

Convergence of Fates

By Natan Samson

Mentored by Prof. David Puretz

Submitted: 5/31/20

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein  
Honors Program.

Table of Contents

“Convergence of Fate” .....	3
Reflections .....	51

## Convergence of Fates

### Chapter One

“I’m impressed Jaren, you’ve really managed to advance so far since you’ve been here,” Krista said to Jaren as they walked out of the classroom together.

Jaren nodded in response, his sunglasses shielding the smile that was creeping into his eyes. It had been seven months since he’d transferred to Postir University in Br’stillia for the student exchange program, which was the first international program that Br’stillia had agreed to after years of isolation. When other countries had first landed in Br’stillia, they had discovered that the land was rich with valuable minerals and jewels. They had immediately attempted a hostile takeover of the country, promising to better utilize the resources that Br’stillia was wasting. Br’stillia had managed to fend off the colonizers and had subsequently poured its resources into defense, shutting their borders to the rest of the world. Several leadership changes and global apologies later, Br’stillia had softened their policies, leading Postir University, the crown jewel of the capital city of Postir, to propose a student exchange program.

Jaren had been initially lost when he’d first arrived, but he’d quickly managed to rise to the top of his class. While he’d like to think it was thanks to his brains and hard work, he couldn’t deny that Krista, who had made it her personal mission that he would succeed, had helped. Headmaster Liam had assigned her to help Jaren with his transition to a new county and university, and she had fervently embraced that task, pushing Jaren to excel in his academic work. Despite this professional beginning, they’d become close friends in the months since then.

“Do you want to go to the arcade once we’re done with classes?” Jaren asked, quickly changing the topic away from his academic performance. “I still haven’t gotten my revenge after you got lucky and beat me at Air Riders last week.”

Krista snorted. “You say that every time you lose. What was your excuse this time? That the sun got into your eyes again?”

“Well, yeah, as a matter of fact it did.”

He didn’t have to reach far for that excuse, considering that gleaming rays of light reflected off every angle of Postir. It wasn’t just that most of the architecture in Postir favored sheer metal and glass, though that was part of the issue. No, the problem was that nearly every single person here was a Trist, which meant that their bodies were covered in fine crystal from head to toe. This crystal wasn’t merely an aesthetic, as they were able to control it at will for offense and defense, as well as manipulate light energy, both of which were crucial in defending against the invaders seventy years ago. He’d have gone blind by now if they hadn’t made him a specialized pair of sunglasses before he arrived that protected his eyes from any major damage. At least he didn’t have to cover up his skin or wear heavy-duty sunscreen like most other visitors. The rough and cracked surface of his skin was naturally resistant to burning, no matter how long he spent outside or exposed to the various beams of sunlight reflected from every corner, just like everyone else in Stronak. While this natural resistance may have made Stronak the most dangerous enemy to Br’sillia, they had no intention of waging a war of any kind. Instead, they had been the first country to agree to the student exchange program with Br’sillia.

“As much as I’d like to beat you again,” said Krista, “you know we don’t have time for that. Finals start in two weeks, and we have to make sure you’re prepared.”

“That’s what you said yesterday. And the day before, as well as the day before.”

“And you got two questions wrong yesterday, so you clearly haven’t understood all the material yet. Remember, Jonathan Samen and his friends destroyed the Demogorgon in the year 2024 and established the GPO in 2026. I can destroy you in Air Riders once you’re getting every answer correct.”

Jaren hated history, but these were still basic facts that he should have known. The demon Demogorgon had rose from the underworld in the early 1900s, eliminating most world governments and conquering the earth. Most people hadn’t taken Demogorgon seriously when he arose; he looked completely human, with only the flames in the center of his eyes indicating his demonic nature. That was until he summoned the powers of the underworld to the earth. The initial effects were devastating; hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes shook the globe, reshaping most landmasses. Only a few large countries, such as the United States, Mexico and Russia survived mostly intact. The rest were fractured, the land warping and shifting to form new continents and countries. The rise of Demogorgon hadn’t just affected the land; the power was absorbed into the crops and water around the world, irreversibly changing the genetics of the people who consumed it. It would take years of Demogorgon’s harsh rule to discover that these biological changes had allowed humans to manipulate and control the energy of the underworld. Jonathan Samen, using this newfound power, gathered a group of warriors and fought against Demogorgon in a long bloody war. He managed to defeat the demon, but the consequences of the merging of earth and the underworld still persisted to this day; some countries decided to return to their previous borders and names, while other, mostly those whose biology was changed by Demogorgon, decided to stay as they were.

Jaren and Krista walked down the hallway together, the squeaks of sneakers on glass filling the air as throngs of students headed toward their next class. Krista and Jaren had just finished their physics class and were on their way to English. The curriculum wasn't that different from what Jaren had experienced at home, but the way that it was taught certainly was. Stronakian education favored a looser teaching method, where students were encouraged to explore the topics on their own and come to their own conclusions. Their country had been at peace for years, one of the reasons Br'stillia agreed to this exchange program, and a large artistic culture had flourished during those times. The landscape of Stronak had also helped, with its expansive mountain ranges and plentiful plant life. Most of the country was preserved as natural parks and reserves, with only a small portion containing the cities and towns where the population lived. Their ability to control the dirt and stone around them had enabled Stronak to field a small but highly effective military force, letting everyone else pursue their passions.

Br'stillia, on the other hand, had a regimented education plan; students were drilled on each subject until they understood it perfectly. It had been a nasty shock for Jaren when he had suggested an interpretation of *Orchards for Arellia*, a popular novel about mental health from the late eighteenth century, only to be told outright by the teacher that he was wrong. Every citizen of Br'stillia had to enlist in the army for at least two years, and lessons were designed to get the young educated as soon as possible. Thankfully, Krista had helped him adjust, drilling him almost nightly on the material that they had learnt that day, but those first few weeks in Postir had been tough.

They reached their classroom as Krista pulled open the crystal door, giving Jaren a curtsy as she held it open for him.

Grinning, Jaren strode into the classroom, where most of the students had already arrived and were chatting with each other. However, as Krista entered the room, the door closing behind her with a loud thud, the chatter subsided as the students realized that Jaren had entered.

“Hey what’s this about?” Jaren said with a grin, swallowing down a slight lump that was rising in his throat. “I swear, whatever happened, it wasn’t me this time. Sure, the lava pools in the park were me, but that was weeks ago at this point...” He slowed to a stop when he realized no one else was talking, the sound of silence filling the room as he stood by the doorway. He swallowed again, that lump refusing to go back down.

One of the professors jogged toward the classroom, slightly out of breath. When he noticed Jaren standing by the doorway, he walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Jaren, you need to come with me. Headmaster Liam has something important he needs to tell you.”

Jaren nodded, following the professor down the hallway while the class resumed whispering as soon as he left the room. He had no idea what was so important that the headmaster had personally called him to his office; the only guess he had was that he had been expelled, but he had done nothing that would deserve that. Except for the lava pools, but he had assumed that issue had already been resolved. It wasn’t his fault that the professor had asked him to demonstrate his powers in front of the class while standing above an underground deposit of lava.

The professor guided Jaren to Headmaster Liam’s office, a small nook near the entrance of the school. He stopped in front of the door, a metal sheet with a handle that was one of the few

surfaces in the entire building that wasn't reflective. "This is a private matter; Headmaster Liam wishes to speak with you alone."

Jaren looked at the imposing door, grabbing the handle and yanking to try to get the heavy-looking slab to open. It slid open much easier than he had assumed, causing him to stumble backwards a few steps before steadying himself and stepping into the office.

Headmaster Liam was waiting for him, his mouth pulled in a tight line as he waited for Jaren to take a seat. "Jaren, I'm going to treat you like an adult here and tell it to you straight: Stronak has been attacked and defeated. We've received confirmed reports that most of the nation was wiped out, with only a few survivors making it out before the entire country was destroyed."

"H-H-How?" stammered Jaren, trying to piece back together the jigsaw puzzle that his mind and emotions had just shattered into.

"I can't say for certain at this moment. It's only been thirty minutes since I got this information and you deserved to know as soon as possible

Jaren sat in his seat, unmoving, as his brain processed what he had been told. This was impossible, right?

"I'm afraid all I was told by the GPO was that the country suddenly became noticeably dimmer. It was then attacked by some kind of shadow monsters, as described by the few people who managed to flee in time."

It made sense that Br'stillia had been the first nation to be contacted by the GPO, the Global Protection Organization. Shadow monsters, and the general dimming of light, would

imply that whatever attacked Stronak had manipulated light energy to do so, and light energy was the expertise of Br'stillia. However, the only time Br'stillia had produced creatures even similar to this description was during their war against the invading nations seventy years ago. Even then, it had taken five people at once just to produce one monster, and they had been exhausted for several days after. The scale of attack that the GPO had reported would require more energy than ten Br'stillias.

The headmaster paused for a second, checking a message on his computer before returning his gaze to Jaren. "I'm only telling you this Jaren because I know what you're going to try to do in this situation. I remember speaking to your teachers before you arrived in this school and each one said the same thing. "Excellent student: bright, friendly and extremely eager to learn. Always sticks by his friends, even to a fault. Headstrong and confident, no matter what the result may be." I've been watching you the entire time you've been in this school, and I confirm all those reports. You've managed to excel in every one of your classes, and also end up in the infirmary three separate times while defending other kids. I know for a fact that, once the shock wears off, which it will you're not going to sit here and not get involved in the GPO investigation. I'm not going to stop you, and I imagine Krista will try to help you in some way. The only thing I will do is wish you luck with whatever you attempt and ask you to be careful. Don't throw away the rest of your life trying to find the answers, but I encourage you to at least try. You won't be happy unless you do at least that."

