

Watchful Eyes in the Night

There's something about the nighttime that I will always cherish. I don't think I'll ever know exactly why. Magic is everywhere and has always been a part of my life, but I feel that it comes into existence only after dusk. To look up and see the twinkling white stars that embellish the pitch-black sea above is wondrous. They seem so infinite, so eternal. And the moon seems to watch over you in a protective, almost maternal way. It's nothing like the sun with its unforgiving heat and blinding brightness. The moon is steady; it brings a feeling of serenity, peace of mind, and safety. My skin can't burn under the moon. Daytime thrives on chaos and people are the ones to fuel it. Whether it's crowding into humid train cars even if they're packed to capacity, chasing after buses whilst cursing the dismissive drivers, or slaving over textbooks in poorly air-conditioned classrooms. All of this happens under that big bright star. It's a whole different story when sunset hits. Darkness falls, and in the darkness there is life. You can hear it in the buoyant music being blasted in neighboring houses. You can see it in the dazzling spectacle that is fireworks being set off by the lake. You can feel it in the chilled nighttime air.

At night, things don't *have* to make sense. Words don't have to have meaning unless you want them to. Secrets are told under the pale light of the moon; confessions uttered without fear of judgment. I remember this one time at grandpa's cabin, Blair and I stayed up really late binge-watching her favorite show. I can't remember what the title was but I know that it was some sort of sitcom. All that mattered was that my sister liked it, so I liked it.

If she laughed, I laughed, and if she cried, I cried. During a commercial break, she said, “There’s nothing I wouldn’t give to live their lives. A life without magic or monsters. Must be nice, right? Being normal, I mean.” She didn’t say anything else for the rest of the night. There was no explanation or follow up conversation. No further comments or concerns. I simply nodded. And that’s all I needed to do. And that’s what nighttime is about: simplicity. It’s either time for tranquility or entertainment. Laughter or relaxation.

But not tonight. Tonight is a waking fever dream because the moon is no longer the only one watching me. Somewhere in the shadows, invisible irises are burning holes into the back of my head. But every time I turn around, I am greeted by nothing but the darkness of night. A different kind of darkness. A sinister kind of darkness. I feel like something has gripped my stomach, twisting it into several tight knots. An unknown force digs into my soul with venomous claws, implanting a sense of dread into the pits of my being. Goosebumps raise on my arms through the air is warm. This is the deadly calm before the storm, I can tell.

Oh God, what am I talking about? What storm? Is it possible to go insane in a matter of hours? I know I wasn’t like this when we left. It was that lady. The one in front of my school. The one that grabbed me by the shoulders and told me in a panicked state to watch my back. Of course, I hadn’t taken her seriously back there. For all I knew, she could’ve been high or something. She was crazy, just plain crazy.

But what if she wasn't? What if there *was* something stalking close by, waiting patiently? Always just one step behind.

We arrived at the cabin a few hours ago. This is the place of my childhood and yet it has never felt so foreign. Blair and Augusta knocked out on the couch a while ago. I'm supposed to be asleep but closing my eyes only brings intense waves of uneasiness, enough to make me nauseous. I refuse to leave myself vulnerable to whatever may be lurking. So instead, I find myself sitting at my small desk, hunched over the yellowed pages of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* with my quilt wrapped tightly around me. My lamp was too dim to provide any sufficient light. All the letters seemed to blend together, merging into one single mass of ink but I couldn't care less. I've read this book religiously since I was a fifth-grader. I didn't need to see the words to know what I was reading. Every so often, I'd glance over my shoulder, making sure that I was in fact, alone, despite what my instincts told me. I look over at my clock and try to convince myself that I can make it until sunrise when a loud yawn escapes my lips. Damn it.

SILENT NIGHT

It's quiet. Too quiet. The entire world around me has shut down. There are no glittering stars to embellish the sky tonight. The only reliable source of light is coming from the three dim street lamps lining the sidewalk. The air smells vaguely of cigars. I figured that the police officer next door must've finished smoking not too long ago. He does that every night. I wonder if it calms him. He seems very stressed most of the time. We've never spoken but he doesn't seem very calm unless there's a lit cigar between his lips. I wonder what his wife thinks of it. They barely talk, so she must not care. The wind is relentless, making what should've been a mild and peaceful night, a frigid and hostile one. I hold my coat tighter to my body in hopes of stopping the shivering. From the roof of this house, I can see the outline of the rest of the town, the chapel standing especially tall. I find it strange and unsettling how desolate it is. It's barely 12:45 a.m. and this place has practically become a ghost town. There isn't the sound of distant cars, or firecrackers set off by local juvenile delinquents, or even your occasional drunk man stumbling his way home, babbling nonsense in slurred speech.

Down the block, I can see a dark figure standing on the corner. They're so still that I'm not sure if they're real for a second. They don't seem to be doing anything. It's too dark for me to make out any of their features. Whether they're a man or a woman, blonde or brunette, I can't tell. They do seem fairly tall though. Tall and

intimidating. I can faintly see them turn and lift their head and I'm positive that they must be looking at me. We both stay there for a moment, looking at each other's faces veiled in shadow. Then they turn their back and walk away. I watch as the mysterious silhouette disappears into the night. I watch as they become enveloped in darkness.

My mind goes to Eileen. I wonder if she's sleeping. I wonder if I can pay her a quick visit. She very rarely locks her windows. I think about the necklace she gave me with the broken half of a heart. She said it wasn't much and it was pretty silly, but she has no idea how wrong she was. I can't remember the last time that someone gave me a gift. I reach up to my neck and stroke the silver charm, letting it glint in the weak moonlight and picture her in my mind. Thinking of her bright smile, her sweet laugh, and especially her eyes. You can tell a lot about a person through their eyes. They are the windows to the soul after all.

