

Fiction Writing

Spring 2024

By Sydney Winegar



Reflection

For being 18, I'd like to think I've accomplished some cool things in my life. I just recently published my very first book "PLAGUED" by Sydney Beatty; it's a post-apocalyptic, young-adult, fictional read and it took four years to write. I also am going to be graduating college with my associate degree in social arts (which I also think is kind of a big deal), and I will be getting married as of September this year. Crazy year, am I right? I think this class has helped me grow so much as a writer, especially when it comes down to expanding my writing game. As a published author, I have my own personal writing style that compliments me as a writer, but being in this class allowed me to experience, and reach out into other writing styles, perspectives and practices that are far out of my comfort zone and some of which I really enjoyed. Writing isn't for everyone, but for me, writing is a stress relief. It's something I can do to clear my head, organize my thoughts, and put my ideas into motion. Writing is a passion, I have been doing it since I was 12 years old, and it's always stuck with me. Through the good and the bad, the write (see what I did there? Haha) and the wrong, writing has always been it for me. Writing is the breath of fresh air that I need, the decompressing flop into your bed, and sweet-treat delight for me, and I truly believe there won't be a time in my life when I won't write. Whether it's jotting down notes in church, making a grocery list, organizing my to-do list, poetry, a song, or writing my next story, I will always and forever write.

Short Story #1 Scene - The Lord of the Rings: Approaching Edoras

Scratchy yellow grass blows like a horse's mane as the four distant travelers draw near to the capital city of Edoras. The wind roams without boundaries in the country of Rohan; there are few things that stand in its way. Merely everywhere to look is either a hill of yellow grass or small, withering shrub, and above, where the heavens stretch beyond any man's reach in all directions, the sky is a crisp and bright blue.

The riders four ride their steeds steadily, coming out of a once determined canter, they approach the Edoras with precision. In the lead on a white mount, is the wizard who is well seasoned with age. His white hair and beard tell of his wisdom, and his easy eyes ensure trust. With him are his three hunters; Aragorn, heir to the throne of Gondor and excellent tracker. His allegiance is to that of the ring bearer and restoring peace to all lands in Middle Earth. Then the remaining two, and the most remarkably growing friendship, reside between a charming elf, Legolas, and a stubborn dwarf, Gimli. They rode together and so far, had gotten along for the majority of their embarkment.

The noblemen knew of the rising trouble in Edoras. Saruman had been poisoning the beloved King Theoden, and his mind had become corrupt with evil and vile council. Going as far as to exile his own nephew from the lands, and neglecting his son in his last dying breaths, the poison of Saruman's words needed to be stopped—the party of riders intended to do just that.

The King's niece, beautiful and most lovely of all creatures in the entire country, Eowyn, desperately waited for salvation. Her uncle, though not in his own mind, was tearing her and the kingdom apart and she could no longer bear his torments. She stormed out of the castle and came to find relief in standing on the palace steps outside. There she could think and be free of the torture inside her home. There she could look up and outward to the distant plains and hope to find a means of help. The wind swept her breath away, and more so, a nearby banner.

The wind caught hold of it, and carried it over the capital city, out beyond the wooden gate, out to the open plains. The riders four caught glimpse of the fallen banner—the once proud horse kingdom had fallen ill to Saruman's infestation, and they could only hope, Eowyn, could only pray, that they could cleanse it.

Short Story #2 - Photo Scene

There's a man whose name is unsaid. The things he has done have become more famed than his own name, and even then, it is a burdened and bitter subject to bring up. There was a man who came to our little town who became popular with everyone. He was charming; the ladies swooned over him and offered him their battering eyelashes and cougar side eyes. He was self-driven; actively looking to buy land nearby, though he did not have a lot of money to his name. The men, though all well off in their own ways, wished to have what he did; opportunity. The men wanted what he had, and the women just wanted him for his dashing looks and charisma.

He was always wanted.

After some months our little town's infatuation of the man slowly melted away like snow in the warming spring. He became merely a passing thought when he was seen. The man became normal like one of us, and we watched him smolder into said lifestyle; he lost his spark, his unique draw of character, and we no longer desired to fan his flame. The men no longer envied his opportunity, for they found their own opportunity through the money they made through their own labor. The women grew tired of doing themselves up and receiving no attention, so they no longer bothered to do it.

The man was one of us.

