

Oracle

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2019 Young Writers' Contest

Montgomery Blair High School—Montgomery County, MD

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Talia sat in the whitewashed room, staring at the Com on the wall. She sat perfectly still, back straight, head up, mind empty. She had never waited for a call before. There had been no reason. Calls were a waste of time, an inefficiency.

She wanted badly to play with the sleeves of her suit. To take her hair out of its perfect bun and tie it up again, tighter. Tug on her white gloves, even polish the shiny, metallic helmet that sat on the floor next to her chair.

But she didn't. Her suit was fragile, her appearance important. And everything was perfect. There was nothing to fix. No one made mistakes on the day of the Transmission.

Time dragged by like honey being poured out of a jar. Talia would miss honey. It was sticky and made a mess, but it made things sweet. And things could have stood to be a little sweeter.

After minutes that felt like days, the Com began screeching.

"Incoming message. Incoming message. An audio chat has been requested. Request sent from District 233, Home 166729. Incoming message."

The woman's voice was perfectly neutral and unsettling in its lack of humanity. Talia imagined herself rushing over to the microphone, pushing herself against the wall and pouring her heart out to him. But she couldn't. That was not protocol. That was not efficient.

Talia picked up her helmet. She walked to the Com, pushing the Accept Request button with one gloved hand. She expected her hands to be shaking, her heart to be racing, but everything was still. The white walls stood around her like a fish tank, imprisonment and protection.

The call connected.

"Hello."

She almost recoiled at the sound of her own voice. Robotic. Emotionless.

"So today's the day, huh?"

Conor sounded exhausted. She knew he had been in main control doing preparations for the Transmission for the past four days. They let him sleep at home last night. They let him call from home today. But she knew he would be back soon enough, thin, muscular body curled over a screen, pressing buttons and ensuring everything went as smoothly as always.

"Yeah," she responded. From the other end of the line, she thought she heard a chuckle.

"Do you know when I first realized that I wanted to marry you?"

The question came from nowhere, a stranger in her doorway on a foggy night.

"When?"

She was promised that this discussion went unrecorded. Five minutes. 300 seconds of uninterrupted conversation and then a click and he was gone. A severed limb she had to live without.

"We hadn't formally met yet, you probably don't even remember me from back then."

She heard the chuckle this time, she was sure of it. Soft and warm against the cold static of the Com feedback.

"We were in training, I was learning to be a launch operator and you were an Oracle apprentice, obviously. You remember they split us off into groups, but we all had meals together and I would see you in the big cafeteria. I thought you were beautiful the first time I saw you, but..."

Conor trailed off. Talia could still hear him breathing. She couldn't see him, but she knew what he looked like. He had one hand pressed to

his temple, an elbow rested on his knee perhaps, bent over the microphone without realizing he was taking his long breaths right in her ear. She counted the seconds of silence without meaning to.

“I realized that I wanted to marry you when you walked into the lunch room with the rest of the Oracles and... I guess that was the day they told you guys what an Oracle does because everyone around you looked depressed. But you were glowing. The fire that I saw in your eyes that day, it gave me purpose. If you could take pride in being an Oracle, hell, I could take pride in anything.”

Another long pause. Another shaky breath that washed over Talia, drowning her.

“Do you know when I knew I wanted to marry you?”

Her voice was steady, but her heart was in her throat, beating against her neck and choking her.

“When I realized that you knew I was an Oracle and you still filed the family request documentation.”

Pause. Breathing.

“When they told me what I was, I understood my duty, I wasn’t upset about that. But I never thought I would have this. You. The kids. The home, separate from my Nurturers. I didn’t think that was for me. As an Oracle.”

Talia had heard stories about what people said during this call. You get one. They must call you. Most were partners calling for one last whisper of affection. Some people told secrets. Some talked about sex. Others just sat on opposite ends of the Com and cried. And some Oracles didn’t get a call. They just waited until the doors opened and they could enter the ship. The most human interaction they got was the launch operators telling them they were “ready for liftoff” and saluting them with the traditional “Bring us good prophecy.” What sad, lonely creatures they must have been. An Oracle for a society that didn’t care.