Eileen's eyes are the type that hold entire galaxies and seem to have so many secrets and stories. And if you look close enough, you can see all the colors of her irises. They aren't just hazel, there are specks of gold and green mixed in there too. Hers are the type of eyes you get lost in. A ghost of a smile pulls at my lips for a second. I'm abruptly pulled out of my daydream at the sound of a shrill scream. Then it's quiet. Too quiet.

Reaping Day

Is there anything more cleansing than this? Kneeling by an open window, watching over the old city, and the scent of petrichor filling my lungs with every breath as the rain steadily pours. Not too heavy, but not too light. And it's so pleasantly quiet as if the whole world is at rest though it isn't late. I raise my head to admire the blanket of untainted white that is the London sky. Closing my eyes and inhaling deeply, I let the quiet embrace me as one would an old friend. I allow it to envelop my form, overwhelm my senses, whisper its secrets in my ears. It's the type of quiet that brings clarity and inner peace, and I want nothing more than to have a piece of it engraved in my soul. I opened the window further, in hopes of it drifting into my bedroom and spreading its tendrils until every nook and cranny had absorbed its influence. Little drops of rain find their way into the room, making their presence known with darkened spots scattered throughout the fabric of my pillows and clothes. I welcome them in with open arms. This is a place of refuge, stay as long as you'd like. The people below go about their business in silence with a mutual acknowledgment of each other's existence. Cars glide by at a leisurely pace, urgency seeming to be a foreign term to the ones behind the wheel. Is there anything more relieving than this?

Of course, it's all short-lived. My moment of peace, gone almost as soon as it arrived, fleeing without even a brief

farewell. The disruption comes in the form of a crow with a dreadfully familiar face. It rests upon the windowsill of an apartment across the street from me, eerily composed. Its eyes, cruel and empty pools of obsidian, spoke volumes in complete silence. My heart nearly halted entirely. Quick and shallow breaths were all I could manage as the creature confined me in its gaze. An eternity slipped by as neither of us dared to look away from the other. Then, without breaking eye contact, it spread the woeful omens upon its back and took flight, sending a chill up my spine. Only then, as it vanished into the heavens above, did I realize that not more than a few seconds must have passed.

He was there, right behind me, I could tell. Those people, if you could even call them that, had never been fond of delaying the inevitable; there was no point in taking his time with this. He didn't cause even the softest creak in the old wooden floorboards, there was no sound indicating the slightest intake of breath, but he was there. His aura, that eerie and impossible blend of terror and calm spread faster than a disease, sinking its infectious claws into my moment of tranquility, dissipating it instantly. My hands shook like a scared child's, and yet my breathing slowed, my heart beating stably once again. I remained facing the window, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me like this. Nails dug into my palms, knuckles turning white. The quiet, the peaceful, welcoming quiet, had been replaced by its bitter relative. Dead quiet. Foul quiet. A quiet that reeked and left the lingering taste of bile in my throat. A cold sweat had broken out on my skin, making

my hands slick and clammy. Damn him, damn the stupid crowd, damn everything his kind stood for. Damn them to hell! I had brought this upon myself, yes, but shame on them for preying on me while I was down. I bet it was all sport to them, taking advantage of one's vulnerability. This was all a game, wasn't it? Cheap entertainment behind the facade of business and professionalism. Damn them.

The tension bubbling up in my stomach made me nauseous to the point where I was certain that even the slightest movement would cause me to spew up my last meal. But the bombardment of unwelcome emotions barely got a chance to surface before being drowned out by an ever-growing blaze fueled by his presence. Resentment. I was shocked at myself, almost taken aback at this unexpected reaction. The astonishment, however, was gone faster than my moment of peace as I allowed this burning feeling to fester and spread. Like fragile sparks finding their tenacity as they emerge into a great wildfire, consuming all in its path, the resentment left no inch of my being unstirred. Regaining my resolve, I tightened my grip on this raging hostility and used it to steady my trembling hands and propel myself to my feet. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, restoring long lost strength, pouring vitality into my shaken spirit. Turning on my heels, letting this newfound audacity drive me forward and accepting that I was likely nearing my epilogue, I lifted my face to finally confront the adversary. My blood ran cold.

An internal layer of frost began to accumulate the second my eyes met his. Sinister and hollow orbs of crimson

stared me down, clearly unimpressed with my brief display of courage. I took in a sharp breath, trying to maintain whatever shred of dignity I had left. The inferno, once magnificent and glorious, had been reduced to mere embers in the blink of an eye. All at once, panic settled in, wrapping its frigid hands around my heart in an unrelenting hold. Breath caught in my throat, a sudden desire to retreat tugging at my conscience. My eyes darted to the closed bedroom door. I faltered for a second, my legs almost instantly darting forward. Every instinct screamed at me to make a run for it.

Maybe there's still time

I think I can make it

I don't want to go...

No.

I scolded myself for allowing such feeble thoughts to flood my mind. No. I refuse to spend my final moments making futile plans of escape or wishing away the inevitable. I would not go out with a whimper, like a sniveling coward. This moment was set in stone from the second I had shaken his hand, now I was reaping what I sowed. If this was the end I was destined to meet, I'd welcome it gracefully. No tears would be shed. No prayers would be uttered in vain only to be dismissed. Like an esteemed monarch making their way to the chopping block, no trace of dismay apparent as they march towards a certain demise, I would greet my fate with poise.

