

CARRPE DIEM, ALIEN NATION!!!!



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The Right Path

I woke up feeling the light of the sun beaming onto my face, warming my entire body through my blinds. I groaned as I tossed and turned, before deciding there was no use in trying to get comfortable again. I looked at the clock in the corner of my bedroom. 11:47 AM, it read. I sighed, it was much later than I had expected. I used up all the energy in my body to rise from my bed. I didn't realize I slept so long, but to be fair I hadn't slept well last night. I was tossing and turning for hours, and I found myself stirring from my sleep every 20 minutes or so. I headed to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee to start my day. I got the coffee machine going and sat at the table to scroll through my phone while I waited. I gave a quick glance to the top of my phone and noticed the date. September 18th. I took a deep breath and rubbed my temples slowly. September 18th. I checked again just to make sure I was reading it right. I was in for a long day.

Today would have been the seventh anniversary between my ex-boyfriend, Christian, and I. My first love, and my only love. It had been four years since we had separated, yet every year on our anniversary, I sit, reflect, and reminisce on everything. I'm 26 now. I was 22 when we broke up. It took me years to get over it, and even now, when the date goes by, it feels like I get sucked back into the cycle again. It doesn't matter how long it's been since the last time I thought about it. Every year on September 18th, it feels like all my healing goes down the drain.

Luckily for me, I didn't have work today. So I can spend all day watching romance movies and bundling up in blankets. I got my coffee and migrated back to my room. I got cozy in my bed and started up the Netflix. I scrolled through some rows before deciding on my comfort breakup movie, *Someone Great*. I pressed play and cracked open the snack drawer to enjoy with my coffee. I watched the movie dozens of times and still feel every emotion like I'm watching it for the first time.

Twenty minutes into the movie, I looked down at my phone to answer some texts. I was engulfed into my phone for maybe no longer than 30 seconds when I hear a sharp whirring noise taking over the room around me. I threw my phone to cover my ears and shut my eyes, as I could feel a bright light threatening the film over my eyes. The noise was getting louder by the second and suddenly ZAP. There was one more loud clashing before silence. My heart was beating out of my chest and I was breathing heavily. I slowly opened my eyes, unsure of what was to be in front of me when my eyes adjusted to the light.

I breathed deeply while I took in the bright panel before me. It was just like the movies. A huge portal, with a bright, twinkling gradient surrounding the edges of it. I could look inside. My eyebrows furrowed in confusion as I took in the sight before me. It felt familiar, too familiar. I rose up from my pillows to peek in closer, as I was trying to process the scene before me. My eyes opened wide in shock as I finally realized what I was staring at. I was staring at my college apartment, the one from my senior year. I got up from my bed and looked in the mirror. I had a baggy t-shirt on, sweatpants, and my hair was in a messy bun. Yikes, but what could possibly happen, I thought. I took my chances and stepped into the portal.

I took a deep breath as I looked around my apartment. It was lively, decorated. Patches of red and green took over the place. I grabbed my phone and took a look at it. December 12, 2019.

I had gone back in time four whole years. I took a moment to process the date. It was the date Christian and I had broken up. It felt like a sign, like I needed to redeem myself. Every year, I regret how things left off, and every year I think about what our future could have been. The past four years have been hell for me, I had spent most waking moments thinking about him. I thought about how I could have done things differently, and constantly wished I could go back and time and fix it. Now, I was given the opportunity.

I was in a bad headspace during the last few months of our relationship. We spent the majority of our relationship long distance, with him in Louisiana while I was finishing up university in California. I was under a lot of stress finishing up my final year of college and was highly irritable. Christian had on the receiving end of my frustration. He did nothing but support me and help me, and I was bitter and rude all the time. Trying to balance academics, internships, and finding a job after college was consuming me. I met a guy, Austyn, in one of my last biology classes and he was helping me study for midterms and finals. I spent a lot of time with him, thinking I was doing the right thing as I saw it as putting my education first. Little did I know, I was neglecting my relationship and pushing it aside while spending an unnecessary amount of time with another man. Weeks into the quarter, I realized there may have been another reason I was seeing him. I would feel a nervous pit in my stomach when we would study together, and we were becoming overly comfortable and touchy with one another. Yet, through all of it, my boyfriend was supportive and unsuspecting of my actions.

