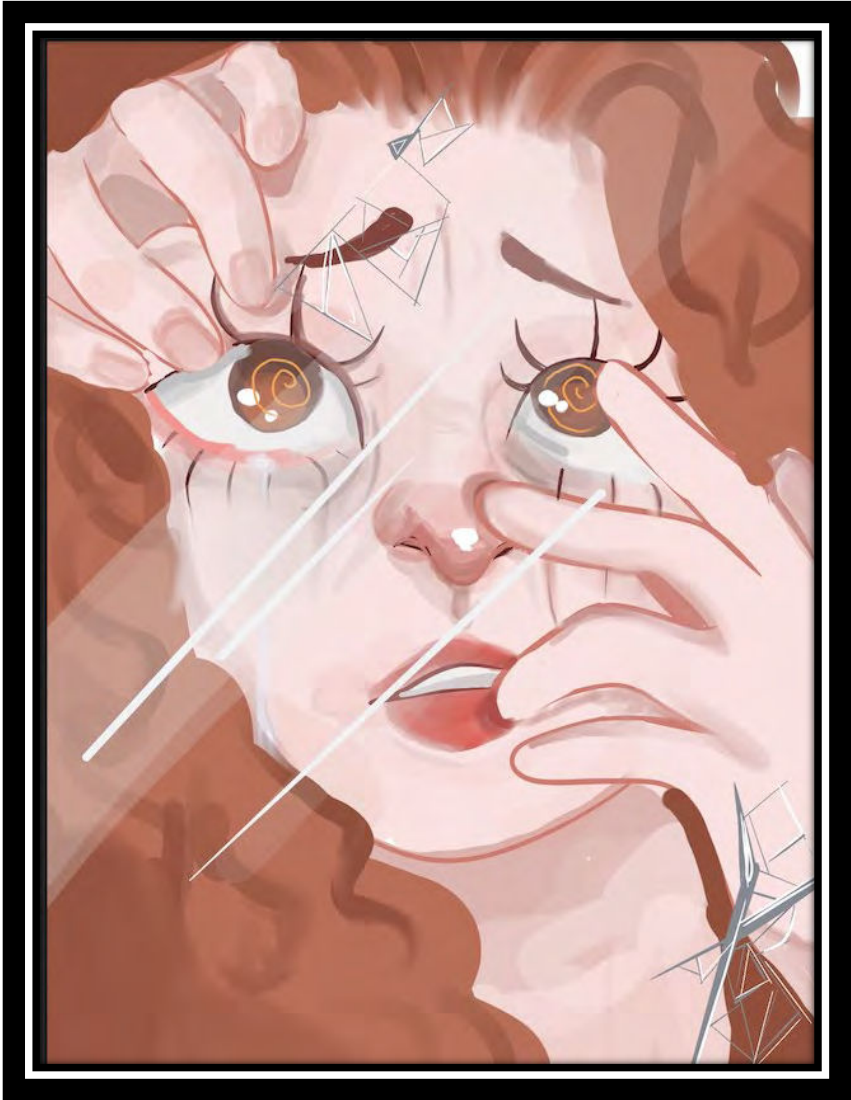


## FOG

Alex Placey

It was a miserable kind of night. One of those nights that is perfect for staying inside and watching a comfort show or lighting some candles and reading a nice book. But if you were outside, no matter what your disposition for life, you hated it. Cold and wet, with snow still blanketing the earth. This wasn't any regular snow unfortunately; it was snow soaked with the slow drizzle of rain. The rain wasn't warm and fun either, as it was freezing cold and seemed to leave everything soaking wet. On top of the soaking wet snow, the ice-cold rain, and the constant need to be warm, it was also foggy. Not the pea soup kind, or even the cheery spring morning kind that rises as soon as the sun hits the horizon. This fog was just visible enough to be a nuisance, but not enough to warrant any kind of retaliation. The fog was thin and wispy, and yet, you could see it everywhere you looked, always just there. Looking across a parking lot, the end would only look slightly obscured, because this fog wasn't the thickest of the thick that distorts sound and prevents proper sightlines. The ever present fog was just enough to make distance figures seem shadows of life, and to make everything seem unreal.

DISTORTIONS BY EMILY BELL



ART BY AMELIA GONZALEZ-HERNANDEZ



# FICTION

## THE OPEN DOOR

Scott Bergan

It's Friday night and I just left my work place, and unfortunately, it's raining. Seems like it's raining every Friday night when I leave work, and since I live in Florida it's not unusual to rain frequently. I run to my vehicle with my automatic unlock on my car key. As I drive away from work I need to remind myself that springtime in Florida is a very rainy time of year. And since it's only May more rain will dampen the sunshine state for several months. Now if I can just make it to my apartment without the rain flooding my car that would be a plus and maybe the start of a good evening on my drive home.

Been driving for several minutes when I realize that my father whom I haven't seen in a month was expecting me to stop by and visit him at his apartment, but through hesitation I really do not care to visit the old man only because of his drinking issues. I am the only one that lives nearby and the whole family brothers and sisters included have made excuses for not seeing him. Granted everyone is in their seventies with health problems, but I don't buy those excuses. The family just doesn't care and it's sad. I decided to visit him for a while. I pull over and call my father and let him know I will be fifteen minutes away, just on the other side of Sarasota and driving toward the beach and will be there soon.

As I pull into the driveway of my father's apartment building, I noticed a door slightly ajar looks like it might be the door to my father's apartment. I approach slowly and notice no one is inside his door or even inside the living room area. Wonder where he is? Since his apartment is on the first floor it's easy for him to leave fairly quickly and unnoticed by too many people, since the apartment is in the corner of the crescent-shaped complex. Anyway, I head into the apartment and look in the bedroom and finally the bathroom. I look into the shower and I see feet sticking out of the tub, and notice my father what looks like he is sleeping in the tub. Next to the tub on the floor is a bottle of vodka and three empty beer cans. Strange. When I talked to him about twenty minutes ago, he didn't sound too bad.

Maybe a little drunk or a few drinks in him. Now he's passed out.

My father is a recovering alcoholic and at seventy-two, he's has been sober for six months I wonder what happened. I don't understand, but I don't drink, and in my fifty two years I have been drunk only a few times when I was in my twenties. It's just not for me.

"Dad!" I say loudly. "Hey, wake up!"

Screw this. There's no reply. So I decide to turn the shower on cold, and within a few seconds I get a response.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" my dad mutters.

"No. Are you?" I ask him. "I thought you were on the wagon. Why did you fall off?"

