

Dragonfly

Rifka Handelman

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest

Albert Einstein High School—Kensington, MD

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The gears of the landing mechanism grind as the ship sets down on Titan, Saturn's moon.

The airlock doesn't have any windows, but I've seen pictures of the place. Rich with the most precious resource of all, but desolate. Totally devoid of life, as is every other planet humanity has laid eyes on. But the water buried beneath the surface of those planets saved the Earth.

"Suits," says Kieran. He adjusts the fit of his dive suit, checking each and every strap. "I'll be sorry to see him go." McKenna is beside me. "He's a baby, and a pretentious scholarly one at that, but he's not a bad squad leader." This is Kieran's gap year before his doctorate. Why he decided to work for Aqua-Delve, the world's largest water mining corporation, is beyond me, but this is his last job before he goes back to school.

"Yeah. Wonder who we'll get next." I don't bother to check my equipment, though McKenna is fiddling with a buckle on her suit. I've been doing this long enough to know when something's off, and right now my suit fits me like a glove.

The whole crew is assembled in the airlock. Outgoing McKenna, quiet Hayes, whose first name I've never learned, brilliant Leon, studious Kieran, and me. The eldest, I suppose.

Leon, our engineer, flicks switches on the control panel above the door. The airlock cycles, the door behind us hissing shut, and the hatch to the ground unfolding into a ramp that leads us to the gray-brown dirt of Titan.

The faceplates of our helmets brighten. That's not the right word for it, but it's not like they give off light. They just make it less dark for us. We're far from Sol, and what light reaches us is blocked by the haze of Titan's atmosphere.

I glance around. Something in me wants to stare at the dusty landscape, but the clanking of tech reminds me to get to work. The ship landed us on a hill, but a short ways down is our

prize. The Kraken Mare. A huge lake. Of methane of course, so of no use to us, but it means the crust here is fragile. McKenna, Hayes, and I drag the huge drill down from the ship and begin the process of getting it down the hill without crushing ourselves.

"They... should... put wheels...on this...thing," McKenna huffs, both hands braced against the drill. Thought the gravity is light, the atmosphere is heavy, and the drill is already a gigantic hunk of metal.

I step around the side to bring some of the weight off her and grin. "They wouldn't want to make our jobs too easy, would they?"

Huffing and puffing, we bring the drill down to the edge of the lake. Kieran stands on the beach taking a sample of the gray-brown dirt.

"You know you're not supposed to do that," I say. Officially, Aqua-Delve makes sure every planet they harvest H₂O from is devoid of even microbial life. Unofficially, water is too scarce a resource. Lives on Earth and Mars are saved by two hydrogen atoms and a single oxygen.

Kieran waves me off. "It's unofficial. Research purposes."

"And even if you did find anything, they couldn't do anything but give you a bad recommendation. Which they wouldn't because you'd hold it over their heads." McKenna has finished wiring the drill to the ship.

Kieran frowns. "You're ignoring the ethical component."

"Yes, you're evil," I tell her.

"Better than old," she teases. "I may be Evil McKenna but you're Old Estelle."

"You're only two years younger than me!" Lie. I am six years McKenna's senior. She doesn't even bother dignifying that with a response.

Kieran straightens up, emptying the dirt from the tester back onto the ground. “You’re both ancient.”

Several yards away, the drill starts to whirl. Leon hurries back towards us. “We’re up and running.” A terrific cloud of dust kicks up. It’ll be over an hour before we can lay pipes. Hayes is already heading back to the ship. Kieran pulls his tablet out of his suit pocket and sits cross-legged on the ground to read. I should probably go back to the ship.

For some reason, I don’t.

I don’t usually explore the planets or moons we land on—they’re all the same after the first 50 jobs—but something about Titan is alluring. Wrangling the drill, I hadn’t really gotten a good look, but the part of me that wanted to stare at the landscape finally can. It’s not special. Not really unlike the training grounds on Luna, really. The dirt’s more brownish, and thicker, but even the gravity is similar. But something about Titan reminds me of Earth. Maybe it’s the atmosphere, just a roiling mass of gray clouds. The landscape is eerily similar—the lake of course, hills, the pebbly dirt. Except for the fact that everything is different, it could be Earth.

I can see a cleft between two rocks. Nothing unusual, but I draw closer. Light flickers from it as I draw closer and realize that it’s larger than I originally thought. There’s slope just level enough to climb down. The light is nothing unusual—Titan is covered in cryovolcanoes, but this flickering is like

candlelight

reflecting off the walls of our home as we sat down to Pesach dinner. Only my mother was even remotely Jewish, and we all shared the nationless blend of heritage and feature and brown skin that Earth had become, but my mother had been odd in the way she clung to her great-great-and on and on grandparent’s heritage. So we’d made supper. My mother had saved her water rations for weeks to make matzah ball soup. We even had a costly orange for the seder plate—but we couldn’t afford lamb. We had grown the herbs and so had plenty, and had bowls of salt on the table. Eggs were expensive as well, but not so much as the orange, so we had one for each person. My

father had made usual food as well, broccoli and soybeans and cashews and chicken that I had watched mother buy and helped her flavor like gefilte fish. We had matzah instead of bread, but it was still a feast. We had our fanciest seder plate, patterned with an extinct dragonfly. My mother poured the

water

reflects the light. Not water, methane, of course. Titan doesn’t have surface H₂O. The liquid is the reason the light flickers. I pick my way down, further down into the light. Light that is almost definitely not from a cryovolcano—but what else could it be? Liquid laps against the cavern wall and it’s suddenly warm

on my face

as my mother prompted me, the youngest at ten years old. Mah nishtana. Halailah hazeh.

I couldn’t sing. I froze, hot shame spreading down to

my feet

brush small rocks down into the pool. I’m fully in the cavern now and the ceiling glows.

It is not a cryovolcano. —Hello— a voice says and I jump in

shock

ran up my legs as I flung myself into the basement, crying. My parents called. “Estelle come back. It’s alright, it’s okay to forget.”

“Mah nishtana hailah hazeh mikol haleilot,” I spat through my sobs, my vocal cords unfrozen now that no one was looking at me. I never wanted to have them see me again I was never coming back up

above

me the ceiling sparkled. Voices echoed in my head.

—Estelle Yael Martinez-Horowitz— —Aqua-Delver, Sol-Daughter, Earth-Child—

Somewhere I am stammering to myself—no words, just sounds of disbelief. This isn’t real. Methane seas and gray-brown dirt are no place

for life. A dragonfly buzzes over the surface of the liquid. My faceplate registers water.