Inhaling deeply, I lifted my chin, rolled my shoulders back, and straightened my spine, like a soldier addressing their commanding officer. I forced myself to step forward at a relaxed pace all the while looking him dead in the eye, making my intentions clear. The heavy cloud of impending death that already hung in the air between us only grew and intensified as I got closer. There was no running, hiding, or putting off what was meant to be. There was me and him in the here and now. This would be over quickly, and I would not protest. I narrowed my eyes at him. *Do your damn worse.*

For years, I was certain that this man's stoic expression was permanently etched into his features, allowing for the inhuman, undead atmosphere that pursued him like a loyal pet. His bloodless skin had been spared from the harsh winds of time, only adding onto his ghostly appearance. It was difficult to imagine him being capable of anything more than a scowl and yet here he stood. What started as a smirk developed into a failed attempt at suppressing a deep, bellowing laugh. He gripped his stomach, leaning on the polished silver of his cane as he doubled over slightly. The laughter dripped with mockery, undoubtedly of my sudden bravado. I clenched my fist, suppressed the urge to lunge at him while he was busy belittling me.

"Are you done?" I raised an eyebrow at the man, crossing my arms across my chest impatiently. Gradually, his hysterics faded as he straightened himself out, towering above me. He smoothed out the dark material of his suit and ran a hand through his jet black hair, clearly taking his sweet time, relishing in the irritated expression that

adorned my face. As he collected himself, any evidence of him breaking character slowly slipped away, with an aggravating smirk the only indication of his antics.

“You’re scared,” he stated, clearly amused.

“I’d be a fool if I weren’t.”

“Why assume this facade then?” He tilted his head and if I didn’t know who was before me, I’d say he was genuinely confused or interested. A heavy sigh left me, taking a piece of my remaining stability with it.

“Because I am many things, but undignified is not one of them. I suppose you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” I sounded surprisingly steady, not once losing its impassivity. I would be lying to say that I wasn’t impressed with myself but I wasn’t given time to feel pleased with this small achievement as the man’s smirk grew into an insufferable smile upon hearing my words.

“Anyone you’d like to bid adieu?”

“I’ve already done what was necessary,” I said, my voice lowering as I pushed down the countless memories pleading to be recounted. The time to reminisce was over. Nostalgia was a siren, luring its victims with the promise of recovering long-forgotten feelings, and it was a sure-fire way to lose the aloof demeanor I had established for myself. I had to remain in control. This would be over soon.

“Right then, no reason to delay. Eternity awaits.” He held out a leather-bound hand, blue flames steadily engulfing it. I hesitated to meet him halfway, eyes lingering on the

fire. It was cold, implausible, and ceaseless. Much like him. “Come on, no need to be shy. They’ve been anticipating your arrival for quite some time, it would be cruel to keep them waiting.” I met his gaze one final time, building up my grit.

“See you on the other side.” In one swift motion, ignoring the persistent voices begging me not to, I firmly took his hand in mine.

And the world went black.

Prophecies Uttered in the Slushie Aisle

I never thought that this is how I'd bite the dust. I've always imagined myself going down in an action movie type scenario where I save a bunch of orphans or something. But the universe is cruel. So here I am, clutching my empty stomach and dying of starvation in the back of a freaking hippie van. The sun had set a while ago and now the sky was littered with stars with the moon as the centerpiece. I would be lying if I said it wasn't mesmerizing to gaze upon, but my wandering thoughts wouldn't allow me to contemplate such beauty. Even if it was painful to think of, I couldn't but visualize images of burgers and fries so vivid that I could almost smell the oil and taste the processed meat. Letting out a heavy sigh, I slumped back in my seat, holding my grey hoodie closer to my body. Time had slowed down, reality had become surreal. I never would have thought that upstate New York could be so eerie, but I suppose it could seem that way when you've been on the road for God knows how long. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that we were stuck in a loop, doomed to drive upon this path for eternity. Minutes became hours, hours became years, and this was going to be a *very* long night.

We were the only car out here as far as I could see. Then again, I couldn't exactly see far. Street lamps were inescapable in the city but practically nonexistent up here. Though the headlights were relatively dim, they were all we could rely on for light. I thought that we'd

stop to at least stretch, but Phoenix, who's diet consisted of pure caffeine (on that note, I do not recommend mixing Red Bull and coffee), seemed intent on driving all the way. My face was lazily pressed against the cool glass of the window. We've passed about a dozen cafes, diner's, and bakeries. Just looking at them made my mouth water.

"How much longer? I'm *hungry*," I whined, dragging out my words and sliding down in my seat.

"Lieth, we just ate at a rest stop."

"That was like five hours ago!" She reached down in her duffel bag, briefly looking away from the road, before tossing me what appeared to be a clump of tinfoil. Inside was her half-eaten ham and cheese from this afternoon. I'll admit, I was tempted at first, but my pride was far greater than my hunger. I chucked the sandwich at the back of her head. The tinfoil got stuck in her black hair and hung like a silver ornament.

"Bullseye!" I cried with a sudden burst of excitement.

"Hey, you said you were hungry!" She brushed the foil at her hair, letting it fall to the floor. "If you're not gonna take that then-"

"Stop the car!" I interrupted. We came to a screeching halt. I jerked forward at the sudden lack of motion and my face smacked against the back of her seat.

"What happened? You okay?" Ignoring both her and the dull pain in my nose, I swung open the door and ran towards the fluorescent sign reading *7-ELEVEN*. Behind

me, I could hear another door slam shut. “Seriously?!” Nix yelled at me angrily.

“Dead serious,” I said whilst walking inside.

