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The Framework of Fantastical Heroes

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## INTRODUCTION

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns  
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered  
the hallowed heights of Troy.

Many cities of men he saw and learned from their minds,  
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,  
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.

But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove-  
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,  
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun  
and the Sun god wiped them from sight the day of their return.

Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,  
start from where you will – and sing for our time too (*The Odyssey* 1-12).

Few people are unfamiliar with the stories of Homer, stories that have survived in the minds of the people and captivated their imaginations for nearly three thousand years. The epics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* have inspired thousands of writers to create their own stories with heroes that subdue evil in the name of the good, such as many works on Arthurian legends and even the popular *Game of Thrones*, and now, many films show resemblance to Homer's epics, such as the highly popular Marvel universe movies. To write his works, Homer called upon a Muse to inspire his writing and guide it with a divine hand as he detailed the sufferings and victories of Odysseus and Achilles, and with his heroes inspiring countless minds over centuries, this begs the question what is so captivating about Homer's epics? With the Muse's divine

assistance, Homer was able to combine a near perfect formula for the stereotypical – and yet captivating – fantasy hero that many writers have employed in fiction since Homer’s example. This formula for a well-rounded and captivating character is as follows 1) leader/best of his or her people, 2) possesses culturally attractive qualities, 3) overcomes great monster(s), and 4) travels on an Otherworldly journey; furthermore, this formula persists in characters from other popular works from across literary history such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and more recent works like *Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

As is shown in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the major players in Homer’s epics are all kings or the best warriors in their army, and they do not fulfill their titles just by birthright. In Homer’s mythical world, leaders are chosen by their ability as well as by their birth. Odysseus is the king of Ithaca, but he is also the famed strategist who was a commander in the Trojan War. The suitors of Penelope are all nobility, but their character and ability do not equal their high birth; therefore, they do not – and never could have – assumed Odysseus’ throne (*The Odyssey*). Menelaus is the King of Sparta, and though he does not give Achilles the proper respect, he is corrected throughout the story and assumes more of the character a king is meant to possess by the end. Achilles is not only the son of the king of Phthia but also the leader of the Myrmidons and the greatest warrior in the Trojan War. When he leaves the front, the Achaean army struggles and is nearly forced to retreat via their ships (*The Iliad*). This idea of being “the best” or the leader is perpetuated in both *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the beginning of the tale, Beowulf is the prince of Geatland and the best among the Geats he leads. He is strong enough to tear off Grendel’s arm when his men’s weapons could not pierce Grendel’s flesh. His exploits prove him the best of Geatland, from what we are told, and when he returns from aiding Hrothgar, he becomes the king of Geatland (*Beowulf*). Sir Gawain is not a king as he serves King

Arthur, but he is the best knight. Sir Gawain saves Arthur from potential disgrace when he relieves Arthur of the Green Knight's challenge, and when Sir Gawain returns from the Green Knight's challenge, the whole court celebrates his victory and claims that no other knight could have performed as nobly and knightly as he did. As proof of this claim, all the knights wear a green sash to commemorate Sir Gawain's trial (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*).

For many authors, the heroes in their fantasy stories are often naturally the leaders and the best compared to those around them. If this is not true, then it often becomes true by the end of the tale. Consider a typical story of an underdog, the character begins as someone potentially low-born and/or lacking critical skills in what they aim to do (like a poor beggar boy who wants to become a knight and expertly wield a sword and shield). This boy is determined to become a knight, so he trains throughout his life and undergoes many trials and difficulties that prove his worth and hone the skills he has been training. Through this struggle, he becomes the best. This could be shown in the story by the king, or ruler, officially knighting the boy and proclaiming him the best, or the boy defeats a challenge that no other warrior was able to best; therein, the boy proves he is the best. As Gawain is recognized by the court and the other knights that he is the best and Odysseus is the king of his people for his skill, characters that fall under "leader" or "best of their people" can be varied, and as such, they are present in nearly every story. This may imply that readers prefer to have a character that is a leader, potentially to see as a role model or for another unknown reason more internally related to the reader.

Another quality of Homeric characters that can be found in other works is the character possessing qualities that are attractive or ideal to the culture the story originates from. Homer's characters all have a deep sense of honor. Even though more sinister characters like Agamemnon hold honor dear and quote that in their reasoning for decisions made.

But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,  
 else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.  
 That would be a disgrace. You are all my witness,  
 look – *my* prize is snatched away (*The Iliad* 138-141)!

Here Agamemnon cites his honor as both a physical thing – his prize, a girl that he took as his spoils – and a moral thing. The moral sense of honor Agamemnon twists in his speech to his commanders because he wants to justify taking away one of their prizes (i.e. captive women) as recompense for losing his prize. Agamemnon then tells Achilles that he will take away his prize because he loathes Achilles the most, and Achilles is publicly humiliated by Agamemnon. This blow to Achilles' honor is a valid, unlike Agamemnon's twisting of his own honor to get what he wanted, and Achilles sits out of the war for a while when his captive woman is taken by Agamemnon. By Homer's portrayal, the world in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* functions upon honor, as having honor is a very important value to covet, and because honor is a value that people work their whole lives to accrue, the heroes of the story naturally are very honorable and make their decisions in respect to their honor. This can also be said for the characters being strong warriors, as being a powerful warrior was highly valued in the society of the tale. Thus, Homer imbues traits into his characters that are favorable to the society of the time of the character – and potentially during his own time period. Honor, strength, and loyalty are all displayed by Achilles and Odysseus throughout their respective tales and even in their crossovers, such as when Odysseus meets the spirit of Achilles in the underworld.

Additionally, the hero possessing culturally favored traits is apparent in the tales of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as well. As a Geat warrior come to the land of the Danes to kill Grendel for King Hrothgar, Beowulf hails from a very difficult culture than Homer

and knights like Gawain. As such, he has different virtues that are celebrated by his culture. When Beowulf arrives in Hrothgar's lands and is welcomed into the king's Hall, a warrior named Unferth takes immediate dislike to Beowulf because he has had so many famous exploits. He attempts to shame Beowulf by bringing up a swimming competition Beowulf had with Breca when they were unbearded, young men. Beowulf appears to have technically lost the swimming match, but he replies to Unferth.

...Let me set the record

straight: I had more strength on the sea,

and hardship too, than any other man.

.....

We were together at sea the space

of five nights, until the flood drove us apart,

weltering waters, coldest weathers,

nights darkening and the wind howling

.....