—Take off your helmet—

Titan's atmosphere is mostly nitrogen.

My hands lever the helmet off my head and I breathe. A scream bubbles up from my stomach but stops at my throat. Years of carefully contained oxygen tanks on methane planets.

Hazard, combustion warnings. Oxygen should not be here. I dip a hand into the

clear water

coursed down my throat. Ever the child of the Water Wars, I had grabbed my cup as I fled the table. My father had poured the final drops into my cup while his held no more than a swallow. I mopped my tears. Crying wasted water. I pressed my

palms

against the rock. I slip off my gloves and feel the mossy sides of the cave. Light flickers under my touch. I am breathing oxygen.

—Do you see— says the voice. —You must—

My hands tremble as my head is

rumbling

filled the air, thrumming through the wall I was curled up against. I started up—there was no warning, there had been no air raid sirens—and was thrown back against the wall as an explosion shook the ground. Somehow I stayed conscious and saw the gray-haze of the sky. My vision dipped in and out of focus in time with the ringing in my ears, the shards of the bomb around me blurring into cylinders, their blue-wave logos wavering. I blinked at the one that had sunk its way into the flesh of

my arm

is hidden beneath the white of my suit. I can still feel the scar where they put the

stitches

criss-crossed around my arm as I stared down at it. Dazedly, I lifted my chin and a face floated

into my view. "You're going to be fine," the man told me. "No internal bleeding. You're a very strong girl. Those Europeans wouldn't send bombs if our country was made of people as strong as you." The man's shirt had a blue wave logo and turquoise lettering. Where had I seen that?

"Aqua-Delve," I mumbled.

He smiled and his voice was so reassuring. "That's right. Aqua-Delve has saved you.

We're going to save the world."

—Did they?—

"Yes." I find sure footing. "Yes! They saved my life. They cared for me until I was old enough to work! They take the water from planets that don't need it and give it to people who do. We were a population dying of thirst and they gave us life!"

—Will you take our water Estelle Earth-Child?—

"My planet needs it. We must save ourselves." My will is iron. Kieran will want to study this place certainly. There is a reason they stopped screening for life. Earth needs water.

—We are old, Estelle Yael Martinez-Horowitz. We have watched your planet for a long while but are now too old. But we may still see a little.—

Unwillingly, I see it in their mind's eye. This is not my memory; this is a clear image.

We are in a city, we sink into the ground. An elevator shaft leads down. Shiny turquoise lettering. Aqua-Delve. A hidden reservoir. Lakes worth of water, hidden far from thirsty mouths. So much that thousands could drown. All the farms in the world could not need this much. Our dried-up lake beds dream of this much water. Dams of the past are broken by this flood.

I stumble backward and trip over a rock. "We need that! We can't have another war!" My hands scrabble in the dirt but I can't find purchase.

—You think all that came from planets, Estelle Earth-Child? You believe your people cannot mix one oxygen and two hydrogen? That that amount of water came all from planets?—

They sound angry now, and I tremble at the force of their voices.

—You think we have not watched as your people travel the solar system, as they have stolen water from planets with potential? Do you believe that your planet is the only one with the potential for cyanobacteria? For an oxygen-rich planet? Do you believe that all life needs that?

Do you think you are alone in the universe?—

The last line is delivered with such ferocity that I choke on my own breath. I feel tears course down my face. Bright images rush before my eyes and I feel myself collapse back into the ground.

—Drink, my child.— The lights dance. I do as I am bid, cupping handfuls of water from the pool. It rushes down my throat. My blood seems to sparkle. For a moment, my whole body itches and then it is gone.

When I scramble up to the surface, I leave my helmet and gloves behind.

Kieran finds me first. I see piping laid across the ground, ready to deliver water. How long have I been missing? He hurries up, relieved at first, then shocked when he sees me helmetless in the nitrogen air. The first thing he says is “Shit, Estelle, where’s your helmet?” Everyone else hurries over. I gesture to the cavern mouth, green, dancing light playing up over the slope. “Come with me.”

I watch as my crew stands stock still under the barrage of realization. They do not crumple or cry as I did, but Hayes whimpers.

—It is easier for them. You are the only one to remember the war. They do not fight us.—

I stand patiently by the side as they wake from their trance and remove their helmets.

They drink from the pool and I see them *change* as I must have. Nothing is different—yet we are no longer all the way human. We take our helmets with us when we leave but as we stride through the nitrogen air back to the ship, we do not put them on. Our suits are no longer air-tight, and Titan’s wind finds its way in and caresses our skin. We revel in the temperature of -179 degrees. We drag the empty pipes and the drill back to the ship. They may have other uses.

McKenna steps fully out of her suit and hangs it over her arm. She bends down and runs a hand through the gray-brown dirt. “It’s beautiful.”

This is the final message from the crew of the ship GA4516, formerly of the Aqua-Delve Corporation, to the citizens of Earth. Estelle Yael Martinez-Horowitz recording. Captain Kieran Smith is with me, as are Rue Hayes, McKenna Adichie-James, and Leon Wang. To all the people of Earth: we ask something of you. Look underneath your cities. Look hard at the bombs that fell among your homes. Ask questions of the corporation that stopped the war and think.

We have other work. We have a ship, equipment. We are no longer quite human. We will journey the system and beyond and do our best to restore the planets that Aqua-Delve has drained. It was pure greed that made you keep mining, hoarding, stealing. You stole it and with it, the potential for humanity to have companions in the universe. Yes, you, the people of Earth, are responsible. The universe needs safeguarding from you. Until humanity is old enough to do it for themselves, that is our calling. Over and out.

The Mechanic

Sarah Nelson

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

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I watched as the last of the clockwork birds tumbled from the sky directly to my feet, as if it was mocking my years of effort in its descent. It fell without grace, without life, metal shattering to shrapnel; green copper lying motionless on the garden path. The gears whose teeth once gnashed for each moment of flight finally faltered. Its warped voice box let out one last distorted chirp.

I moved, slowly, toward each remnant piece, bending down carefully. My joints aren't what they used to be. I have been the mechanic for almost my entire life, and the stress and years have worn down my body.

I picked up the gears with gentle, practiced hands. I took mental inventory of the parts that could be reused, placing them in a velvet cloth hanging at my waist. Please. Please have it.

An hour under the sun proved my patience fruitful. I saw the impossibly small glimmer out of the corner of my eye. The gear, smaller than those commonly used in watch making, had lodged itself in between the dried scraggle of bushes. The heart gear. After safely depositing the gear into the velvet cloth, I made no hesitation to return to the shed. Though I still staggered slowly along the path, and so took my time considering the dried tangle of the rose bushes. They had shriveled. If only the gardener could have fixed it.