“I asked for the kids to stay home from Education today,” Conor said, as if giving her a mundane life update would somehow take the weight off of the situation. “But that’s not protocol.

They’ll watch the Transmission from the classroom with everyone else. No exceptions.”

“It’s better like that,” Talia breathed.

She couldn’t think of the kids. Aaron and Saphie, twins. The strongest set of two the society’s Birthers had seen in a while. Conor had been proud. He had squeezed Talia’s hand, kissed her brow. Held their children to his chest and smiled his toothy, genial grin at their infant faces.

The Com beeped. 60 more seconds. A countdown had begun on a Hologram in front of Talia. She knew Conor was facing the same one. Miles apart, both forced to watch as their time ticked away, a blue projection of a condemned future.

“Talia.” Conor called to her, voice raspy. “I will be with you.”

“They’re putting you on the launch operation Com?” she asked, surprised. Granted, there hadn’t been a “personal conflict” like this one in a while, but still, she never thought they’d give him the actual last words.

“No,” he replied. Talia’s heart dropped. Of course they didn’t. That wouldn’t be efficient. “But that’s not what I mean.”

30-29-28-27

“I will be with you. So will the kids.”

23-22-21-20

“And I’ll be with you.” Talia’s voice began to break, she felt a tear well at her eyelid.

14-13-12-11

“And hey.” Conor’s voice sounded cheerful again, rejuvenated.

6-5-4-3

“Bring us a good fucking prophec—” click.

Conor was gone.

During Training, the Oracle apprentices were constantly filmed. Talia assumed it was the Society documenting their progress or sharing it over

public Hologram channels, but she knew now that it served a bigger purpose.

“The cameras are the most important part of the Transmission, they give the rest of the society hope,” her instructor had said. “Never get caught with your head down. You take pride in your sacrifice. You do it for everyone around you. They cannot know if you feel anything but unyielding loyalty to your duty.”

And throughout training, that’s what was practiced. Talia was good at it. If she had to take a break to pant after a particularly hard physical exercise, she did so in the Excretion Room. She was nothing but smiles, radiance, charm in front of the mechanical eyes that followed her.

She was the same now. Conor had been gone for minutes. Talia had put on the helmet, drying her eyes with a pure white glove. As she faced one of the blank walls, it parted, revealing a long, barren hallway of unforgiving steel. Talia stepped out of the room and three cameras were there waiting for her, each working with a mind of its own, flitting about to get the perfect angles of society’s hero of the hour.

Her body went into autopilot. Without thinking she tossed her chin up, lips playing at a confident smile, walking with purpose—but not arrogance—down the grey hallway. Two doors at the end of the hall offered her entrance into her vehicle. She stopped at the doors, stood with her hands behind her back, the posture of absolute attention.

A voice crackled into her ear. She could hear the announcements blasted over the Hologram channel, accompanying the footage of her making her way to the ship. She heard everything that they heard: the rest of society, her children, maybe even Conor.

“Oracle 716: Talia.” The same eerie voice that announced the Com call presides over this. Talia could see the shot in her mind. A dramatic pan upwards, starting with her boots and working its way up her suit until it captured her face, bold and pleased, through the glass of her helmet.

“Trained in Station 027, District 233. She has a partner and two children. Today, she will be making the Ultimate Sacrifice.”

The voice trailed off and music welled in Talia’s ears. At the absence of the voice, Talia dropped her attention. The cameras followed her as she crossed the threshold, striding from the hallway into the bottom of the space shuttle. Again, she moved without thinking. At the back of the shuttle entrance there was a ladder that led to the cockpit. Talia began her ascent, cameras rising with her, capturing her heavy breathing as she labored against gravity.

She used to be afraid of heights. Climbing ladders during Training would leave her lightheaded and weak. There was no mercy for her fear. Eventually, she just... got over it. They would have had her refer to it as “conquering weakness,” but Talia was never sure.

She didn’t look behind her as she reached the top of the ladder. She knew that if she did, the cameras would capture her grimace, the fear in her eyes. Human weakness is not to be tolerated.