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So many choices, so little time. Even though not even two minutes ago I was so desperate for some kind of nourishment, I was taking my time wandering through the convenience store, taking it all in. Most people find peace of mind in the hushed halls of a library, but I am perfectly content roaming the linoleum aisles of a 7-ELEVEN, frolicking amongst the chips and dip. I had elected to ignore Phoenix who had been standing impatiently with a pack of energy drinks for the past fifteen minutes. I thought she might be happy to finally have feeling in her legs after driving for so long, but apparently, she prefers them numb.

“Hurry up, short stack!” she called out as I ogled over the wide variety of sugary snacks on the shelf next to the slushie machines where I had gotten my cup of cherry flavored goodness.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist, old woman!” I retorted.

“You two don’t get along, do you?” A woman next to me said, chuckling softly. She had braided blonde hair reaching just below her back and was dressed in a modest knee-length blue dress and matching cardigan. She seemed the type to shop at a farmers market, not a store where the coffee is stirred with the nearest heroine

needle (at least that's how it is back in the city). What caught my attention though, was her necklace. A chain, dull and bronze with age, secured a circular glass pendant that held the image of a vibrant green cat's eye. It felt as if the eye had been staring me down, criticizing and analyzing. I could have sworn that I saw the pupil dart to one side for just a moment before focusing its gaze on me again. Was this like one of those paintings where the eyes follow you? Or perhaps my tired mind was playing a cruel joke on me. I turned back to the gluttonous snack I had been examining.

"She's my older sister. It's my job to annoy her," I said, ignoring the persistent feeling of being watched.

"Oh, I wouldn't know anything about that. I wish I had a sister," she said, turning her attention to the shelf. A small smile pulled at my lips as I decided on a cup of edible cookie dough.

"Guess I'm pretty lucky." Before I could pick it up, the woman's pale hand had roughly grabbed my wrist. My voice caught in my throat. Too shocked to even mutter a protest, I looked back at her in confusion and disbelief. Her once warm brown eyes had become distant and apathetic as if she lacked a soul. She no longer seemed to be a person, but a hollow shell of a once-living being. Streams of green light were encircling the pendant hanging around her neck. The eye darted around in a panicked frenzy.

"Be wary. Their eyes know no bounds." Her voice was eerily flat. Dead, almost.

“What the hell lady?!” I was finally able to get out. I yanked my arm towards myself in a sad attempt to try and escape, but her firm grip only tightened. Strange how someone who appeared to be scrawny and fragile could have such bone-crushing strength. “Let go!”

“Be wary. Look about. You have yet to face the adversary.” My heart pounded against my ribcage, my wrist aching from trying to free myself in vain. I wanted to scream, to find the strength to speak as I had before, but with each passing moment, my voice slipped farther and farther from my grasp, the words tumbling out of me before my mouth could even open. I looked around over my shoulder, desperately trying to find Phoenix who appeared to have vanished. *Where the hell is she when you need her?* Without anywhere else to look, my eyes almost instinctively fell on the watchful pendant, its steady glow difficult to ignore. Now I knew for sure it was watching me patiently with what I could only imagine was malicious intent. There was something eerily human about it, and I found that once I had become locked in its gaze, it was impossible to tear myself away from it. Hell, I didn’t even try. It was as if I had been bewitched and lured in by an unknown force. I had stopped trying to attempt to break free from the woman, my muscles relaxing all at once, my once frantic mind finding ease as it was enveloped by a misty haze. The world fell away, leaving me and the eye to our own devices. A tight knot had begun to form in my stomach, growing tighter with every second. My vision became increasingly murky as a white light consumed my surroundings.

“I think we’re done here.” A harsh but recognizable voice effectively snapped me out of the trance. All at once, I was once again standing under the fluorescent lights of the familiar convenience store. Standing before me was Phoenix, staring down the blonde woman with unfiltered animosity, daring her to make even the slightest movement. Her face was nothing less than frigid contempt. I could feel the silent rage emitting off of her, anxiously awaiting the opportunity to bubble to the surface. She said something else to the strange woman but the words didn’t quite reach my ears. I was suddenly aware of a persistent dull ache and found that several finger-shaped marks circled my wrist, each a furious shade of red. “You okay, Lieth?” I flinched as Phoenix reached to check the bruises, briefly forgetting that she was a friendly face. She faltered at first, a truly rare sight, before twisting her face in anger. “What the hell was that nutcase trying to do? If I see her in the parking lot, I swear-”

“Nix,” I said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “She probably wasn’t in the right mind, there’s no use starting conflict.”

“She’s the one who- you-” she sighed, defeated. “Yeah, whatever. We oughta get going. You got everything you want?” I looked down at my slushie, a void of artificial red, nearly completely melted. The longer I stared at it, the less appealing it seemed. A sudden wave of nausea crashed down on me, suppressing any previous hunger. I was startled to hear an abrupt outburst of laughter followed by a heavy-handed slap to the back, knocking all the wind out of me in one swift motion. “All that time

spent complaining and all you got was a lousy slushie? And cherry's so overrated, I didn't raise you this way!"

"Well one of us has to have good taste," I giggled, playfully slapping her arm, not with nearly as much force.

"Shut up," Phoenix said ruffling my hair. "You go on ahead and pay for the other stuff, I'll pick out a sandwich or something for you." She handed me her wallet and pushed me forward lightly. It's funny how someone like her, who effortlessly maintains a tough exterior and could kill anyone with a single glare, manages to lighten any situation, no matter how dark. She had everyone fooled but I could see straight through her facade.