Jaren stood up from his seat, the ground slightly rumbling when he stood up. "Thank you for everything you've done for me," said Jaren. Cracks formed in the ground beneath his feet as he walked toward the door. "After I'm done taking care of this, I hope I can come back and finish my education here." He opened the door with an even louder thud than he had on the way

in, the wall behind it splintering on impact. As the door swung closed, the headmaster stared at it for a second before he was interrupted by another “Ding!” from his computer. He looked back toward the computer, responding to yet another message he had just received.

## Chapter Two

Dorian traced the letter F in mid-air with his wand, leaving behind a faint shimmering line where he had gestured. He completed the letter, striking it through the middle with a broad stroke, causing it to glow with blue energy before it slowly descended into the ground in front of him. The patch of ground began to liquify, turning into a dirty brown liquid that resembled mud, but was too thin to be naturally occurring. The liquid began to take shape, forming a single webbed foot in the dirt. The liquid continued to churn into three more webbed feet, followed by a body and head, as it solidified into a fully formed frog. The frog looked around the room, croaking softly as it shook some soil off its body.

Professor Madriach passed by, picking up Dorian's frog and examining it. She gently tugged at all four of its limbs and listened to its heartbeat for a few seconds. "Wonderful form Dorian, frog is in perfect working condition. Great job." She made a quick mark in her notebook before continuing to the next student. She knew that she didn't really need to check Dorian's work, but it gave a glimmer of hope to the rest of the class if she made it seem possible that he'd messed it up.

It would seem strange to a passerby that Dorian would be the center of attention in this classroom. With his standard Fallorian College uniform (created by the finest fashion designer in New York City) including his dark robe and three-button polo, as well as his short black hair, brown eyes and glasses, Dorian didn't stand out for his looks. However, he had gained a reputation as one of the brightest students that Fallorian College had ever seen, and he knew it. His classmates would beg for the day that Dorian would eventually fail, finally proving that he wasn't invulnerable.

That day would probably never come, as there wasn't much hope in the first place that Dorian would ever fail. The energy manipulation that Fallorian College practiced extended to two main areas, and Dorian excelled in both. The first form of energy usage was the storing and usage of raw power, allowing them to fuel raw machinery and other electronics without any need for a power source. This had effectively ended most of the risks of global warming, and Fallorian College had made a lucrative business of loaning out members of the college to power entire factories. The second form involved using energy to create organic beings and other forms of matter. Using this technique, the college was able to shape the earth into differing forms, ranging from basic tools to live animals like the frog Dorian had just produced.

Most of Dorian's classmates had not done nearly as well as him. Several of them just looked sadly at the ground in front of them, hoping to see anything appear from the muck they had created. A few more held up assorted frog parts, including a heart and two stomachs, hoping that they could at least get partial credit. Some had managed to summon live creatures, but the animals were either missing limbs, the wrong color, or in the case of Edward, somehow a miniature sheep. The shrill bleating drew the attention of Professor Madriach, who marched over to a sheepish looking Edward.

"How in the world did you manage to mangle the casting that badly! This is one of the simplest patterns to trace, and you still screwed it up! If you can't keep your hand straight while attempting to manipulate energy, you don't deserve to use that wand!" Professor Madriach launched into a tirade, not giving Edward a chance to get a word in as a tidal wave of exclamations and chastisement slammed into him. Dorian rolled his eyes and went back to his laptop, making sure that he had perfectly copied the form in the instructional video. He repeated

the F several times with his wand before the flood of words from the professor's mouth slowed to a trickle.

“And this reckless use of energy is why we have strict rules!” she snapped, before turning around and confronting a group of students who had been snickering softly the entire time. “Since you seem to find this very funny, you should be fine practicing this overnight. Anyone who failed to create a green frog with all its limbs intact will have to demonstrate the technique at the beginning of class tomorrow. Remember, the hand motion is only one small part of the casting process. Correctly using conjuration energy requires a constant connection to the ground, as well as concentrating on the latent energy you can pull from the earth below you. None of the energy comes from the wand itself it merely acts as a channeling tool for the underground energies. Keep that in mind instead of trying to shove the energy out of the tip of your wand.”

As the bell rang to signal the end of class the students filed out the door, chattering with each other about their plans for the rest of the day. Dorian closed his laptop and slid it into his bag while Edward sprinted across the room in his direction, knocking several textbooks to the floor and drawing a glare from more than one of his classmates. Dorian headed toward the door, only to be blocked by Edward looking at him like an excited puppy.

“Wow Dorian, you did such a good job with your casting! It looked so much like a frog, and nothing at all like a sheep.”

Edward was taller than Dorian by at least half a foot, making it easy for him to block the doorway. It wasn't that Edward was tall for his age; rather, Dorian was just extremely short, even considering the fact that he was two years younger than the rest of his class, who were all at least seventeen. Edward was dressed in a pair of slacks and a polo shirt, neither of which was in the

school dress code. Of course, almost no one besides Dorian actually followed the dress code; it was more of a suggestion than a rule.

“Yes Edward, that’s what happens when you actually use proper technique. Not that incompetent mess that you managed to perform.”

“But Dorian, I did it the same way you did. Watch!”

Edward grabbed his wand from his side holster, waving the slightly chipped and fading marbled stick in midair. He traced out a pattern in a wild flailing motion that resembled someone having a stroke more than it did a careful casting of a powerful force. The energy oozed into the ground beneath Edward, the dirt writhing as if in pain as it shifted and morphed into a horrifying monstrosity. It had the back half of a rat, the front of a gerbil, and a pained expression of being in agonizing torment. It let out an ear-rending shriek of agony before limping off to a dark corner of the room.

Edward put his wand back into the holster, shrugging his shoulders. “Okay, maybe not the same way, but I wasn’t that far off.” Edward got no response as he turned back toward where Dorian had been standing, finally noticing that Dorian had already left the room a minute ago. “Damn it, not again,” he muttered as he stormed out the door.

Dorian, meanwhile, was booking his way down the hallway as fast as he could. He had a separate research project on how to improve the efficiency of storing energy that he was working on, and Edward had already taken up way too much of his time. A curt word was usually enough to dissuade anyone from trying to mooch off him, but Edward had been markedly persistent. Still, a few more displays like that and he would probably give up too.

As he sprinted down the hallway, he couldn't help but admire the construction of the building. This building had used to be one of the various public schools found around the city, with fading gray walls, nearly broken wooden doors and a maintenance budget that wouldn't even cover a cracked window. However, the building had been quickly renovated when the college moved in through a mixture of muscle and generous donations from the headmaster. Gone were the worn walls and tattered posters, replaced with walls of polished marble and various paintings, ranging from cubic masterpieces created in Mexico to post-impressionist pieces produced in Stronak. The entire building had been expanded, with two extra floors added on to the existing four, and a training yard for practicing energy manipulation had been created directly behind the college. The classrooms had all been outfitted with smart boards and projector screens, with each student being provided their own laptop for college work. While all that could be found in a typical college, albeit one with extremely deep pockets, the building had also been upgraded with the energy manipulation that the college was known for. All the electricity was run off a chunk of uraninite in the cellar, the metal that was most well suited for long-term storage of energy. Fallorian's headmaster himself spent ten minutes a week transferring energy from deposits beneath the college into the uranite, which gave it just enough power to last until the next week.

He had just reached the entrance of the building when he felt someone grab his shoulder. He spun around, yelling before he even finished the motion "Edward, I'm not helping you with your-" He cut his tirade short as a broad muscled chest entered his vision, about two feet taller than where Edwards's would have been.

"Headmaster Samen wishes to speak with you," said Professor M'zbach, ignoring what Dorian had just blurted out.

“But my projects! Surely Headmaster understands how important- “

“Headmaster Samen has already said that he needs you urgently, no matter what you claim to be working on. He said that this would be your chance to finally put your studies into practice. Now, follow me.”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, three weeks after he had arrived in New York City, Jaren failed to enjoy the tour he was being given as the world inched closer to destruction. He lagged behind Krista and Mayama, trying to ignore the bespectacled Professor Gerden as he showed them around the city as part of Fallorian College’s “cultural outreach program.” No one really paid attention to Jaren as he walked slowly behind the group, which suited him just fine. At a cursory glance he looked like any other person in New York City, albeit one who could be playing professional sports, standing a bit over six and a half feet tall with dirty brown hair, grey eyes and noticeable muscles under his shirt. His shirt was torn and caked with dirt in several places, revealing the rough and cracked bronzed skin underneath. The dirt and tears were a result of his frequent trips through the ground, as he was able to glide through it like it was water. While every person in Stronak had the ability to use this power, only those who put a ton of practice and work into it were able to use it effectively. It was similar to how every person in America could manipulate energy like the students of Fallorian College, but few had the knowledge and the practice to do it properly.

The college itself had been founded one hundred and fifteen years ago in New York City. It had been hard work convincing the governor of New York to let a college of energy manipulation trainees into New York City, with many arguing that that much uncontrolled energy could lead to disaster, such as what had occurred in New Orleans. However, after

Headmaster Trean, the first headmaster of Fallorian college, proved how useful the college could be for the city by powering the entire subway system off a large chunk of uranite, the governor agreed to allow the construction, with the implicit condition that the college would continue to use their power to make improvements to the city.