I never went further with Austyn, but it was a crush I developed nonetheless. I realized it had gone too far when we were studying together one evening and he placed his hand on top of mine. It made my heart flutter, but I pulled away quickly. Immediately my mind went to Christian. I racked my brain trying to recall a time where I told Austyn about my boyfriend, and I realized I had never told him. I excused myself and told Austyn I had to go. I went straight home and called up Christian, choking up as I told him the entire story. I admitted to catching feelings and never mentioning I had a boyfriend. I was completely transparent, because he did everything he could to support me and deserved honesty. My voice was cracking, in an attempt to prevent tears, until I heard him break down. At that point, I couldn't stop myself from letting out tears as well. I had been hurting the person I loved the most, and I felt awful for it. He said he figured that I met someone else because I had been cold and distant with him. I cried harder, not realizing my actions until that moment, not realizing I had been such a horrible girlfriend.

He was just as loving and supportive as I knew him to be, telling me that he will always be there for me, but being in my life romantically was just too much for him. He couldn't be with me anymore. We continued to be friends and talk, but I always instinctively spoke to him like he was still my boyfriend, trying to convince him that I will put more into our relationship. I was pushing and pushing but inside he was hurting, and I couldn't fix what I had done. Until today.

I checked the time on my phone, it was 10 AM. We hadn't broken up yet. I had texts on my phone from Christian, just saying good morning and that he hopes I have a good day. I texted back and ran to my room to open my computer. I was going to fix this. I looked up the next flight to Louisiana, and I booked it without a second thought. I shut my laptop and grabbed my

suitcase, frantically packing my bags with everything I'd need to last me the week in Louisiana. I got an Uber to the airport and started the journey to fixing my relationship.

When my plane landed, I grabbed my suitcase and Ubered to his place. I checked my phone in the Uber to see he had texted a few times, checking on me throughout the day, even though he hadn't received responses. He was always so thoughtful. As I looked up, I saw his home come into view. As the Uber stopped in front of his house, I got out and grabbed my suitcase from the trunk before going up to the front door. I took a deep breath, cracking my knuckles to waste some time before nervously knocked on the door. I waited a few moments, no response. With a shaky breath, I lifted my fist to knock again. As my knuckles nearly made contact with the door, it swung open, revealing my Christian. His eyes were wide and he lifted me off the ground, spinning me while asking me questions. He held me tightly and took his time with me before putting me down, greeting me with a kiss when we finally met face to face.

He grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen and started making me a plate of dinner, tending to my needs first, as I answered all his questions. I watched as the time flew by and the minutes that were once spent arguing were being replaced with new memories, good memories. Memories of us laughing, loving, and growing our relationship. We spent the evening catching up, as I couldn't change the distance I put between us in the weeks leading up to this moment. We talked and talked, we watched a movie on the couch together, and when the movie ended, we got ice cream at a late night ice cream parlor. We took care of each other, and it was truly one of the best nights of my life. At the end of the night, we put on another movie and watched until I fell asleep in his arms. I'm not sure when he fell asleep but I presume it wasn't long after.

When I woke up, I found myself in bed. That's odd, I thought. We fell asleep on the couch last night. I checked the time, it was 8:45 AM. Interesting, I thought I'd wake up later because of jet lag. I looked over at my lovely boyfriend and studied his face. My eyebrows furrowed as I felt like I was noticing things in him that I didn't notice last night. He looked oddly more mature, like he had a more sculpted facial structure and his stubble more prominent than last night. It was only a couple hours ago, how could he look so different? I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, looking to the nightstand for my phone and checking for any texts and calls.