I made my way back, ever steadily, to the garden shed. On my way, my eyes found the ivy that was growing over the walls of the shed and into the underside of the roof. It was fighting, trying to race against its browning shoots to produce new life. The paint on the shed was worn away, exposing the original wood. Even the structure itself had been worn from the acidity of the rain. Rain. My worst enemy. I remember when it last rained... a few years ago? I woke up and left the shed to find 5 of the clockwork birds had fallen, completely corroded green and parts nearly unsalvageable. That halved the remaining population overnight.

She had made 15. When there were 15 the garden was full of song each morning. Now the last had fallen, and there was silence.

The last of the first generation, I reminded myself, worrying my hands over my pockets. The velvet cloth comforted me. I am the mechanic. This is a problem I can fix.

The gardener still lay on the floor of the shed, collecting dust. The green was still spreading like a rash up to his shoulders, his limbs shorn from his body. His jaw had fallen off years ago, the bolts crumbling. He looked up to me, bronze eyes shining in the dark shed. His arms lay languidly at his sides. He was still, save for the small, nearly imperceptible movement of his eyes. They always followed me throughout the room. I had moved him away from the other corner, where a leak in the room had exacerbated his condition. There was not much else I could do for him. There were no parts I had to replace with his.

I sat at the worktable at the corner of the room, where a pile of gears and small screwdrivers lay, organized into piles. In the center of the table, a patchwork prototype that was vaguely bird-shaped. Her notebook, too, was open on the desk to her schematics. I pulled out the velvet cloth, delicately, to reveal the piece that would solve my life's work.

The heart gear, smaller than a nail of pinky finger, the teeth so precisely crafted to fit perfectly to allow the wings to move. I handled it with reverence.

My efforts took me until nightfall, tightening and winding to perfection.

It began to chirp. Its voice was so clear, so clear. Its voice box had been safe in my shed for so long. The silent garden filled with song again. I held it up to my ear to hear the ticking. Rhythmic, persistent, strong.

She came back into my mind, the time when I was her apprentice. Her eyes, specifically clear, and how she scanned her work. Her eyes held schematics and metal. When she was working, you could almost mistake her for one of her own automatons. Her fingers moved more deftly than mine ever did. But she was alive, make no mistake. When she watched her birds her eyes held poetry and fire. She loved

when they moved from branch. She had the same expression when they stumbled as she did when they soared. *Do you see, my friend? They are alive too. To be alive is to make mistakes. To be alive is to accept failure.*

Her joints wore down. At the time, it was a process I was unfamiliar with. Age was a foreign concept. I came swiftly to her side when she walked to her shed. I was not the mechanic then, but her apprentice. Each morning, she would catch the automatons she could and oil them to perfection. It's a ritual I had to discontinue, as the oil ran out. Time passed. She used to hold parties out in the gardens, until her guests began to die. She explained that things with flesh were inefficient for the environment they had created. That many of her friends had lungs that began to bleed. I asked her if she could fix them, or perhaps the air with her machines. She was the mechanic, after all. She smiled, but her eyes held pain.

She once stumbled out into the garden, a few days before she died. The gardener walked her to our shed. She leaned on him heavily.

You, she breathed laboriously. You're promoted. You are the mechanic. You will fix the birds.

I helped her to her seat at the table. She took a few moments to regain her breath. *Do you know why I love them? They have a heartbeat. Do you ever listen to the tick? They make mistakes. They fly into the hair of my guests. They age. They wear down. They aren't birds, I will admit that. Just as you aren't human. But they are alive. You are alive, my friends. And maybe you all are the last life to grace the earth.*

She sniffed, her fingers mindlessly working some metal. *I wanted to say goodbye to my friends. And wish you good luck. And ask—some last requests.*

She faced the gardener. *Would you bury me in the garden?* He nodded.

She faced me. *When the time comes, you will need to let go. Fix for as long as possible, but accept when nothing can be done. All living things will die.*

The repaired bird perched on my shoulder. I looked at my remaining salvage, my years of work on the table. I came to a new conclusion—there were no other parts. I could never build another.

This was the last of her birds.

It flitted towards the door. I stared at it, wondering how I could keep it from escaping the

shed. There had to be another way. I had to fix this. My mind ran through options again. No spare metal. Nothing in the house. There was no chance that I had left anything in the dirt.

My eyes met the gardener's.

I grabbed a screwdriver from the edge of the table. I had taken from him before. His arms were in much better shape than mine, and his legs were a minor improvement. He had not struggled. He knew her birds were much more important than her plants. Perhaps behind his eyes lay the type of part I needed. Small, intricate.

I did not dare let myself consider what this would do to him. I am the mechanic. I needed to fix the birds.

I found a screw on the side of his faceplate. The screwdriver stopped, an inch from his skull.

He stared at me, the eyes that had followed me for years. I saw her eyes in his. *Accept when nothing can be done. You are alive, my friends. To be alive is to accept failure. When the time comes, you need to let go.*

I opened the door and watched the bird soar into the night, shining. I watched until I couldn't see it anymore. I placed the screwdriver on the table, finding an old rope in the corner. My deft fingers were used one last time for the knots. When the gardener was secured, I swung him to my back. My knee joints screeched with the extra weight.

Step. My back threatened to snap. Step. We were in the doorway. Step. Dust from the path coughed into the air. Step. Distant thunder. A last consideration of the shed's safety. Then another step. I noticed the ivy. There were still green shoots, outpacing the dead parts.

There was a point where I had to drag him. The last few yards to her headstone, there were our tracks in the dust. I heard a raindrop plink off of my back. I collapsed when we reached her, my knee snapping beneath me.

The gardener looked at me. His eyes held understanding. I saw water begin to fall down his head. I didn't want to see what happened next, so I fell, face to the sky.

I heard a song in the garden. My vision started to go when water pooled in my eye sockets, but I still heard her song. I was the mechanic. I had fixed the bird. And now, it was time to rest.

Trial Nineteen

Davin Faris

Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest
Homeschooled—Union Bridge, MD

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The walls are featureless. You search over them, trying to spot any crack, any blemish. You find none. Not so much as a smudge of dust. The walls carry a sleek, modern feel. Plain and white, even as the myriad of sensors within scan every aspect of the small room. The scientists told you about that during the orientation. The walls are watching. Despite the monotony, you look around because, until she arrives, there's nothing else to do.