On July 22nd, however, the man who'd succumbed to the average man's race, had struck oil on his land. His opportunity, his chance, his sheer luck, had come to rest victorious over the entire town. His land was now worth a large fortune, and with it he bought himself everything his heart desired and more. He bought our town and became the mayor, and with that, with his money, he became wanted once again.

We no longer wanted him because he was new and different, we wanted him for his money and power.

The man shook hands with his past self, his unidentified, nameless self; shed his old skin and stepped out fresh and newly named. Identified and known only for his money and sheer luck, our little town came to envy the man who we lost to the power of the sudden wealth and fame. His name was not known to us before, and that's how it will remain. We do not know the man who is now our mayor, we never did know him. He never was one of us. He was just on the prowl for his own succession, and for that he was hated. His actions; the regret of the town's men for not buying the land before he did. The jealousy and anger that ran rampant for not seizing the opportunity like the man had was rank through-out the entire town.

The man let his old self get burned away, and with it, us, and the town. He no longer was associated with us, and we no longer associated with him. He was a new man now, one of

which was not to mingle with the common folk, one of which only looked for opportunities to grow and make himself better and come out on top of the rest of us.

Short Story #3 – Dialogue

“He bit me; full force just launched himself at me and now I’ve got another bruise!” Jerry forms a fist with one hand, and he punches it into the open palm of the other.

“Wait, wait, let me get this straight; your uncle—” Billy stops himself short, eyes glancing up from the freshly dug hole in the ground, and the body wrapped up in an old blanket within it. “Your uncle bit you, and you...you killed him?” His voice tries to remain level, but it’s hard to hide his concern.

“Eh, he wasn’t doing so great anyways. And when he came at me with his dentures-a-chompin', I rounded up my fist and sucker punched him right in the face.” Jerry offers a cheery smile. His hands are on his hips, and he grabs the shovel that he’s staked in the ground and goes to throw dirt on top of the body. “Yeah...he didn’t take it very well.”

“Jerry, he’s dead.” Billy replies, again trying to remain calm. He motions to the body, and then to his lifelong friend. “You murdered your uncle.”

“It’s not murder if it’s an accident.”

“Are you sure it was an accident??” Billy questions. “Never once have I heard you say anything good about your Uncle Jefferson. How sure are you this was an accident?”

Jerry shrugs his shoulders up as he goes to throw more dirt on top of the body. “Pretty sure. I swung out of self-defense.”

Billy inhales deeply, collecting his composure. “Your Uncle Jefferson was 86 years old. I’m not sure what you were defending yourself from, apart from a sack of skin and bones, but you certainly did not have to go punching him and then killing him on accident!”

“Well, it’s in the past.”

“That’s a terrible way to think Jerry!”

“He and Aunt Roberta were talking about ordering there gravestones just the other week, this will save them a lot of money in the long run because now they only have to pay for one

headstone.” Jerry replies lightheartedly as he continues to throw dirt over his dead uncle’s body.

“This is saving them a lot of money.”

“Does you aunt even know about this?”

“Of course not. She’d be devastated to find out that I killed Uncle Jefferson.”

“So, you admit that you killed him?” Billy persists.

“I never said that.”

“Yes, you did!”

“What’s your point?”

“You murdered your uncle!” Billy exclaims, hands shooting up into the air in rage.

“That’s it, I’m calling the police!” He declares as he goes to pull his phone out. As he does, Jerry pivots with a raised shovel overhead.

“If you call the police, you’re going in the hole.” Jerry threatens, “Drop the phone.” Billy obeys. “Now, why don’t you pick up your shovel and help me bury him?”

With reluctance, Billy takes hold of his own shovel and begins to throw dirt into the hole. “I don’t want to go to prison.” He mumbles under his breath.

Jerry takes his shovel end and cracks it into the back of Billy’s head the second he finished speaking. Billy crumbles and falls into the hole Uncle Jeffersons body is in. “Guess you can just go to heaven with Uncle Jefferson then.”

Short Story #4 – Murder

Lapping black ripples taunt the edges of the dock, the depths, they call out and beckon passersby to join them. It’s a tempting thought; wading out into the great black pool. It would be a welcomed pleasure to feel the icy waters swallow up the heat of anger; the hateful fire that burns in every man's soul. The fire is sometimes quieted, but it never truly is stanchd. It’s always there, always smoking, sometimes it stirred and poked and perhaps it’ll spark up; jump and show itself a little, but it goes back down once it’s said its piece.