While checking my phone, I heard thumping outside the bedroom, like someone was running around the house. It put me on high alert and I looked up, my eyes widening when I realized I didn't recognize this bedroom. It was a huge master bedroom that I had never been in before. I got out of bed quietly and walked around the room. I put my phone back on the nightstand and was taken aback when I saw framed photos on the nightstand. The pictures were of Christian and I, with two young children. They looked to be about the same age and they couldn't be any older than 3 years old. My heart started racing, when I realized what had happened. I picked up my phone to confirm. We were back in the present, in a world where everything worked out between me and Christian.

I rubbed my temples when I realized I would open the door to find children, MY children. I looked in the mirror, I looked much older. I had deep bags under my eyes and I had frown lines, which I didn't have before. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before opening

the door and taking in the sight in front of me. My children were playing, a young boy and a young girl. Simultaneously, I was taking in our house. It was a big, two-story house seemingly.

My children came up to me, exclaiming for their mother, and I gave them hugs one by one. I brought them to the kitchen, figuring I should cook them breakfast. I talked with them for a while and realized they were in fact 3-year-old twins. Their names were Ezra and Ella and they were answering my questions freely. They were so precious, I could see a mix of both their father's and my eyes, which I loved. I had always loved their father's green eyes, and I think it paired well with my deep brown eyes, giving our children a pretty hazel color. They were identical twins, and I could see both of our features in them. I felt the ability to take on the motherly role, and I could tell they were good kids as well.

I started up breakfast, simply making bacon, eggs, and pancakes. It ended up looking like a lot of food but it was simple to make, and I was satisfied with the job I did. I set the table up and served my children a little bit of everything, having small talk with them to learn about this life I had stepped into overnight. I set a plate for my husband, waiting for him to come join us.

About 30 minutes into breakfast, I heard movement coming from upstairs. I wondered what he was up to, as he wasn't joining us quite yet. I had no clue of this life I had joined in on. He could be doing anything. We could have family days on the weekends I had no idea about. He could be getting ready for work. Maybe he had plans with friends this morning. But, I took into consideration that today was our anniversary, and hopefully we'd be spending it together. I scrunched my nose, realizing I didn't look that great right now, and I'd be seeing Christian for the first time on our seventh anniversary. Hell, I didn't even know if he was my boyfriend or my husband at this point. But, it was only breakfast and I had plenty of time to dress up for him and get something special to celebrate our day. I heard our bedroom door close and listened as his footsteps came rustling down the stairs quickly. I called out to him, saying I had made breakfast and greeting him for our anniversary.

I watched as he walked right past me, hockey uniform and all, look me straight in the eyes, and head toward the door, exiting our house. He didn't say goodbye or anything. He didn't say a word. I was taken aback. Did we get into a big fight the night before that I wasn't aware of? Was that fight big enough to overlook our anniversary? I wasn't sure what was going on, but I spent the rest of breakfast catching up with our kids.

I found it interesting that he still plays ice hockey. It was his favorite sport and it seemed like he was just going out and playing with his friends like he used to. It was refreshing to see something from our past make it all the way into the future. I decided to brush past what happened and enjoy the day with the kids until he got home. I took out my phone from my pocket and sent him a quick text, greeting him again and asking when he'll be home. I checked my phone after a few minutes, noticing he read my message, but got no response. I felt a little bit down, but I didn't want to let the kids see me upset. I was processing a relationship I was unaware about, while trying to console children who I didn't really know either.

I eventually took the kids to the store to grab flowers for Christian, and I let them pick out their own snacks while we were there. I grabbed a stuffed animal as well, a giraffe, which I

remember to be his favorite animal. We headed home and I let the kids enjoy their snacks and played a show for them, while setting up the anniversary gift for my husband. I put the flowers in a vase we had at home. I then wrote a note, telling him how much I loved and appreciated him, and set it up with the rest of the gift. I went back to the living room with the children and waited for him to come home. I heard the door open not long after, and I called out to him. I heard his footsteps go straight to the stairs and my eyebrows furrowed, taking it upon myself to follow him. I watched as his body disappeared into our master bedroom, and I followed him, asking how his day was and what he was up to. My heart was beating quick as I didn't know what I'd be walking into, whether he was angry or upset or even just indifferent. I wouldn't know how to react in any situation. I approach him, placing my hand softly against his arm. Immediately, he flicks me off. My eyes widen as I feel like I don't recognize this stranger in front of me.