...A savage thing

dragged me to the sea-bottom, had me fast

in its grip...

.....

Yet it so turned out I slew with my sword

nine sea-beasts. I've never heard no tale

of such night combat under heaven's vault –

none so fierce nor steeped so in hardship (*Beowulf* 532-534, 544-547, 574-577)!

In this speech to Unferth, Beowulf indignantly explains that he did lose the swimming competition to Breca since he came ashore in the wrong place, but he still bested Breca and all other men since he only lost because he was slaying “nine sea-beasts” in a battle “so fierce” and “steeped so in hardship” (*Beowulf*). This speech is best termed as Beowulf boasting his exploits and justifying his abilities, and though boasting is not a trait highly valued by society in the United States today, this seems to be a trait valued by the anonymous author and his or her society as Beowulf goes on to berate Unferth for being so awful a warrior that he could not beat Grendel himself and protect his lord, and since he could not do that, Beowulf had to come to save Hrothgar and his people (*Beowulf* 590-607). In this reply from Beowulf to Unferth, the author makes an important distinction in why this boasting is acceptable by Beowulf. When Beowulf berates Unferth, Beowulf says “Grendel...could never / have devised such torments for your lord / ...if you [Unferth] were half so brave as you make out” (*Beowulf* 591-592,594). This section of Beowulf’s long speech justifies his boastful comments because he was backed up his exploits with action, such as swimming across the sea for five days before killing nine sea monsters even though it cost him the match. Beowulf looks down on Unferth because he may boast and be jealous of Beowulf, but Unferth could not even protect his king from the monster that terrorizes his people. I believe the author may have even added this in to Beowulf’s speech as a lesson to his readers – that boasts and tales should be backed by exploits and not shameful failings.

For *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the traits that are valued by the society of the Arthurian court and the society of the anonymous author’s time are that of the knights, particularly Gawain’s. As a knight to King Arthur, Sir Gawain is bound by a knight’s code – a code that contains rules on protecting women, being courteous, courageous, and maintaining

fidelity to sworn pledges or promises. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is particularly focused on knightly traits, which John Burrow described in his article as “the chivalric mind-set – the way knights in particular see themselves and their fellows.” Judgements by others and decisions made by Gawain are not ruled solely by the values of the truth, but instead, he values his chivalric codes. One trait Gawain is tested on repeatedly through games is his “trauthe” – his pledged word or promise, pledge of faithfulness to a lover, and/or personal integrity (Middle English Dictionary). Gawain’s trauthe is tested through games proposed by the Green Knight. The first game is the Game of Beheading. The Green Knight challenges Gawain to cut off the Green Knight’s head with his large axe, and once this is done, Gawain will have his head cut off in a year and a day’s time. Gawain cuts off the Green Knight’s head, and the Green Knight is magically still alive. Gawain is now bound to hold to his word, even if it means death. Because Gawain is an honorable knight, he goes out to search for the Green Knight and is housed by a lord who knows where the Green Knight is and offer to take him there the day of Gawain’s pledge. While Gawain stays there, his trauthe is tried for a second time. The lord of the castle challenges Gawain to swear that they will share the spoils of whatever they win each day that Gawain stays at the castle. This is the Game of Exchange, and Gawain agrees as he is supposed to stay in the castle and rest before he meets with the Green Knight while the lord goes off hunting with other nobles. For three days, this game stands. Each day, the lord brings home part of the kill and presents it to Gawain. While Gawain is at the castle, the lord’s wife begins trying to seduce him. As part of the game, anything Gawain “wins” from the wife or any other lady would be something he has to share with the lord. Through his courteous speech, Gawain manages to evade her except for a few kisses for the first and second day. Gawain presents these kisses to the lord, but on the third day, the wife offers Gawain a magic girdle that will prevent

him from all harm. Out of concern for his life since he is to be beheaded, Gawain takes the girdle and a couple kisses. On this day, Gawain breaks his trauthe as he only presents the kisses to the lord. When Gawain goes to meet with the Green Knight, the Green Knight reveals he was the lord the whole time, and he gives Gawain a nick on the neck instead of beheading him. As explanation, the Green Knight tells Gawain:

As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized,  
So is Gawain, in good faith to other gay knights.  
Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there,  
But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,  
But that you loved your own life; the less, then to blame (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2364-2368).

Though Gawain was meant to be beheaded by the Green Knight, the Green Knight spared him because he never expected a knight to willingly come to his own death with such grace, but because Gawain broke the pledge for the second game, the Green Knight nicked his neck as punishment. The Green Knight notes that because Gawain's motives were to save his own life, a very human trait, the Green Knight forgives him for breaking his trauthe. Gawain returns to Arthur's court, and he receives a warm welcome and is celebrated for having succeeded better than any other knight could have.

Unlike the Green Knight, Arthur and his court have had no occasion to be concerned with anything except the Beheading Game, for it was solely upon Gawain's conduct in this adventure on their behalf that they staked the 'renoun of the Round Table'. They have only just now heard for the first time about his extra test in the Exchange of Winnings, whereas they have been worrying for a whole year about the outcome of the perilous

Beheading Game (cf. 674-83). Since Gawain is now known to have succeeded in honouring all the terms of that original covenant, they have every reason to respond as they do; and they are justified in adopting the green girdle as a new item to be included among the honourable insignia of their order (Burrow).

For the court of Arthur and his knights (the Arthurian society), Gawain has become the pentacle of knightly virtue. For the Arthurian society, Gawain embodies the knightly values they hold dear: faithfulness, truthfulness, courteousness, and courageousness. He managed to succeed at nearly all the tests and maintain his *trauthe*. They exalt him so much so that they adopt the green girdle the Green Knight allows him to keep as their insignia for all knights to wear.