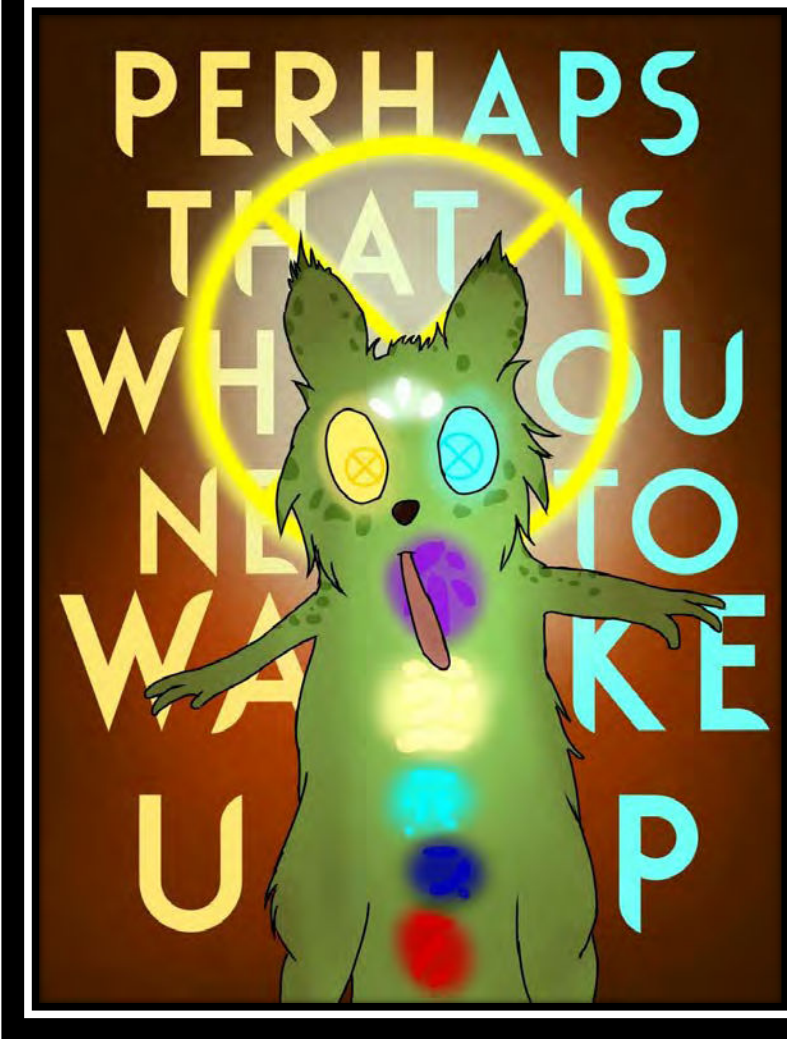
"Damn baseball strike. Just when I get excited about baseball and spring training, they pull the plug and go on strike," my father says angrily.

"So, no baseball? That's no reason to fall of the wagon and get drunk," I reply.

About an hour passes by and my father has started to sober up. Of course, with the help of much coffee and some food he is starting to look better. I get him into the shower and now he smells better. Finally, I advise him to call his sponsor and meet him at the very next AA meeting to get his sobriety back on track. All in all, it's been a hectic day and on my drive home I pray for father. I am the only son and only child. Without me, my father will end up in a hospital or homeless or possibly dead. As I think about the open door to his apartment, that was a sign from God -- and damn those ball strikes! I try not to chuckle. I head home and think about all that I have in my life.

When I arrive home, I turn the radio on and listen to a sports station talking about the strike. I'm thinking, I hope all this nonsense ends soon.

GET ASCENDED IDIOT! BY CECILIA MELLO



## SKIN

Alan Finn

For anyone familiar with a New England bar setting, it was the type of environment consistent with the lines of Billy Joel or the writings of Robert Frost. The soul drank in the wallowing of stagnant woes, whilst the patron's consumption fed into their vices. It was the perfect type of environment where those who had reached the ends of their wits came to either hunt down the last dredges of hope or drown in a bottle. Pushing open the doors to the Blinded Beggar, Lieutenant Carver Liebertz sucked down his cigarette and blew out the smoke through the closing door.

Late as it was, the Lieutenant was glad that the bar was mostly empty. There were what looked like two regulars nursing their drinks at solitary corners, and the bar server was at their post behind the railings. He waved casually, though he didn't recognize the server this time around. The Lieutenant moved quickly towards the second to last booth; the one where he saw Nina Mullers' handbag and jacket hooked to the corner.

"Low lighting, shit snacks... at the least the drinks are a healthy strength." Detective Johnathan Holden knocked back a tumbler of brown liquor. "The Lieutenant should be happy with that."

"I'll be happy with anything that'll turn down the noise in the computer." He slid into the booth next to Detective Holden. "Johnny, did you or Muller order me anything or am I doing it myself?"

"I ordered rounds for all of us, but the hopper said, 'No seat, no drink.' Pretty catchy." Muller said, reaching into her bag. "Phones off, right?"

"Left both of mine in the car; Plaza is hounding anyone with brass on their collars at this point. They want everyone staying hands off the Cipher case until Major Crimes takes over."

"Kind of glad I failed the Lieutenant's Exam last season, for now anyway." Johnny chuckled. "Mine's been dead since before Muller and I got here."

"How did you ever make Sergeant before me?" Muller scoffed. The server arrived and passed around their drinks and water, taking the snack bowls to refill them. The detectives stayed silent in the meantime, waiting till he had made his



return trip and topped them off. Once he had, the atmosphere in the booth changed, as if the lights themselves had dimmed.

“Major Crimes will have complete control of the cases come Monday morning.” Liebertz sighed. “Kenneth is a good cop, but bureaucracy and politics put the blinders on him a while ago. He’ll close it first chance, not carrying if it’s solved.”

“You still disagree with the forensic psychologists. The Cipher murders look like the m.o. of a serial killer.” Muller passed a pack of Pocky sticks across to Johnny.

“Psychologists said it was probable The Subject used a few local criminals to get past the security measures.” Johnny chewed thoughtfully. “They seemed oddly insistent that the incidents outside the three Cipher murders were The Subject cleaning up loose ends before moving on.”

“Doubtful. But it would fit the m.o. they’re trying to establish. Careful and thoughtful planning, brutal and sloppy execution.” The Pocky slid back across the table.

“Kenneth will be saying the same thing. So why is it wrong, and why are we wrong?” Liebertz had been writing in his pocketbook; he ripped out several pieces of paper and laid them out on the table.

Pointing, he waited until either Muller or Johnny said something. They knew the routine.

“The first murder was the Miyazaki family. Wealthy Japanese-American father and mother. Father oversaw the investitures for a tech blah blah. Mr. and Mrs. Miyazaki, and their youngest child, were murdered in the home. The eldest daughter lives away in dorms for college. Poor kid.”