“What do you want? I don't understand why you're doing this. We haven't celebrated in a long time and all of a sudden, you're doing all this for no reason. I thought we were fine just being together for the kids. You didn't have to go out and spend money for an anniversary we don't even keep up with anymore.” he spits, shaking his head. I stare in disbelief as I process what just happened. I understood, my brain was putting the pieces together. The life I longed for was not the life we were on the path of having. While I could sit here and remember all the good moments we had together, we didn't have a marriage that was sustainable. All the memories were just that, memories, and I couldn't hold onto memories in hopes that our marriage will see clearer days. I could beg and plead for the life I imagined, but it just wasn't realistic for us. We had two beautiful kids, but at what cost? I don't have the man I wanted this life with, and overall it broke us apart. This wasn't the life I bargained for.

I stepped out of the room, wiping the tears from my eyes. I hadn't spoken a word to him. I don't think I needed to. I went downstairs to play with the children again until I heard the front door open and shut once more. He was gone once again.

At this point, I went back up to our bedroom, unsure of how to proceed. I heard a blaring noise and noticed it was coming from an iPad on the nightstand. That's odd, I don't remember it being there when I woke up. I walked towards the loud noise and read the alarm that was going off on the iPad. It was 9:00 PM exactly, and my options were not “Snooze” and “Stop,” but they were “Revert” and “Stay Here.” I took a deep breath and looked around, recognizing the life I would be soon leaving behind. My children, my big home, but I didn't want to place unhappiness upon myself for the rest of my life. I had to put myself first. I pressed “Revert” and immediately shut my eyes as the bright light took over my body once more.

I woke up feeling the light of the sun beaming onto my face, warming my entire body through my blinds. I groaned as I tossed and turned, before deciding there was no use in trying to get comfortable again. I rose from my bed, looking around and recognizing my own bedroom, not the big master bedroom I just experienced dread within. I smiled as I picked up my phone off the nightstand, checking the date. It was September 18th. I looked at the clock in the corner of my bedroom, 11:47 AM.

Rough Draft #2

By Sarah Belew

It is the madness in which the sun rises to curse the day,
the way in which the winds howl to chase at your feet,
and where the dust never settles, never to satisfy.

In the cesspit of the home you dwell,
you demise yourself to a corner
only to be pulled out by fervor,
of the clock ticking in your marrow.

As you rise from a restless slumber, you think of
the sacrilegion of your existence,
but also the oath you kept to your name
so no one else may take it.

May the evil eye look upon you
this day and the coming dark nights
and help bare your soul to the world,
as you are too horrified to do it.

It would surely help to excommunicate yourself from the world,
but you are doomed to be a pest within it,
no matter how hard you try to cease the blasphemy within your veins.

As you dwell upon this grey surface
be alarmed, be swift, be crude,
all in the name of seizing this accursed day,
because this cursed day was made for you.

(alex bravo)

nurture

I.

It's always been a little frigid,
a little sensitive in my hometown—
short-lived breaths like wisps
buried under all
the inundation,
citrus fruit turned inside out and
pictures of the corners of my house in a stowed away box,
little miseries littered in sundry,
overcast like soft wrinkles, shadows without weight.

I carried my heart
like a pail on a rainy day.

II.

There I knelt, a vassal, in the tall grass
and in its pockets I found
cicadas, sprouts, silence,
time stretching in all directions past the horizon;
you know, a man told me to lay on the ground
and imagine the Earth upside down
to appreciate how alone I felt,
fall into the sky I see now
and find nothing waiting below.

But how can I thank gravity for safety
when it curses me so? —
I, and all the flightless birds,
when I was on the verge of spilling.

III.