The final two qualities of a hero of the Homeric equation are greatly intertwined, that of defeating monsters and traveling to the Otherworld, and sometimes do not occur simultaneously. In the scope of *The Iliad*, neither Achilles nor any other human or demigod character directly enters the Otherworld, a world other than what is considered present by the character, but it is important to note that Homer takes the reader into the realm of the gods and has the gods descend upon the battlefield. This blurs the line between what is the normal world of the humans and the Otherworld of the gods. But during Homer's tale, Achilles still does not defeat any non-human monsters; although, Odysseus faces many monsters in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus faces sirens, Scylla, Charybdis, a cyclops, and even more if figures like Calypso and Circe are to be considered monsters. Though not all are directly slain, Odysseus defeats each in a different way. He and his crew escape being eaten by the Cyclops and drowned by Scylla and Charybdis. Odysseus also escapes from Calypso and Circe's enchantments so that he can sail home to Ithaca. Odysseus also travels/opens a portal to the Underworld, a kind of Otherworld, through a magical ritual where he sees the spirits of friends that have died – such as Achilles and

Agamemnon. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf defeats the monstrous Grendel, Grendel's kinswoman, and much later, a dragon. To kill Grendel's kinswoman, Beowulf must enter her lair by swimming under a lake and coming through a cave. Beowulf also uses a special sword to slay her, and her blood melts the sword into a puddle. Beowulf's entrance into Grendel's mother's (called his kinswoman in this translation) lair is very Otherworldly as the language is unclear and muddled, depending on the translation.

...They [the Danes] knew not  
 who sire them [Grendel and his kinswoman], and whether they were the issue  
 of a whole race of such demons. They rule a secret realm –  
 wolf-trodden slops, win-swept headlands,  
 waste places where the waterfall  
 plunges downward in the ridge-shadow,  
 a precipitous torrent. It is not far,  
 reckoned by miles, that dark water.  
 Over it hang trunks glazed in ice,  
 huge-rooted trees lean over the mere (*Beowulf* 1355-1364).

In this description of how to find Grendel and his kin given to Beowulf, a whole secret realm can be accessed by diving deep beneath icy waters. This journey has not been made by another, but the way to get to the water is known. The language here is specifically foreboding to signal the danger that Beowulf will be embarking on. It is possible many Grendels could be present in this other realm, and the way there is rough as well. The Otherworld in Beowulf's tale is the realm that the monsters come from that can only be accessed by diving down into a lake (*Beowulf*). For Gawain, his adventure takes him into the strange new land of the Green Knight. When he leaves

Camelot, Gawain notices the landscape somewhat rapidly morph into something different than what he is used to in King Arthur's realm. Only after this morph does Gawain magically stumble upon just the right castle that he needs, and the lord of the castle also happens to be the same person as the Green Knight. Though this is not overtly Otherworldly as fairies and monsters are not present to trick or attack Gawain, the Green Knight's realm is a place of magic and is where Morgan le Fay is casting all her magical spells. Within the book *Otherworlds*, Aisling Byrne delves into the concept of the Otherworld in literature. In her introduction, she writes:

The entry through the hillside, the land's beauty, copious quantities of precious stones, and rick materials, even the freedom from night-time darkness wrought by an unnatural light source, are all highly conventional motifs [for the Otherworld]. In other narratives, otherworld spaces often feature beautiful gardens, fountains, fruitful trees, refined bird song, a beautiful palace, or a pavilion. A distortion of spatio-temporal rules is also frequent... The boundary between worlds may...be a passage through a hollow hill, but it also frequently takes the form of water barrier (Byrne 1-2).

For Byrne, the Otherworld realms have many different signaling factors that a character has entered them. They may be lushier than the normal world or have grand architecture like a massive castle. Otherworldly cross-overs can also happen when a character passes through a secret tunnel or through water. This can be seen when Beowulf swims through the water to find the realm of the Grendel demons, and when Odysseus travels to the Underworld, he begins where two rivers meet. Gawain senses a scenery change, and then, he comes upon a large castle in the middle of a forest. Through old fantasy tales such as these, motifs of the Otherworlds persist and become familiar to readers. Readers of fantasy can then be alerted when presented

with a motif that the character has enter another realm and the story will likely be entering an even more adventurous phase.

For Homer, his heroes represented how he imagined Odysseus and Achilles would have been at the time of their existence – though fictional – and gave them traits that reflected their values: being the best of their people, having traits that their people admired, defeating great monsters to gather honor and renown, and travelling to Otherworlds. This frame for a hero works so well that it can be found within the later stories of *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Naturally, this framework can be seen in more recent and still popular works such as *Game of Thrones*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *The Lord of the Rings*. This framework may persist today because it operates like Kevin Pask suggests in his book *The Fairy Way of Writing*.

The novelistic experience of the readers of *the Lord of the Rings* leads us back to the fairy tale: a genre that, it turns out, the characters of the Shire – and elsewhere in Middle Earth – also know. These characters find themselves in the very recognizable “modern” position of trying to make sense of old and largely discredited tales – tales that come to reassert their old power in new circumstances (Pask 136).

In Pask’s examination, fairy tales (and I would widen this to the fantasy genre in general) can function to call back to what is familiar to the reader or listener. Classic tales tend to reiterate the same moral lessons, and “modern” tales wrap these moral lessons up in fancy new packaging. Though the tale may appear fictional (like the fairy tales of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*) or may actually have fictional origins, the familiarity brings the reader to the reality that the moral lessons have truth to them. In Pask’s commentary, he likens this to when Sam believes all the fairy tales while others dismiss them, but by the end, he’s right: dragons exist, Ents exist, etc. By the observation that this hero framework has persisted through time, I believe that this

framework may be essential to the fantasy genre and will continue to exist – even if all literature were to disappear, the Homeric hero would appear in new fantasy tales.

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## GUARDIANS OF THE BLACK GATE

T'was Midsummer's Day when Fate came to call upon Sir Gaheris, the youngest of the knights pledged within King Arthur's service. Every knight of King Arthur and lord and lady of the court was in attendance at Arthur's castle to take part in a sumptuous feast to celebrate the kingdom's latest successful conquest, so no one spied a stranger amongst their midst, swathed in a dark cloak and shorter than the average man. As the steaming meats and pies were brought forth, the dark stranger stepped out from the crowds, bowed before the king, and spoke. "I wish that you would hear my plea and fulfill it at my bequest, my lord King Arthur, as I humble myself in your presence."

"Speak, and my knights and I will hear your woes and beat them out for you. But, remove your coverings. Reveal your face and name so that we might all show you proper worship," so spake the king before his court.

"If that be your price, let it be so." The stranger removed their hood to reveal a ghastly face. T'was the visage of a crone, but to be sure, it was the ugliest visage the king and his court had ever laid eyes on. The skin was blackened and dry in spotty patches. Her eyes were milky and set deep into her face. The skin sagged and folded, and the hair upon her head was sparse. The king's face remained passive, but many of the knights and faces of the court could not hide their horror and disgust. "I come as a messenger sent unto you by my king, who is held prisoner by the devilish king who has invaded and wishes to ransack our lands. His vassals are all but vanquished, so he has sent me to gather as many knights as you might send to drive away the invaders."