It’s calmed momentarily, that is until...it’s poked again.

And when the fire is fed and satisfied, that's when a forest gets burned. The lake continues to grow dark as the sun falls heavy behind the trees. The last embers of light burn orange against the dark ripples of water. Like a sinker being tossed and drowned out in the water, so too falls the heart of Danni. His eyes, unblinking, tasteless, black, stare at the icy waters out before him, the last coals of the fire in his chest still hum angrily. His fists, still shaking from the crippling perverseness of his heart, tremble as he slowly sinks them into the cool water below.

The hot, red, blood melts into nothingness, and his hands burn—pins and needles prick every trembling nerve in his fingers as he relaxes into the painfully sweet sensation. The war drum in his heart begins to fade into a steady, hard thump, and his chest heaves in the cool evening air.

He gulps it down like it's an elixir, bound to save him from his own madness. The water encompasses his skin up to his wrists; his hands become relaxed within the pool, and as his physical torment begins to release and fade-way, with it comes the clearness of thought, and Danni knows of what he has done.

Major Story #1 – Potting Problems

It's already been an incredibly long week. It's hot outside, not that I mind, but it tends to make working a little stickier and a little more disgusting feeling than what it needs to be. To top all that sweaty goodness off, I know I'm going to have to deal with the rotten attitude of Anna here in a little bit. Boss said she'd be in today, and this time she wouldn't be late or clocking out early. Did I feel like dealing with her snooty comments and rolling eyes that are always illuminated in blue screen light? No, not really, but I unfortunately didn't have much of a choice. We're understaffed as it is, and I can only manage so many garden departments by myself. I'm stressed enough as it is running all the programs, checking inventory and answering everyone's questions, and what's dealing with one more persons crabby attitude?

Over my shoulder I hear the flop of sandals hitting the ground, the lightness of Anna's weight was almost nonexistent. The girl was skinny and thin, almost like a mini version of me but she was more athletic, more agile. I glance off to the side as she approaches. She's wearing short-shorts, like the kind that stop on your upper thigh and with it, her loosely tucked in work shirt. She's not dressed up to standard, and I do not have the patience to tell her to change, or the time for that matter.

"You ready to work?" I ask her rather pointedly as I place a hand on my hip, turning to face her head on.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” She says, thumbs still tapping against her screen.

My lips press into a thin line. “Great, put that down and help me repot these Morning Glories.” I grab a spade and shove fresh potting mix into a new pot. Anna is slow to comply. Her weight shifts from hip to hip, before she stuffs her phone away and rather reluctantly watches next to me. The girl just watches. Her eyes are heavy and dart in a line as she observes me shoving, re-planting and setting aside the freshly bloomed flowers. “You just going to stand there and look pretty or you going to help?”

“I don’t know how to pot plants,” She mumbles under her breath. She grabs a half open bag of soil and then flicks it—loose compost shoots off like firework rays in every direction. Anna grimaces. “Do you have gloves? I don’t want to get dirt under my nails, I just got them done.” Her hands flex at her freshly done manicure, and I feel my shoulders slump.

“Anna, you’re not even touching the dirt.” I have draw in a long breath before going on. “Not a lot at least.”

“But my nails--”

“Just do it.” I cut her off with a low snap while I continue my work, and Anna, finally following suit grabs another spade and begins loosely plopping the soil into the new pots. It takes her a minute to fully surrender to the defeat of loose dirt getting under her nails, but she trudges on, even to her own disliking. “See? It’s not so bad.” I grab a loose handful of the rich, dark dirt and sift it through my fingertips. “It won’t hurt you.”

“Just shut up.” She grumbles back, eyes low, and face down. I leave her be and decide not to prod at her anymore. It doesn’t take us long at all to finish repotting all fifty Morning Glories, and I take a minute to admire the fresh array of summer flowers. Their smell is sweet, and their contrasting indigo blue color burns brightly against the other plant life in the green house. “Let’s grab a cart and we can wheel them into the main store, yeah? Then we can move onto the next batch.” I say, and Anna looks huffy.

“There’s more?”

“Yeah...it’s only ten A.M., we have a whole days’ worth of work ahead of us. This was just the beginning.” I explain as I grab a large cart that was abandoned by a customer and wheel it over. Its uneven wheels drag and squeak as I stop it in front of our work bench and start carefully placing the pots down. “Why don’t you go load up the compost and wheel it over here? We’re going to need more for these Marigolds.”