We were in the war, between battles,
tall grass, empty parking lots, lone lampposts,
lucidity and cumulus archipelagos,
quiet pressure pressing temples.

In my hands lay a book flat
and I hoped in the ink I could break from time,
quotidian arrested respiration;
stuck in this place of eternal recurrence,
lamentation, forgetting, questions.

But even so, in these minor feelings
is a place where I can learn these lessons, time and time again:

IV.

If you look in your chrysanthemum tea,
you can see convection right before your eyes,
the ways in which the heat shows it's changing
all from the inside,
the same turbulence that makes the clouds
the coming and going of crowds
trace around us like step-printing,
hanging in the air of this
precarious subsisting.

Siege the day!

The eastern forest forms a rampart
To stop the sieging sun
Majestic moon mounts battlements.
Soldier stars man these walls

Shooting bursts of radiance,
Their darkness doomed,
but still flies true
Against the swelling sun

Orion with his bow,
The bear striking with its claws.
Rays of light, begin to smite
These heroes of the dawn.

On wall of shadow
Light seeks
cracks and creases,
Questing for a hold

Lumin ladders scale the wall
Climbing to the west.
Shadows flee, a route indeed
As light lances ram the walls

Cracking night, color bleeding through.
The mountain gates
Now in snowy silence.
Orion fades and bear is slain

Bleeding blue the sky.
Burning light and burning bright
Sun soars up
to claim its crown..

Till once again
deceitful moon
drags it wayward down.

The Moon Shines

She shines for
Star crossed lovers
Shines for evening sky
And sunset pinks

For weary fisherman
And eager eels
The astronaut
And alley dweller

She shines for beauty
For love and longing
Fading and renewal
All things awful

For me
At 3 am
On a mattress
Awake.

Broken blinds
Bind us
Til she dips beneath the hills
And I can fucking sleep.

Dandelion Puffs

Wishes find you in the strangest of places.

One time I was listening,

One Valentine's Eve,

To someone who'd been cheated terribly,

But I digress.

Because listening at 3 am

We saw a dandelion wish,

Blooming in the grass

I told them "Make a wish"

(You need it more than I)

And they did

6 hours later he asked them on a date.

Wishes are funny, fickle things

Occasionally you find one, a stranger

But if you look, they are everywhere

Blown apart.

I think that day it was blown apart

They didn't want his words

They didn't walk the garden

But they did forgive him

And they are all the worse for it.

Wishes are funny, fickle things

So I will leave the wish I found

On empty grass

Alone.

Others may blow apart

I will

Will it to the Wind.

Caroline Ives

A Conversation over Coffee

The day Earth was invaded, almost nobody noticed.

The invaders were a small, but populous and intelligent alien species. They came to Earth in billions of little ships, exactly enough to have one hover over each member of the human race. These ships psychically tethered to their respective targets, in a way in which the ship's alien occupants could, if so desired, charge a metaphysical beam with the push of a button: resulting in instant, clinical death.

The real name of the species was unknown. Instead, they were referred to as a collective by the same name blazoned across their ships: MORI.

At least, that was what they were called by those few who knew of their existence.

The thing about MORI was that they were “practically invisible”, as in they were invisible to practically everyone. But, for some reason, an infinitesimal percentage of the human population was capable of seeing them.

And one of those people was Cassandra Blake. Cassandra, or Cass, lived in a suburban community with her family and attended a standard high school where she enjoyed moderate popularity. She had no idea why she, specifically, had been cursed with the knowledge that the MORI existed, when no one in her town or her extended family were aware.

Oh, a few of them had *heard* of MORI before, especially those who frequented supernatural and cryptid websites in their free time. But none of them could *see*.

Cass hadn't told anyone that she could see the MORI. Not even her twin sister, Helen, who Cass usually told everything. She knew there would be no point. But because the MORI *were* mentioned on the internet, and by that exact name, Cass knew there must be at least one other person who saw the ships. And she was determined to scour every corner of the web to find them.