The music continued to blare in Talia’s ears. Reaching the top of the ladder, she pushed the hatch above her open. She crawled into the cockpit, familiar to her after hours of flight simulations. Strapping herself into the single seat, she stared through the front windshield and into the sky. The Sun glared back at her, making her eyes water through her visor. It would only get closer, she knew.

As Talia began the space ship’s prep sequence—flipping the same buttons and turning the same knobs she knew so well—the music faded out and the voice returned. It was time for the final part of the Transmission ceremony. The cameras that had followed her into the cockpit steadied themselves, training in on her face.

“The Oracle is ready for takeoff.” Talia knew she would never be ready. “Today, for the seven hundred and sixteenth consecutive year, our society sends an Oracle into space.”

As the ceremony commenced over her headset, Talia thought of the day the Oracle apprentices were told what they were to do.

“As you know, it is believed that our Earth’s orbit is degrading, bring us closer to our Sun and

threatening the lives of everything around us," the Trainer had said. "Our Oracles head for the Sun and as their ships break down and they burn to a crisp, they collect data.

"The sacrifice of these great, noble travelers will ensure that we know how much our orbit has shrunk and when our planet will become uninhabitable. This is your sacrifice."

The trainees should have known. They had watched enough Transmissions. But it's different when your life is attached. Most of them cried. Talia did not.

"Bring us good prophecy," the voice finished its sentiments. Talia finished her checks.

All systems go.

Launch will begin in 10.

9.

8.

7.

6.

5.

4.

3.2.1...Lift off.

It took 100 days to reach the Sun. 100 days of data collection and transmission back to Earth. 100 days of silence under beeps and whirrs and the occasional warning message from the same metallic, chilling voice. 100 days of life alone.

But more importantly to Talia, it was 100 days of missed living. 100 days of children growing. 100 days of memories. 100 days of falling asleep next to Conor and waking up to toddlers jumping on the bed.

For 100 days she looked into the Sun, watching it come closer and closer. Strangely enough, her eyes didn't water like they did on the day of the Transmission. She supposed she just got used to the piercing brilliance of the star.

It wasn't until the alarms on her ship began to go off that she fully realized what was about to happen. After 100 days of contemplating her fate, something in Talia accepted. Not the same acceptance she felt on the day they announced

it to the Oracles in Training. It was a bigger acceptance. An inner peace.

I am doing this for Saphie. For Aaron. For the future of my family. For Conor. She thought. I am not doing this for the voice. Not for society. Not for the millions of people who watched from Earth as I launched myself into the Sun.

As the sunlight began to warm her body, as the ship's loudspeaker projected the voice saying "all is well" over and over again, as the star she had spent so much of her childhood gazing up at flew towards her at breakneck speed, Talia sent her last message home. The data would tell Earth's command how far the Sun was away from the Earth, tell them how much time they had left. She wondered for a brief moment if Earth was in any danger at all. If she was less a scientist and more a sacrifice. It was an irrelevant thought.

She sent her prophecy.

And then, Talia, a woman of 37, melted into legend. Oracle number 716.

February 19, 2308--message from Oracle #716

Oracle: According to my ship's readings, Earth is still 0.98 astronomical units from the Sun. The society remains safe for another year. The Sun is not nearly as beautiful up close. That's not data, just a personal observation. At the risk of being inefficient, I have one thing to ask before I crash. Tell Conor that I am always with him. Tell my family that every time they look at the Sun, I am there, watching over them, protecting them and--

Error

Error

Attempt reboot

System failure

Magic

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Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2019 Young Writers' Contest
Homeschooled—Bel Air, MD
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I didn't always live in a jar.

I had a family once. My mother was a beautiful human being, with wild golden curls and eyes like a striking post-rain sky. My father smelled like smoke and... father. My brother laughed at everything, and my dog was like that of a fairy tale... and that was what I was. I'm straight out of the bedtime stories Mother tells us. I'm magic.

To the person reading this, it must be in the future, for I've not yet found a way to the past. Imagine a time before yours, where magic is feared and 'witches', born with power, are burned. When I was born, Mother tells me a sunbeam trickled through the window onto my face... but it was midnight. Within my first year, I found I could turn my hair colors, have flowers bloom in winter and make the rain go away. Imagine my father's fear in hiding what his sweet, precious girl could do, his fear in keeping me a secret from the neighbors and the nobles. I had no idea that most pumpkins didn't grow to five feet on their own, or that starting the fireplace with my bitty fingers wasn't commonplace. If I didn't fit my favorite dress, I simply made the dress grow with me.