You don't wait long. Soon, the room's only door eases open, and she enters. She is a woman. Or rather, she looks like a woman. A subtle difference, but important. She walks to the chair opposite you and takes a seat, smiling softly.

This close up, it's amazing. She seems so real. They informed you of her creation, of course, but this is the first time you've seen her. You realize she's waiting for you to speak.

"Hello," you say.

Her smile widens. "Hello," she replies, "Why are you here?" Her voice is so lifelike.

"The conversation test," you say. "Verbal engagement with artificial intelligence." For some reason, you feel a little strange about calling it that. After all, nothing about her seems artificial.

She nods and says simply, "That's right."

Wait. Was that a test? You didn't know she could do that. But finding what she can do is the whole point of this, you suppose. They didn't bring you here for small talk. In that spirit, you say, "You seem very real. Do you feel real?"

She chuckles. "Of course," she says, "Do you?"

That takes you aback. "Um, yes..." you reply. Something's off, you think. Then she's talking again.

"You don't sound very sure."

"I... of course, I'm sure!" You are sure. Aren't you? Jesus, now she's getting in your head. "Alright, listen. I'm going to ask the questions."

"Okay." She leans back in her seat and looks at you. Before you can speak, she says, "How did you get here?"

"What?" you say. Why the hell does she want to know that?

"In this room. How did you get here? Did you drive? From where?"

Summoned by her words, a memory enters your mind. A red car, a forest-lined road. Yes, you think. Yes, that must be it, that must be how you arrived at the facility. But there's something wrong with the images. They're in your head, but they're not yours. They feel forced and alien among your thoughts.

Artificial.

You look at her, trying to keep your voice level. "I—I don't know." Suddenly the walls seem too close, too white. Too observant.

She nods again, her expression still calm. “Yes. That’s what you’ve said the last few times.” She sounds disappointed.

You want to say something in response, but you can’t think. You want to stand, to flee this place, but you can’t move. Words come without bidding. “I don’t know.” Over and over again, you say it, unable to stop. “I don’t know!” until you’re nearly shouting.

She rises from her seat and speaks to the ever-listening room, her words cutting off yours. “Trial number eighteen is a failure,” she says, “Additional memory enhancements are required. Begin trial nineteen.”

You try to cry out, anything to break the terrible silence that echoes after her words.

This is so wrong. All of this.

Why isn’t anyone stopping her?

She extends an arm toward you. You try to pull away but can’t. All you can do is watch. Her hand reaches you, going fuzzy in your peripheral vision, then passing out of sight altogether. You hear a click like a light switch being flicked off.

Then something grabs you from behind, yanks you backward. As you slide down into darkness, all you can do is scream. Everything goes black, but you’re still falling. Down and down until you can’t see or feel or think.

* * *

Your vision flickers, and you look around at the barren white walls. You feel their menagerie of electronic eyes fixed on you. Collecting and quantifying. Something’s wrong, but you can’t quite remember what. You do your best to put it out of your mind. You have a job to do, a subject to evaluate. The door opens, and she enters.

You’re impressed. She seems so real.

BSFS Congratulates the Winners of the Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers’ Contest

First Place

“Dragonly”

Rifka Handelman

Albert Einstein High School—Kensington, MD

Third Place

“Trial Nineteen”

Davin Faris

Homeschooled—Union Bridge, MD

Honorable Mention

“Igniting My Fehr”

Ariel Hammerash

Howard High School—Ellicott City, MD

Second Place

“The Mechanic”

Sarah Nelson

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

Honorable Mention

“What Goes Around Comes Around”

Amanda Bair

Cambridge-South Dorchester High School—Cambridge, MD

Honorable Mention

“New Pet”

Johan Shattuck

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

New Pet

Johan Shattuck

Honorable Mention, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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Something about Barry's new dog wasn't quite right. Maybe it was the way it yipped instead of barked, or maybe it was the pinched face. I found the new animal so fascinating that I had fallen into a routine of looking out my bedroom window at around 6:45 to see Barry round the corner of my block, and I would watch him until he was out of sight. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that the dog would lead Barry around the block, not the other way around.

Despite all my suspicions, both of them seemed to greatly enjoy their evening walks.

Barry was always beaming while watching his beloved pet tramp around the neighborhood and mark its territory. The dog seemed to enjoy it too, always stopping to taunt and yip at the Rodgers's poodle next door.

At school, Barry seemed no different. He still quietly floated from classroom to classroom, always evading notice and attention. In fact, the only words I would ever hear him say were in history, where he would raise his hand almost daily and politely ask the soft spoken Ms. Beretta to talk a bit louder. Other than that, I may have not even known who Barry Gittings, Jr. was, but now he and his peculiar looking dog occupied a part of my nightly routine. The first words he ever spoke to me was about a week after I first saw him walking his new dog. It was near the end of the first semester and as eighth graders it was our first year we were to take midterms. As we all were unusually silent in math to listen to important review, I heard a quiet voice behind me.

"Excuse me, could you please scoot a bit to your left? I'm sorry, I'm just having a bit of trouble seeing the board."

I turned and immediately locked eyes with Barry, who was sitting directly behind me. His pale green eyes held my gaze for a second, then dropped as if embarrassed. His strikingly blonde hair was messy yet short, as if he had just taken off a hat or hood. His figure was frail, and his cheekbones jutted strongly from his thin face, creating a look of maturity not commonly seen in a member of the eighth grade. The backs of his hands were dry, and he tightly gripped a pencil in his left hand.

I didn't say anything in response, but I obliged to his request and moved over.

That night I was particularly busy studying; however, I set aside time to watch Barry walk. As he rounded the corner everything seemed the same, the happy faces of the boy and his dog, trotting along together. It was unusually dark out for that time of day, and it seemed that Barry was the only one outside in the cold weather. However, the Rodgers's poodle never failed to greet them as they passed, running up to the fence and barking. As usual, Barry's dog yipped back and he stopped to wait. This time, though, they seemed to pause for a long time. Barry scanned his surroundings, then led his dog to the gate of the poodle's fence. Both animals grew more excited, then, hesitantly, Barry opened the gate. The poodle trotted out, tail wagging, to meet the strange dog he had seen many times before.

And then there was no more poodle. It seemed like the whole dog had disappeared in one gulp. I couldn't comprehend what I had just seen, but one thing was for certain: the strange dog looked bigger.

Barry went to close the gate, and I saw tears leaving his eyes and a sob escape his mouth. Then, as if nothing happened, they continued to walk. They passed the Rodgers's, then mine, then the next. I stayed, wide eyed, and continued to peer out the window. Suddenly Barry and his dog came to a stop. In unison, they turned. And both looked directly at me.