Usually, all she found was a fat load of bullshit. But one day, while perusing a niche social networking site, she stumbled upon something promising: a post from an individual who said they could see the MORI, and were looking for others who could as well.

There were a lot of people floating around on the internet who liked to pretend they were able to see the MORI, so Cass wouldn't have paid the post much mind if not for the fact that the poster had attached an image of a MORI that appeared to have been drawn on a napkin. There were a lot of supposed "real-life sketches" of the MORI floating around. In her searches, Cass had seen everything, from pint-sized rocket ships to mini Millennium Falcons. In reality, every MORI was in the shape of a silver horn torus (or, if you prefer, a bloated doughnut) and was the relative size of a can of sardines. Their surfaces weren't entirely smooth, either, but rather had intricate patterns of mechanical lining.

The attached napkin drawing was completely accurate, down to the very last bolt.

Cass responded to the poster privately, agreeing to meet up at "Carpe Café", a quiet establishment in the nicest part of town. She told her parents she was meeting classmates for a study date, and told her sister she was meeting up with a boy.

When she got to Carpe Café, Cass peered inside. At a table pressed against the storefront window sat the person she was looking for: an androgynous individual who seemed slightly older than Cass herself. They matched their profile picture exactly, which Cass took as a good sign.

"Cassie123?" the person asked, as Cass approached.

She nodded. "But I prefer Cass."

They smiled. "Parris. How long have you been able to see the MORI?"

Cass frowned and glanced around the café. There were one or two other patrons inside, and three baristas working behind the corner. None of them seemed to be looking. "One month and 22 days," answered Cass. Parris raised a leading eyebrow. "And four hours and twelve minutes," she added.

Parris grinned. "Sorry, just checking. A lot of people get that question wrong."

Cass's eyes widened. "You've talked to people about the MORI before? Have you met anyone else who's able to see it? Also, should we really be talking about this in public?"

"It doesn't matter where we talk about it, no one's going to take us seriously" answered Parris, taking a leisurely sip of their black coffee. "And as for the others: Nah, they were all fakers."

Cass let out a quiet “oh” and slumped in her chair. “So, what now, then? How do we stop them?”

Parris seemed genuinely confused. “Huh?”

“How can we stop them if it’s just the two of us,” Cass pressed. “I’ve tried to catch the ships before, but they just blip out of the way when I get too close. I think what we need to do is convince more people to ”

Parris put their hands up. “Woah, hang on. I didn’t sign up to save the world. That wasn’t what that post was for.”

“What?!” cried Cass. “Then what *was* it for?”

“I wanted a friendly conversation,” they said, and gestured at a visibly fuming Cass.

“So you were going to, what?” she hissed. “Ignore the MORI? Deal with it?!”

“Yes,” said Parris, bluntly. “The MORI kill people very rarely and very sporadically. I’m not sure what it is they’re doing, but I think it’s unlikely they’re trying to wipe us out, otherwise they would have done it by now. Also, it isn’t my problem.”

Cass stared at them. “You’re a monster,” she muttered, and considered leaving right then and there.

But she knew, deep down, that her chances of finding anyone else like her were very, very slim. A long awkward silence passed, broken by a barista coming to take Cass’s order. She got a chai latte.

“Out of curiosity,” Parris cut in, once Cass had her drink. “Why exactly do you want to stop the MORI?” Cass scowled at them. “Honestly. I want to hear you explain it.”

“Because,” Cass said, intensely. “Because I’m worried. I’m worried that one day, I’ll see the lights flicker over the head of someone I love... and I won’t be able to do anything to stop it.” Cass abruptly realized she was becoming emotional and swallowed heavily.

Parris was watching her intently. “So, it’s got nothing to do with fear of your own death?”

“Of course it does. I’m someone I love,” she said bluntly. Parris coughed in surprise. “What? I don’t want to die. I never said I was an altruist.”

“Fair,” Parris noted, smiling. Then they looked down at their coffee, and seemed to hesitate for the first time that day. “...Hey Cass. Have you ever watched a MORI kill someone?”