On the positive, my family never went hungry, for I could make beans grow from the dirt floor of our cabin, but on the negative... the nobles sent knights through the village once a month on witch hunts, and I was forced to hide in the crawlspace, lest I accidentally sneeze out glitter or something to give me away. My parents did so well, keeping my magic hidden. I grew, played with the neighborhood children and fought hard to keep my magic in, but I slipped up once, at ten years of age, and that's when the accident happened.

There was a boy, with thin, slanting and coal-black eyes that matched his hair. We were playing together one afternoon, when he threw his ball to the other side of the creek.

"Go to get it!" He yelled and laughed, and so I began to wade through the creek to the other side, but the other side was thick with prickly bushes. Nonplussed, I simply sent the bushes back down with my magic, tucking them back into the soil like babies. They didn't hurt me. I retrieved the ball and waded back to the boy. He stared at me with wide eyes and a gaping mouth, and I didn't understand. All I'd done was put away the bushes and gotten the ball for him.

I wiped my hands down my muddy front and the dirt was disappeared as if by some invisible river. I held the ball out to the boy, but he stared at it, ran away and screamed the one word that placed me in my glass prison: "WITCH!"

He yelled it at anyone who would listen, and I chased after him through the streets.

"Witch! She's a witch! RUN!" I needed to do something, or bad things would happen.

He was fast, but my magic was faster. I threw my arms out and he became a golden ray of sunlight. He's still there today, if you want to go see him.

The villagers tied me, and I couldn't escape without hurting someone. Night fell, torches were lit and the nobles were alerted. Everyone in town gathered around the post to which I was tied. Mother's eyes had a pink look around the blue parts and Father's vein on his temple was pulsing as he held my

brother's shaking shoulders as he cried, because there was nothing to laugh about. The nobles arrived on the backs of tall white mares and they came to me.

"They say you are a witch. Is this true?" A short and round man asked me.

I shook my head at them from my perch high on the post.

"No! I am not. Witches hurt people and use magic for bad things. I do not."

"You are indeed magic then?"

I hung my head. "Yes, sir."

My brother hiccupped.

The noble squinted his eyes at me and looked toward the docks, where ships come in.

"Then if you pledge to help us, you may live."

They then took me from the post and took me from my family. They built a nice stone tower on the edge of the beach for me, had me shrink myself and placed me in a jar on the top of the tower. Now I use my magic to bend the moonlight at nights, to alert ships of the rocks and reefs, keeping people safe every evening. I never aged since then, and it has been a very long time since I have seen people who weren't tower guards. I saw my family only once more, when they all boarded a boat destined for a place they called "England."

When night comes, there are three sources of light in the village.

The moon, the boy... and me.

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Newfound Normality

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2019 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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The sun was low, but Jon Winkler's spirits were high as he waltzed down Manheim Boulevard. He had just been released from his job at an analytics firm, and he was determined to spend the night improving himself. After all, he was only 18 points away from qualifying for a interest free auto loan. 18 points away from being able to afford the car of his dreams. Jon took a few minutes to daydream about his future. He envisioned himself cruising around the streets of Haven, radio blaring, with a partner next to him... But his thoughts came crashing down as he mindlessly bumped into another pedestrian. Jon apologized profusely, dreading what the stranger would do, but it was no use.

"Idiot," muttered the stranger as he walked away.

Seconds later, Jon felt the familiar buzz in his pocket. He whipped out his Tracker, and his heart sank. *Obstruction of Walkway. Reported by Samuel Lord. -1*, its screen read. *Shit*, Jon thought, *19 points now*.