Still disgusted and uncertain, Anna trudges over to the compost pile just outside the greenhouse. The sound of a shovel shucking into the loose soil tells me she’s working, and for a second, I’m at ease. She’s finally doing something without whining, what a relief. The shovel clops down and I watch as the girl struggles to pick up pick up and push the giant wheel barrel over. It’s not even half full, and Anna’s putting all her strength into not tipping it over. “We’re going to need more than that, but this will do for now.” I say, and Anna huffs.

“What did you say these were again?” She asks a beat later, referring to the fresh blooming marigolds that are waiting to be repotted.

“They’re marigolds,” I tell her. “I love a good golden marigold.”

“They’re pretty,” Anna says, words far fonder than what I expected them to be. “Do you like them?”

Hesitation rests against my tongue. “I do like them.” I toss some fresh compost in a pot. “They were my dad's favorite flower.”

“Were?” she asks. “Is he--?”

“He died of cancer when I was twelve.”

Silence hangs over us, and I find that my mind is falling into a deep pit of undealt trauma. I don’t want to think about dad's death; it caused so much heartache. I don’t want to relive that pain; I don’t want to feel it again.

“Sorry to bring it up.” she says quietly, eyes staying low. “I had no idea.”

“Oh, it’s fine.” The lie rolls right over my teeth. I offer her a lopsided grin and shrug. “That was over ten years ago. Why don’t you run to the office...there’s an entire filing cabinet of seeds; grab the lily seeds, we can start planting those too now that I think about it.”

Her head tilts to the side and her keen blue eyes study me. “Are you okay?”

I play it off. “I’m totally fine. Like I said, that was well over ten years ago. It caught me off guard but he’s dead--” I shrug and let my shoulder fall loosely. “I can’t do anything to change that.”

She nods slowly. “Well, okay...I’ll be back then.” Then she’s gone. Quick and quiet as a field mouse, and I am left alone with my plants. Has it really been ten years since dad died? It can’t have been. It’s been so long. So, so long since I’ve seen his face, or felt his hugs. It’s been so long since I saw him coming home from down the dirt road. It’s been so long since...moms been okay. When he died, every good thing in my life went up in flames. Mom’s never been the same since he died...I have never been the same.

Tears burn against the corners of my eyes, and I feel an ache rise in my chest. My thoughts clot with hurt as I quickly draw in a deep breath and rub the tears from my eyes. Why am I crying? I shouldn’t be crying, I’m too old for this, I’m at work!

The marigolds sit in front of me on my work bench, all smiling at me with their bright golden faces, but I find no comfort in their cheer. Dad’s been dead for ten years, and not even the happy memory of flowers could offer me peace of mind.

Major Story #2 – Extended Murder Story

Lapping black ripples taunt the edges of the dock, the depths, they call out and beckon

passersby to join them. It's a tempting thought; wading out into the great black pool. It would be a welcomed pleasure to feel the icy waters swallow up the heat of anger; the hateful fire that burns in every man's soul. The fire is sometimes quieted, but it never truly is stanchd. It's always there, always smoking, sometimes it stirred and poked and perhaps it'll spark up; jump and show itself a little, but it goes back down once it's said its piece.

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The blood is quite literally on his hands.

His heart slumps down into his chest, just as the sun sinks behind the pine trees. The last golden rays of light melt like gold against the black lake. He kneels on the board walk a moment longer as the evening chill sets in. Danni, alone in his crimes, slowly cranes himself to standing. There's no one to be heard or seen, Sabrina had been the only one he'd come up here with. His wife was the only one to know of his actions, she was the last, and only one to witness it. In fact she was more than a witness, but the victim. She lived it out; until she wasn't. The strength of his hands had snuffed the breath from her chest. His fingers left bruises on her swan-ish neck, the neck he had been so infatuated with when they'd first met. Her eyes had half rolled back when she finally puffed out her last bit of air. She had such heavenly blue eyes; soft like clouds, and anyone who had an ounce of desire in them got lost in her gaze. Danni had been one of the fools who'd become so intoxicated with her beauty that he had to have her.

Sabrina had every male student in the high school wrapped around her, every last one, and to the day, five years later, she had followers. In their vows, Brina had vowed to be his and his alone, what a lie that had been. She was supposed to his, and his alone, and at first it

started that way, at first, she was all his. As time went on, her attitude changed, and Danni slowly began to lose little parts of her. Her attention, her eyes, her time, her body.