Cass paled. “Yes,” she admitted, quietly. She’d been walking home from school one day, around a week after the MORI had first invaded, when a Honda Civic had passed by on the open road. From the driver’s side window, Cass could see a flashing red light illuminating the single teenage boy behind the wheel. Not realizing what the light indicated, Cass had stopped to watch. The vehicle traveled a few more feet before a steady honk erupted from the car, as though something had fallen against the horn.

Cass watched as, instead of turning when the street ended, the car crashed directly into a residential wall. She later heard that the authorities proclaimed the boy had died in the accident, after suffering cardiac arrest from behind the wheel. This being despite no medical or family history pointing to heart problems.

When Cass finished her story, all Parris said was: “It sounds like you weren’t able to see the actual death too well.”

Cass shivered. “No. And thank god for that. What about you? Have you seen anyone die?”

“A few times,” said Parris. “I’m from a big city, so it makes sense, statistically. The first one was an older woman who was carrying groceries to her car. She dropped dead in the middle of the parking lot.”

“I’m sorry,” said Cass, and Parris smiled again. “You seem so relaxed. How do you...deal with it? With knowing that you, or anyone else, could die at any moment.”

Parris snorted. “Sounds like the human condition.”

“Don’t be poetic,” said Cass. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” said Parris, leaning forward. “Listen, Cass. From what I have learned about the MORI, they seem unstoppable. There’s no way to disable their ships, and once they flash, there’s no way to save whoever they’ve targeted.” Cass stared down at the table. Parris was confirming what she had already known. “Of course, it’s possible I’m wrong. If you want, you can leave right now. You can try to stop the MORI, and see if there are others willing to help

you. It'll take you a long time, but I'm sure they're out there. Then, once you have enough people, maybe you'll come up with a plan sane enough to try that none of you have thought of yet. Then you can try it, and when it fails, you can try another plan. And maybe, eventually, something will work. You can dedicate your life to trying to save it." Parris leaned back again. "Or, you can stay here, and keep talking to me." Cass, having now finished her drink, was watching Parris intently.

An hour later, the barista came by, and Cass ordered another latte.

A Distant Place

“Just a few more hours, San.”

“Do you really need to go, Dos?”

“Yes. It’s my duty. You’ll have to do it too someday.”

They were sitting on the swings at the nearby park. After all this time, Dos was finally chosen. San didn’t want to believe it, but he knew Dos was right. In time it will be his turn. San grabbed the chains of the swing a bit tighter.

“Do you know what’s gonna happen to you?”

Dos looked over at San with an excited glance. “Yes, they’ve told me already. I’m going to be a human!”

“A human?”

“That’s right! I’ll be able to talk, and dance, and run anywhere I want!” Dos smiled a big smile. However, when he saw the look on San’s face, it warped itself into a slight frown, and he looked down at the ground. “I won’t be able to see you again, San.”

San looked at the ground as well. He didn’t want to believe it. The two had spent their whole time here together for so long, laughing, playing, crying. “Are you really sure?”

Dos swung gently on the swing. “I wish I wasn’t.” He looked over at San. “You remember Ein, don’t you? We haven’t heard from her ever since she was chosen.”

San started to remember Ein. He hadn’t been as close to her as Dos was, he was too young. But when they took her away, San and Dos never heard from her again.

Dos started to speak up. “You’ll come see me off, won’t you? At the Fireplace?”

San looked at Dos, trying not to cry. “Of course I will. Let’s go together.”

The two got up from the swings and joined hands. They walked through the streets, passing all the others who were still awake in their homes, playing. Laughter ringing throughout the evening. Dos and San were quiet the whole walk through. They knew what came next.

The two finally saw the Fireplace, its blue fire illuminating the large hill it sat upon. It was enormous, enormous in comparison to Dos and San. The large chimney reached into the sky, white smoke from the top flowing out into space.