“But...” Muller tapped the paper. “Jewelry of higher value than the missing inventory was left in the house; same with tech items and an uncracked safe. Safe would have been crackable for the crew that broke in if monetary gain or blackmail had been a motivation. Instead, the parties had been dismembered. Precision tools were used, with segments arranged in patterns. Dismemberment came post-mortem.”

“The same happened for the second family, the Flanders.”

“All-American story: self-made husband duo built their multi-million-dollar online business. Adopted a kid—a little boy—sent him to private school, and used

their wealth to lobby for online businesses, especially during the financial crisis and the pandemic.” Muller motioned for Johnny.

“Do I have to? This one didn’t sit well with me.” Johnny sighed before nodding. “The Flanders couple were bound in the basement. An investigation found evidence that the couple had planned from the beginning to portray themselves as a loving family as a marketing ploy. The kid was simply a prop to them. So, The Subject made them watch while the kid was tortured before bleeding them to death.”

“Once again, we have the m.o. of thefts and break-ins past S-tier security systems. So why the brutality behind the messages, and why the messages at all?”

“The messages don’t make much sense. The Miyazaki and the Flanders families were hit in differing manners, no solid modus operandi, in the last murders, the Claremounts’ Foundations heiress and her family were horrifically brutalized.” Liebertz pointed at the third series of notes. “Security system was torn apart. Surveillance kits were ripped from housings and the data vault was magnetized.”

“There was a reporter who snuck in before us. I remember that guy, found him in a puddle of his own making outside the living room. That’s where the family was killed; Alicent Claremount and her two daughters and the daughters’ spouses.”

“It was weird too. The family was seated around the table, facing each other, with a gun placed in the middle. The gun was there on the table like someone had picked it up and set it back down after the fact. It was the same gun used to murder the family. Johnny said it looked like an execution ring, right?”

“Yeah, saw one once, triple homicide-suicide. Was all kinds of fucked up.” Johnny downed the drink in front of him, motioned for another, and stayed silent. Another box of the pair’s favorite Pocky snack was pulled from a pocket in his jacket.

“Dammit Mo, you were the one that insisted on quitting smoking. Now I’m going to be the one getting fat off snacking.” Mueller grumbled, then resigned herself. “It’s after these murders that everything falls apart. The suspect’s list was just starting to get solid, and then they drop like damned flies.”

Liebertz leaned back, downing his glass. “Started with that damn mousy fella, the locksmith. We had several witness reports spotting him in the regions of the murders in the right timeframe. Never got to question him though.”

“He was struck by a car near his residence.” Moreno had his phone out, reading

from it. “Dead on arrival at the hospital, EMTs quoted him saying he was being chased by a monster.”

“His apartment was ransacked, lends credence that he might have been fleeing someone. Forensics didn’t turn up anything, unfortunately.”

“We were able to link him to a software technician as well, but when we tried to go by the chicks’ place, neighbors told us she had died.”

“Jumper.” Mueller laid her forehead on the table. “Fuck it’s warm. Anyways, she must have had a guilty conscience because the neighbors said it was maybe a day or two at most before we showed up, which was the same time we learned about Mouse.”

“Brings us to now, today, when we tried to bring in one Mr. Tendo Urihara.” Johnny went back to his phone for the notes.

“That was Menendez, Seibert, and Wilson who were assigned to bring him in. I reviewed the surveillance footage with Mueller; and the same conclusion as their Sergeant. The only individual with access to him before ourselves was an Uber-eats driver. App history showed delivery completed on our guy’s end. No confirmation from the driver’s device.”

“Records from the carrier were a bust. The device went dead shortly after confirming the order; we will get a ping if it reconnects, that’s a waiting game, and the data will be forwarded to Major Crimes if it comes through.”

“Somehow, between the time our uniforms got the order to bring him in, Urihara ordered delivery, the delivery meal was tampered with, and now Urihara is in a coma.”

Liebertz rubbed at his eyes. He was tired, immeasurably tired for some reason. “He was our best lead for whatever they did to fence the stolen properties, and I doubt those three would all hit these kinds of targets without some kind of direction. There’s a piece we’re..” He stumbled over his words.

“What’s wrong lieutenant?” Mueller sat forward, head hanging drunkenly. Her next sentence was slurred. “Ts problems...Thists, what?” She leaned to Johnny and poked his side.

Johnny didn’t respond to her; instead, he slumped forward snoring softly. Liebertz tried to reach over to him, but he ended up slumping into the booth. He tried

grabbing at Johnny's leg under the table, but his hands felt like they had lost circulation and gone numb on him.

Mueller managed to shove Johnny out of the booth, trying her best to stand. The best she could do was to get her feet under her before toppling into a heap on top of her unconscious partner. She was trying to mumble something to him, but his eyes would not focus on her face or lips. He tried looking to their silent patron for help, but the figure was still standing at his place behind the counter. Liebertz thought she could see the man wiping glasses or something but he couldn't be sure. What about the other two in the bar earlier, were they still there?

He tried to speak, to say something to ask for their aid. "Hurgh..." Instead, he almost choked on his tongue somehow and ended up gagging. He gasped and tried looking up again. Surely that would have gotten their attention no matter their drunken stupor.