Through all that cold contempt, sarcasm, and indifference. I could see the warmth, the kindness that she wouldn't admit to if you had her at gunpoint. I was grateful to have her around when no one else was. To know that there'd always be someone to catch me when I fell too far. But there wasn't time to get all sentimental, she'd hate it anyway. I'd thank her later but for now, the only thing on my mind was getting out of here without delay. I make my way to the register, a spring in my step, eager to get back on the road.

It didn't take long for my lifted spirits to be dampened, however. There was something in me, a little voice, telling me that this wasn't over, but I turned a blind eye. Now it was impossible to ignore. As I handed over the necessary amount to the cashier and could see Phoenix making her way to the front, the feeling of eyes burning holes in the back of my head grew exponentially. The voice, once a whisper, now a shrill scream. Out of the

corner of my eye, I could make out a blurry figure but hesitated to look, already having a vague idea of what, or rather, who it was. Mustering up enough courage to investigate as the items were being bagged, I finally turned my head to face the source of discomfort. At that moment, I swore I stopped breathing.

There she stood just outside the entrance, gaze fixed on me, unmoving as if her feet were planted to the cement. Her face was indiscernible, somewhere between concerned and stoic. Maybe neither. The amulet glowed a dim green, enough that it stood out prominently in its dark surroundings. Though I could see it I was sure that my vision was failing me. It was no longer an eye. No indication it had ever been one. It had no pupil or organic quality to it. It was a simple gem. An emerald on a bronze chain.

“Hey.” I jumped, feeling a hand on my shoulder.

“Something wrong?” Phoenix asked, failing to sound passive. I looked back, only to find that the woman was gone, no sign that she had been there in the first place. It was as if she had ceased to exist; swallowed up by the night.

“It’s nothing,” I lied.

Midnight Visit

It's Friday night and I'm bored as hell. My body has decided without my consent that sleep is out of the question. So here I lay, gazing out the window, begging my eyelids to close for more than two seconds. Tonight is clearer than usual. There are no smokey grey clouds as far as I could see. All the stars stood out against the inky black sky. It's truly beautiful and mesmerizing to look at. I think of taking a trip up to the roof again, but I'm just not in the mood. I'm fine admiring the night from my bedroom window. I look down at the book in my hands, trying to focus on the page. I've been reading the same two lines for the past ten minutes. It's not a bad book, I just can't seem to process simple words, let alone a sentence. I glance at the clock to see that it's a bit past midnight. I think of visiting Eileen. Her mom's probably sleeping by now. Eileen on the other hand probably won't sleep 'till three in the morning. I figure that we could both use the company. Swinging my legs off my bed, I carefully tiptoe my way to the living room. Abuela's wrapped in one of her shawls and snoring softly with a novela still playing on the TV. *Carita de Angel* puts her to sleep every night without fail. A little trip down the block wouldn't hurt, I think while grabbing my combat boots from their place near the door.

It's colder than I anticipated and I regret bringing such a thin hoodie. Despite the fact my fingers are stiff from the weather, I'm able to scale the fence to Eileen's backyard with ease. I stand at the base of the tree whose branches

extend to the sky and beyond. The light's on in her room as I expected. I can see her silhouette moving around restlessly. My body slumps with relief, seeing that she's awake. Most people pick up the phone when they want to talk to their friends, but I guess I'm not most people. A conversation over the phone is just so fake and artificial. I want to *see* her smile when she laughs. I want to *see* the way she plays with her hair absentmindedly and the way you can tell she's about to tell a joke when her eyes glimmer with excitement. She's the one person that keeps me away from the edge, I need her to hear her voice as it is. No, a phone call isn't genuine enough. I hate that.

I pick up a nearby pinecone and chuck as hard as I can at her window. It bounces off with a dull *thump*. I fiddle with the straps of my backpack as I see her shadow move towards the curtains before pushing them aside. She's wearing a blue onesie decorated with small white crescent moons. It's a childish look that emphasizes her innocent features. I pull down my hoodie and wave. After a moment of squinting, she seems to finally recognize me and her face slowly gives way to an angelic smile. God, that smile will be the death of me. I can't help but return the delighted expression. She pushes her window open along with the screen poking her head outside and waving for me to come in. Without a second thought, I make my way up the side of the tree. As I climb higher, the air becomes frigid. Branch after branch, my hands become numb. I steal a glance at Eileen who's watching me nervously and playfully wink before grabbing the branch nearest to her window.

I'm barely inside before Eileen envelopes me in a hug. I smile, hugging back tightly as the shivering subsides. She pulls back looking at me in disbelief. "Noelle, what are you doing here?"

"I got bored. Didn't feel like calling," I said closing the window behind me, blocking out the arctic breeze.

"You're *freezing*," she slips her hand into mine. A sudden heat rises in my face and I find myself at a loss for words. Thankfully, I don't need to speak because Eileen is one step ahead of me. "I think we still have some Nesquik. I'm gonna make you some hot chocolate."

"No, you don't have-"

"Nonsense," she cut me off. "I don't want you to freeze to death." I thought of declining again, but there was no stopping her once she set out to do something. She was already walking out the door. I sat myself down on her pastel pink sheets, slipping off my boots as I listened to her footsteps get farther and fainter. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. She really could be childish at times, but that was one of her best qualities. It amazes me how she managed to maintain the slightest bit of innocence with all she's been through. Resilience. Another one of her qualities. No matter how much crap you throw at her, she bounces back with her smile brighter than ever. I've never asked, but it's been in the back of my mind for a while. I want to know why she's always happy and optimistic. I want to know how she manages to keep smiling despite everything. It amazes me. It really does.