The whore cheated on him with his best friend from high school.

And that did the trick.

Danni's palms trembled as he rubbed the shakiness into his legs, he took one last breath of the cool night air before he turned on his heels to head back to his newly bought cabin. The windows of the cabin were dark; there had been no time to turn them on before the sun fell. The kitchen oven timer was screeching its annoying cry, for the cupcakes that Brina had been making were finished. Danni trotted right over to them, deliberately averting his eyes from the paling body on the floor.

Slightly burned on the top, but more than perfectly edible, Danni took the cupcakes out of the oven and set them on the counter to cool. Unfinished buttercream frosting sat in a mixing bowl right above his wife. She'd been making it right as he'd slammed her head on the counter, and choked her on the floor. A puddle of blood stains the granite counter; it's out of place in the clean, half furnished kitchen. Danni grabbed a paper towel and he quickly disposed of it in the garbage disposal. His mouth salivated at the smell of sweet, smooth frosting, and he found himself picking up the mixing beaters and finishing whipping the frosting.

He needed something sweet to distract his mind.

"You know, you always were a good baker." Danni comments to his wife, still refusing to look her in the eye. "Lucky me, right?" He says as he takes a dollop of the frosting of his finger and sucks it clean.

Brina says nothing; she can't. She's dead.

Her body still vacantly stared up at the ceiling.

Danni went to grab a butter knife and he began to smother each red cupcake in the creamy frosting. The very first one he finished frosting, he took a whopping bite out of. "So good." He says with a mouthful, taking a glance down at his wife. Instantly, his gaze darts back to his cupcake in front of him. "Too bad you weren't," he adds a beat later, swallowing hard and thinking for a moment. "You're mine," He tells her. "Ain't no one else ever going to have you again."

Major Story #3 – The K-15 Experiment

The entirety of my life has been spent in the compound hidden in the deep woods. I can't recall the last time I went outside, and because of that, my skin has come to match the color of the walls that surround me. I can't remember the last time there was a day where no one came to poke me with a needle or pester me with their scale ranked questions. There are memories in my mind that recall unfamiliar heavens outside of the compound, places that are

so innocently sweet; calling me to come and remember them, but they all are too good to be true. I don't know anything outside of these walls anymore, not anything that I'm comfortable with any more at least.

Hell is a strange place for everyone; it's unique to everyone's own tastes and preferences. My hell probably isn't anywhere close to being like yours. Mine is full of men and women in white coats; doctors, scientists. Their analyzing eyes question everything about me and who I am and what makes me so unique. Silver syringes full of burning medications automatically trigger a part of my brain to shut off and accept defeat in the fact that, I will always be tormented and questioned for my abilities. My hell is full of sleepless nights, nights where I've been forced to stay awake so the doctors could study the wave-lengths of my brain, and could examine my neurological patterns—so many sleepless nights, nights that have blended into days, and days of restlessness, frustration, and more answerless questions that seemingly no one would ever be able to understand.

They will never understand.

They can't, because I'm the furthest thing from normal there is in this world.

I don't even know what I am.

Am I even human?

I look like a human; I've got skin, it's unhealthily white. I've got eyes, they're tired and heavy. I've got a mouth and tongue, they can speak, but no one knows what I'm trying to say. I have a heart; beating, ever going, full of...feelings. Emotions; so deep, so raw, and beyond natural, and no one feels them like I do. I feel everything; the stress, the curiosity, pride, and excitement of others. I feel their own anxiety that tears them apart. I know of their dread and tiredness after they've worked a twenty-four-hour shift and long to leave and go to their own place of comfort.

I feel everything they do, and it's more than I can bear.

After living the same life, the same day, repeatedly for the past ten or so years... you tend to grow tired of the repetition. I don't know how the doctors and scientists do it; maybe it was because they could leave, or maybe it's because they received rewards and earnings for their work, but they never seemed to grow weary of their jobs.

They just loved to torment me; stick me, test me, work me, push me, prod me until I couldn't take it anymore.

I'm strong, I'm very strong and determined, but even I know of the humiliation of how much the human mind and body can take. It doesn't matter if I run laps all night or sit through a recording of men and women screaming and crying in pain, I've fallen short of expectation...and they've only ever pressed for more after—they demand I do better, demand I try again, in order to meet their expectation.