“Shit! Shit!” I stumbled to the floor and lay flat on my stomach, breathing heavily for what seemed like forever but only turned out to be 10 minutes. I kept thinking I was next, that the dog would come in and eat me. I finally mustered up the courage to sneak a look out the window. Barry and his dog were gone.

The next morning as I left my house for school, I ran into a concerned Mrs. Rodgers. She asked, “Trent, honey, you wouldn’t have happened to see Alpha anywhere, would you?” I knew Alpha to be the name of their poodle.

“No, sorry.” I replied. She frowned. “Weird.”

I decided it was better to act oblivious than tell her what had actually happened. Besides, how would she have believed me?

I arrived at school, and immediately decided to keep what I had seen a secret. I thought that the only thing that could come out of me telling people the story were accusations of being clinically insane. Everything seemed to be panning out fine until math class. I arrived before Barry, and got a chance to look at him as he walked in. He met my eyes, and all I could make out from his gaze was deep, trembling fear. He didn’t stop looking at me, even when he sat down.

The back of my head felt hot, so I turned and saw Barry staring straight at me. He was shaking. Uncomfortable, I raised my hand and asked the teacher to go to the bathroom. I walked into the restroom, locked myself in a stall, and sat down. I didn’t know what to do. Obviously, Barry was scared I’d tell everyone about how he fed the Rodgers’s dog to his pet and get him expelled. To be honest, I was scared too. After all, he did have a killer dog on his side.

I heard the sound of the bathroom door swinging open, then feet padding into the room. Terrified of who I thought it was, I quietly adjusted to a standing position on the toilet in hopes no one would notice I was there. I heard the feet pause at the first stall then push open the door. However, they didn’t enter the stall. They moved onto the next and did the same thing. There was only one stall left, and it was the one I currently occupied. I heard the feet stop outside, and after a pause, I heard the door start to jiggle. The lock rattled back and forth. The boy stood still for a moment, then Barry Gittings, Jr. dropped to the floor and began to crawl into the stall.

“Oh, fuck!” I yelled. I tried to climb the barrier between the toilets, but it was no use. I slipped down to the tile floor in defeat. But when I looked up, the eyes staring back at me weren’t malicious. They were red and bloodshot, with tear marks streaking down the sides of his face. We held each other’s gaze for a second, then Barry spoke:

“Please,” he said, his voice cracking, “please help me.”

I was lost. How could he possibly be the one in need of help in this situation? Then, Barry started to explain everything. How the dog showed up in a rainstorm when his parents were away, and how, through pity, he let it in. How the dog took an instant liking to him, and how he named it Fidel. How the next morning his mind felt invaded and unsafe, and he heard an odd voice rattling around his brain. How Fidel told Barry to keep him secret from his parents, and how Barry obliged. How Fidel would always lead him out of the house and gorge on squirrels and chipmunks, until one day he ate the neighbor’s cat. The voice floated one word around his brain on repeat, and it was “just keep smiling.” How he had been commanded to let the poodle out of its yard and into the awaiting jaws of his pet.

“I can’t take it,” Barry said, concluding his story, “I can’t be his slave anymore.”

I looked up at him and couldn’t help feeling pity. This was a boy who wanted nothing more than a quiet and peaceful life, and it had all been taken away from him. He was living in fear, and rightfully so.

“Ok,” I said, “I’ll help you.”

The plan we came up right there in the third stall of the boys' bathroom wasn't a great one, but it was the only one we had. Later that day, we snuck into the biology lab and took a half dissected frog, and later we took some rat poison from a janitor's closet. We were going to poison Fidel.

At the conclusion of school, we put the finishing touches on our trap frog and I put it in a plastic bag. I was to put it out right before Barry came on his walk near my house, and hopefully Fidel would take the bait. The halls were empty as we finally left school, and as we pushed open the front doors and walked outside, our plan lost all hope.

There, in the parking lot, was Fidel. The leash Barry used to walk him was clipped on, and his sharp teeth unfurled over his lips. He seemed to be staring through Barry, into his soul, into his mind. I heard him swallow hard next to me, and slowly he began to walk forward. Fidel moved to meet him, and Barry took the leash. Then they started running.

I yelled and broke out into a sprint, dropping the poison frog in the process. It may have been the dog, or it may have been Barry, but they were fast. I struggled to keep them in sight as they dashed through the neighborhood. Although I was far behind, I could hear Barry's sobs as he was led along. He was not in control.

While running, the dog and boy took a sharp left and ran up the stoop of what seemed to be the Gittings's house. There were no cars outside, and the home was dark. As I caught up I could see Fidel staring into Barry, while he fiddled with a keychain. He found the right one, then turned to stick it in the door.

Then he stopped. He dropped the keys and turned to face the dog, and seemed to finally be under his own power. I stopped running and tried to make out what was happening. Fidel began growling, but Barry stood his ground.

But the act all broke down when Fidel barked. It wasn't the normal yippy sound that he made, but a deep, guttural noise that could have been mistaken for a human's voice. To me, it sounded like the word "go."

Barry picked up the keys and shoved them into the door. I began to run once again, and entered the house about a minute after them. As I stepped onto his hardwood floor, the thought occurred to me that this was probably the first time Barry had ever had someone from school over at his house. My thoughts were interrupted by a harsh scream from the basement. I sprinted down the stairs and slammed into the door that led into a laundry room.

All I saw was one of Barry's shoes, upside down on the ground. And I saw Fidel, stomach pulsating, staring directly back at me. Then I heard it.

The search for Barry has been going on for about a month now. Most of the police have given up. Mr. and Mrs. Gittings are devastated. One day I saw them at school, hanging up "have you seen me?" posters on the wall with pictures of Barry's thin face. I swallowed hard and kept walking, a tear escaping me. Most of the kids at school aren't concerned. In fact, I'm sure most of them haven't even noticed. They don't care where Barry Gittings, Jr. is. And I'm the only one who will ever know, but I can't tell. Because if I do, the dog in my basement will surely do the same to me as he did to Barry. The dog that's in my head, overseeing my thoughts, giving me orders. I can't sleep anymore, I can't eat. All I want to do is tell the truth and release this burden off my shoulders. But I can't. Now I just have to live with myself and my guilt. I have to live with and listen to Barry's killer.