“And what reward might be won by the victorious knight who would travel with you, lady?” spoke Sir Falkred, a knight of Arthur’s with much worship to his name.

“I regret that my lord has very little to offer as a prize for any lofty knight that volunteers his service for my king.”

“Your king sent you in dire straits indeed, madame,” the king tented his hands and surveyed his knights.

“I can only offer my company, though it be but meager restitution.” This did not cheer any of the knights, and many appeared altogether uninterested.

“Under such circumstances, I cannot order any of my men to go, but if someone were to volunteer to travel and fight for you, lady, he would have my blessing.” The king made this decree, and the atmosphere was palpably tense. No knight rose for the crone, but she stood stern as the eyes of the room avoided hers.

Finally, Sir Gaheris turned to King Arthur. “By your leave, my lord, and if it not displease your lady, my queen, I would go with this woeful lady to the lands of her people and free her lord from the yoke of the invaders. We will set off in this instance.”

“Aye, Sir Gaheris! The Queen and I will provide you everything you and this lady may require for the journey.” The king gestured to a servant, and provisions were sent for.

Sir Gaheris bowed to his king, queen, and then the old crone. “I hope this humble knight does not displease you, lady. If you accept my service, I will be ready forthwith.” The old crone inclined her head to the knight and bowed before the king and queen. As she left the grand hall, the court sprang to life, and food and drink were being passed about.

Sir Gaheris returned to his chambers where his squire helped him into his armor. The squire draped a chain metal tunic made of well-wrought, tiny, white gold rings over Gaheris. This had been a gift from the king, and Gaheris always wore it into battle. Over this, the plated metal made of burnished steel. Finally, a plain, green girdle was added. The squire went off to prepare a horse as Sir Gaheris went in search of the crone. He found her waiting upon a palfrey with a greying muzzle.

“Where are we to set off to, lady, and what are you called?” Sir Gaheris asked as he mounted his best un-cut horse.

“It is a land far to the north. It will take several days of riding before we cross into my lord’s country. Though, you need not know my name.” The crone led the way for three days along a route that led due north for much of the way. Nightly, they stopped to rest, and each night they accepted the hospitality of a lord they met along the way. On the fourth day, the weather turned cold, and a biting wind blew down from the north.

“We have crossed over into my lord’s country, Sir. It shan’t be long now.” The old crone pointed up the road with an aged, withered hand. “There lies the castle of a faithful vassal to my lord. I suspect we should be able to seek shelter with him for the night.”

Onward they rode until they came within sight of the sprawling castle. The crone suddenly pulled up her palfrey and let out a pitiful groan. “We will not find shelter here this night, Sir Gaheris. The invaders have already taken this hold as their own. See how the gate has been blackened? It is their sign. We shall have to give this cursed place a wide birth.”

Sir Gaheris surveyed the castle and saw an unfamiliar standard flying from its wall. “Is that your lord’s vassal’s house?” Sir Gaheris pointed to the black weasel standard above the gate.

“No, Sir. That is the house of the invaders. They bear on their standard a black weasel. Come, we should leave before we are spotted.”

“My apologies, lady, but I will not run. I may best provide my services to you by first revenging the lord of this castle, the vassal of your lord, and freeing it from such desecration.” And so, Sir Gaheris rode forward to the gate where he hailed to the watch guard for their lord or captain. Out from the gate road a knight in black armor followed by several mounted guards.

“Who are you, Sir Knight, and why have you called me from my castle?” so spake the Black Knight.

“Black Knight, I have commended my services to this lady in the name of her lord to free their land from invaders. Were you the knight that slew the lord of this castle and took it as your own? I have come to revenge him, so if it not be you, direct me to the knight.”

“The lord of this castle... Ah, yes. It was I who slew he. The sniveling coward could not best me in our duel, so I put him over there.” The Black Knight gestured to a large tree to the far left of the castle grounds. In the tree, hung several bodies, bedecked in armor, by their feet. “Any that could not match me, I placed there.”

The old crone let out a quiet gasp, and Sir Gaheris gripped the hilt of his sword roughly. “You are no knight!” he roared at the Black Knight. “You are a traitor knight. We shall duel here and now for this blasphemy. Ready yourself.” Sir Gaheris and the Black Knight readied their lances and shields as their steeds blew and pawed the ground until great clouds of dust obscured them from onlookers. Each gave their horse its head, and out from the dust they hurtled toward each other. With a thunderous crack, their lances broke against each other’s shield, and both knights were thrown to the ground from their horses. Sir Gaheris was the first on his feet, and he

pulled forth his glistening blade. He waited for the Black Knight to rise and ready himself before they both lunged with their blades colliding. Where one gained the upper hand and prepared to strike, the other would spot a weakness and lunge for it. After an hour, blood freely dripped from both knights, and they agreed to a brief reprieve to catch their breath. They glared at each other beneath their helms, but in a moment of distraction on Sir Gaheris' behalf, the Black Knight proved his treacherous nature. With a secret signal, three of the Black Knight's men lunged at Gaheris. Gaheris parried all but one who brought forth fresh blood from his shield arm. With renewed vigor, Gaheris ruthlessly struck at the men and parried their blows. With such treachery, knights such as these do not deserve mercy. His blade wet with blood, Gaheris slew each of the men in turn, though still sustaining some wounds himself.

Sir Gaheris lifted his blade to point at the Black Knight. "To have broken yet another covenant, mercy you shall not be met with. Ready yourself, traitor knight."

The Black Knight turned and mounted his steed as a squire brought him a fresh lance instead of facing Sir Gaheris. Sir Gaheris ran to his mount as the Black Knight bore down upon him. The lance glanced off Sir Gaheris' pauldrons as he wheeled his steed about. The crone offered her knight his lance as the Black Knight turned to gallop toward him again. Sir Gaheris took the lance and gave his steed his head. Like thunder, the knights clashed together. Sir Gaheris deflected the Black Knight's spear, but it plunged into the side of his horse. The lance of Sir Gaheris run true as it pierced under the edge of the Black Knight's helm. Down they fell together, Gaheris moving to avoid his fallen steed, and the Black Knight crushed beneath his. No more sound or movement came from the Black Knight, so Sir Gaheris rose, victorious but bleeding.

Sir Gaheris addressed the Black Knight's men, "Your captain has fallen! If you wish to live another day and do so as true knights, pledge yourselves to me and be spared." The Black Knight's men knelt before Sir Gaheris and pledged themselves to him and promised to serve him when called upon.