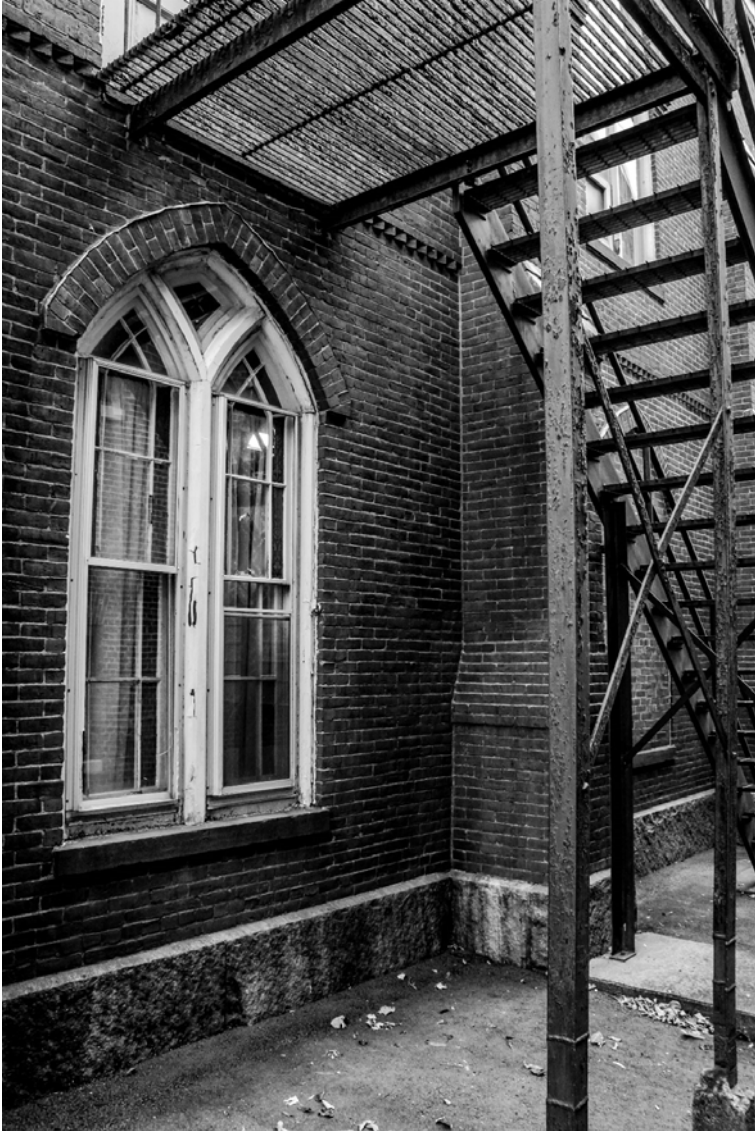
The watering in his eyes and gagging cleared his vision just enough, and now he saw the two figures on either side of the bar. Neither had moved the entire time! They sat unnaturally stiff, and their arms were just lying on the bar like they had never even reached for their drinks once. He tried reaching for his overcoat, and his phones, either one could speed dial their emergency response crews. He just needed to stretch a little bit further and he could get the inner pocket.

"I must commend you, Lieutenant; even under the effects of a small amount of diluted Propofol you have your wits about you. Good, I would rather keep it that way." This voice wasn't familiar, but he also felt like it was picking at the back of his head for him to remember. "Truthfully, I will not ask you to remember me, not yet. But later on, I will. First, I must make sure to deposit your..." The bartender! He had come from around the bar, and now he nudged Johnny and Muller with his foot. "These little pet projects of yours."

"Muolr. Jahny," Liebertcz reached out again. The Bartender caught his hand, turning his arm over and rolling up his sleeve.

"Do try and relax yourself, Lieutenant." A needle pierced his forearm. "Don't worry. I will be back for you shortly."

OLD BUILDING BY KERRI-ANN DURAND



## CHAPTER III: A ROSE'S THORNS

Layla Neveu

*DRIP, DRIP, DRIP, DRIP.*

The taste of metal hung heavy in the air. Adaira groaned as she regained consciousness, now painfully aware of the sharp sensation that picked away at her left eye. An oppressive darkness surrounded her, creeping into her very soul, with the only light penetrating the darkness being a lone torch, mounted on the wall with the same cold iron that kept her here. Her hands were tied with a thick, itchy rope, and a short, heavy chain was attached to her right leg. Why was she alive? This was the only question that held any significant weight in her mind. Not where she was, or what they would do to her; she could easily guess what the answers to those were. But for now, she was breathing, and by the gods — she *hurt*. But that very same pain meant she was alive. That meant she had some sort of chance of redemption. Survival. *Maybe she could wait 'till morning and pick the locks of her prison before making a grand escape through a window!* She looked around, and her hopes were immediately squashed. Not a window in sight. The dim golden light of the torch didn't do much for her eyesight either, especially now that she had a cold rag tied around her injured face.

She felt around. Nothing, not even a pebble. Only the cold stone floor greeted her calloused hands. How odd, a prison cell being this clean. Of course, her captors had stripped her of her armor and weapons, too. Hell, they had even taken that small silver amulet that her brother, Darius, had given to her.

She wondered if they could sense the magic infused within.

The quiet, repetitive sound of fresh water dripping onto stone was the only welcome company she had. The dungeon seemed to have no other inhabitants, save for the occasional scuttling of a rat. Why was no one else here? Generally, dungeons were used for all sorts of prisoners- thieves, heretics, and captives alike.

Maybe things were different here.

Her mind began to wander back to the thought of escape. Would she even be able to return home, having failed her task? The heir was still alive. No, she was sure that the Guild would excommunicate her if she came back emptyhanded, at the very least. At worst, they'd simply kill Adaira, with the assumption that she had

become defective. A vampire sympathizer. A heretic.

Stolen jewelry or a torn piece of cloth would never be enough. She needed Lyka's head.

Of course, dying in battle was much more dignified than returning empty-handed. A failure.

The quiet creaking of rotting wood pulled Adaira from her thoughts. *She wasn't alone?* Panic gripped her heart. Blinded and beaten, there wasn't much that she could do to defend herself from whatever lurked in the shadows. She felt like a coward.

*Click, click, click, click.*

It wouldn't be much longer until they reached her, wherever it was in this maze of cells. She shuffled backwards, with great effort, and pressed her aching back against the icy wall. It was a small comfort to her strained muscles, which were exhausted by both the fight and the journey there.

A familiar pair of poison green eyes was the first thing to pierce through the heavy darkness, and Adaira damn near groaned. *Of course* it was her. *It had to be.* The gods apparently had a sense of humor, albeit a sick-and-twisted one.

A vampire soon stepped into view; her pale-white skin seemingly glowing in the dim golden light that surrounded the two. She towered over Adaira's slumped form, somehow appearing to be even taller than before, and she cocked her head to the side. Her posture was strict and taut, her footsteps clearly practiced, and a fine, high-collared tailcoat hugged her torso. It seemed to be dyed the same shade of crimson as her hair, or maybe it was the other way around. Vampires always had a strange taste in fashion. Always going for whatever had more flair. She found it stupid and impractical, just like the nobles back at home.

"Hello, dear huntress— Or should I call you 'prisoner?'"

Adaira's eyes narrowed as she gazed up at the other woman. Lyka. She was only an arms-length away from her, with the thick iron bars being the only separation between them. Oh, the things she would do if she could just get to her! Lyka spun a large brass key in her right hand, taunting her with the very idea of freedom.

"I'm sure you realized that coming to this place might as well have been suicide. Why did you come alone?" The woman leaned close to the bars; her expression thoughtful and calculating. "I knew stupidity ran rampant in Hunters' blood, but I didn't think it had gotten this bad. Unless there was another reason..."

"Seriously?" That was it? That was what she wanted to know? Her brows

furrowed, and she very nearly spat on that stupid polished shoe. “What kind of question is that?” Gods, the audacity to keep her alive for this!