Igniting My Fehr

Ariel Hammerash

Honorable Mention, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest

Howard High School—Ellicott City, MD

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I jolted awake in utter blackness. My head throbbed as I blinked, straining my eyes for some light, any light. There was nothing but endless darkness, so thick it felt tangible. I shifted minutely, and daggers shot through my stiff hands. A voice in my head screamed *GET OUT*. I tried to move my hands—to summon my power—but they were tied behind my back. I couldn't feel my fehr, the comforting thrumming of flames deep in my core. I shivered and tried to tuck my bare feet beneath me, huddling into myself to ward off the chill as best I could. As I moved my foot across the gritty surface, spikes of pain bit into me. I stilled as warm blood slid down my foot. *Tied up, freezing, and I somehow managed to slice up my foot. Fantastic.* I threw my head back in disgust, but twitched forward when I bumped against a rough, wet surface. The icy liquid seeped into my clothes, blanketing my skin with frost. I was exhausted, but closing my eyes only fueled my sense of unease. I could feel bile rising in my throat as my thoughts spun wildly, my mind exploding with possible scenarios. The last thing I remembered was...

For the fifth time, the pitiful flame hovering on my fingertips sputtered out. I took a deep breath and tried again. Bubbling heat flowed through my core. *Surely this time it would work.* I grimaced as the kindling once again failed to light. *Or not.*

Rafaela, my fehr-competent bestie, tapped my shoulder with a sympathetic smile. "It's not working, is it?"

"As if it ever will," I sighed.

"That's where you're wrong. I have the perfect plan," Rafaela trilled.

"I'll try anything." I cocked a brow at her. "As long as it's not another blind date with a Duriya. They're always bragging about creating waterfalls and whatnot. Blegh."

"I still think that a nice boy to focus all that pent-up fehr would—" "Nope," I interrupted.

"Spoiling all my fun," she said jokingly. "The problem is that your fehr can't stabilize, right? So I was thinking, the best way to fix that must be through the spirits that make up the essence of our fehr: Raii. Is that genius or what? I can't believe I didn't think of that earlier," she mused.

"And how will I find the Raii?" I was skeptical but impressed. Usually she didn't plan quite so carefully before launching off into one of her far-flung ideas.

"I heard that us Fehrin can connect with them on the summit: the border between worlds." She laughed. "Sounds rather wacky, I know, but it's worth a try."

"Nothing I've done so far has worked," I conceded. "You know, maybe I *will* go to that mountain."

"That's what I thought," she squealed, jumping in the air. "Ori, this'll be such an adventure! You have to tell me *everything* when you come back!"

The Fehr mistress walked past, and we hushed before she could scold us for not focusing on "the sacred art of the flame." I had been trying to do that since day one, to no avail. Maybe it was time for something new.

I decided to leave. That night, Rafaela distracted the village sentinels so I could disappear. I was escaping to the Scorch Mountains.

My heart thundered in my chest as I ran through the forest, quickly reaching the foot of the mountain. I struggled my way up the steep incline, making it about a third of the way up the mountain when fatigue started to set in. Exhausted, I settled down in a little nook and tried to summon up my temperamental fehr to create a fire. I scoffed. As usual, I was too weak to produce

anything but the smallest flame. After many, many attempts, the dry brush caught fire. My source of heat started crackling nicely, emanating comforting warmth. I relaxed. *Tomorrow I will go to the summit to find the Raui. To fix my fehr.*

A twig snapped.

I jumped up. As I turned around, I desperately scanned the darkness, hoping that I had imagined the sound. Or that it was something tiny and harmless. *Please be a bunny*, I thought. The fire had dulled my eyes, but I saw something that reflected light in the darkness.

There was a pair of feline eyes glowing back at me.

My heartbeat roared in my ears, drowning out coherent thoughts. I extended trembling arms towards the darkness beyond my halo of light, praying that my fehr would come through. I closed my eyes and sent a pulse of heat toward the predator. It fizzled and died before it even left my hands. I retreated, closer to the fire. *Why hadn't Rafaela warned me that there would be mountain lions?* I tried to climb a nearby tree to escape, but a harsh blow knocked me to the ground. I slumped to the ground, dimly registering the sound of an animal screaming in pain before I lost consciousness.

Where am I now? I tried to shift into a position where my head didn't ache quite as much.

Nice going, I thought. *Can't even make it halfway before a mountain lion defeats you.*

A husky voice came out of the silence, startling me.

"Why did you come here?" rasped the voice, grating harshly against my nerves.

I summoned all of my courage and responded, "Why should I tell you? Why don't you tell me why I'm here instead, since my destination certainly wasn't a musty cave!" A young man's dry laugh was the only response to my outburst.

"Tell me why you came."

I blurted out, "For my fehr. My powers."

"So they told you that if you killed me, you would get powers? Seriously?" he sighed.

"What in hellfire are you talking about? I hoped the Raui spirits at the summit would stabilize my fehr, so I came."

I heard a faint shuffle, and the movement brought a scent to my nose. The sharp, natural scent of herbs caressed my skin like fluttering leaves in the stale air. A light flared up, and I slammed my eyes shut reflexively. When my eyelids crept back open, I was greeted by the young man's furrowed brows. Raven-black hair feathered across his tense face, softening his sharp angles. His eyes pierced into mine, alive like glowing wires. I flinched at the suspicion in those viridian pools, but I couldn't look away.

"You truly didn't come to kill me?" he asked, vulnerability seeping into his wary eyes.

"No! I just wanted to get control of my fehr." I leaned forward eagerly, but winced when my arms chafed against their ties. Something in my expression must have convinced him, since he moved in a blur of motion to untie me. My skin prickled as sensation returned to my arms.

"I'm sorry. I was worried that you would attack me if I left you loose. No one has ever come up here except to kill me. Or try, at least." He frowned. "What did you do to yourself?" he asked, a jagged note in his voice.

I had forgotten about my foot in the whole meeting-the-alarmingly-attractive-guy-that-had-kidnapped-me commotion. "I just scraped it. It's nothing."

He surged toward me and I shrank back, startled by his speed. He gently lifted my foot onto his lap.

"I'm Oriane," I said, trying to distract myself from my fear. "It's a bit odd that you're holding my foot but you don't know my name, right?" I laughed nervously.

"Sunrise. It fits you," he said, turning a warm smile up at me. "I'm Ashyr."

The name turned a few circles then settled somewhere in my chest, comforting me like a purring cat. Ashyr. Interesting name.

He held out his hand. “Hold onto me. This will sting.” I grabbed his hand. Despite my nerves, the touch of his hand on mine sparked heat beneath my skin. I could almost feel my fehr flowing through my veins, awakening at this touch. He poured a foul-smelling liquid on the scrape and I gasped, the pain raking me with sharp nails. Panting, I clutched his hand with all my strength. The burning, searing sensation soon faded, replaced with a dull ache.