The crone then approached her knight and gave him a slight bow. "I thank you, Sir Gaheris, for revenging the memory of this lord in the name of my king. Have your men cut down their bodies and provide them with a proper burial so that their souls may pass on."

"Rightly you speak, lady." Sir Gaheris' men loyally set about completing the task for their new captain. "Would it displease you, lady, to rest here for the night and set off in the morn?"

The crone paused and looked to the northern sky. "Bitter winds blow down to us. I think we have little option but to weather here as a storm is liking to make the roads impassable for several days."

With the dead buried, the knights and the crone weathered in the castle for nye on a week before the roads were passable again. Sir Gaheris spent this time getting to know his men and earning their trust, and as recompense for their foul deeds under the leadership of the Black Knight, he ordered the men to set about restoring the desecrated castle. By the day of their departure, Sir Gaheris was pleased with their work and proclaimed that he forgave them their trespasses here. He trusted them so that he left the main body to protect the castle and had only six accompany him and the crone on the rest of their journey. As his steed had been killed in the battle, Sir Gaheris mounted the Black Knight's horse, a sturdy black warhorse with spirit, and the crone was helped on to her grey-muzzled palfrey.

“How far do we have yet to go, lady?” The crone looked again to the north, and as Sir Gaheris watched her, he wondered why he had thought she had appeared so old at King Arthur’s court. She looked like a stately old lady now, but surely, she had always looked this way.

“If we ride swiftly, it should be no more than a day and a half ride from here. I will lead you, if it please you.” The crone prodded her palfrey and set a pace that surprised Sir Gaheris and his men. They could never have imagined the lady was capable of withstanding such a pace. As she rode along the road, the weather grew colder and more unforgiving. Heavy clouds loomed overhead making it seem like evening rather than mid-day. The party stopped at the foot of a mountain pass while it had yet to snow, and the crone convinced the knights that would it would be wiser to cross the mountain now and continue throughout the night rather than wait for the snows to clear again. Before they set off, she came to each of them in turn and blessed their fur cloaks. “The cold should not be a hindrance now. The king’s castle lies on the other side of this mountain. We can rest in the morrow once we have crossed.”

The lady, familiar with the pass, led the party along a rocky trail. Many a horse lost its footing, but each knight righted his horse before they could fall to their deaths over the edge of the mountain. With his cloak held close, Sir Gaheris wondered at the crone’s enchantment. Though the winds tried to tear the furs from his hand, he remained warm. With such little discomfort, the climb seemed to have passed in an instant, and after descending a much harder path, the knights gathered round a fire to break their fasts. It was then that the lady spoke with Sir Gaheris of what he was to face.

“I fear that the journey is far from over. The invader king is said to have a beast that blocks the way to the castle, and there is but one road to the gate. The king himself is rumored to

be a beast of a man, larger than any and undefeated,” the lady said as she warmed her hands by the fire.

“As I have pledged my services to you, I will face both the monster and the king if they are what block the path to freeing your king.”

The lady smiled faintly, her face appearing softened by the firelight. “I wish you the best of luck, Sir Gaheris. But, let us be off now while the time is yet ripe.”

The party set off down the road that led through the forest, sheltering them from the snow. Suddenly, the trees parted, and a vast, hilly field spread out before them, split in twain by the road. In the distance, they could see the king’s tall castle resting at the foot of a sheer cliff. The lady and her knights continued on toward the castle when, suddenly, a hill next to them began to rustle. The horses grew nervous as snow fell and a dragon turned its eyes upon them. Sir Gaheris and his men drew their swords as they regained control of their steeds. Together, they charged the monster, slashing at his scaly hide. The dragon opened its massive maw filled with rows of teeth as long as a man’s forearm. A great rumbling resounded from its chest, and fire spewed forth, melting one of Sir Gaheris’ men and his horse in an instant. One daring and clever knight rode close to the dragon’s belly and began slashing at a single, large scale over and over. The dragon turned on him and melted him, but all was not in vain, the dragon’s scale came free, revealing soft flesh beneath. The dragon, aware of this weakness, thrashed madly to keep the knights at bay. It slew another of Sir Gaheris’ men, but while it was distracted eating its kill, Sir Gaheris leapt from his horse in a surge of bravery and thrust his sword into the dragon’s exposed flesh as he landed, piercing it and causing the dragon’s lifeblood to flow outward. Enraged, the dragon shook Sir Gaheris from its side, spread its massive wings, and flew away in retreat.

Sir Gaheris retrieved the dropped scale and presented it to the crone. She accepted his gift, tucking it away as the sound of distant hoofbeats drew closer. From the castle, a host of men rode carrying the standard of a black weasel. They stopped before the small party, and an emissary approached Sir Gaheris and bowed. "My king has heard that you took a castle a his, and now, you have defeated his dragon. He acknowledges your skill and challenges you to a duel so that you both might test your strength."

Accepting this challenge, Sir Gaheris and his party follow the emissary back to the castle. Just outside a towering black gate, the king of the black weasels waits on his horse with his lance ready bedecked in armor impossibly black, darker than even the Black Knight's. Sir Gaheris readies his lance and shield, but before they begin, he calls to the king. "Black King, I needs ask you of the king of this kingdom that you invaded. What has become of him? I have pledged to this lady to free her king."

"Regretfully, I must tell you," the Black King called back. "Your lady's king died while I held him hostage. Though I provided him with the best medicines found in this kingdom, he could not be saved."

"This is grave news indeed. By my oath, I needs revenge him then. Let this contest also serve as my revenge," Sir Gaheris spoke.

Both readied, the knights raised their lancers and gave their horses their head. Boldly, they charged at each other. There was a great crack as they came together. Their lances splintered against each other's shields, and steeds pawed at each other ferociously, spraying the ground with blood. Both knights were thrown to the ground. Avoiding their horses, they came together, swords drawn. Hacking and parrying, they dueled as the sun continued to pass through

the sky. They were an even match in skill, and as one landed a blow, the other was also able to gain ground in the next instant. But as the duel continued, the Black King's great size sapped his strength while Sir Gaheris still moved lithely, and when the Black King went to lunge at Sir Gaheris but faltered, Sir Gaheris lunged forward and sank his blade into the Black King's chest. It was in that instant that Sir Gaheris glimpsed victory but realized the Black King's plan. When Sir Gaheris went to lunge, the Black King used the last of his strength to swiftly bring his sword about and place it between himself and Sir Gaheris. The power of Sir Gaheris' lunge thrust the Black King's sword through Sir Gaheris' armor so that both noble knights were wounded badly.