Jaren continued to slowly saunter along as Professor Gerden stopped for the twenty-eighth time this trip to point out another landmark. Did anyone really care about how tall the Empire State Building was when there was a danger that could destroy it in an instant. GPO scouts had confirmed that none of the shadow creatures were attempting to advance further than Stronak and the surrounding area, leading the GPO to classify the situation as ‘contained’ and not a risk to advance further. Still, he was certain that whoever caused the disaster in Stronak was just waiting, and they would advance as soon as the GPO let its guard down. He had tried voicing his complaints to Krista, but she had insisted that they be respectful to their hosts. Fallorian College was the most powerful member of the Global Protection Organization, and they were the ones who had convinced the GPO to send them on their mission. Sure, he was thankful to them for that, but that didn’t mean that he appreciated being forced to wait for weeks while they made sure that every single procedure was properly followed to authorize their mission to travel into Stronak. When he mentioned that to Krista, she had just snorted in return.

“Jaren, the entire city could be sinking into the ground, demons descending upon it and rending the citizens limb from limb, and Fallorian College would still be arguing whether the paperwork was in place for them to fight back. We’re going to have to wait for them. If you annoy them too much, we’re not going to have a single person backing us anymore.”

Of course, she was right, which made the wait so much more infuriating. Without her, he’d probably have run straight ahead without even considering getting backing from the GPO. It

was a good thing that they had; the GPO was insistent that almost no one know what had happened in Stronak. If Jaren had run around telling people about what had really happened, he probably would have found himself in a cell sooner rather than later. The GPO had invented a cover story of a huge earthquake devastating the country and forced the global press to run with it. Almost everyone had believed it immediately; due to the makeup of the GPO, no one believed it could provide a unified lie. Every single nation that was willing had a seat at the GPO, including countries that hated each other, and they were known to almost never take action due to the number of members. However, they had somehow managed to agree to lie about what had occurred in Stronak, with no members holding out.

Krista had managed to convince the GPO to let them go on a scouting mission, as long as they didn't tell a soul about what had happened in Stronak. Of course, as with every bureaucratic agreement, it came with some conditions. Firstly, they had to take Mayama with them on their mission, as the GPO wanted an official GPO operative to come with them. While Mayama wasn't technically an operative of the GPO, Misterdam had agreed to let the GPO assign their operatives when necessary. This condition he didn't have a problem with, as Mayama seemed like a pleasant person who could help them out. Secondly, they had to stay at Fallorian College, as it was only an hour away from the GPO headquarters in New York City.

He would have been fine with this last condition if Fallorian College administration didn't insist they go on a sightseeing tour during their wait. They claimed it was part of their "cultural outreach program," but he was sure it was just an excuse for them to show off the improvements their usage of energy had made to New York City. He groaned in frustration as Professor Gerden prattled on, kicking a nearby bench, which uprooted itself from the ground and slid back a foot. Gerden paused a minute to frown at him before continuing on with his tour.

Professor Gerden guided them up another street, showing off the Billy Johnson Playground and pointing out where a small anti-gravity zone had been constructed to reduce injuries from falling. It was powered, he explained, by a small deposit of uraninite which was refilled weekly with a casting by a member of the college. While many metals and minerals found in the soil were sources of energy that could be drawn from, uraninite had the greatest capacity for storing energy long term with little depreciation. This was one of the many gifts that Fallorian College had granted to the city since their founding.

Jaren, bored out of his mind from listening to Professor Gerden spew his history lesson, watched a small child climb up one of the slides on the playground. Right before he reached the top, the boy's hand slipped from the ladder. He tottered on the edge of the step for a second before plummeting backward. The child fell for around 3 feet before his descent began to slow, like he had hit a patch of air that was extra thick. Before the child hit the ground, a rope of water streamed out of the mouth of a fountain nearby, catching the boy while also soaking him to the bone. Jaren and Krista both turned and stared at Mayama, who was concentrating on the fountain, her arms twisting as she carefully manipulated the shape of the water. She blushed at the attention and dropped her arms to her sides, causing the water to lose its shape and fall toward the floor along with the child.

“I wasn't really paying attention to the whole talk about the anti-gravity thing. I just panicked when I saw the child falling. I'm really sorry about that.”

The professor winced as the child started crying, splashing around in the newly formed puddle. He slipped his wand from his holster, and with a quick flick of his wrist, transferred some of the energy into heat to dry the child's clothes. This, however, did extraordinarily little to

pacify the child, who began to cry louder, or his mother, who began stomping toward the professor with murder in her eyes.

“Ahem” he coughed. “I do believe that’s the end of our tour for now. I might have a... situation to deal with at the moment. You should head back to the college without me and meet Headmaster Samen. He said that he should have some good news for you concerning the paperwork, specifically Articles 13B and X12.”

“You guys walk there by yourselves,” Jaren said to Krista and Mayama. “I can get back faster on my own.” He stomped hard on the ground, his legs sliding straight through the surface like it was made of liquid. The rest of his body quickly followed as he sunk straight into the dirt, leaving no trace that he had been standing there besides a small pile of rubble. The only indication that Jaren had even been there was the fading sound of rumbling moving back toward the college.

\*\*\*

Sometimes, Krista thought while she and Mayama were walking toward Headmaster Samen’s office, Jaren needed to keep himself under control. He was constantly ignoring people, standing alone, and generally being a moody mess. She understood that losing his home and assumingly his entire family had been really hard on him, but the support that they could gain at the college was crucial to their success. He, more than anyone, knew how important their mission was, and that he shouldn’t mess them up preemptively by ruining their support. Did she wish that Jaren could be by himself and able to take the time that he desperately needed to deal with his emotions? Sure, but that wasn’t the reality of the situation, and Jaren was only hurting their cause at this point. She had discussed the issue with Headmaster Liam, and he had agreed

that whatever destroyed Stronak was far more powerful than anything in history since Demogorgon had been defeated. Figuring out exactly who controlled that power would be the first step toward stopping it. Jaren needed to be able to put aside his emotions for a while to make sure that they could succeed.

Krista strode down the hallway, Mayama desperately trying to keep up, and noticed more than a few of the students staring at her while she went past. She was used to it at this point; Br'stillia had been, and still was in most ways, a very closed off nation. They had only recently opened commercial travel in the last hundred years, and the exchange student program with Stronak that Jaren had participated in was one of their first outreach attempts. Of course, after the disaster that turned out to be, considering the nation they were conducting outreach with didn't exist anymore, it would probably be years before Br'stillia attempted any more outreach. Her appearance at the college would therefore be one of the few times anyone in the United States would see someone from Br'stillia. While she hadn't been appointed an ambassador in any official capacity, she knew that she would be viewed as one by the Br'stillian government who had authorized her to go on this mission. It was crucial for her to endure these stares and set a good reputation for Br'stillia when they eventually were willing to become more open with the rest of the global population.

It made sense that they were staring; after all, who wouldn't stare at someone whose entire body, from the top of their head all the way down to their ankles, was covered in a thin layer of crystal. Of course, they couldn't see much of it since she wore clothing that covered almost every inch of her body so she wouldn't accidentally be blinding someone every time she walked past. This had never been an issue back home in Br'stillia, but she did it as a courtesy to the humans whose eyes wouldn't react well to concentrated rays of sunlight. She left her arms

bare, however, making sure to keep them constantly angled away from anyone's face, for the off chance that she needed to defend herself if they were attacked. Fallorian College had strong defenses, but there was no point in risking being unprepared. After the chaos that had befallen Stronak, which had one of the strongest militaries in the world, she wasn't sure if anywhere could be considered truly safe.

Jaren was waiting for them in front of the headmaster's office, acting like he hadn't just ditched them in middle of the city with a screaming child and a furious parent. Professor Gerden had spent several minutes profusely apologizing to the furious mother of the boy Mayama had soaked, and she wasn't completely sure that he had prevented the mother from filing the lawsuit that she had threatened multiple times. Jaren nodded to Krista, pushed the door open and walked straight into the office. Krista groaned in frustration as she followed in after him, forcing Mayama to scramble to get in before the door closed in her face.

They had met the headmaster a few times since they had reached the university, but she was always impressed when she walked into his office. The floor was covered with a plush velvet carpet, spotless despite the many students who came in daily. The walls were made from shining oak wood and covered with an excessive number of trophies taken from battles over the last one hundred and twenty years. Directly opposite the door, behind the headmaster's large oaken chair, was a pristine white skull of some monstrous creature. Some claimed that it was a dragon that the headmaster had slain when it attacked Miami, while others thought it was a foul demon that had tried to blend in among the people of Philadelphia. Either way, it leered down at the students who stood before the headmaster's desk, undoubtedly increasing their anxiety. It didn't help that the desk was as impressive as the walls, formed out of a dark crystal of anomalous energy absorbing properties and covered with papers that constantly were being filled

out by an automated pen. A small globe sat on the corner of the desk, occasionally coming alive and spinning in place when a spot on it lit up with activity.

The headmaster had already been talking with a student before they had come in, looking up from his conversation when Jaren threw open the door. Of course, Jaren hadn't bothered to knock before slamming the door to the side and letting them in; the simple courtesy of announcing their presence seemed beyond him in his current state. Krista opened her mouth to apologize, but the headmaster cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"It's fine, it's fine. I was just finishing up my conversation with Dorian anyways. Take a seat, I have a few things that I need to tell all of you."