I know how it feels to hurt.

It's something that's so familiar to me, and I've learned to love it with the entirety of my being.

I don't even know how it's possible to have endured so many tortures for so long; with the endless cycle of being treated like I'm worthless, I've come to realize that I am in fact of little worth. Apart from being an interesting experiment, and an intriguing person to examine, I don't do much good apart from that.

In this life, I'm here to serve one purpose, that's to show whoever is watching me what I'm made out of.

What is that you might ask?

To be honest, I'm not sure myself, but whatever I give them, they always seem to like.

Give them resistance to physical exhaustion; give them emotional numbness, and yet show that you understand and relate to everyone else's, you make some scientists very happy.

That's the thing about someone like me...I'm called a Path.

An Empath, if you just have to know the whole name.

And Empath's can feel and soak in everyone's emotions around them; they know exactly what's going on inside a person's head without saying a word, and they can relate to other people well. It actually sounds like a somewhat helpful ability, but in the hands of the wrong people, like the people I'm with...they tend to think they can use what you have for their gain. With the ability to be an Empath and feeling everyone's emotions, I can also become overwelled with too many feelings and thoughts, so much so, I can shut myself off from feeling anything at all, which for some unexplained reason makes me an asset to the people I am with.

Someone who can turn off their emotions and work tirelessly out in the field is a great "resource" to have. Having been hearing this for the past couple years has made me become rather dull to remembering why and how I'm important. Most days, I've stopped caring for what it's worth—I don't care anymore. Not about myself, not about what I'm being tested for, and not for what I'm going to have to do one day. I simply cannot care—If I just do my job, maybe one of these days they'll leave me alone...and if not, then so be it.

I don't care.

I don't care about caring; I don't care to care. Caring is of little regard to me. I have no worth; I am of little matter or concern to any passing thought. I'm not bothered by the actions of past crimes, or the conviction of future guilts. What was done to me and what will continue to be done to me—I don't care. What I've done and will do? Doesn't matter.

Because I don't matter.

I never have, and I never will.

And that's fine with me.

The static sound of ringing buzzed in my ears for what felt like an eternity. The static burned against my eardrums, and I so desperately wanted to throw the headphones off; tear the sticky pads with wires that were stuck to nearly scalped head and run to the nearest exit, but I knew there was no point. I let the weight in my face pull my posture forward, causing me to slouch.

I waited for the test to begin.

Greenback, Dr. Greenback to be specific, wrote a note down on his chart before looking back to me. “I don’t want to see any signs of activity. Got it, K?” He asks me.

My head nods ever so slightly.

“Alright,” He says. Greenback’s memory is etched as far back as the first day I arrived here—or at least the first day I remember. He’s a strange man; much older than what he was ten years ago. He has a receding hair line, that’s etched with grey hairs. His beard is also thinning. His keen blue eyes study me, as he pressed the tape recorder that sits between us.

The static clicks, and I know what’s going to come.

It’s not subtle this time; a scream rings through the canals of my ears and travels down to the most sensitive organ in my body. My heart wants to lurch in agony as the blood curdling screams ring out.

There comes another cry, it’s a male this time, and he sounds as though he’s being beat to death. They’re crying overlaps into one shattering plea, and it grows louder with each passing second. Hurt prods at my heart and an ache develops at the back of my throat and travels into my jaw as the screaming intensifies.

I can’t feel it, I tell myself.

Don’t feel it. Don’t feel it, K-15.

Just pass the test and move on.

The pleas grow stronger, and I force my mind to focus on anything but the emotions these people are wailing about. My eyes zoned out on the machine that’s in front of Greenback. It’s keeping track of my waves; the activity in my brain. There’s another showing them the rhymes of my heart, another counting of my breath I draw in. They want to know everything; they want me to shut off my emotions entirely—me, an Empath, who feels everything!

My wrists tremble as another shrill wail bleeds into my ears; it’s younger, female. Almost child like. She pleads for help, and it’s almost as if it’s purposefully being directed at me.

“Please! Help! Help! Help me! HELP ME!!!” She yells, and I can almost see the tear on her face.

Bloody, bruised skin. Tear against her flesh. Horror struck eyes full of desperation as she reaches through the headphones to me.

“HELP ME!!!” She pounds a fist against glass, and my mind begins to race.