He sullenly walked away from the scene of the encounter, and tried to distract himself with the games on his Tracker. He beat a few rounds of *Galaxy Quest*, and had successfully forgotten the past until an ad popped up. *Download Witch Hunt*, it read, *and boost your points now!* Jon sighed at the obvious scam, and glanced up from his phone just in time to glimpse a plastic bag floating along the street. He jogged over to it, picked it up, and placed it in the trash can. Once again, he felt the familiar buzz, and he glanced back down at his Tracker. *Delittering. Automated Report. +1*. Jon smiled. *Back to 18*, he thought, looked back down at *Galaxy Quest*, and continued on his way.

After another hour of walking, Jon arrived at his destination, exhausted. He looked around him. The squat stores that he had been passing had turned into towering silver skyscrapers, whose antennas pierced the heavens. However, none rose quite as tall as the building in front of him. He read the sign; *The Stewards of Haven. Cleaning Society One Step at a Time*. He walked in, and after walking through a series of metal detectors and scanners, he beheld a clean, white reception area. Jon walked over to the receptionist. "I have an appointment for 7:30," he said.

"Okay, wait one moment please," the receptionist replied.

Jon took a seat in one the black leather chairs, and picked up a stack of magazines. *Steward's Life, Improve, Score Report...* Nothing in the stack interested him, so Jon placed the magazines back on their rack, and looked around. His eyes scanned the room. He glanced at the security cameras in each corner of the room. For a moment he pondered their usefulness since the Trackers were always recording his movements anyway, but he soon settled on the State Protection Department's slogan; *Better Safe than Sorry*.

"Guide Porter is ready to see you now." The receptionist's call shattered his thoughts, and yanked Jon back into reality.

"Okay, thank you," he replied, and he moved towards the reception desk.

"Right this way," the receptionist said as she guided him down glaring white hallways. At every corner there were more cameras, but neither Jon nor the receptionist bothered to acknowledge them.

At last the two arrived at Guide Porter's office. The receptionist opened the door, and Jon walked through. This room was far different from the rest of the facility. It had wooden paneled walls, a soft green ceiling, with bookshelves on the wall behind Guide Porter's desk. Elsewhere, the walls were covered with an even mix of pleasant paintings and posters that either represented the Stewards or the SPD. Finally, Jon's attention came to Guide Porter. She was short and had short, grey hair. On her nose, gold rimmed glasses perched. She wore drab green and grey clothes, the colors of the Stewards, but had a beautiful golden brooch pinned to her sweater.

"Guide Porter, how kind of you for meeting with me," Jon began, "I am here because—"

"Please, call me Mrs. Porter," she interjected. "And I know exactly why you are here. You are taking the initiative to become a better person as well as a better steward to your community. Due to your efforts so far, I would like to give you a small reward right now." She mindlessly tapped on her own Tracker, and Jon felt his own vibrate, but the feel was not familiar. No, now his Tracker going off ferociously, as if it was some sort of alarm. He pulled it out of his pocket, and his heart jumped. *Reward for Stewardship. Issued by Guide Porter. +5.* Jon had never received so many points at one time.

"I don't know what to say, thank—"

"There is no need to thank me, you earned them," Mrs. Porter interrupted. "And there will be more high rewards if you can complete the tasks that I assign to you. So... do you think that you are up to the task?"

Without even thinking, Jon replied, "Absolutely."

"Fantastic," Mrs. Porter replied. "Well then, that concludes our meeting. I will send over the list of tasks later this evening. Feel free to peruse it right away, and send back any that you are not comfortable with. However, remember; any tasks that you choose to send back lowers the reward that you will receive."

"Of course," Jon responded, and left the office. He walked back down the same clean white hallways, past dozens of cameras, past the reception desk, through the grid of metal detectors and scanners (*Better Safe than Sorry*) and was soon out of the offices. It was then that Jon finally broke his composure, and smiled. *13 points*, he thought. With this new number ringing in his head, he began to walk home.