For a man with such an impressive room and an even more impressive reputation, Headmaster Jonathan Samen didn't cut a very impressive figure. He looked to be in his mid-eighties, with a long grey beard which was beaded several times at the tip. He wore a grey suit which was crisply pressed, with a light blue shirt to go along with it. He wouldn't look out of place at the board meeting of a Fortune 500 company, deciding the fate of hundreds despite being well out of his prime. Krista knew, however, that Headmaster Samen was one of the most powerful beings in the world. He was over 250 years old and had been a major part of ending three separate wars that threatened the fragile peace he, and the members of the army he raised, had created after they overthrew the demon Demogorgon. He had grown tired of the adventuring life, however, and he had retired to run the college for the last thirty years. He claimed constantly that he was doing better work shaping the next generation than he had done in all his years of adventuring, but no one believed him. He had gone on several long rants to professors and students about the inefficiency and uselessness of the GPO, and everyone knew that he regretted helping found it.

Krista had been lucky to get the headmaster's support for their mission, but she hadn't just randomly picked one of the GPO leaders and hoped they would be receptive to her pleas. She had done her research, and Samen was rumored to have been outraged when he heard what happened to Stronak without the appointed GPO peace force lifting a finger to help, and had called for a large force to be mobilized to destroy whatever had attacked Stronak with the energy burst. When his request was denied, Headmaster Samen had stormed out of the meeting, decrying the passiveness and cowardice of the GPO. He had been thrilled with her idea of sending out a scouting force to convince the GPO of the danger that they faced and had agreed to propose Jaren and her as suitable candidates for the job. After some negotiating, including agreeing to include Mayama on the mission, the GPO had voted to authorize their excursion. She knew that Jaren would be unhappy that they were only being sent out on reconnaissance, but it was the most she could do right now. Maybe once they finished their mission the GPO would allow Jaren to be included in the force that would send to defeat whatever Mayama, Jaren and she would find.

\*\*\*

Mayama stood by the door of the office, trying to pretend like she knew what she was doing here. Krista and Jaren had already settled into two leather seats that flew over to where they were standing, leaving her alone by the threshold of the room. This always seemed to happen whenever the three of them traveled anywhere; they would get the appreciative looks, Krista for her amazing personality and awesome abilities, and Jaren for being absolutely ripped. Meanwhile, no one paid much attention to the other girl who was long, lanky, had dirty blond hair, lacked any coordination, panicked when she had to answer a single question and whose only unique feature was skin that was tinged slightly blue. She preferred that no one paid

attention to her though; it was much easier than the alternative that had been her life until now. After all, she had been chosen at a young age to become a specialized operative in the Misterdam army, able to lead and complete missions in any country in the world.

As soon as the rumor had started floating through the barracks that Headmaster Samen had requested a reconnaissance mission to Stronak, she had known that she would be included. Misterdam, her home country, never missed a chance to showcase their skill on the world stage, and she had been the elite trainee next in line to be sent on a mission. The last trainee had accompanied a force of soldiers to put down a domestic rebellion in Egypt, which had grown tired of its government agreeing to pay large tariffs to Belliar for electronics, and had yet to return. This was the role she had trained for from birth after all: to showcase the talents the people of Misterdam possessed. She knew that she was ready for this mission, but that still didn't help calm her nerves about it. Besides, nowhere in her training was it ever mentioned how to carry a conversation, or what to do when you're the only one left standing in a room. Diplomacy had never been on the priority list for Misterdam after all. Her training had mostly consisted of lessons on how to disable enemies in a short amount of time, make tactical plans, and utilize her powers of control over water to their greatest extent. Despite being trained to conduct missions in foreign countries, she had never been trained to actually interact properly with those foreigners. Misterdam only sent their operatives to help to establish their reputation on the global stage; little attention was paid to how the native population would react.

She held the door open for the student who'd been meeting with the headmaster, figuring that he'd want to leave the room as soon as possible to not interrupt their meeting. She stood there for a few seconds as everyone was silent, Mayama fidgeting as Dorian made no move to

head toward the door, and Krista and Jaren sat awkwardly in their seats. After a couple more torturous seconds, Headmaster Samen spoke up.

“That won’t be necessary Mayama. Dorian will be joining you three on your mission, so he’ll need to be here for this conversation.”

Mayama nodded, aware of the fact that her face had turned bright red. Despite herself, she couldn’t hold back from asking a question.

“Why is he joining us headmaster? We’ve only discussed this with the heads of the GPO, who made sure that we wouldn’t tell anyone else about it. Even you said that we should ‘Never tell a soul unless you want to lose all the support for your mission,’ which was really ominous and threatening. Of course, I didn’t tell anybody after that, but now you want to tell a random student? No offense, I’m sure he’s very skilled at the wavy wandy thing that you all do, but he’s still in college. Isn’t he still training to becoming a full fighter? I’m certain he’s very good at his studies, but I doubt he’ll perform nearly as well once he has to actually fight on a battlefield and I’m going to stop talking now.”

Krista had buried her face in her hands at this point, while Dorian looked utterly shocked and confused. Even Jaren looked slightly nonplused by Mayama’s outburst, and the headmaster was fighting unsuccessfully to keep a smile from appearing on his face. Mayama wanted to die, right here on the spot, just a simple heart attack which would take her out of her misery. She would have loved to be Jaren right now and sink into the ground, only she would probably never return and just stay down there forever. This had been a problem for her ever since she left Misterdam; every time she opened her mouth, she couldn’t stem the flow of words. She prattled on for minutes at a time until she finally realized how long she had been talking.

Headmaster Samen cleared his throat. “Ah yes. Mmhhmm. Excellent question Mayama. That was the first detail I wanted to inform you about today. While you have my unconditional support, several members of the college were not as enthusiastic as I was. They have therefore requested that I send one representative from the college to assist your group. Dorian here is our most talented student and is years ahead of his class at the “wavy wandy” thing as you so eloquently put it. Even without the rest of the administration insisting on it, I would have chosen him to assist you three on your mission.”

Mayama still had doubts about the kid, considering that he looked to be significantly younger than any of them, but there was no way she was going to bring them up. Not after that disaster of a question that she asked the headmaster. She hoped that Krista would ask a follow up question, but she was content to sit there and let the headmaster explain himself. The kid, Dorian, looked awfully self-assured considering that he’d only been included as a condition of support. She, on the other hand, had reluctantly resigned herself to her fate when her superiors had informed her that they had negotiated to send her as a representative to send with Jaren and Krista before they would agree to the mission.

The headmaster continued, “Now, the second thing I wanted to discuss with you. Once I agreed to let Dorian join your group on your mission, the rest of the administrative process went surprisingly smoothly. It only took three more days of negotiations after that point to hammer out all the details. The college has prepared all the supplies that will be necessary for your journey, and you’ll be able to depart tomorrow.”

Jaren and Krista nodded appreciatively, seemingly happy to finally set out on their mission. Mayama, on the other hand, was currently having a quiet nervous breakdown. She knew that they’d eventually have to leave on their mission, but she’d hoped that would be weeks away,

possibly even months. Training to go out into the field was one thing; actually going on a mission against a force that had destroyed the strongest military in the world? Not as easy. Fallorian College administration was notorious for its inefficiency, and she had never been more thankful for that. However, the headmaster had apparently pulled a few strings to get their request through as fast as possible. Once the request reached the GPO, it had only been a matter of formality before it was approved. While Headmaster Samen didn't have the same pull that he once had, he still commanded enough respect to get approval for a mission with such a small expenditure. After all, he had formed the GPO himself, and everyone knew that if he wanted to, he could have just set himself up as ruler over the world instead. Nevertheless, getting a request through the college administration this fast was a feat in its own right. Headmaster Samen must have felt that their mission was important enough to skip a few steps, and that terrified Mayama. Fallorian College *never* skipped any steps.

“Before you head out, I want to make sure you're on all the on same page for what exactly your mission will be. A being of unknown origin channeled a huge amount of light-based energy, creating creatures made of pure shadow in the process, and proceeded to wipe out Stronak. The unstable situation has prevented us from gathering any further information, and that's the role the four of you will be filling. You will infiltrate Stronak, hopefully undetected, and locate the source of the energy. You will also report on any significant information you find along the way, but your main priority will be to find whatever caused this mess. Once you locate it, you will travel back and debrief for the GPO. You will not, and I repeat, will not confront the being that caused this disaster.”

The headmaster paused for a second, locking eyes with Jaren. “Jaren, you've been allowed to accompany this mission due to your familiarity with the location and the lack of any

other available guides. Just follow orders, and a force will be dispatched to deal with the issue once you identify it.”

“Once you have gathered this information, you will retreat from Stronak and contact the GPO when you reach Belliar, which is the closest populated city. As far as we’re aware, the sheer amount of energy in the air will prevent you from contacting us once you’re in Stronak, so you will be forced to leave before reporting. This is a recon mission only, so combat should be the last resort. That’s why I’m sending in you four instead of a large squad of soldiers. If I still had the power I once had at the GPO, you would be supplied with plentiful resources for this trip, but those days are long past and there’s nothing I can do to change that. Instead, you will be traveling light; only take as much as you think you can carry. The results of your mission will be crucial to any future actions we take to combat this threat. I personally know how effective a small team can be and I encourage you to bond over the trip so you can better synergize with each other. There will be a boat ready for you at dawn; I suggest you spend the rest of the day preparing for your journey.

The headmaster finished his speech and waved his hand toward the door, causing it to swing open. Mayama, Jaren, Krista and Dorian all filed out of the room, standing up just a bit straighter than they had walking in.

### Chapter Three

“Can we rest for the day? I’m not sure how much longer I can keep walking.” Dorian slumped to the ground, his bag falling beside him. Mayama and Jaren both looked at Krista, who shrugged her shoulders and placed her bag down near Dorian, before starting to set up camp.