Lyka scoffed and righted herself before straightening out her collar and smoothing the wrinkles from her coat. “I’m not asking this because I care about your personal life, I already know how miserable you all are.” She paused and began to pace with her hands delicately folded in front of her. “It’s simply unlike the guild to throw away such a valuable asset. After all, I know how thin your ranks have become in recent years. They shouldn’t be able to afford such a loss.” A small smirk graced her lips, and she stopped, her gaze looking elsewhere. “But I do remember you asking me for my name, back in the courtyard. How peculiar for a huntress to want such information from a vampire. Well, unless the Guild was trying to target me specifically.”

Adaira grit her teeth. How did she know all of this? The dwindling number of hunters had been a closely guarded secret, especially among the city folk back home, but she supposed that any vampire would notice if each troop sent their way was smaller than the last. She leaned back and averted her gaze. “What makes you think that I’ll answer your questions so easily? You’re wasting your time — though from the looks of it, you do seem to be the type to enjoy that.” It was a cheap grab, yes, but she at least had to try.

It seemed to do the trick, to Adaira’s satisfaction. Lyka put a hand on her hip and cocked her head to the side, her now-intense gaze burning holes into Adaira’s skull. “You’re making me feel as if I’ve guessed correctly. I wouldn’t have such an attitude if I were you, though. Unfortunately, I have orders to keep you alive, but nothing was specified on what *condition* you had to be in. Would you rather me let your wounds fester and rot?” A decorated hand rested itself against the iron bars of Adaira’s cell. “Do not worry, your cooperation would be rewarded. Be grateful that Lord Ivanhof himself isn’t the one to oversee your ‘stay.’ I’m sure that you will come to find me to be... much more *agreeable* than him.”

A tense silence befell the two as they both refused to back down. Adaira, with her refusal to give into questioning, and Lyka, with her unsatiated ‘curiosity.’ It gave her time to think.

Lyka was the first to break the silence, and Adaira took that as a small victory. Hopefully it would be the first of many.

“I see that you need time to decide,” Lyka’s eyes narrowed as she shook the



dust from her hand. "I will be back tomorrow morning, come first light. I expect answers then. But, until then, I will be sending down some servants to change your bandages and give you water. I don't need infection to befall you." She spun on her heel with a small flourish of the hand. "Well, not quite yet." Lyka threw one final glance over her shoulder- and left.

Silence settled around her like an old friend, and Adaira let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. She let her head fall to her chest and pulled her legs in as close as she could get them. Information. Was that why she was being held captive? She furrowed her brows. That didn't make any sense! She didn't know anything useful. If anything, the Guild withheld information from her! What could they even want from her? Even Lyka had already correctly guessed her mission, her purpose. So why was she still being held here? Why did she need to be kept alive?

*Why?*

Of course, she was left with more questions than answers. Gods, all she wanted was answers, though a respectable death would be nice too. Maybe she could challenge Lyka to a duel? *As if she'd accept.* If anything, she'd only accept out of pity, and would probably leave her alive. Per orders.

It was not long after Lyka had left when she heard the creaky sound of rotting wood again. It must be the servants Lyka had mentioned. Her thoughts were confirmed when a pair of two, plainly dressed vampires emerged from the darkness and stood just outside of her cell. They were nearly identical in their appearance, with both having the same snow-white hair and same plain clothing. *Strange.* One held a bucket of soapy water with a sponge, and a few clean rags were tucked into their apron pocket. The second one held a roll of bandages and a small, dark glass jar held carefully in their hands. It seemed to be filled with some sort of liquid. The servant with the bucket stayed back, cowering behind the one with the bandages.

The bandage-servant reached a shaky hand into their pocket. Out came that same brass key that Lyka had been holding. They slid it into the lock with a satisfying *click*, and the heavy door swung open.

If only that meant freedom.

If anything at all, it preceded the bitter taste of humiliation. The water-servant was the first one to enter the cell, and the bandage-servant quietly slunk in behind. The water-servant's eyes were wide with fear as they reached into that bucket, their gaze darting from her face to her hands. As if she could do anything. Adaira couldn't

find the energy to fight them. So, there she sat, her good eye trained on the floor, grimacing as the water-servant's sponge swiped past the occasional cut or bruise. They both flinched away at her every movement. She was sure that they saw her as some sort of rabid beast, about to snap. Doing so would've been satisfying, if only her position wasn't so pathetic.

They left her face for last, and Adaira began to wonder if they were afraid of her biting them. How ironic; a vampire being afraid of her biting *them*. She wouldn't stoop so low. Well, not yet.

The bandage-servant removed the itchy cloth that had been covering her wounded eye, and the water-servant came in with the wet sponge wipe it. Her eye had been glued shut by a mixture of dried blood and pus, rendering it both useless and painful. The warm, soapy water of the sponge mixed with the large scab, allowing it to finally loosen and melt away.

She nearly screamed as they began to work at it.

The sharp pain of her injury intensified tenfold, reaching all the way into the back of her brain. It felt as if they had taken a burning-hot fire poker to her eye, and all she could do was sit there and take it. The longer the servants worked, the sloppier and rougher they became. She could understand why, but gods if it didn't make this more unbearable than it already was!

It felt like an eternity had passed by the time they had finished with her damned eye. The bandage-servant was the last to step out of her cell. He locked the door and leaned in to whisper something to the other. She knew that vampires had a native tongue, but she had never truly heard it spoken before. It sounded rough yet elegant, at least that was how she'd describe it. The water-servant gave a final glance backwards before nodding to the other, and before long, she was alone again.

Her wounds were now tightly wrapped in bandages that smelled of herbs. Whatever liquid the bandage-servant carried had burned like ice, and she'd prefer to never feel it again. It must've been some sort of healing oil. Oftentimes, healers used oils and tinctures to invoke specific deities for healing certain ailments, with Faenith generally being touted as being the most effective with infection. After all, her domain laid within the earth, creation, and destruction. In essence, life, and death. While passing various alleyways, however, Adaira had overheard whispered rumors of Noctros being better than Faenith. Worship of Noctros had been outlawed in Borrowmyer many years ago, and no one dared to make tinctures dedicated to

her; at least, no one did so publicly. After all, Noctros was the deity that brought about the blight that was widely known as the vampires, or, more accurately, the 'moon-blessed.'

The rest of her day passed by uneventfully. The only other person that had come to visit her cell was a well-dressed servant with sleek black hair. He was small in stature, especially when compared to Lyka, but still held himself with confidence. In his hands was a large bowl of water, held carefully so as to not spill the precious liquid within. He knelt down. Right at the bottom of the cell door was a small opening, carved out between the bars. It was small enough to not allow a person through, but large enough to slide dishware in and out of the cell.

The servant slid the bowl in and left without a word.

Adaira stared into the black abyss of the water's surface. Small ripples of light appeared and disappeared like blinking stars as she nudged the bowl with her bound hands. She leaned over in a futile attempt to see her reflection. Small streaks of gold dotted the surface in a sharp contrast to the murky blackness beneath. Her hands were useless for drinking, bound as they were, so she leaned down to sip from the top of the water's surface. Like an animal.