"There you go," Eileen chimes handing me a red Christmas mug with antlers painted on. The heat

immediately defrosts my practically frostbitten fingers. I sigh in relief, relishing in the warmth spreading through my hands. I admire the work she put into one drink. There's whipped cream piled to the top with a sprinkle of cinnamon and chocolate sauce drizzled on.

"Wow, you outdid yourself."

"It's my specialty," she says like a five-year-old presenting their latest art piece. "Hot chocolate a la mode!"

"But there's no ice cream."

"I'm choosing not to listen to you. Drink up!" I giggle, absentmindedly tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. The second I do this, Eileen's smile falters. "What's that?" Before I could respond she pushed my hair up, exposing my neck. I freeze in place, my eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Are you freaking kidding me?" The edge in her voice was unsettling. "Noelle, I want you to be honest with me, okay?"

"...Okay."

"How did you get that cut?" I flinched at the sudden stinging on my neck as her hand grazed over the wound. Pushing my hair back down I scooted farther into the corner of her bed. I refused to meet her eyes but I could feel her burning holes into the side of my head.

"It's nothing," I said frantically. "I probably fell."

"Please don't tell me that you got into another fight." I hesitated for a second too long.

"Look, I-

“You *promised* me you wouldn’t do this anymore!”

“What the hell was I supposed to do? I saw a lady getting robbed and I wasn’t going to just let it happen! Is that so wrong, Eileen?” Looking away from me, she directed her gaze towards the ceiling, letting out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry okay,” I continued. “But I’m not going to stand by if I see someone in trouble. I just wanted to help.” She still wouldn’t look at me.

“You could’ve gotten seriously hurt.”

“But I didn’t.”

“But you could’ve.” I didn’t bother arguing. I knew I couldn’t change her mind no matter what I said. The silence filling the room was deafening. I looked back at the window and considered leaving, but I knew she wouldn’t let me walk away from this.

“I know why you do this,” she finally said. “I know you feel the need to help everyone and save everyone, and it’s noble. It truly is.” Moving closer to me, she put a comforting hand on my knee. “But you’re not some sort of comic book hero. You’re not invincible. What if something were to happen to you? What then?” A million responses ran through my head, but no words left my mouth. I sat there making eye contact with the floor.

“Noelle, look at me.” She placed a hand under my chin, gently turning my head until I faced her. “Promise me, for real this time, that you won’t get yourself in any trouble from now on. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to you, so promise me that you won’t put yourself in harm’s way. Please.” Her eyes

resembled a lost puppy's. My heart sank in my chest just looking at them.

“Cross my heart,” I lied through my teeth.

August 15th

Rule #1: Never stare into the dark, lest it drags you down

Rule #2: Ignore the screams, no matter how loud they get

Rule #3: Never go outside, no matter how much the voices beg

Rule#4: Be cautious, for tonight the abyss stares back

Rule#5: Pray, for the rain is upon us

Ophaniel

The chapel's attic was lonely. More than usual, that is. Ophaniel's never had a problem with solitude, but tonight was different. She wanted nothing more than for someone to hold her and calm her nerves. No one had visited her for hours, and her heart seemed to beat faster with each passing minute. Wrapping her wings around herself and absentmindedly rubbing the silky material of her white nightgown, she gazed out her window.

Usually, she had the best view of the charming Artemis Falls and would spend delight herself in looking out over the town as night settled in. She loved watching spouses return from work, being greeted at the door with eager embraces. She loved watching local teens set off firecrackers, mischievous smiles pulling at their lips. She loved watching the dazzling fireworks being set off by the lake. It showed how people went out of their way to bring

light to the world, whether it was through sparks in the sky or resonating laughter. That was not the case of tonight. Everyone had scattered into the safety of their houses early in the day. No stars, no moon, not even a streetlight could be seen. Nothing but darkness and that damned rain. God, how she hated this night. There was something out there. Something sinister and bloodthirsty that made it feel like her stomach was housing a swarm of restless moths. And she couldn't shake the feeling that it was looking for her. So here she sat, attempting- and failing -to distract herself from the pestering thoughts flooding her head. Staring into the black abyss the outside world had become, it felt as if the darkness was beckoning her; urging her to join it. "Ani, what are you doing?!" A familiar voice shrieked. "Get away from the window, it's not safe!" Sister Hannah frantically closed the shades after making sure her young ward was a safe distance from it.

"Sorry, I must've gotten lost in thought," Ani walked back to her bed, sitting on the edge. "It's quiet," she said, attempting to change the subject. "Has everyone been put to bed?" Hannah sighed, clearly exasperated.

"Yes, but not without a fight. Everyone's so restless today. I can't blame them," her eyes darted back to the window like she expected someone- or something -to appear. She blinked a few times as if she was shaking any unpleasant thoughts from her mind, before redirecting her attention to the girl in front of her. "I came to bring you your dinner," she said placing a polished wooden bowl from which steam was rising on the dresser beside the bed. Ani knew what it was just from the smell. Sister

Kara's famous chicken, rice, and mushroom soup. On a normal Thursday night, her stomach would be fluttering with excitement and anticipation as she waited to be delivered the heavenly dish. Then again, there was not an ounce of normal to be found on this Thursday night. Instead of being intoxicated by the scent of the food before her, she found herself almost repelled by it. The last thing she wanted to do was eat in fear that she wouldn't be able to keep it down.