She’s in pain, she needs to be helped, I want to help!

I want to get her out.

The cries all blend into a horrendous scourge of torture, and it clicks in my head that Greenback isn't thrilled at me. The machine watching my waves is spiking—the needle drawing the waves on the graph paper is shooting up and down, showing them my brain felt what I heard. My heart has jumped up to a hundred thirty-two BPM and I'm taking in more oxygen than before.

Greenback's head shakes in disapproval, and his lips part with a tsk.

He cuts the crying people out of my ears and immediately take the headphones off.

"Not you're best day." He comments. "I've seen you go a lot longer with a lot worse." He tells me, disapproval rests on his lips. His brows knit together, forming an angry line and he rubs his jaw while he recollects his thoughts. "You didn't even last thirty seconds. I think that's your new personal worst."

I just glare at him.

He presses an intercom link to reach out to the people outside the room we're in. "Take him back to his room." He orders, and without missing a beat my escorts enter. There two men whom I'd become very familiar with over the years. I still didn't know their names, but I knew what they were capable of doing. They carried semi-automatics over their shoulders, and let me tell ya, they aren't afraid to use them.

I speak from experience.

"Just back to his room, sir?"

"Yes. Hobbs will be in to see him later."

"Yes sir," The first replies as they go to tear the sticky pads off my scalp and chest. "Get up."

I obey without a second thought. My mind does begin to wonder though, as we leave the room, who in the world Hobbs is. I've heard lots of names around here before. General Swayne, Greenback of course, Dr. Dempsy, Ashpaw, but Hobbs? That's a new one.

"Greenback," I call over my shoulder, and I immediately feel one the soldiers press a gun to my back—they worry I'll step out of line. "Whose Hobbs?" I pause and look back at him. "Never heard of him before."

"That's none of your concern. You'll learn who she is soon enough."

Her?

Hobbs is a girl?

Greenback's sharp eyes meet mine. "Now get back to your room." He's stern, and my soldiers press me on with a nudge.

Now my attentions peaked.

I cannot help but wonder who this new Hobbs girl is. It's not often you hear of new people coming into the compound. Most of the time, the people around here are very private about

what's going on: who's new, who's coming and going, what's going on in certain rooms, who ordered what to happen. Everything's a big secret. There are only a few people who I know here—know by name at least. I see so many faces, countless faces, but so few actually speak to me, so few share their identities with me, and yet so many know *my* name.

I'm the only one here who's not allowed to know anything.

Apparently, I am allowed to know the name of this Hobbs girl, however.

Why did Greenback mention her name?

He's usually so careful about what he says around me...and yet he so carelessly revealed her name and identity.

Was she important?

Or was she so much of a nobody that it didn't matter if I knew her name or not?

That can't be it...anyone who is in here has to be somewhat important. They don't just go handing out applications to work in a major secret compound in the middle of nowhere.

Hobbs had to be special.

My guards slide open the white door into my plain room, and they leave me without another word.

There's a bed in the corner, unmade. There's a nightstand table with a warm lamp on it, and a notebook and pencil that I'm allowed to journal and doodle with. There's a toilet, sink and mirror, and nothing more.

It's cozy.

With a quick flop, a gush of cool air rises up as I fall into my cool white sheets. I roll over and my eyes stare up at the concrete ceiling above me. There comes the buzz of the air filtering through the vents, and there's the rush of water moving in the pipes not too far off. The sounds further push me into my head as I focus on the curious thought of wondering who Hobbs is.

I've seen women before—here they are mainly nurses. I don't think I've ever met a female doctor or scientist. Was she even a doctor or a scientist? Who was she, and why was she here? What was she going to do? Help me? Hurt me? Make me feel like I'm the most valuable piece of garbage in the world?

The hours seem to pass slowly—or is it minutes—time is nothing but an illusion here. Sometimes seconds will pass and a week will go by. Other times a lifetime will go by and only an hour has passed. I don't like waiting; it takes too long. And my curiosity has truly gotten the better of me and I cannot help but wonder who in the world is going to walk through the door to my room.

As if she heard my beckoning thoughts, my door buzzes and it slides open.

My body jumps up into an upright position, for I cannot help but want to look at her and get a feel for who she is.