Nothing was incredibly special about Jon's walk home that night. He simply played *Galaxy Quest* and walked, although he was now extra mindful of the other pedestrians. He went from the towering Corporate District to the Shopping District, filled with luxury shops and huge billboards advertising the newest releases. At one point, a fleet of armored cars, filled with Protection Officers armed to the teeth, drove by. Jon cheered with the rest of the pedestrians as they passed, and then continued on walking. Finally, he returned to the Housing District. It was by far the most natural district, and even Jon put his Tracker away to gaze at the ponds, bushes, and trees as he walked by. Of course it was all fake. The Industry of Haven had killed all real natural life years ago, and the artificial bushes and trees were all products of the State Beautification Department. But they were pretty to look at, so no one cared if they were real. The SBD had even put speakers that emitted bird sounds in the trees. The most obviously modern things in the Housing District were the cameras and microphones on the streetlamps, but since they were everywhere anyway, nobody paid any heed.

After a while of taking in the natural beauty, Jon finally walked up the brick steps to his home, and entered. He lived in the standard Worker's Housing apartment layout; a living room, a kitchen, an office, a bedroom, and two bathrooms. He threw himself onto his couch, and turned on the television while he waited for Mrs. Porter's tasklist to come in. He flipped through the channels. All that was on

was some State Protection Department special broadcast about some war that was going on, and why that meant that you were *Better Safe than Sorry*. Jon really didn't want to watch it, but also knew that he couldn't just turn off his TV in the middle of a SPD special broadcast; it would arouse suspicion, after all. So, he left it on, and went to prepare dinner.

He pulled a chicken out of his fridge, and had just placed it in his instant-oven alongside some green beans when his Tracker buzzed. He slammed the oven door and jumped over his counter, getting to his coffee table in record time to check it. *Eating Healthy. Automated Report. +1*. He put the tracker back down. *12 points now, but still no task list*. He returned to his instant-oven, and pulled the chicken and beans out. He prepared a plate, and returned to his TV just as the SPD broadcast ended. He finally turned the TV off, picked up a book, and read while he ate. It was an engrossing nonfiction book about the history of America. He read about how America had been a cesspool until Samuel Manheim had been elected president in 2056, and of the huge murder numbers, mass shootings, bombings, and large scale terrorist attacks. He learned of the ineffectiveness of American leaders until Manheim had opened the door to undesirable elements of anarchists and other subversive elements. Only the fearless Manheim had stood up to the world, and was the first to protect his citizens. *Good God*, Jon thought, *how horrible America used to be*. He finished the book after a few hours, and he glanced at the clock. 9:30. He put the book down, and took his plate back to the kitchen, and placed it in his dishwasher.

Just then, his Tracker vibrated again. He rushed over to it, and read the message. *Task List Received*. Aglow, Jon walked to his bedroom, laid down, opened the list, and scrolled through the tasks.

1. *Volunteer at a Stewards-Sponsored program. +10*
2. *Post a Pro-Protection Department Post to any Media Platform. +15*
3. *Help the Beautification Department construct a natural structure. +10*
4. *Bring up Pro-Protection Department topics in 10 conversations. +10*
5. *Report a potential Subversive to the State Protection Department. +20*

Any completed tasks will be automatically checked off, and their points will be automatically added to your score total.

Jon was overjoyed. 65 points up for grabs! Naturally, his eyes drifted towards task #2. *I need 13 points*, he thought, *and here are 15 points, easy*. He quickly logged on to MyMedia, and began writing a post.

Just had a meeting with a Guide from the Stewards of Haven today, and I had a marvelous time. I just wanted to thank the State Protection Department for guarding the headquarters! Their security systems go a long way towards protecting us, and they don't get enough love! Better Safe than Sorry!

Jon clicked post, and within seconds his phone vibrated. *Task Fulfilled: Pro-SPD post. Automated Report. +15*. Jon smiled, and relaxed on his bed. He had finally done it. *Tomorrow, I'll apply for the loan*, he told himself. He got up, and changed into his bedclothes. He checked his Tracker one last time before going to bed. There were dozens of positive comments on his post already. People saying *Agreed*, or *Hell yeah*, or even *Praise the SPD!* Jon smiled, plugged his Tracker into its outlet and got into bed. He picked up his journal, and wrote only one sentence: *Great day, nothing out of the ordinary in Haven, finally qualified!* Jon put his journal down, and turned to look at the mirror across his room. He smiled and gave a thumbs up to the camera positioned in its frame. Its small green light blinked once, as if in agreement. Then Jon turned off his light, laid down in bed, and drifted off to sleep.