"That's alright. I'm not hungry," Ani said, feeling guilty about rejecting the meal. Though, it was comforting to know she wasn't the only one feeling this way. She's never had the privilege of interacting with the other children of the orphanage, but she knew how ecstatic they'd get at suppertime on Thursdays. She'd become accustomed to hearing the quiet patter of feet accompanied by overjoyed squeals on the floors below her. This evening, however, the silence was prominent, and the air was deathly still. She wasn't completely sure if anyone even had supper today, but there was no way to be sure. She looked up at Hannah, wordlessly asking for some sort of comfort. Hannah, who knew that look all too well, didn't hesitate in sitting beside the young girl and wrapping an arm around her and smoothing down her ruffled feathers, holding her in an almost protective manner. She wanted to tell her it would be fine and that there was nothing to worry about, but she was a terrible liar. So there they sat, in borderline uncomfortable silence. Ani allowed herself to find some solace in the warmth of her guardian, inhaling the familiar scent of vanilla and cinnamon embedded her clothes.

“I want to call Papa,” Ani finally said, gently tugging at the sleeve of Hannah’s simple black dress.

“I understand, but you know it’s not safe, right?”

“I know, I know. But it bothers me that I can’t sense him. It’s that stupid rain, I’m sure of it,” her voice had become unexpectedly harsh. “I just need to know that he’s safe.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Hannah said, unsure of her own words. “You can call him as soon as all of this is over.” Ani pulled her knees up to her chest and further sunk into the comfort of her wings, relishing in the warmth of the soft golden feathers. She looked over to her caretaker, not missing the doubt evident on her face but decided against commenting on it. The rain was still pattering on her window, a bit louder than before. It sounded as if someone was knocking frantically, begging to be let in. She suddenly wished that she could somehow mute the never ending drumming.

“Yeah,” Ani said. “When it’s over.”

Theodore

To say that Theodore was a paranoid person was an understatement. How many fifteen-year-olds do you think sleep with a knife in their pillowcase? But you can’t blame someone who grew up in questionable circumstances. Tonight though, he had every reason to be suspicious of his surroundings. The nearby scream he had heard barely five minutes ago was a crude reminder of that. At times like these, he was grateful for the surplus of various weapons hidden in the cabin’s walls and floorboards. It was almost comforting but not enough to ease his troubled mind. What bothered him

the most was his inability to calm himself. As paranoid as he was, he made a point to never show it, but tonight his actions betrayed his facade. He was always moving, one way or another. As he bounced his knee, tapped his fingers, and paced across the cabin, he realized that he must've looked like an expectant father in a hospital waiting room. *Dammit, Theo, get yourself together*, he scolded himself. A deep feeling of shame sat within the pit of his stomach like a block of cement. Shame over the fact that he was incapable of regaining his composure. Shame over the fact that he felt as if he was five all over again. So small, and vulnerable, and *weak*. God, how he hated that word. It made his insides churn, and tasted like bile in his mouth. But as he found himself staring blankly at the silent images flickering across his television screen, a hunting knife held close to his thumping chest, flinching at the faintest sounds, he knew that there was only one word that could describe him. He was, undeniably, without a doubt, *weak*. And at that moment, he wanted nothing more than to disappear.

This wasn't Theodore's first August 15th, and it certainly wouldn't be his last (not if he could help it). The Falls had been his home for as long as he could remember, and he learned quickly that the rain was just something everyone had to deal with in this godforsaken town. He couldn't recall how many years it had been since he had worried about this stupid night. As he failed to remind himself why this time was any different, his jaded eyes wandered over to the framed photo that resided on top of the fireplace, the light of the TV casting a shadow over it. Theo has never been the type to reminisce. He had a

strict policy of looking forward, and nowhere else, but this particular photo had always been the exception. He couldn't help but replay the memory in his mind like an old film, allowing the sweet embrace of nostalgia to engulf him.

It was his first time in an amusement park, back when he was still a snot-nosed, wimpy, nine-year-old, mama's boy. His mom used it as a distraction from the fact that his father had deemed his family unworthy of his time. The look on his face was burned into Theo's memory. Cold and unreadable, with an atmosphere of hatred emitting off of him. He wondered how someone so familiar could become a stranger in the blink of an eye. His father looked down at him in annoyance, leaving him curious as to what he had done wrong. His mother had held his shoulders a little too tightly, ensuring that he wouldn't attempt to try and make his way towards the man he no longer recognized. He remembered watching as the sleek black van hastily speed out of sight, knowing that behind the wheel was a coward desperately trying to escape the wrath of his would-be wife. Looking up at his mother's face, eyes glassy and features etched with fury as she tightened her grip on him, he thought for a moment that he may never see her smile again. Reality finally settled in, slamming onto him like a brick. Nothing would ever be the same. He'd spend the rest of his days knowing that his father was off somewhere with a bone-thin redhead who used to be nothing but a secretary, completely dismissing the family that he would rather not exist. Everything was broken.

The next day, his mom was determined to prove him wrong.

He could practically taste the pleasant, nectarous taste of the candy apples he so eagerly devoured. The smell of fresh popcorn, the delighted screaming children, the wind against his face; it was all a bit overwhelming and he loved every second of it. That night, his mother held him close to her side as they sat atop the Ferris wheel. Their gazes were fixed upward watching as the obsidian sky became illuminated with the brightly colored sparks of crackling fireworks. The picture was taken at the gate of the amusement park, right before it closed. His mom had taken the camera that hung around her neck and handed it to a worker, slipping him a five-dollar bill, before kneeling to Theo's height and slinging an arm around his shoulders, giving them a reassuring squeeze. His heart had swelled, and he concluded that this was what heaven must feel like. Nothing would ever be the same, and that was okay. There would be no more empty promises followed by hollow apologies. His mother would no longer lose sleep waiting for him to come home only to find that he reeked of another woman's perfume. From here on out, they would have each other's backs through thick and thin. A mother and her son against the world. As he looked ahead, staring into the camera lens, his eyes, lips, and spirit smiled joyously all at once. A hell of a lot has happened since that day. His mother's various failed attempts to reenter the dating pool, the three expulsions, the gymnasium fire, so on and so forth. But none of that mattered as long as they had each other.