Water dripped down her chin to her neck as wet hair began to cling to her face. Oh, how she would kill to be able to braid it. It'd be the first thing she'd do if she had her hands untied. The second thing she'd do... She was unsure.

Revenge was always an option.

That damned vampire was the reason why she was in this mess in the first place. She couldn't stand her.

Boredom was the first to creep in. There was nothing to do with herself; she couldn't even carve things into the walls, so she stood up to stretch. It was all she could do. There wasn't even a loose rock to kick around.

Rats continued to scrape at the walls, taunting her.

Exhaustion then visited her, hours later. It's very essence slowly creeping into her mind and body like some awful sickness, overriding all of her better instincts that screamed at her to stay awake. Her body needed sleep to heal but that meant being vulnerable. As if she could even defend herself. The worst she could do was scream, thrash, and bite.

The torchlight finally burnt out, immersing her in shadow.

Her mind fought to stay awake now, her eye blindly darting around the darkness

of her cell, but she couldn't fight it forever. It was only a short matter of time before her body slumped, limp, against the stone, and her mind finally slipped deep into a dream-state.

Death.

Betrayal.

Her, in the very middle of it.

Everything was the same as it always was. Forests, seemingly infinite, surrounded her. The leaves were colored with the oranges and reds of autumn now tainted with the splatter of fresh blood. Two fallen armies around her, with vampires and hunters alike, littering the ground, blood mixing together into one incoherent mess.

A full moon, shining proudly above the small clearing in which she stood.

Adaira held her sword close to her body as if it were the only thing she had left. It felt cold. Had she killed someone? Something? Her sword was stained with blood, a clear sign of violence, but uncertainty still plagued her conscious.

The only thing she knew to be true was that she had failed. *Again*. Still, what had she failed at? Was she supposed to protect someone?

Adaira quickly tried to scan the bodies around her, but something intangible tugged at the back of her mind. *It wasn't the same*. She was immobile. Her hands had been neatly folded around the hilt of her sword, as if she were a statue of stone. The sensation of hot blood dripping down her torn linen shirt told her otherwise, but she didn't feel alive. A large wound had been inflicted upon her by some unknown force. There was no pain. *Not anymore*. Where was her armor? Adaira's eyes darted around wildly. This wasn't her usual nightmare. *Someone was with her*.

A woman's scream, ripe with grief, echoed throughout the trees.

It wasn't her own.

Adaira woke with a start, finding herself to be somewhat relieved now that she was back in the cold dungeons. Anywhere but there. Her lungs burned in her chest, bitten by the frosty night air, and she let herself slump against the stone wall of her prison. Nightmares had plagued her since she was a child, but that one was *off*. Different. Why had it had filled her with such dread? Gods, it had felt so real. That

scream... Had she heard it before? It felt so familiar. No, no, she couldn't have. It was impossible.

She had nothing to blame but her current situation for the strangeness of the dream. Despite her desire to disregard it, something deep within her urged her to remember this dream, to tuck it safely within the recesses of her mind and to store it there forevermore. And so, she did.

Time had become immeasurable by the time the familiar clicking of heels resounded from that old wooden staircase somewhere at the entrance of the dungeon. Was it morning already? She couldn't tell. There were no windows, at least not in her cell, nor in the hallways that led to it. It kept her separated from her deity and kept vampires safe from the sun. It was clever. Deep isolation like this had the tendency to drive one into the thralls of madness.

"Are you ready to speak?"

A familiar voice rung out from above, and with that presence came the soft glow and comforting crackling sound of firelight. The torch had been lit. It was a small mercy, and she was grateful for it.

Adaira lifted her head to face the woman. She carried a small leather-bound book and what seemed to be a thin stick of charcoal. A golden necklace decorated Lyka's neck, a single large ruby sat in the middle of that necklace and sparkled in the firelight. She looked much more plain today. Well, as plain as one could get while still wearing ivory lace and crimson jewels. "I think we may have different versions of 'ready,' but it seems that you've come prepared regardless. Now what, you're a scribe too? I was right; you really *do* like to waste your time." Ah, at least she could have a bit of fun with her situation.

Lyka scowled at her. "Now, prisoner. I don't have time for your games. Answer my question. Why did you come alone?" She hovered the charcoal over the book expectantly and looked at Adaira with tired eyes.

Adaira sighed in exasperation. "Gods, you won't leave that topic alone, will you, you damn leech?" She shook her head. "Fine. I was sent alone because that was what the Guild wanted. One soldier is stealthier and is an easier loss to deal with than five. Why is this information so valuable to you?"

"Very good. Now, that wasn't too hard, was it? I've already assumed that you were sent here to assassinate me, of course. Am I correct?" Lyka's eyes narrowed at Adaira as the scratching sound of charcoal and paper filled the air.

Adaira finally averted her gaze. Seriously? Looking at the wall had become much more preferable to looking at the condescending bitch, and she didn't let Lyka's avoidance of her question go unnoticed. She wanted to bring it up later, but for now, the woman's voice was just so grating. "Fine. Yes, I was. But look, you're alive! Hoorah, I failed. Happy now? Is that seriously all you want to know? Would you like me to kiss your boot while I'm at it, too?"

"Silence, you mangy rat! I'm becoming increasingly tired of your attitude. You're *lucky* to be in my care. Lord Ivanhof would have already disposed of you by now for that tongue of yours, but he is preoccupied at the moment."

"I don't think *lucky* is the word I'd use—"

Lyka huffed and snapped her book shut. "Now, I suppose your behavior should be expected, no matter how annoying it is. I will see you soon, huntress. Try not to miss me."

"I'd pay you to leave me alone."

No response.

Adaira finally glanced back up to where the other woman had just stood, but all that was left behind was the stale, metallic air that never seemed to go away. She thanked the gods for that.

Hours passed. Another servant had come to her, this time holding a small silver plate of slop. The smell of it was unappetizing and sour, like how grain often did when it had just begun to ferment. As the servant slid it under the small opening of the cell door, she was finally able to take a closer look at the so-called 'food.' It was grey-ish in color, with small chunks of what she thought may be meat, or maybe... it was potatoes? Her stomach growled viciously as nausea bit at her throat. Gods... she hadn't eaten in *days*. The firelight bounced off of something small and metallic, tucked neatly between the bowl and the plate it sat on. At least they had the decency to give her a spoon.

She nearly wretched at the taste.

Days passed by, each one the same, except for every third day, when the bandage-servant and water-servant would come by to clean her wounds. It was the only way she was able to keep track of the time, as it had become the closest thing she had to entertainment in here. She had begun to understand why prisoners would carve tallies into the wall.