They came upon the path that led up to the Fireplace. Before them stood a large being floating slightly above the ground, white robes draped across its body. Its two white wings stretched across the sides of the path, blocking the way. Its face could not be seen, a bright light sheltering its true visage from view. A golden crown floated atop its head, five spikes protruding from it in uniform fashion. It extended a long arm toward each of the two from under its robes, touching them.

“Dos... there you are... your time... is soon... but San... your time... has not come yet...”

“Can I see my friend leave? Please?” San pleaded.

The being stood there for a moment, scratched its head with one arm, stroked its chin with another, and clutched an elbow with a third. Upon coming to an answer, its arms returned under its robes.

“I... don’t see why not...” It reached two arms towards them, one for Dos, one for San. “Come... follow me... little ones...”

Still holding hands, Dos and San took the being’s free hands with one of their own. They were led up the path to the Fireplace together. They looked around the hill which they were led

up. It overlooked the whole place in which they lived, and they could almost make out the slight curvature of their planet. Multiple beings flew about, attending to the various needs of the place, keeping watch over the little ones.

Finally, they reached the mouth of the Fireplace, and the being let go of their hands. Many other beings were there, identical to the one leading Dos and San. But one was in the middle of them all, towering over the others. Like the others, his face was impossible to make out, but the light that masked it shone brighter than them all, blue as the flames within the Fireplace. In the place of two wings were six, and the crown that floated atop the other's heads was replaced by a golden disc.

"Ah, welcome, the little one they call Dos," the great being's voice thrummed within Dos and San's souls. *"And what a surprise. The little one they call San as well? You haven't been chosen yet."*

"He... wanted to see... his friends off... my liege..."

"Ah, of course. You're welcome to watch, San." San didn't know how, but he knew the great being was smiling. *"You'll be chosen as well eventually."*

"Yes sir," San said. "Will I really never see Dos again?"

The great being extended an arm, placing his hand on San's shoulder. *"It is not up for me to decide, little one. You may see him in your life, and you may never see him in your life. You may love him, despise him, or have no thoughts of him. That is up for fate to decide. Those who are chosen will never recall what happened here, in the age before."*

San and Dos looked at each other, tears welling up in their eyes. They'd never see each other again. They won't even know if they'd see each other again. They embraced each other, sobbing. They held there for a long moment, as if time itself had stood still. Then, words began to escape from San.

"Dos... I... I... don't want to forget you!"

"San... I don't want to either!" Dos wept. "But... it'll be all right, I... I promise."

"Dos... whatever happens to you, don't..." San said, tears rushing down his face. "Don't ever forget me! I won't forget you either! Even if we do forget we'll... we'll... we'll find a way to remember! So we can be together again! So please don't forget! Promise?"

The two stopped embracing for a moment, clasping their hands together. Dos looked at San with a determined look on his face, trembling from his tears. "I promise! I swear I promise! We'll be together again!"

The great being looked from the little ones to the Fireplace for a moment, the blue flames flickering brightly. His gaze returned to the little ones, and he placed a hand upon Dos's shoulder. *"Dos, your time has come. Are you ready to be born?"*

Dos looked at the great being, and then to San. "I'll remember, San. I promise. We'll be together again! Just you wait!" He rubbed the tears away with his arm and turned to the great being with a newfound vigor. "I'm ready."

Dos and San held their hands together for another moment, and then let go. The great being led Dos towards the blue flames of the Fireplace. San couldn't hear what the great being was saying, but soon after, Dos began stepping towards the blue flames. The cerulean fire began to reach towards him, grasping for him. He looked back at San with a smile on his face and waved at him. San fell to the ground weeping. But it was a happier cry now. He knew that this goodbye was only temporary. A goodbye to the Dos as he knew him. He smiled at Dos, with tears in his eyes, and waved back.

Dos looked back into the heart of the Fireplace and began to walk into it. The blue flames held him tightly, bringing him into them, until San couldn't see him anymore. But San saw a brief glimpse of a warm space and a sense of floating, before emerging into a cold, white room, and somehow knew Dos was alright. The blue flames shone brighter than before, and the chimney that reached high into the planet's sky emitted a short burst of blue.