It had been three weeks since the group had left the United States, and it had been long enough for everyone to get sick of Dorian and his behavior. The trip had started off well enough, with a boat waiting for them near the tip of Long Island, one of the few resources that the GPO had supplied them. Mayama had been thrilled to start their journey on water and had spent the trip manipulating the water around the boat to speed them up and perform most of the general ship maintenance. This had made it easier to ignore the fact that Dorian had spent the entire trip complaining about being seasick and refusing to help.

They landed at Belliar after one week at sea, immediately stocking up on supplies before heading out on foot. They were unable to take any vehicles into Stronak; either they were too loud for their stealth mission or ran off a fuel source that they wouldn’t be able to refill while in the burnt-out husk of the once proud country. While walking extended their journey by a week, it wasn’t the main cause of their delay. That would be Dorian, who seemed to run out of energy around three hours before anyone in the group had grown tired. That had at least doubled the amount of time they would have spent walking, and they had just barely reached the border of Stronak when Dorian had decided that their journey for the day was over.

As Krista gathered some kindling for a fire, Jaren threw a bundle of cloth and poles directly at Dorian, nailing him in the face.

“Set up the tents then, it’s the least you can do.”

Dorian just groaned in protest, shoving the materials aside and turning over. A blood vein slowly started pulsing in Jaren's forehead as he slammed a hand into the ground, sending a line of erupting dirt in Dorian's direction. Dorian yelped as the shifting mounds hurled him directly into the sky, sending him at least thirty feet into the air before plummeting back toward the earth. He frantically grabbed his wand from his holster, making several semi-circle movements to absolutely no effect; he couldn't draw energy from the ground when he was mid-air. At the last second, Jaren stamped his foot, forming a hand from the soil that grabbed Dorian moments before he slammed into the ground. The hand dissolved into dust, unceremoniously dumping Dorian on the ground. Furious, Dorian scrambled to his feet and shoved a finger in Jaren's face.

“What was that for? You could've killed me you brute!”

“Move that finger or you lose it.”

Dorian blinked, drawing back a second before reasserting himself, finger safely back by his side. “My point still stands. This whole mission goes up in flames if we start fighting each other.”

“And I was thinking that the mission would go better if you weren't involved anymore.”

Jaren didn't give Dorian a chance to respond, stalking away to go help Krista with the fire. Dorian gestured angrily at the empty air behind Jaren before noticing Mayama sitting outside and making a beeline toward her.

“Can you believe him? I knew he was a hothead, but that was ridiculous! I could've died!”

Mayama nodded, spinning a ribbon of water from a puddle that she had found on the ground. “Yeah, that was irresponsible. He shouldn’t have done that. But I do think...” Mayama recoiled as Dorian shot a sharp look at her. “I just think that maybe you could help a little bit more? I know it’s hard for you to walk so long, but it’s hard for all of us. I think Jaren might like you a bit better if you just pitched in a bit more.”

Dorian sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and pushing his glasses up to his forehead before letting them fall back down. “Look, Mayama. We all have our specialties on this team. Krista is a great leader and organizer. Jaren provides the brute strength. You provide that upbeat morale and friendship. Me? I provide the brains and the utility of being able to do more than just punch people with my energy. Nowhere in that job description did it say anything about being able to walk tens of miles a day or set up a tent. The headmaster asked me to come on this trip to help you out, and I’m willing to do that to the best of my abilities. But!” Dorian paused for dramatic effect. “That’s only for tasks that are within my abilities. Jaren needs to stop trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. I’m sure you understand that.”

The smile that Mayama had started the conversation with remained plastered on her face, though it had gotten fainter as Dorian’s rant continued. Alarm bells had started screaming in her head the moment she had broached the topic, and they had now reached full volume, reminding her of her mistake in even trying to bring this up with Dorian. Where had she seen any hint in his behavior that implied he would be willing to make some changes to mollify Jaren? She just nodded at Dorian, who seemed to be mollified now that someone agreed with him.

“I’m glad at least one person in this group has some common sense.” He waited a bit for a response from Mayama, but when none came, he walked back over to his backpack and pulled out a notebook, opened it up, and began to scribble furiously. Water bubbling and pen scratching

were the only sounds that filled the campsite until their meal was ready, a simple vegetable stew. They still had plenty of supplies left, but they weren't sure when or where they'd be able to restock.

It wasn't a very scenic dinner. The war had completely decimated the landscape around Stronak. All the grass and plants in the area had died, leaving behind a field of wilted brown stalks and crushed stems. Nearby buildings lay in rubble, the remnants of furniture and toys peeking through the destroyed structures. The bodies of fallen soldiers had been removed from the roads and surrounding areas, but the abandoned jeeps and tanks had yet to be towed away, as the burnt-out shells sat in the middle of the highway, gasoline leaking out where several of the vehicles had been upended and torn to pieces. The situation didn't improve if one looked farther into Stronak; the landscape was dotted with craters and scorch marks on the vast rolling hills and mountains. The beautiful scenery that Stronak had been famous for was utterly ruined, and it was unknown whether anything would grow there again.

Mayama and Dorian ate their dinners in silence, Mayama barely looking up from her bowl before excusing herself for the night, and Dorian shooting a glare at Jaren a few times before also retiring to his tent, leaving Krista and Jaren alone.

"I'm not saying we should kill him, but maybe we can just leave him behind by accident," Jaren said. "Once we get back to the college, we inform them that Dorian fought bravely, but he ultimately was torn apart as he tried to flee the enemy, weighed down by the size of his ego."

“You know we can’t do that. I trust Headmaster Samen, and he wouldn’t have sent Dorian with us if he weren’t useful. Just give him some time, I’m sure he’ll prove himself soon, even if right now he’s a bit...”

“Useless? Annoying? Irritating? Frustrating? Somehow the worst thing that’s happened to me in the past year?” said Jaren, cracking a weak smile.

“All of the above, I guess. Listen, if it’s still an issue once we get farther into Stronak, we can have another talk about this. Meanwhile, try not to take his head off? Maybe he’ll help more if he feels like he’s a part of our group.”

“No promises there, but I can at least try. Anyways, I’ll take first watch tonight we need to be careful now that we’ve basically reached Stronak. Whatever being destroyed my home created those dark monstrosities to help it out, and you know we don’t want to get caught by them when we’re asleep.”

Before they had left New York, the headmaster had given them all the information that the GPO had managed to gather since the attack on Stronak. The Stronakian army had been attacked by creatures made of pure shadow, given sentience by some form of life energy. The little correspondence from Stronak that had reached neighboring countries implied that these creatures had been nearly invisible when they attacked Stronak due to the overwhelming darkness that had descended a few hours beforehand. The only glimpse of the creatures that anyone had gotten was by the illumination of gunfire, explosions, and the heavy-duty headlamps of some vehicles. While some of the darkness had subsided since then, it would be nearly impossible to see the creatures if they were attacked at night. Not much was known were certainty about the method the creatures used to attack their enemies, though examination of the

corpses and debris had revealed that the victims had been pulled away from the main forces before being killed. Additionally, several of the soldiers have been killed by asphyxiation, while others had been killed by blunt force trauma to the head. This had led the GPO to conclude that the creatures were extremely strong and should be fought at a distance.

Krista and Jaren finished cleaning up the remnants of the meal, being careful to stomp out the fire to make sure it wouldn't flare back up. As Krista headed to her tent, Jaren settled in a few feet away from the camp, getting ready for the long watch ahead of him. Luckily for him, it didn't have to be an uncomfortable night. He sunk his hands into the dirt, shifting around the rocks and gravel as he shaped out a lounge chair in the ground. He started with the seat, using the clay deposit that was directly under their campsite, before crafting the arms and back out of the dirt, making sure to filter out any sharp stones. He wished he had some grass to cushion the armrests, but the light sapping energies that had killed Stronak had also eradicated all the plant life in the nearby area. Jaren settled into his newly created chair, obscuring his position with a mound of earth. As a gesture of good will, he might leave the chair for Dorian when it was his turn to take watch.

Not that there was much to watch for around the camp. They had set up their tents to the side of the main highway, which was cracked and shattered from the fighting that had taken place just a few months earlier. While there had been a few businesses and houses next to the road, including a small strip mall where Jaren used to shop for clothes, they had all been leveled by the utter destruction that had taken down Stronak. If he closed his eyes, Jaren could see the Stronak soldiers in their red and black uniforms, desperately shooting at the encroaching darkness. He could imagine them hurling waves of earth toward the enemy and extracting the mineral deposits nearby to create explosives where they thought the creatures were coming from.

But it hadn't mattered in the end; each one of them had been dragged off by shadows appearing from the darkness, tendrils wrapping around their arms and legs as they were yanked off their feet, their screams soon disappearing altogether as the entire army was destroyed by those shadow creatures. He wondered when they had realized that no matter what they did, they were still going to lose the fight. Had those last few soldiers kept fighting till the end, or had they given up and just waited for their eventual deaths?

Jaren's eyes shot open as he woke up, cursing himself for having been so careless. But what had caused him to wake up? He listened for a second; nothing, not even a breeze. It was quiet. Wait, hadn't there been a few birds still sticking around earlier? He could have sworn he had heard them before he fell asleep.

That was the last thought Jaren's brain managed to process before the shadow to his right rose from the ground and leapt toward him. Unlike a normal shadow, it didn't appear to be created by any light. Instead, it was a patch of black on the ground, nearly invisible during the night. Despite being a solid mass, the shadow never fully separated itself from the floor; it was more like a wave of darkness rose from the ground and smothered Jaren. He managed to get out a quick yell before the shadow swallowed him whole, turning his vision entirely dark.