Lyka had yet to return.

By now, Adaira had figured out that she had been blinded in that left eye. It was healed enough to come to such a conclusion, and the bandage-servant had even taken enough pity on her to tell her this. They said they were sorry. She couldn't tell if they were lying.

Had it been weeks?

It must have been.

Her bandages had now been taken off, permanently, but she no longer had a way to keep track of the days. Without the water-servant and bandage-servant, Adaira quickly lost count. All she could do was guess. There was still no sunlight.

Darius must think that she's dead by now. He's probably even held a small funeral for her, with what little funds he had to spare. She wondered if anyone would have joined him. Between running the farm and getting food for the both of them, they never had much excess to spend, even combined with Adaira's income from the Guild.

The rats had now become a strange sort of company to her, their familiar scratching now a welcome distraction to her wretched mind.

The temptation to make small talk with the servants had become increasingly appealing, as well. She even asked for the name of that well-dressed servant, and what was more surprising was that she had gotten an answer. His name was Vahlius, and he seemed kind.

Was this Lyka's plan? To leave her down here long enough that she'd become desperate and easy to speak to?

Adaira reached for the little silver amulet that her brother had given to her. It was for this journey. Her hand found nothing but air, and the feeling of defeat finally consumed her.

She missed her brother.

Her garden.

Her life.

But never, ever, the Guild.

## THE CONSTRUCT

Layla Neveu

The hulking thing before her moved unnaturally. It disgusted her. It *fascinated* her. The construct, made of a honey-colored metal, maybe brass, stood upon eight spindly legs, each seeming to move independently from one another. It was a masterpiece of design. Steam sighed from the joints of the creature with each step, its cogs turning in a fast series of clicks. A single purple gemstone shone brightly from within the center of the beast, held secure by a strange mechanism that suspended the thing in midair.

She eyed the construct, a simple journal and pen in hand. It had only been three years since these creatures had begun to emerge from the old ruins, wreaking havoc, attacking civilians. And yet, they had since found a way to ‘tame’ them. It was a stroke of genius, she had to admit. All one had to do was momentarily disable the construct with electricity, open the glass carapace, and switch out the enchanted stone. Simple, really, but first one had to be proficient in the arcane arts, which was the real hurdle of it all. That was why she was here. The threat was far from over, and those in power had begun to wonder if it was possible to use the constructs as defense. She certainly believed so, as the weaponry they held had proved far from useless. Just above its large glass eye was a small recess in which sharp metal bolts were stored. The things shot at a surprisingly high velocity, as she had seen one recently demonstrate. She glanced back at a bolt that was firmly lodged within a tree. “Well, I suppose that is another check on the list.” At least they were fun to talk to. They didn’t have ears to listen, instead seeming to sense vibration, and they didn’t have mouths to scold her when she said anything profane, so they made for good company. She smiled, checking off yet another box. “Alright, I think you should be good to go, then! I’m sure the captain will be thrilled to hear this.” That’s it, only one more inspection to go.



LAKE SHOT BY AYDEN LAUGHTON



## NUMBERS

Emily Bell

One Year.

Dayeon had only trained for one year.

Of course, she saw herself as the most talented in her group. When she'd been scouted by her company, she'd been told how talented she was. How much potential she had. After being built up to that degree, signing the contract had been rather easy.

As her first class started, trainees started to form into their own little clusters, practicing what looked like clean dance routines. Dayeon tapped one girl on the shoulder. She looked over at her, eyes scrunching into a smile.

"Hey, Dayeon, right?"

"Yeah, hey. I was just wondering, are we working on anything in particular?"

"Oh, sorry! One of us should have told you. The group is preparing for the monthly evaluation. It's only a week into the month, so you should be fine."

"What's a monthly evaluation?"

"It's a performance that we do each month for the staff. It lets them know how we've grown, and if we're ready for debut," the girl said, pulling her dark hair back into a ponytail. "I'm Hani by the way."

Dayeon smiled, "Thanks for telling me, I was a little lost trying to figure out what to do".

"No worries! Anytime you have any questions, just let me know! I've been here for a while, so it's just daily routine now."

The class came to a close, Dayeon was looking forward to the months ahead.

The three weeks passed by quickly. The trainees would wake up, and then weigh themselves on a scale sitting in the dorm living room. Then they would go eat breakfast, save for the few trainees who were told that they needed to lose weight. After that, there were classes and rehearsals. Dayeon and Hani would walk to the dorms together. They would fall asleep in their bunk beds, drained from the hours of dancing and singing.

Finally, it was the day of the evaluations. The girls sat in their dressing rooms, doing their makeup and curling their hair into picture perfect waves. Hani crouched down in front of where Dayeon was sitting in front of her mirror, holding a small pink pouch.

“Smile,” she said, pulling out a compact filled with a baby pink blush. Dayeon smiled, and Hani dusted the blush on her cheekbones, and on the tip of her nose. She squealed in excitement. “The color suits you so well! You’re totally cool toned!”

“Thanks Hani! You look amazing!”

“Thanks, Dayeon,” Hani tilted her head and smiled.

“Dance group one needs to perform now,” said a staff member, gathering the group members to go onto the stage. The performance felt like it was over before it even started. As they hit the final pose, Dayeon’s eyes scanned the audience, looking at the CEO sitting at the front of the auditorium.

The CEO looked at the group as they filed into a line. Hani gave Dayeon’s hand a reassuring squeeze as they prepared for the critiques.

“I think that most of it was solid,” the CEO said, folding his hands as he analyzed the group. “But I think that some of you need to work on some things. Dayeon?”

Dayeon gulped nervously, “Yes sir?”

“Your dancing is good, but your body entirely takes away from it. Are you even taking care of yourself?”. Dayeon felt the eyes of every person in the room focused on her body.

“Sir, I”-

“I don’t want any excuses. You’re going to have to diet. What would your fans think if you don’t take care of yourself?”

Dayeon left the evaluation dejected, head hanging low. In that moment, she decided one thing. She would do anything debut, even if that meant not eating. It shouldn’t be too hard, right?

She started with little things. She had heard that carbs made you bigger, so she stopped eating rice with her meals. No one really said anything about it, because most of the girls ate low carb. She sat in the cafeteria, looking at her meager portions. Hani sat down next to her with her tray. “I thought I’d join in on your diet, it sucks doing it alone.”

“Thanks Hani, I appreciate the thought. But you don’t need to diet, you don’t gain weight at all!”

“I wish that were true. The company said the same thing they said to you last month during my evaluation, I’ve been losing weight since.” Dayeon’s jaw dropped. Hani’s always seemed super skinny, and she never seemed to worry about her body. As the two waited for the lunch period to end, another trainee slammed a practically empty tray on the table. “You guys too?”