Sir Gaheris fell to his knees and pulled the king's sword from his body. "You fight well, sir. It was an honor," he said to the king, but when Sir Gaheris looked at him, he saw that the Black King was already dead.

The lady rushed to Sir Gaheris' side and grasped his hand. To Sir Gaheris' amazement, the old crone transformed before his eyes into a beautiful, stately lady. She was ethereal to behold with a crown of crystal upon her head. "Sir Gaheris, you have fully fulfilled your pledge, and as thanks, I must give you what was promised." She pulled forth the dragon scale, and in her hands, the scale changed shape into a crown. As she placed it upon his head, his vision was filled with a blinding light. Sir Gaheris found himself kneeling in green grass in an expansive meadow. The snow was gone, and in its place, flowers bloomed galore. The castle was still there, but the gate was no longer blackened. Sir Gaheris' wounds had also disappeared, and his armor had been replaced by fine gold clothes. The beautiful lady smiled at him, and Sir Gaheris' heart had never felt so gladdened by a sight. "My name is Queen Amara, Sir Gaheris. I have found you worthy through deed and moral fortitude to share my world with me and my people. I welcome you home, King Gaheris."

*The End*

## DON'T BE ALONE

We had left our hometown of Holbeck about forty-five minutes ago in the Professor's car to head to an extra credit lecture when the girl next to me startled me from my daydreaming out the window. "Professor, how far are we from the lecture? I really need to pee."

The professor sighs. "We're only half way there. Can you... Can you hold it, Fran?"

I don't know what possessed this girl's parents to name her "Frangelica." They were probably part of the group of parents that thought old-fashioned names needed to be brought back in style. Don't get me wrong. I like old-fashioned names, but "old-fashioned" doesn't mean combine two century-old names into one. I really pitied her... "Professor," she whined. "Isn't there a rest stop? Can't you pull over?" ...until she opened her mouth on the first day of class.

The professor rubs his nose in frustration. I look at the clock on the dashboard. It was nearly five o'clock. "We're going to be late if we have to stop," was all he said after a moment.

"But the lecture doesn't start until 5:30! Surely we have time for a bathroom break." Fran was sitting forward from the seat behind the Professor and had placed her hand on his seat. "Please?" Her voice reached a nasally whine that made me nauseous.

The professor sighs and looks resigned to pull over when something catches my eye. *Watch out.* Something dark is lurking in the ditch next to the road up ahead, and the longer I look, the more it looks like an animal. "Professor, watch out!" I yell as the dark animal darts across the road in front of us.

"Oh, shit!" The professor swerves to miss it, and the whole car shakes as a BOOM explodes from the back of the car. The car sways back and forth dangerously, and the professor

yanks the wheel so that we swerve back into our own lane. WHAM! My head almost smashes into the seat in front of me as we collide with something. My skin is raw where the seatbelt pulled taunt.

We've stopped.

"Is everyone okay?" the professor asks. Groans reply. He turns around for a headcount. "Fran. Rose. Nathaniel," he mutters as he gives us each a once over.

"I'm okay," each of us groan out as he calls our names.

Having done his professorly duty, he abandons us to check out the front of the car where it looks like my side is crumpled. My head and neck are hot and sore, and the skin underneath the seatbelt is slightly raw but not as bad as it felt. Could be worse. I look over at Fran. A little bit of blood has dripped down the left side of her face where she must have hit it on the glass, but it's already starting to dry. "You okay?" I ask, more gently than usual.

She looks at me, hazel eyes wide. "I still have to pee," she whines.

"Damn it all," I mutter under my breath. I rub my hands into my face. "Okay, let's go. We'll have to get out on your side."

Fran's door opens easily. I look over at Nathaniel. He looks pretty pale, and his head has drooped down towards his chest. He must have taken more of the blow than me. "You okay?"

His head kind of snaps up, like he's just woken up. "Yeah... Yeah. My head just kind of hurts. Everything's kind of swimming. Are we swimming?"

My bottom lip hurts as I bite it. "No, we're not. Let me help you out Fran's door. There might be fumes, and you probably have a concussion." He climbs over the console, and I steady

him as he steps out. “Why don’t you sit over here?” Together, we shuffle over to the wall of tall concrete blocks that follows the white line of the road. His body flows down into a puddle on the pavement, resting against the wall. I look around. From here, I can see one of the back tires blew out while we were driving. Back down the road from where we came, the road is empty. No trace of the animal than ran across. I guess we missed it. Though, I now notice Fran’s nowhere to be seen. “Fran? Fran!” She doesn’t answer. I walk around the front of car where the professor seems to be surveying the damage. “Professor, did Fran pass by this way?”

He’s mumbling to himself and doesn’t seem to hear me. Suddenly, he looks at up me. “Huh... What?! Oh, Rose. Yeah, uh... She went over that way.” He points to the concrete wall to our left.

“You mean she went over the wall?” The professor mumbles what sounds like agreement, but he doesn’t look up. “Good thing we all signed waivers for this trip,” I mumble as I walk over to the concrete wall and lift up my arms. The edge is still about half a foot above my fingertips. How did she get over? “Uh, Fran?” I yell. “Are you there?”

“Yeah!” she answers, kind of distant. “I couldn’t wait any longer! Just, uh... Let me have my privacy, okay?”

Sighing, I roll my eyes. “Professor, don’t you think we should call AAA or something?” I pause, looking at his old car with rust in places. “Maybe call some other emergency number?”

The professor takes out an old flip phone from his pocket and squints at it. “I don’t seem to have any reception for some reason. That is very odd... This should be even more reliable than modern...” he trails off mumbling and fidgeting with buttons.

I take out my phone to check it. No cell reception either. “I don’t have service either.”

“Maybe solar flares intercepting with the signal...”

“I’m gonna check with the others, professor. You just keep doing... Yeah... That.” I scurry off around the car to check on Nathaniel. “Nathaniel, how are you feeling?”

“Things are still a bit swimmy,” he moans. He has his hands pressed against his eyes.

I crouch down to get a closer look. “Do you mind if I take a closer look?” He lowers his hands, raises his face, and slowly opens his eyes. A chill shudders down my spine as he opens them, and I can see that his pupils are pinpoints. “Are you bleeding? Does anything hurt?”

“I mean, my head hurts,” and he points to the right side of his head. His hair is matted with blood where he points, but none of it looks fresh. I try not to poke around too much on it.