This wasn't the color black, something that you'd paint on a picture to represent an oil spill or find at the bottom of a coal mine. No, this black was the complete absence of light. Jaren thought he had gone blind as he struggled against the walls holding him in place. He tried to shift through the ground, or at least bring up some metal to cut through the creature, but he was suspended above the ground which made it impossible for him to use any of his energy. As he shoved harder, the walls began to constrict around him. His lungs started to ache as the air in

them was pushed out by the continuous squeezing, and his arms went numb as their circulation was cut off.

Then a ray of light pierced the darkness. His sight was restored as a large claw tore through the creature holding him in place. He coughed, rolling out of the way as a large grizzly began tearing into the shadow, shredding it to ribbons. Another shadow tried to grab it from behind, but it spun around faster than any normal bear should, deflecting the first strike with a claw before cutting it in half with the other. As Jaren's vision cleared, he managed to see Dorian standing over him and hauling him to his feet, all the while continuing to yell at him.

“Get up, you're not dying already! We need you for this mission.”

Two more shadows emerged from the ground, slamming into the bear and knocking it to the floor. The shadows swarmed the bear, consuming it and dragging it off into the night. Dorian grimaced and waved his wand in the air, drawing a pattern of shapes traced in energy that he grabbed and shoved into the ground. The earth flashed blue briefly before a leopard appeared in front of them. It leapt forward, taking a bite out of yet another shadow creature that had been drawing closer.

“The bear used up a ton of my energy, I don't know how many more creatures I can summon. I'd be able to do better if I wasn't woken up abruptly in middle of the night because SOMEONE couldn't do their job!”

The leopard managed to take down another shadow before it was also overwhelmed by the increasing number of shadows, completely suffocated by their sheer weight. Jaren watched in horror as the leopard struggled for a bit, mewling helplessly before it went limp. Dorian frantically slashed the air as another leopard hurled itself toward the shadows, this one slightly scrawnier

than the last. He grabbed Jaren by the shoulders, shaking him back and forth while continuing to yell.

“Do something! Throw a rock at them at least. Don’t stand there gap-jawed!”

Jaren looked past him, staring at the second leopard which had been surrounded by the shadows and was about to meet the same fate as the first, and didn’t move from where he was standing. Krista emerged from her tent and sprinted over, pointing her palm outward at the melee. A spike of crystal shot out, impaling one of the shadows and carrying it directly into another. It was quickly followed by two more spikes, each striking the middle of a shadow, causing them to lose their forms and melt back into the ground. She spun her hands rapidly, producing two spiraling crystalline swords as she managed to reach Dorian and Jaren, setting her feet in a defensive stance as she stood in front of them.

“Get back to the tents!” She yelled, swiping at a tendril that was inching closer. “You can help me out once you’re a safe distance away.”

Dorian nodded, grabbing Jaren by the arm and yanking him back toward their campsite. Krista stabbed one of the creatures through the chest, crystals forming around the wound before they exploded outward, sending shards into several of the approaching creatures. Dorian stumbled back into camp, still dragging a limp Jaren, as Mayama stepped out of her tent.

She raised the pistol she was carrying and aimed carefully before putting a bullet into three shadows that had been approaching Krista from her left. She emptied the rest of her clip into two of the other shadows and reloaded as Krista took out another shadow with a quick stab. Fighting together, they managed to drive back the rest of the creatures, with help from an eagle that Dorian managed to summon before falling to the ground, panting heavily. Jaren remained on

his knees, motionless except for his eyes, which flicked back and forth between the fighting and the ruined highway. The last shadow collapsed to the ground with three smoking holes in its chest area, and the camp returned to silence once more.

Krista pulled her sword out of one of the creatures and examined it up close. It didn't seem to have defined body parts, but instead was a mass of a black sludge-like material. Cutting through it had felt akin to slicing through a bowl of Jell-o, and it seemed to have been random when she had hurt it enough to kill it. When it had tried to kill her, though, its body had solidified enough for its blows to knock her backward. Now that it was dead, whatever magic had animated the creature had left it completely, leaving it as nothing more than a puddle of black goop.

"I di-didn't kn-know you had a g-un." gasped Dorian, as he tried, and failed, to get to his feet.

Mayama nodded. "It's something I learned to do. It's not very helpful to be the person who can manipulate water sources when there's no groundwater in sight. So, I figured, or at least the people I got my training from figured, that even without water I should be able to fight. I was originally planning on packing a rifle, but it was too big to include. The pistol on the other hand..."

"Well Dorian," interrupted Krista "the gun is clearly there to improve her 'upbeat morale and friendship'."

Dorian's face reddened slightly as he finally managed to stand up. "It seems that I owe you an apology Mayama. You provide more value to this team than I initially assumed." He glanced down at Jaren. "Unlike some people."

“Don’t you have a bed to collapse into Dorian?” asked Krista, still conspicuously holding the swords she had just used, swinging them around in practiced motions. “Or are you going to run out of energy before you even get there?”

Dorian opened his mouth, closed it, and stumbled off to his tent, nearly falling over twice before he collapsed through the entrance.

Krista turned back toward Jaren. “Jaren, are you okay? Is there anything I can do to help?”

Jaren’s eyes finally focused as they snapped towards Krista. “I’m fine, I’m fine. It was my fault for falling asleep. Those things took a lot out of me, but I should be fine in the morning. Can you take the next watch please?”

“Jaren, if you need to talk to someone-” Jaren sank into the earth, with a small rumble indicating that he had emerged in his tent, leaving Krista and Mayama alone by the remains of the campfire.

“Sooo,” said Mayama, “How do you do that?”

“The swords? I obviously can’t teach you how to make the swords like I do, but I can show you some basic moves if you want.”

“No, not the swords. I know how to use those already, learnt it when I was five.” Mayama gave a stilted laugh, then stumbled onward. “No, I meant the way you talk so well. How you can say the right things when you need to.”

“I don’t know about that.” Krista cocked her head to the side. “Dorian’s off sulking in his tent, and I have no idea what’s wrong with Jaren that he froze up like that. Fat lot of good I did with my words.”

Mayama shook her head. “You managed to teach Dorian a lesson in humility and shut down what could have been a nasty fight between him and Jaren. Besides, I’m not just talking about tonight. You seem to always know what to say and when you need to say it. Dorian might be a jerk, but he was right when he said you were a great leader. There probably wouldn’t have been a mission in the first place if you hadn’t been there to convince everyone involved.”

“That’s the thing; I did a good job talking because I had to. Like you said, if I hadn’t convinced Headmaster Samen, then there would be no mission. If I couldn’t control Jaren and Dorian, then this entire mission would be a failure already. If we’re not going to succeed unless I do something, then I have to do that thing well; I have no choice. Will that advice help you? I don’t know; every single person is different in what motivates them. You seem to be rather good with that gun of yours, what motivated you to become that skilled with it?

“Oh, that’s easy. I’ve been training with it every single day since my fourth birthday.”

Krista blinked. “Did you say fourth? As in, you were four years old when they gave you that gun?”

“Do they give the children weapons for their training at a younger age in your country? I know we wait until four because the child’s arms haven’t developed enough strength until then, but my people aren’t particularly strong.”

“Actually, we don’t give weapons to children as a general rule.”

“Really? Then how are you so proficient with your swords? Talent like that is usually achieved by someone after twelve years of training, beginning at five years old. I suppose you could be really old, but I don’t think that’s true. You’re not actually forty or something right?”

“I can assure you, I’m not forty. I’ve just trained with swords for a while, and I’ve gotten rather good with them. I’m just shocked that you’ve been training to fight since you were that young.”

“I guess we have to train that long to have a chance.” Mayama knelt to the ground, scooping up a handful of dirt. “You, Jaren, Dorian; all three of you can manipulate energy as long as you have your feet on the ground. But me and my people? We need to have water that’s attached to the ground. Seas, rivers, fountains, even puddles all work, but there are plenty of times when those aren’t in easy reach.” Mayama gestured to the barren landscape around them. “Like now for instance. And it’s not like my people are physically gifted in any way; I didn’t know it was possible to lose every single Olympic game until Misterdam managed it the first time they entered. So, if we can’t channel energy the best, and we can’t be the best physically, we have to try to be the best at anything that’s within our abilities. Skill with weapons just happens to be one of those areas. Sorry, I’m rambling again, aren’t I?”

“It’s fine, I basically asked you to try to explain your entire culture to me.”

“It doesn’t help that I’ve always been told to emphasize the struggles that my people have to deal with whenever I talk about our country. That’s why the military insisted that I go with you three on this mission; to prove that ‘Misterdam can be just as successful as the best from any other country, even in an environment that isn’t advantageous to us.’ Or at least that’s what General Slaterra told me.”

“Wait, military? General? You work for the army?”

“I’ve been a soldier for as long as I can remember. Trained from birth to show the world what Misterdam can do. It’s a great honor, as I’ve been told several times by my superiors. Now that I’m thinking about it, it makes sense that I’m not particularly good at carrying a conversation. Hard to practice your niceties in public when you’ve been practicing at the firing range in all your free time.”

“Hey, we’ve been talking for a while now and you’ve been great so far. Maybe your conversational skills aren’t as bad as you think.”

Mayama blinked, trying to remember how long they had been speaking for and how they even had gotten to this point. She had been trying to ask Krista about her speaking ability and had ended up spilling her entire life story instead.

“I guess I just feel comfortable talking around you. It’s like being back home in the barracks and chatting until curfew. Anyways, you should get some sleep tonight, I’ll take the last watch until morning.”

Krista thought about arguing for a second but realized that she really needed to get some sleep. The abrupt awakening, combined with the frantic fighting that had erupted right after, had left her more drained than she wanted to admit. “Thank you Mayama,” she said before heading back to her tent for the rest of the night.