Hobbs is also curious by nature. In the way her dirty brown eyes glitter, in the way her jaw sits loosely. She looks at me, not as if I'm some animal in a cage, but like I'm a friend she knew from long ago. She's gentle, rather timid. I wouldn't think a woman like her would be found in a place like this. She is younger, had to be around my age, maybe a little older. She's easy on the eyes, that's for sure. Her wavy braid hair is pulled back in a low bun, and her eyes are still untouched by the harsh realities of this world. She's much too gentle to be here if you ask me.

Hobbs steps in a little more, and the door closes fully behind her. She has a clipboard tucked under her arm and she's already reaching for a pen in her back pocket. I can feel her uncertainty as she gets closer, she's never done something like this before.

I take that back; she has, she's experienced, but she's still not totally confident, not with someone like *me* at least.

"So, you're Jack." She greets softly, her lips are as tender as her words.

My mind puzzles the name.

Jack?

Who is Jack? Am I Jack?

My name is K-15...

"Jack," She says my name, and I snap out of my head. "My name is Hobbs."

I tilt my head and look at her unsurely. "Am I Jack?"

"Yes," She replies with a gentle shake of her head. "That's your birth name. K-15 is your call number." She pauses for a moment, and she considers what to say next. "I got permission to entreat you to your real name."

I just stare at her, and I notice that she shifts her weight back ever so slightly. "It's nice to meet you, I've heard a lot about you. All good things of course, but it's very nice to meet you. I'm Hobbs." Her tongue gets tripped up, but she recovers easily. "I'll be your personal moderator from now on."

"Moderator? For what?"

"For all things regarding your health, your abilities, or your industry output."

"My industry?" I repeat, raising an eyebrow. "What industry?"

"Your line of work is considered to be dangerous and unstable. You're new, and not a lot of people are going to like getting to know you. I'm here to put in a good word for you and make sure you don't do anything you're not supposed to." She answers me, and it finally clicks in my head that Hobbs is a lot smarter than I anticipated.

"I don't work."

"You'd be surprised to learn that you do in fact work, and it's about to get a lot harder." She speaks as though I've never heard of such a threat before, and her eyes fill with

sympathy. I don't need or want her sympathy however, seeing as I'm always worked to a breaking point. This will be nothing new.

My shoulders shrug up, and I allow my back to slouch. "Hate to break it to you, but if whatever I am doing now is "work" then, whatever they have waiting for me next will be nothing. I'm used to the pain."

Hobbs falls quiet—her thoughts however are as loud as gunfire. She's trying to find the right thing to say; does she comfort me, does she ignore my comment, or argue back? She doesn't know. Her stress ebbs off her, soaking into me, magnifying my own stress and anxiousness. "I'm sorry...pain is something no one should have to live with." She pauses for a moment, once again, choosing her words carefully. "I read up on your profile...they said you have chronic pain. With being an Empath and all...I can't imagine what that is like. I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

I grunt. They all say that; not even all of them will say they are sorry, they've just lost the care to even bother anymore. She'll eventually become just like them, and soon she won't even bother to express her concern or pity. They all become like that, if they aren't already acting in such a way.

"Would you like anything before we go over the weeks agenda?"

Agenda? That's new.

"Coffee? A donut?" She offers with a hopeful smile.

"I'm fine, thanks." I decline with a shake of my head, and I press to find answers to the real question at hand here. "What do you mean by "agenda"?" I ask her, eyes searching her own to make sure she doesn't half-ass an answer and lie.

"We're going to sit down and talk about what's going to happen to you this week. You start training soon...and I'm going to need you to be on your best behavior for that."

"Excuse me? Training?"

"You've been selected to be trained in the Maine Defense department called T.R.A.C.K. You'll be trained to undergo operative missions in foreign and enemy countries, and to track down anyone who needs to be eliminated."

"Eliminated." I state the word, and she nods. "Like killed?"

"Yes,"

"I can't kill people."

Her lips fall downwards, and I see it in her eyes that she hurts for me. "That's not for either of us to decide. You're the governments property and the military's tool...you're out of luck to get a say in what your life is going to become." She shakes her head and looks down for a moment. Regret pulls at her heart, and for a second, I am able to see that Hobbs is so much more than a woman doing her job, but she is an emotional and sensitive creature. Her hurt and pity for me runs so much deeper than the outside, but it is deep and wide on the

inside, and all she can muster up to say to me is a helpless whisper. “I’m sorry, Jack,” I cringe at the hearing of my own name, and she sighs deeply. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure you’re not turned into something you’re not.”