“Yeah, the company always cracks down on our eating after evaluations. I’ve been on this really cool diet recently. Sooyoung Sunbaenim eats one sweet potato for each meal. It’s really effective!”

Dayeon’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Only if you’re on it for too long,” the girl said, sweeping her hair over her shoulder. “I’m Minji, by the way. Maybe we can help each other diet!”

“Sure, I’d be down,” Dayeon said with a smile. The trio walked out of the cafeteria, talking about the singers they wanted to look like most.

The dorm room was dark, save for the glowing light emitting from Dayeon's computer. "Diet tips to lose weight fast," she typed into her computer. She saved the documents she thought would be the most useful. Closing the computer, she sneaked into the bathroom, took out her phone, and took a photo of her body. "*It's good to have a before photo, for motivation,*" she thought to herself.

The trainees circled around a scale sitting on the floor in the middle of the practice room. A staff member walked into the room. "Alright girls, get in line. We'll see how your progress is going."

Dayeon walked to the back of the line. Weighing herself in her own room was fine, she did it all the time, but doing it in front of her peers made her palms sweat. Minji stepped confidently onto the scale, looking at the number expectantly.

"Yes! 20 pounds down!" several trainees around her applauded.

"That's pretty impressive Minji, how did you do it?" one trainee asked her.

"I didn't eat for a week," she said bluntly. Whispers around the room erupted.

"Wow, she must really want her debut," one trainee whispered.

"I wish I had her willpower," another pined.

"Keep it up Minji," the staff member said. "You're one step closer to debut." Another trainee stepped nervously onto the scale, a sigh escaping her lips when she looked down.

"You're going to have to try harder, Hitomi," the staff member said snidely. The trainees looked at her and whispered to one another.

It was finally Dayeon's turn. She stepped onto the scale with shaky legs, trying to feel as light as possible. She mustered the courage to look at the number. 10 pounds down. She frowned, looking at the number like it had a vendetta against her.

"Good job Dayeon," Hani said to her.

Dayeon glared at her, seething with anger. "Easy for you to say, Hani. You've probably lost way more than me."

"Dayeon, you're being too hard on yourself. You should probably stop--"

Dayeon stormed out of the room in a rage. *Hani probably only said that so she could be more beautiful than me*, she thought. *I'll show her, I must debut.*

Dayeon cut down on her eating as much as possible. She was proud of how little she ate daily. She usually would limit her food to fruits and vegetables, as they had more water in them. Of course, there would be days when she would eat a bit more, but there were ways for her to counteract this.

Dayeon stood at the entrance of the gym, examining the wrapper of the granola bar she'd eaten.

"There's too many calories in this," she thought to herself. As she read the nutrition facts, she felt a pit in her stomach. "*It's fine, I can just work this off,*" she thought to herself. She walked over to a line of treadmills and quickly cranked the speed all the way up. As the hours passed, the room started to spin. She reluctantly hopped off the treadmill and sat on the ground with her head down, waiting for the feeling to pass. She looked over at Minji on the elliptical and sighed. She wished that she had as much motivation as Minji, she always seemed to be in the best shape. She looked over at her reflection in the window and turned her body to the side, looking at hers, then at Minji's.

As the weeks passed, the number on the scale shrunk. Dayeon finally felt that the staff liked her. She'd get extra attention during practice, and the other trainees would compliment her all the time. They'd tell her that her weight loss made her dancing look sharper and cleaner. The shrinking of those numbers gave Dayeon a comforting feeling. It made her feel secure in her future as an idol.

She was cold all the time, but she figured maybe the company had cut down on heating. After practice, she got into the shower to wash off the day. As she combed

her fingers through her hair, a large clump of hair came out. She gasped in shock. Was it something she was using? As far as she knew, she hadn't been using any new products. She looked down at her legs and noticed a lot of bruising, muddy purple colors clustering around her knees. She hadn't remembered hitting her legs on anything, at least not hard enough to bruise.

Dayeon thought she'd bring it all up to Minji. After all, Minji knew so much about health.

"Hey Hani, do you know where Minji is?"

"Minji's not here Dayeon. She went to the hospital today after she passed out."

Dayeon's heart leapt into her throat. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that she has an eating disorder, Dayeon. And I've been meaning to talk to you about this for a while. You should stop dieting."

Dayeon's hands clenched into fists. "Who are you to tell me that, you've been dieting too!"

"Yeah, so I can tell when it's getting dangerous. It was fine at first, but you need to stop. You look exhausted, and all you ever talk about is food." Hani looked at Dayeon with pity. Or was it concern? Did it even matter? *She's trying to take away the only thing that got the trainers to like Me*, Dayeon thought.

"You know what Hani, Fuck you. You're probably just jealous because the CEO finally likes me now that I'm smaller. I'm just trying to be healthy, and you're getting in my way."

Dayeon turned around to leave, when the world started spinning. Her vision faded at the corners, and Hani's cries of "Dayeon!" went further and further away, until it all went black.

Dayeon's eyes slowly opened. She looked around at her surroundings, and realized she was at the company's medical center. She looked to see Hani seated in

a chair beside her and frowned.

“Dayeon, I know. But there was no choice. I wasn’t about to leave you on the ground like that.”

“But what if they don’t let me debut? All that work would be for nothing!” Dayeon pushed herself into a seated position, her chest rapidly rising and falling.

“Then it’d be for the best, honestly,” Hani said, avoiding eye contact with her friend. “You need help, and it won’t be easy to get help if you’re in the public eye.”

“I don’t need help, I’m fine.”

“Dayeon, you passed out. Your hair is falling out, and I’m sure there are other things I don’t know about. The CEO was full of shit when he told you to lose weight. I wish I could’ve told you that then, but I was just blinded by my own experiences,” as Hani continued to talk, her voice slowly raised in pitch and volume. “You’ve always been beautiful, and you need to know that, but right now you’re in serious danger.”

Dayeon sighed, her gaze casting downwards. “I just wanted my debut to be secure. I thought that if I lost the most, then they’d debut me.”

Hani put her hand on Dayeon’s shoulder. “It’s not worth all that. I’ll quit with you if you want.” Dayeon gave her the slightest hint of a smile, and the two came to a decision.

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Three years have passed since Hani and Dayeon left JNX entertainment. The company had debuted a brand-new girl group. From the two’s shared apartment, Dayeon watched the group’s debut music video, thinking of what could’ve been. Hani sat next to her on the couch, closing her laptop. “Don’t dwell on it.”

“I know.”



CRUMPLED PAPER BY LAYLA NEVEU



TRAIN TO NOWHERE BY LAYLA NEVEU





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