Mayama sat there for a few minutes, cleaning her pistol and making sure the safety was engaged before stowing it away for the night. A few minutes into her watch, she noticed the chair that Jaren had made for himself. She tested it, pushing down on the seat, before settling into it to wait until morning.

\*\*\*

Dorian lay in his tent, staring up at the roof as he heard Mayama and Krista chatting outside. He was exhausted, barely able to move and definitely unable to use any of his powers. Why was he still awake then? He should be sleeping, recovering his energy. Not obsessing over the fight. They had won! He had been a crucial member of the team, fulfilling his role perfectly. Jaren might have been served a slice of humble pie! Everything had gone well, so he should just stop thinking about it and go to sleep.

Except... things hadn't gone well. As much as he didn't like Jaren, he had been counting on him to be a strong fighter when the need arose. Instead, Jaren had just frozen when he had to fight, unable to even lift a muscle to defend himself. He had been ready to pull Jaren out of the shadows and chastise him for falling asleep, but he had also failed to help that much. His summoned creatures were ripped to shreds by the monsters, and he had barely been able to keep Jaren and himself safe for a few minutes. If Krista and Mayama hadn't been able to reach them in time, they would both be dead, absorbed by those shadows and never seen again.

That was a kick in the head for him, and he wasn't sure he would ever fully recover. He had been told, for years now, that he was the brightest student to ever walk through the doors of Fallorian College, and his results in class certainly backed that up. He had been chosen specifically by the headmaster himself because of his abilities. Yet when it truly mattered, when his life was on the line and he needed to perform, he had done a subpar job. It didn't matter if he got top grades in every one of his classes if he wasn't able to effectively use those skills when he was on the battlefield.

Fine, he could deal with it. If he was weaker than he had thought, he would work on getting stronger while keeping his new estimation of his abilities in mind. The real issue here was that he had been completely wrong in his assessment of the group. Jaren and himself were weaker than he had initially assumed, and Mayama was much stronger than he had thought at first glance. He had been confident going on this mission because of his initial appraisal; based on the abilities of his group and the difficulty of the mission, he had concluded that their odds of success were extremely high. But now that he realized he had already messed up several aspects of that calculation, he wasn't sure that they would succeed. Not that he really had a choice whether he wanted to go or not; the headmaster had demanded that he go on this mission, and Dorian had understood why once the headmaster explained it to him. If the source of the energy could be harnessed in any way, he was to immediately report it to the headmaster. Dorian had been conducting several experiments on using different forms of energy, after the headmaster had implied that this would be a good area to study, and no one in the college would be better than him at ascertaining the value of this energy source.

He didn't want to die on this mission. He hadn't realized that until now because he had always been confident that he wouldn't. But now that he was facing the very real possibility of death, he wanted to prevent it by any means possible. If one of the ways to prevent his impending doom was to form a cohesive team, then he would become the best teammate possible. It would be tough; trying to form a bond with Jaren would be as hard as trying to punch him without hurting his own hand, but he would have to give it a try. This wasn't his fight, but he would win it no matter the cost.

\*\*\*

Krista groaned as she woke up in her tent, still sore from last night's fight. She poked her head out of the entrance flap, catching Mayama's attention from her seat outside the camp. Mayama stretched and walked over to Krista, carefully stepping around the puddles of goop and overturned supplies that were left over from their skirmish.

"I didn't see anything else the rest of the night," said Mayama, stifling a yawn. "Maybe they'll stay away for good, and we can have a nice and peaceful uninterrupted journey into the middle of a country recently devastated by war."

"I doubt it. I assume these creatures have some level of intelligence, and they know that staying out in sunlight hurts them. We still haven't traveled deep into Stronak yet, so the energy explosion that is preventing light in Stronak is weak in this area. They probably only come this far out in the middle of the night, when they can return easily without getting caught by the sunrise."

"But we could get lucky. Right?" Mayama dropped down next to her bag, grabbing a handful of biscuits from it and popping one into her mouth. Krista followed suit, igniting the remnants of their campfire with a quick bolt of focused light energy from her palm and putting a pot of coffee up to boil. The rich aroma floated into the rest of the tents, rousing Dorian and Jaren from their sleep. Bleary-eyed, they stumbled out of their tents and into the middle of the camp, grabbing their breakfasts from their respective bags before mooching a cup of coffee from Krista's brew.

"Thank you, Krista," said Dorian as he took the cup that Krista had just poured him. "I really appreciate this. Can't start my day without a dose of caffeine if you know what I mean." Dorian laughed heartily as he said this. He was the only one. He took a quick sip of his coffee

before continuing. “Ahem. I’d like to apologize to all of you for some of the things I have said over the last few days. I’ve never traveled this far from my home before, and the importance of this mission has been stressing me out. Of course, that’s no excuse for my behavior, and I would like to apologize once again for how I’ve acted.”

Jaren snorted. “Seriously? After all that-“

“Apology accepted!” interjected Krista. “After all, this mission is too important for us to be holding petty grudges. We need to work together as a team. Since you mentioned your home, why don’t you tell us about it?”

“My home is in New York City, at the college,” responded Dorian.

“No, no, I mean where are you from originally?”

“I grew up in Chicago. But it’s been years since I was back there. Haven’t seen the place since I was five.”

“You’ve been separated from your parents since you were five years old?” asked Mayama.

“I wouldn’t say I was separated; it’s more like a long-distance relationship. I still write and call when I have time, I’m just usually too busy with my studies. Headmaster Samen picked me out personally, you know. He told my parents that I had limitless potential to channel energy through casting and that it would be wasted if I didn’t immediately start my training at the academy. They weren’t happy at first, but they changed their tune after he offered them a pension for as long as I was studying at the college. I’ve been at the college ever since, taking classes and training under Headmaster Samen.”

“You never went home? Not even for a few days as a vacation?” asked Jaren.

“Didn’t see a point to it. I can video call my family anytime I want. Besides, taking days off would only hurt my training. How would I be able to become the best manipulator of energy in the world if I constantly went on vacation?” Dorian sped up, trying to move on from the current conversation. “Speaking of not taking time off, we should really be heading out. We run the risk of being attacked every day from now on, so we should hurry to minimize that time. I’ll start stowing the tents away so we can get going.”

Dorian finished his coffee, cleaning out the cups and stowing it away before walking over to the tents and starting to dismantle them, to the shock of the rest of the group.

Mayama shrugged. “Maybe he’s legitimately trying to be a better person. Either way, I better go help with the tents. I don’t want to have to patch him up after he stabs himself in the leg with a tent pole.”

“I’ll go help with that too,” said Jaren, as he went to stand up, only to be stopped by Krista’s hand on his shoulder.

“Actually, can you help me out over here Jaren? There’s a few things that I need to pack up that I might need some help with.”

“I guess so,” responded Jaren. “What do you need help with?” Mayama was running over to Dorian as a tent began to collapse around him, grabbing the center pole before it slammed into his head.”

“Ok, I lied,” Krista said to Jaren. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay after last night. You were pretty shaken up.”

“I told you already, I’m fine. That thing just caught me off guard and took me out for a while. How would you feel if something made of pure darkness swallowed you whole and tried to suffocate you, making you feel the air slowly drain from your lungs as you struggled to survive? How do you think it feels to know that you’re going to die and you’re powerless to stop it no matter what you try? Do you think you’d be able to just get up after that and be able to start throwing fists?” Jaren began to hyperventilate as he spoke, his breaths coming faster and faster as his voice rose.

“Jaren, you need to calm down. Here, have a drink.” Krista passed Jaren a canteen of water which he gulped down, sputtering and coughing up liquid as he tried to regain his breath. After a minute of hacking, Jaren managed to get his breathing under control, his chest still heaving as he handed Krista back the canteen. “Do you want to talk about it now?”

“Sorry about that,” said Jaren. “I just didn’t want you to worry more about me; you seem to always take any problem you find and put it on your shoulders. Sorta failed at that part though, didn’t it?... Fine, I’ll talk about it. I thought I was ready to fight those creatures. I was going to look them in the eyes, or at least where I assumed their eyes would be if they had them, and rip every single one of them to shreds for what they did to my country. For what they did to my family. For what they did to me. But when then they got the jump on me, I thought I was going to die. Just like everyone else. And then I gave up. I still kept trying to get out, but I already thought that it was over for me.” Jaren squeezed his eyes shut, a drop of moisture running down his left cheek. “What made me so special that I would live when no one else did? Even when Dorian pulled me out of there, I couldn’t believe that I was still alive. So I just froze there and became a useless lump that you had to lug around.”

Krista grabbed Jaren, enveloping him in a hug as he tried desperately to hold back tears. They stayed like that for a few minutes, Jaren's head resting on Krista's shoulder as he shuddered in place. Dorian and Mayama continued to pack up the tents, pretending not to notice what was going on a few feet away from them. Jaren eventually pulled himself away from Krista, wiping his face down from any tears that might have leaked out.

“Jaren, you can't beat yourself up over something like this,” said Krista. “It would have happened to anyone in the same situation as you. You want to know what makes you special? It's that you're going to come back fighting, you're not going to let this stop you, and you're going to kick the ass of whoever did this. Do you understand me?” Jaren nodded. “Good, let's go then. We're burning daylight and I want to try to find some shelter when we sleep tonight.”

Jaren and Krista joined Dorian and Mayama in packing up the campsite, gathering everything that had been scattered the night before. They were fully packed twenty minutes later, with their tents stowed away and bags securely on their bag. Krista took the lead as they marched along the side of the highway, entering the destroyed land that had once been Stronak.