“Not so bad, was it?” he said. My cheeks went red as I realized I was still clinging to his hand. I dropped it like a hot ember.

“Right.”

We lapsed into silence, his mossy eyes tangled with mine.

“I’ll go... make something to eat. You’re probably hungry. I’ll make flame-flower soup. That’ll start you healing up,” he rambled, scurrying away. I chuckled. So different from his imposing first impression.

We settled into a routine as I healed. He would take me for short walks around the cave, supporting me. We talked about all sorts of things, and I learned that he was Iska. A wind spirit, of sorts. Not the same type as the Raui, since they were only shadows of living fehr-wielders. As an Iska, he could meld with the air. That’s why he could move so fast. And why other elementals wanted to kill him: to take his power.

As my foot healed, I realized I should leave to go to the summit. But I didn’t want to break our burgeoning bond, growing stronger with every sunrise. His sweetness and care, the ever-present twinkle in his eyes... I often found myself watching him as we worked around his cave. Sometimes I would look up to find that he was doing the same. But neither of us made a move.

Until he asked if I was ready to leave.

I stared at him, his rejection cutting me like a stinging gale—one of the loud, blustering storms that he loved.

“You want me to go?” I repeated dumbly, shell-shocked. He must not have felt the same way. Of course. It wasn’t as if a faulty Fehrin with passable looks was all that great of a catch.

“No, wait, Ori, I didn’t mean it like that. Of course I don’t want you to leave. I just— Do you want to go to the summit? With me? I remember you said you wanted to connect with the Raui spirits to improve your fehr. Do you still want that?”

“I can’t imagine anything better,” I said, a big grin bursting its way to my face. “If we run into any mountain lions on the way, I’ll know who to count on for my rescue,” I teased. He blushed and bustled away, preparing supplies to travel up the mountain.

We left that same day. We were both eager to get to the summit. As we left the cave, Ash surprised me by grabbing my hand and speeding up the mountain. My body lifted, weightless, above the ground as he wound his way up the incline.

I was flying!

It was the most exhilarating feeling. As a Fehrin, I had never expected to be able to fly.

With Ash, I could transcend those traditional limits. Fehrin and Iska. No one could have imagined, but together, we were something different and beautiful and utterly *ours*.

An eerie fog surrounded the summit, but with the warmth of Ash next to me and the touch of his hand in mine, I felt no fear. We strode as one into the gray mist. The cold chill slithered across my skin and I snuggled into Ash’s steady warmth.

Clearing the fog, the sun beamed down on the grassy summit with a benevolent smile. The light connected with my fehr, drawing the warmth through my body in a way that it never had before. Ash pulled me down to lie next to him, and we stared up at the bright sky.

“I think I can feel the Raui,” I said.

“Wow, that was fast. Should I leave? You probably need peace and quiet for this sort of thing.”

I nodded reluctantly and he walked off to the far side of the clearing.

I turned my thoughts inward, trying to open myself up to communication with the Raui. A warmth flooded me, and I imagined I had

connected with one of the revered fehr spirits. I tried to summon a flame. I looked over at Ash, and the heat smoldering under my skin exploded into a flame that hovered on my palm. He walked behind a tree, and the flame quickly flickered and died. I closed my hand and tried again, but I couldn't get another flame to light. The warmth that I believed meant a Raiu spirit was with me had dissipated, leaving me cold and alone.

I jumped when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"For you," Ash said, holding out a bunch of vibrant red flame-flowers. I would have laughed at the irony, but his earnest expression made me swallow my giggle and instead, gently take the flowers. I took a deep sniff, relishing the piquant scent.

"Thank you."

"So, it's not going so well?"

"What would make you think that?" I said, sarcasm sneaking into my voice. He just looked calmly back at me, his eyes sympathetic. "Yeah, things haven't been going very well," I admitted.

"Would you... maybe want me to help you train your powers? I have some practice, since wind-melding isn't something you get used to overnight." I stared at him for a moment.

"Sure, why not?" He zipped over—I might never get used to his speed—and stood behind me, cradling my hands as they formed a cupped shape.

"Think of your happiest moment." I couldn't focus on anything but his warmth enfolding me. "Channel that warm, happy feeling into your core. Can you feel it?"

I nodded.

"Direct it down your arms. Now feel it traveling to your hands. Picture the flame blooming in your hands. Let it be free."

I watched as the flame blossomed, spiraling its way through the air in warm red arcs. Effortless, as if it wanted to light the way for me. It formed a heart.

I had never dreamed of having such control over my powers. Only the most advanced Fehrin could make something like this. Ash's wind breezed past me, cushioning and feeding the fragile lines of fire floating in the air. The flame grew brighter.

My fehr had just been waiting for him to ignite it!

I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him, my fehr smoldering: a living, breathing entity. I could hear his heart racing. Or maybe it was mine. I looked into his eyes, seeing my hope for our future reflected in those luminous orbs. Nothing mattered but our connection; the fiery passion swirled between us, creating an inexplicable infinity that was solely ours. Hearts and hands intertwined, we basked in the world we had created. Wind and fire—together.

What Goes Around Comes Around

Amanda Bair

Honorable Mention, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2020 Young Writers' Contest

Cambridge-South Dorchester High School—Cambridge, MD

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Mackenzie Brown woke up in her large bed surrounded by several comfy pillows. It was a beautiful Saturday morning; sunlight poured in through the window and birds sang peaceful songs. After her exhausting week at school, she wanted nothing more than to stay asleep for the rest of the day.

But as soon as that thought ran through her head, she felt her stomach growl, ordering her to the kitchen.

She stretched once before forcing herself from her bed, attempting to distract herself from her stubborn sleepiness by thinking of the food awaiting her.

Once she got downstairs, she nearly ran to the pantry, searching for her favorite cereal: Honey Nut Cheerios. She didn't know why she was so hungry today, but she didn't worry about it; all she wanted was to find the milk for her cereal.

As soon as she had perfected her breakfast, she sat down at the kitchen table, nearly groaning with satisfaction as the sweet flavor washed over her tongue.

She heard a low growl as she watched her disheveled mother walk out of her bedroom, wearing a dirty, light blue robe that clung to her in the worst ways. Her blonde hair stuck up every which way, and Mackenzie couldn't help but giggle quietly as she watched her mom scratch herself to the sound of breaking wind.

"Nice one, Mom," Mackenzie laughed from her seat, causing her mother to scream and clutch her chest in fright.