“Yeah, it looks like you’re not bleeding anymore, so maybe don’t move around too much. By the way, do you have signal on your phone?”

Nathaniel takes out his phone from his pocket. He shakes his head, then winces. “No, ah!” he hisses. “No... there’s nothing.”

I roll my lip between my teeth, thinking. “Maybe one of those emergency functions on our phones will still workout without signal.” I thumb into my contacts and see a label for “emergency services.” Several are acronyms I don’t recognize, but the top one says “911.”

“Well, I guess this is kinda an emergency...” I hit the button. It rings... and rings...

“Hello! 911 Emergency Services. How can I help you?” a weirdly cheery voice answers.

“Hi!” I stammer. “Yes, uh... We had a slight accident. Something ran across the road, and we hit the concrete wall on the side of the road after the tire blew out.”

“Animal... Tire... Got it. Is anyone injured? Any other vehicles involved?”

“It was just us, and uh, at least one person has a pretty bad concussion, but myself and another girl bumped our heads a bit.”

“Okay, okay. We can send some responders over to come get you. And, where are you located?”

“Um... One second. I need to ask.” I pull the phone away from my ear. “Professor! What road are we on?”

His head pops up over the hood of the vehicle. “Highway 76?”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s Highway 66. 76 was closed,” Nathaniel says.

I bring the phone back. “I think we’re on Highway 66 about 45 minutes from Holbeck headed to Grand Theory.”

“Okay. Well, it looks like it’ll be about 45 minutes for our responders to get to you. Is that all I can help you with?”

“Yes, thank you.” She hangs up. “Some cops or an ambulance should be here in about 45 minutes,” I tell Nathaniel.

“Did you get the reception to call?” the professor asks, coming around from the front of the car to inspect the blown tire.

“No, I called 911 since that’s the only thing that works without reception,” I say as the professor starts digging around in his trunk.

“...don’t know why you did that,” his voice says distantly from in the car. “I should have something to fix the tire back here somewhere.”

“But with the front of the car, it doesn’t look like we’re going to be going anywhere.”

“I think it’ll still go once we fix the tire. Nothing under the hood looks too broken.” I’m mulling over the “too broken” in shock when I hear him exclaim. “Damn it! I’m missing somethings to swap the tire. I only have a spare and a jack.” The professor shows Nathaniel and I his dingy little donut tire and the rusty looking jack. “Probably good thing you called for help.”

“You mean the metal spinny tool for the tire bolts?”

Nathaniel busts up. “‘Metal spinny tool?’ You mean the lug wrench.”

“Yeah,” I blush, irritated. “That. I don’t know cars very well.” I spin away from them to look back down the road the way we had come. “It’s kinda weird that there was an animal and then our tire burst at the same instant, don’t ya think? You didn’t run over it, did you, Professor?”

“An animal?” asked Nathaniel.

I raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, didn’t you see it? It was big and dark.”

“I did not hit it, and I don’t think it’s very strange,” the professor said as he checked his phone. “What time was it that you called 911, Rose?”

I checked my call logs. “It was at 4:30.”

“My cellphone says it’s 4:30 now. It was also 4:30 when we stopped....” The professor seemed to be talking more to himself than us, and he started rummaging through his trunk again.

“My phone says 4:30, too!” Nathaniel yells, and he started power cycling his phone.

“Yep, still says 4:30.”

“Professor?” I ask, hoping he might have an idea.

“I don’t know, but let me look through these books. They should have some mention of solar flares messing with electronic signals. Go check on Fran.” He was thumbing quickly through a large tome.

If Fran has decided to go walking off without us when we’re supposed to be waiting for help, I tell myself that she can just find her own way back. I sigh and climb up on the bumper to try and see over the wall. Tree tops are visible, but I’m too short. “Fran! Fran, are you there?”

No answer...

“Fran, what are you doing? Can you hear me?” I’ve cupped my hands around my mouth at this point. Off in the distance, I hear a shrill screaming. Forget everything I just said about not helping her. “Professor, help me over the wall!” I run over to the wall, and the professor bends down with his hands together. With my foot in his hands, I lift myself over and hop down on the other side. At the edge of the woods, I see Fran struggling. “Hold on!” I sprint towards her. She’s struggling in the bushes. It looks like something has a hold of her. I push myself harder. I’m panting as I get closer and see Fran beating at the bushing. She’s... She’s just got her hair stuck in the bushes.

She looks at me with pleading eyes. “Help me. I’m stuck!”

I bend over, trying to catch my breath. “You, HUFF, made me, HUFF HUFF, run all the way, HUFF, for that?” I exclaim, clutching my sides.

“I thought I saw something in the woods, so I came to investigate. But I got stuck. I was scared...” Her eyes are watering now.

“We’re fine, professor!” I yell back towards the car in the hope he might hear me. I turn back to Fran and start breaking off the brush limbs stuck in her hair. “You saw something, so you got closer to the woods alone?”

She purses her lips and looks away as I finish freeing her. “Thank you,” she mumbles.

“Uh huh...” Heavy sigh. I peer into the woods from where she was standing. There’s nothing there, but it’s so dense and dark after 20 feet that I don’t know how she saw anything. I shrug it off, and I follow her back to the wall. She helps me over since I’m much shorter than her.

Once we’re back over, I nudge Fran a bit forcefully toward the professor and give her a you-had-us-worried-and-you’re-stupid look. “Uh, professor...” She walks away.

Nathaniel has moved back into the car and is laying down in the backseat. I peek my head through the window. “You doing alright?”

“A little bit better, actually. The professor had some meds, and they’re kicking in.”

“Oh, that’s good. Glad he was prepared for once.” I sit down in the driver’s seat sideways so that I can see into the backseat.

“What happened to Fran?”

“She got stuck in the brambles when she wandered closer to the woods.”

“That’s kind of scary,” Nathaniel replies and put his arm back over his eyes.

“It’s kind of stupid.” Nathaniel doesn’t reply. “Did the professor find anything in his book?”

“He said something about solar flares again, but I don’t know why we’d be without signal this long.”

“How long do you think it’s been that we’ve been waiting on the cops?” I swing my feet to and fro out the open door.

“Maybe an hour? It feels like an hour since the meds are already kicking in.”

“Yeah... Maybe one of us should look for help.” I check my phone again and find the call log for my last call. The time stamp still says the call was made “0 seconds ago.” “Hold on.” I get out of the car. I find the professor still looking through the mountain of books in his trunk.