A trip down memory lane proved effective in decelerating his rapid heartbeat and clearing the paranoid haze clouding his mind. A hint of a smile tugged at Theo's face for just a second before faltering. In this newfound tranquility, he could finally recall why this night was so distinctly different from the others. This is the first time he would be spending August 15th in solitude. The one night when the last thing he needed was to be alone with his thoughts, they were all he had to accompany him. He just couldn't understand; of all the times to be called out on an assignment, why did it have to be tonight? What could be so urgent that she had to leave him alone? It had only been a few hours since she left, but time had slowed around him, making it feel like an eternity. Back when the sky was just beginning to darken a bit too fast for Theodore's liking, his mother had stood by the living room window, double and triple-checking that it was locked before drawing the curtains. She had then leaned down to tie up the laces of her combat boots and sling her grey duffel over her shoulder, the usual confident glint in her eyes. "Remember the rules, kid," she had said ruffling his already unkempt blonde hair.

"Don't do anything stupid, right?" he groaned, throwing himself on the couch with a *thud* and reaching for the TV remote. His words were heavy with indifference, and this aloof mask he wore was not convincing in the slightest, but still, he silently urged his mother to overlook the obvious.

"I know that's a very hard thing for you to do, but try your best," she said, answering his wordless plea.

Stealing a glance at her son, she saw his face contort into his signature scowl. She smirked, knowing that he had decided against responding to the jab at his pride. Not to worry because she knew he probably would have thought of the perfect retort by the time she got back from work. And she *would* come back; she was sure of it. Theodore on the other hand, not so much. His mother was a true badass, there was no doubt about that. Olivia Chapel was a force to be reckoned with. She could tame a wild animal with a snap of her fingers. She could command a raging hurricane to subside with a single glare and it would obey. But none of that mattered on a night like this. As if sensing Theodore's wavering spirit, she made her way over to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Hey," she muttered, her voice soft and laced with genuine concern. "It'll be fine, I'll be back before you know it. It'll all be over soon." The young man suddenly found it difficult to meet her eyes as he placed his hand atop of hers. It was hard to ignore the uncertainty in her words. Presently, Theo sunk farther into the corner of the couch, wishing it would swallow him whole. He found himself replaying that moment; treasuring it even, as he couldn't help but think that that was the last time he'd hear her voice.

"Soon," he repeated under his breath.

Callista

Everything was dead. That's what it felt like. It felt like someone had carved a large chunk out of Callista's soul and left it hollow and bleeding. She wanted to scream, cry, vomit, maybe all three, but tonight she didn't have the energy to fight the unholy forces at work. The best

she could do was count the hours until sunrise. Callista lay motionless on her back, hands folded neatly on her stomach, the mattress beneath adjusting to her form. She couldn't bring herself to so much as close her eyes, weary of whatever wretched being she'd be leaving herself vulnerable to if she did. Her ceiling, littered with the dim glow of plastic stars, had begun to twist and distort ever so slightly as it remained under her unrelenting gaze for far too long. She figured she should try to see the bright side of all this to keep her sanity. Her parents weren't fighting well into the night, that was something. It was all becoming so tiresome. One insult after another, back and forth accusations, and of course all the while completely ignoring her existence. Even still, she'd much rather they get along than be forced into silence by the current circumstances. Even better, she rather they do fight if it could fill the ever-growing emptiness and drown out the rain against her window. The dull thumping was growing closer, louder, more persistent. And she could've sworn that for a moment, the drumming had developed into delicate whispers. Barely coherent speech right up against her bedroom window. Or maybe she was descending into madness. Both were likely, but neither were favorable. The numbers of her neon alarm clock all merged in one bright mass, blurry beyond recognition. Her glasses were within reach, she knew she could retrieve them effortlessly but there was no need. The clock had read 8:30 for the past two hours and it wouldn't be changing any time soon. Callista sighed; a failed attempt at releasing some tension. This night was never going to end.

Usually, this town was her happy place. She could feel everything and it was beautiful. Every brilliant smile and hearty laugh. Every tear shed, every embrace. She felt their joy. She felt their despair. She felt their anger. She felt everything resonate within her, right down to the fiber of her being. Callista drank it all in, letting it restore her, fill her, remind her of the vibrancy of life. She probably only really knew three or four people in the entire town, but she felt as if everyone was an old friend. From the elderly woman down the road who purposely left her pies on the windowsill for any wandering children, to the young newlyweds that owned the local bookstore still not over the honeymoon phase. Every soul, blazing and brilliant, hummed in harmony, toiling through the motions of life with one another. Dreaming together, crying together, loving together. It was all so utterly, shamelessly, undeniably human. And there was an unexplainable beauty in that. It took Artemis Falls to make Callista truly realize what it meant to be unified. All lives were intertwined, the red string of fate leaving not one spirit untouched. We are all so small in the grand scheme of things but how could you say that we were insignificant? Simply living in the Falls overwhelmed her senses in the best way possible. Every second spent breathing in this town felt like fireworks being set off in depths of herself.

But tonight there was nothing. There nothing as if every living thing simultaneously stopped drawing breath. She felt alone. For a moment, Callista had become convinced that everything ceased to exist, leaving her behind to

suffer in isolation. Tonight her only company was the darkness, emptiness, and rain.

It was going to be a long night.