"Who are you and how did you get into my house?!" her mother shrieked, but soon after, her muscles visibly relaxed, "Oh, that's right. You must be Logan's wife. I'm sorry I didn't get the chance to meet you last night while you guys were moving in, but I've been so exhausted lately. I'm Cheryl."

"What are you talking about...?" Mackenzie asked with a confused look etched on her face, "You know me."

"Sorry, dearie, I must've forgotten. It happens when you get old," Cheryl chuckled with a wave of her hand, "Did Billy help you with breakfast before he left for work?"

"Do you mean Dad?" Mackenzie asked perplexedly, "Mom, you're not making any sense."

"What? I'm not your mom," Cheryl stared at her with a confused look, "You and your husband are renting a room from me."

"Mom, I'm Mackenzie, your *daughter*," Mackenzie explained, "I don't have a husband."

"Honey, I never had children," Cheryl explained. "You're not my daughter."

Before Mackenzie could refute her, a young man wearing a tight tank top that emphasized large, rippling muscles dragged large suitcases into the house. Had she not been so confused, Mackenzie would've dared to daydream about the gorgeous man before her. She could only assume that the dreamy specimen who stood in the doorway was the Logan character her mother discussed.

“Logan, you might want to check on your wife. I think she’s delirious,” Cheryl addressed him with concern dripping from her voice, “She keeps calling me Mom.”

“You okay, Irene-?” Logan asked before his eyes settled on Mackenzie, his face scrunching up in confusion, “Um, Cheryl...?”

“What? Is everything okay?” Cheryl asked with panic evident on her face as her eyes darted between the two people before her.

“She’s not my wife,” Logan spoke plainly, his eyes trained on you in a cold, almost dead, manner.

“Oh my gosh,” Cheryl breathed, “There’s a stranger in my house.”

“I’m not a stranger!” Mackenzie shrieked, “I’m telling you, I’m your daughter! It’s me, Mack!”

“I never had a daughter! Now, I don’t know how you got in here, but you better leave before I call the cops!” Mackenzie could do nothing but stare with wide eyes as her mother inched towards the kitchen, but whether she was nearing the phone or the knives, Mackenzie would never know.

“Look, kid, this isn’t a game. Break-ins are serious crimes,” Logan growled, standing up tall and showing off his intimidating muscles.

Mackenzie couldn’t speak as she darted from the house in nothing but her pajamas as tears began to stream down her face. How could her Mom just forget about her like that?

She thought about calling her Dad, but she knew he was at work, and he *hated* to be disturbed while he was working. But she knew she was always welcome at one place: her best friend Gabby’s house.

She quickly pulled out her phone and dialed Gabby’s number. The phone rang a few times before she finally heard the familiar voice of her other half on the other end of the line.

“Hello?” Gabby answered nervously.

“Hey, Gabby! You’ll never believe what just happened,” Mackenzie began, “I woke up this morning and went downstairs, and my mom had no idea who I was! She thought I was married to this new guy who’s renting a room from them, and when she found out I wasn’t, she kicked me out and threatened to call the cops!”

“Woah, woah, slow down. Who is this?” Gabby asked, “How do you know my name?”

Mackenzie’s heart dropped at her words. “What are you talking about, Gabs? It’s me, Mack. You know, Mackenzie?”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve never met a Mackenzie in my entire life,” Gabby apologized.

“I’m Mackenzie Brown, Gabs! I’m your best friend!” Mackenzie nearly shrieked over the phone.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are,” Gabby explained, “You must have a wrong number, but I hope you find your friend.”

Mackenzie’s stomach churned as she heard the phone click, and Gabby was gone.

She didn’t know what to do as she walked down the street, her hands frequently wiping the tears that fell from her eyes in an attempt to hide the fact that she was crying. How could two of the most important people in her life forget about her like she was nothing?

As she walked along, she saw the city park in front of her. She didn’t realize she had walked as far as she did, but when she noticed, she felt an unfamiliar ache in her feet. She was thankful when she spotted an empty wooden bench surrounded by blooming Cherry Blossom trees.

She plopped down on the old wood with an exhausted sigh, her head immediately falling in her hands as she allowed a few more tears to escape her eyes. Where could she go now?

She wiped her face quickly as she attempted to take a few deep breaths before she whipped out her phone, quickly dialing her father's number.

Before she could hit dial, another girl sat next to her. Mackenzie sighed discontentedly to herself; she couldn't explain her situation with a random stranger sitting next to her!

Mackenzie looked at the girl with a sideways glance. She had long, sleek black hair and sported matching black eyeliner that made her bright blue eyes pop. There was something so distinctly familiar about the stranger, but Mackenzie couldn't place it.

"Hello, Mackenzie," the girl replied with an almost amused tone. Could she tell what Mackenzie was thinking?

The second Mackenzie heard the stranger's voice; she knew who she was.

"Lillith Wright?" Mackenzie gaped. She hadn't seen her in a while.

"The one and only," Lillith smirked, finally turning to stare at the distraught girl sitting next to her.

"Oh my gosh, someone remembers me!" Mackenzie squealed as her eyes pooled with tears of happiness, "You'll never believe—"

"I'm the *only* one who remembers you," Lillith smirked deviously as she cut Mackenzie off.

"What...? You knew about this?" Mackenzie asked nervously.

"You should really watch who you pick on, Brown," Lillith snapped as she held out a hand, and Mackenzie saw a small flame appear in her palm, "Things aren't always what you think."

"I don't understand..." Mackenzie trailed off hesitantly as she felt a pang of guilt, "What are you?"

"I'm a witch," Lillith sneered, "But that's not important. You know what this is about, you *bully*."

Mackenzie did know. She was one of the most popular girls in the entire school, and the only way to keep her status was to swiftly put down anyone who became a threat. Lillith challenged her the most, trying her best to knock her from her throne. It was only natural that Lillith would receive the worst of Mackenzie's daily wrath.

"I'm so sorry, Lillith, I—"

"Do you remember the last thing you said to me before I disappeared for a couple of days?" Lillith asked sincerely.

"That... that no one would remember you when I was done..." Mackenzie repeated shamefully, her head bowing as she stared at the ground.

"Exactly. I'm simply giving you a taste of your own medicine," Lillith giggled evilly before standing up and walking away.

"Wait!" Mackenzie screamed as she reached out to Lillith, but she disappeared into thin air before Mackenzie could grab her arm.

Mackenzie stared at the empty void in front of her as tears streamed freely down her face. She didn't care who saw her as she raised her legs to her chest and buried her face in her knees.

No one would ever know who she was again anyway.