“Yes?” he asks without looking up.

“Do you think one of us should try walking to town to get help? We’ve been waiting awful long for the police to get here.”

“I don’t know... With this weird stuff going on, I don’t want anyone going alone. Not with animals running around and whatnot.”

*Don’t go alone*, something whispers. I freeze. Cold shivers run down my spine. It sounds like someone faintly whispering in my ear but... on the inside. Did... Did I hear this before?

“Are you okay, Rose? You look a little paler than usual.” The professor is looking at me, concerned.

“Yeah, yeah! I’m fine! I don’t think anyone should go alone either, but we need some help.”

The professor stands pensively for a moment with his hand stroking his mustache. “You and Fran could go. Nathaniel is in no condition to walk, and he can’t be left alone. I’ll stay with him in case the police show up.” I’m about to protest when he rips a sheet of blank paper from the back of the text he’s holding and starts scribbling on it with a pencil. “Here. Just in case.” He shoves two slips of paper in my hand. “Make sure to give on to Fran.” He turns back to his book.

“I, uh... Okay, I guess... But, what’s it for?”

“Just in case,” the professor mumbles over his book again.

I walk away, questioning my sanity for a moment. Now is not the time for existential crises from voices and weird professors. I put one slip of paper into my pocket and walk around the front of the car to find Fran. She’s walked off nearly an eighth of a mile. Why is she walking off *again*? “Wait, Fran! Where are you going?” I yell to her and start walking to catch up.

She meets me halfway. “I was just going up the hill a little to see if I could see anyone.”

“Well, here.” I hand her the slip of paper the professor scribbled on. “The professor gave me this for you, and he said we should go look for help.”

“What is this?” she asks as she opens up the slip.

“I don’t know. Probably another one of those weird pictures the professor gives us now and again after his lecture. I don’t know what they mean.”

She stuffs it in her pocket. “Well, I think we should walk this way since the cops might come from this way. Maybe we’ll meet them.”

I shrug and start walking. We walk together for what feels like several miles when Fran stops and points at something to our right.

“Is that a road?”

I squint. “Yeah, it looks like it might be.”

“Maybe someone lives down it and can help us!”

I bite my lip. It’s not the worst idea, and Grand Theory is still hours of walking away.

“Sure. Let’s try it.”

Together, Fran and I walk toward the dirt road that led off into the woods. The road doesn’t look like it’s been used for a while. The parallel barren dirt tracks left from tires have started to be covered by grass and tall weeds, and the trees lining the road hang low enough to scrape the top of a car in places. Sunshine still comes through the leaves in patches, so it isn’t dark enough to waste the flashlight battery yet.

“What if we get lost?” Fran asked, hanging back behind me.

“Our phones have compasses, and we can turn around if we don’t find anything after 20 minutes or so. We need to find some help.” I pull out my phone and set a timer for 20 minutes from now since the clock function hasn’t changed from 4:30.

“Let’s stick together...” She jogs up to me and hovers close to my back as we walk.

As we walk, the road gets narrower, and it’s hard to imagine a car fitting between the trees without losing its mirrors at this point. The temperature drops as less sunlight filters through. Goosebumps rise on my skin. Fran grips my sleeve, but I don’t mind. For once, I’m glad she’s there. She could annoy the animals or kidnappers away.

It's been 15 minutes, and we've gone around some bends but no forks in the road so far. I turn on the flashlight on my phone, and in the distance (maybe 10 feet away), the road stops. In the beams of the light, there's a mailbox.

"Oh! Maybe there's a house after all!" Fran starts pulling on my arm.

I let her, and we walk together down the dirt path that leads to a ramshackle old shed. It definitely looks sketchy, and I find myself reaching in to my pocket to hold the little slip of paper. "I don't see a house," I say.

We pause in front of the shed. "Maybe it has stuff to fix the car," she whispers.

"Okay... Let's check it out." Fran grabs my hand. It's warm and reassuring. Together we push open the door and look inside. She has her phone flashlight out now. There's molding boxes stacked along the wall. A rusty bike there. A wheelbarrow without the wheel in the corner. I let go of Fran's hand to go check out another corner where a deflated tire's laying on the ground. "Hey! I found the wrench-thing we need! It's rusty, but it should work." *DON'T BE ALONE*. I'm frozen. I definitely heard a voice.

Fran doesn't answer.

I wait a second. Chills run down my back. I'm scared by myself. I hate the dark. "Fran?" My voice is feeble. Outside, there's a blood curdling scream. It seems to reach into my ears and rake my eardrums. I flinch, but suddenly, it cuts off. I unconsciously grab the slip of paper in my pocket. That was definitely Fran. As quietly as I can, I creep toward the shed door that is open just a crack. I peek through. There's Fran laying on the ground in the road. I don't see anything else. I run out to her. Her neck is at an odd angle, and blood is streaming from her chest, soaking her shirt and pants. "Fran?" I touch her.

Suddenly, there's hot breath on my neck. *DON'T BE ALONE*. I turn my head. There behind me is a misty black shadow. Black vapors seem to writhe in a humanoid shape, but tall. Too tall. Arms too long. Fingers long and sharp looking. Its face is so near mine my heart falters. Hard grey eyes hold my gaze, and a wicked smile with too many teeth spreads across its face. It swings at me. I tell myself to move, but I'm frozen. My chest is hot. It's burning! Blood flows down my front, soaking my hands, my shirt, my pants... *Time to start over...*

I'm awake. Hazily, I remember we had left our hometown of Holbeck about forty-five minutes ago in the Professor's car to head to an extra credit lecture when Fran startled me from my daydreaming out the window. "Professor, how far are we from the lecture? I really need to pee."

*Start over again. You all need to remember. Remember. DON'T BE ALONE.*

My head aches like it's been run over. "Fran, did you say something," I ask, fuzzily.

"I said that I *really* have to pee," she says, lifting her eyebrow at me. "Were you that far gone?"

"What?" And then, I remember. I remember the crash, the call, Fran getting caught in the woods, Fran seeing something in the woods, the cops not showing up, Fran and I, Fran and I looking for something in the woods, Fran and I getting separated, Fran screaming, Fran dying? Me dying? The black smoke, the sharp claws... The grey eyes... The wicked face... And something about the paper the professor gave us with what looked like some kind of sigil scribbled on it.

I look up at the professor to ask him about the sigil when I see a dark animal on the side of the road. "Professor, watch out!"