## Thesis Reflection Essay

Everyone has a different reason they go to college. Some people go for the lifelong friends and the social life; others go to acquire the skills to get a job. Above all else, however, college should be about getting closer to your goals, whatever they might be. I always knew that I wanted my thesis to be a fantasy story. It's been my favorite genre since I was able to read, and I loved the idea of crafting your own world without any boundaries. While other kids were shooting hoops in sleepaway camp, I was reading Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows. I couldn't leave it behind at home; I had just gotten my hands on it and I needed to know how Harry's adventure ended. Harry and his entire world were real to me, and I wanted to create a story that was just as real. I didn't start YU as an English major. I wanted to get a computer science major as a backup in case my original plan, law, didn't work out. However, after a single tortuous semester in computer science, I switched tracks and ended up here, graduating with a major in English. A decision that I made initially just to help me out proved to have been one that I should have made in the first place. I enjoyed all my English classes, and what I learnt in them was crucial towards helping me write this thesis.

My thesis stars four teenagers: Jaren, a 17-year-old from Stronak who can manipulate earth and stones, Kirsta, a 16-year-old from Br'stillia who can create crystalline objects and manipulate light, Mayama, a 17-year-old from Misterdam who can control water and is an expert markswoman, and Dorian, a 15-year-old from the Fallorian College who can create creatures from the earth and store energy. After the destruction of Stronak by a mysterious force, these four are sent by Headmaster Samen, head of the Fallorian College and the Global Protection Organization, to find the source of this destruction. They embark on this journey, each with a

different motivation in mind, fighting with each other and against dark monsters created by the being who destroyed Stronak.

The first thought many people had when reading one of the early versions of this piece was “So is this based on Harry Potter?”. The final version veers far from that initial impression, but the Harry Potter books still influenced the style of this work. The one aspect of Harry Potter that really shines is the world building and description. The books create this world with different rules than our own, and fantastical places that don’t resemble anything you’d normally see. Yet the reader can believe they’re real and see themselves in them; I find that the majority of fans are more obsessed with being in Hogwarts than with the characters or story. I tried to implement this style and strength of world building in my story, as it too created an unrealistic world. I did give myself an edge by mixing my fantasy with the real world; it’s easier to believe a world is real if it bears a strongly resemblance to a place that you’re familiar with. A magical college is much easier to see if it’s a magical college inside New York City. Modern technology is also something that I’ve wanted to include in a fantasy story. Harry Potter teases this but manages to avoid it with the claim that magic interferes with technology. With that excuse not present in my story, I was able to integrate the fantastical elements with modern electronics to create unique situations. The one change I did make from Harry Potter, something which was present in my earlier drafts as well, was the use of the term “magic”. Despite the Fallorian College members wielding a wand to manipulate energy, they don’t use magic. Instead, all the characters draw power from the same source, latent energies in the earth, ensuring that one character isn’t outstripping the others in power.

This leads into one of the biggest issues I had to tackle while working on this piece: making a unique system for my characters to draw their powers from. One of my favorite

authors, Brandon Sanderson, is extremely skilled at creating a different set of powers for each of his books, most of which are interconnected in one universe. I didn't want to copy another book, but I did take inspiration while throwing my own twist in. I started with a single rule: the powers are influenced by the ground. Since this story started with Dorian, the standard magician, this rule was directly drawn from the sorcerers of Egypt who faced off against Moses. This rule makes the different characters feel cohesive in their abilities; they can all believably come from the same world, despite the wide range of powers that result from this one source. Restrictions are also key to making characters interesting; let them have too much power, and they became unbeatable and boring. The members of the college used to have a much wider range of powers that they could cast from their wands, but that was cut down to the two categories that exist in the final story. This rule of restrictions is what influenced Mayama and the path her character took. Weak characters are a trope in fantasy, especially those that deal with extremely strong abilities. These characters, held back by the inferiority of their powers compared to the real main characters, are often relegated to comedy or moral support from the sidelines. Mayama was my attempt at creating a character that had these restrictions but was still powerful regardless. She's a main character, no question about that, but even main characters can be introduced with significant downsides they haven't addressed. In a world as modern and structured as the one I created, it makes sense for the character, and their nation as a whole, to have found a way to compensate for any defects.

Characters are the driving force behind my story, as it's a narrative journey focusing on relationships. An important part of creating these characters was to make them three-dimensional. At the very least, each character needs to have a reason for who they are, how they got there, and a basis for how they would react to future situations. Allison Bechdel's graphic

novel memoir *Fun Home* really helped me see how characters should be created. Real life tned not to have villains and heroes, even though fantasy likes to stick to those tropes. Bechdel's father could be described as an abusive predator, but he's so much more than that in *Fun Home*. Once we know who he is, he's not a villain anymore; we can disagree with his decisions and deride him as a bad person, but he's not a two-dimensional villain who cackles while he commits evil deeds. Dorian, for example, is by all accounts a bad person. He's a temperamental egotistical jerk who only cares about others to the extent that he can use them. However, this makes perfect sense, considering the way he was raised; no family members, only an adoring headmaster and faculty who have convinced him that he's the best in the world. While Dorian isn't the "chosen one" in any conventional sense, his character still plays off the trope of the attention and adulation those "chosen ones" receive. Being told you're perfect tends to make a person believe that they are, and Dorian is no exception.

What separates the good writer from the great writer is a topic of discussion that is too lengthy for this piece to go into depth about it. However, one part of writing that tends to make that difference to me is dialogue. While a story can exist without dialogue and still be excellent, most stories do, at least at some point, have the characters speak. What follows is then a test for the author of the piece: can they make the conversations, thoughts and speeches of the characters sound natural? This is an encapsulation of the main challenge of writing, which is drawing a reader into the world of the book. Dialogue is particularly challenging due to how pervasive it is in our lives; a reader knows how people would be talking and expects dialogue to read a certain way, so it feels off to them when those expectations aren't met. I've always felt that dialogue was one of the stronger aspects of my writing, but it still needed some improvement when tackling a project like my thesis. William Strunk and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style* helped

out a ton with my dialogue, as well as all my other writing, but it was packed with rules and ideas that I either knew already, or were less than relevant to the piece I was writing. I found Stephen King's *On Writing* to be much more helpful in this regard, as King's writing style really shines when he uses it for instruction. One of the most helpful types was to avoid using adverbs to describe dialogue; no more "Jane said angrily" or "John responded tiredly". Once you do that, you admit that you failed to show the character's emotional state in their dialogue and have to resort to telling the reader instead. King also helped me clean up my word usage, specifically in my dialogue, by avoiding unnecessarily complex language. While an author may have a specific audience in mind when they write their stories, which King recommends, the story should be accessible to as many people as possible. Very rarely should someone be going to the thesaurus because their original wording was too simple for their liking.

As I previously mentioned, I tried to keep in mind the tropes and cliches that are usually contained within this genre. The wise mentor character is present, but the reader should be doubting his sincerity, and whether he truly fits the mold of the character that they're accustomed to. One of my biggest pet peeves is the three-person team that is typical in this genre, especially in stories that are aiming for a younger audience. It usually consists of two boys and one girl; the girl and one of the boys get together, while the other boy is the goofy best friend. I wanted to veer as far as possible from that dynamic as possible, and instead created a group of four characters, two boys and two girls. While Krista and Jaren have a prior relationship, it's purely platonic and none of the characters have any romantic tendencies. This also lets each character act as a person, instead of simply being the object of desire for another character. Nothing is worse in a story than to have a character with an interesting backstory and premise introduced, only to realize that they exist solely to further the character development of a different character.

Usually, an adventuring group opposes the status quo, fighting against a tyrannical government for a better tomorrow. The group in my thesis instead works for the GPO, the very definition of a standard government entity. This change wasn't created from a dislike of the plucky young adventures fighting against the evil overlords; rather, I felt that a change of pace could be interesting for a story, especially if some of the characters feel frustrated and stymied by the government oversight.

Fantasy, while a genre that is firmly stationed in the imaginary, still has the ability to comment on modern issues and impart messages to the same extent as other genres. There are certainly comparisons to be drawn between aspects of my story and real-world equivalents. The GPO, for instance, can be seen as a version of the League of Nations or United Nations; its placement in New York City was intentional in order to further that comparison. Its actions or lack thereof, can be a commentary on the actions that either of those organizations took in response to global evil. While other pieces I write may tackle a larger issue as a whole, this story is mostly concerned with issues on the individual level. It talks about trauma, upbringings and responsibility, and the effect they can take on a person. Each of the main characters is affected by one of these to some extent, and how they cope with these pressures is the main issue that this piece deals with. While there are still messages in this story, many of which I haven't mentioned there's more of a focus on showing the reader human behavior, and asking them to react to it, and to determine what they think of the responses presented.

The future of this piece is something that I'm passionate about pursuing. This is just a form of the story that I've been working on throughout college, though the first version would be unrecognizable compared to my final thesis. If I could add anything to the current version of this story, it would be a full prologue featuring Headmaster Samen in his younger days; I plan to

make him a more prominent character in future versions of this piece. There isn't much else that I would change for the current pieces; while I plan to make longer future versions, this piece is self-contained in what it attempts to accomplish due to its length. In the 45 to 50 pages that the story fills, I'm satisfied with the characters, plot, action and setting. While a future revision will undoubtedly include the group's journey into Stronak, as well as their discovery of the cause of the disaster, this piece didn't need any of that for its intended purpose. I believe that for the reason I have stated throughout this essay, I have accomplished what I intended with the story, in the space I have given it.