

# **Short Story Creative Writing Club**

## **Volume 8**

**January 2025**

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome reader, to volume 8 of the Short Story Creative Writing Club's short story magazine. Congratulations to every single writer who contributed work to this collection. You've gone through the various stages of brainstorming, planning drafting, and finally editing your work and here result of all those weeks of hard work. I hope the readers both appreciate and admire the effort that has gone into bringing these stories to life.

I would like to thank everyone who has supported my students in their journey to becoming writers. When you read these stories please keep in mind the effort and passion the writers put into them, but most of all, thank you for reading.

*Editor*

*Cameron Beale*

# LAST CHANCE

Ahmet Fazıl Baysal

It was a typical rainy midnight in Manchester, and Alfred stayed up all night trying to fix things. As the CEO of Los Pollos, Alfred had always worked hard, thinking about his family and trying to build a future for them. But tonight felt different. The company was struggling, and there was no way to fix it. Alfred had always wanted to leave something behind for his family when he was gone, but now that dream seemed to be slipping away. Jesse, his loyal assistant, walked back and forth in the large office. His dream had always been to find true love and retire early. But now, with the company on the brink of collapse, his dream of a peaceful life seemed far away. Alfred and Jesse worried that they would lose their jobs and income. But there was someone who would benefit from all this. Gustavo, the former CEO of Los Pollos. He had been waiting for years to get his old job back. Everything was going as he had planned; while Gustavo enjoyed himself, Alfred and Jesse worked hard, trying everything they could to make money.

Jesse stood by the window, looking out into the rain. "Alfred," he said quietly, "this isn't working. We've tried everything, but the company is going down fast."

Alfred rubbed his eyes, feeling the weight of the situation. "I know, Jesse. But I've always worked hard for this. I wanted to build something for my family. It's just not happening."

Jesse turned to him. "What if we try something else? Something a little less legal?"

Alfred's eyebrows raised in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Look, there's money to be made in other ways," Jesse said, pacing around the room. "People like us, we're stuck. But the mafia? They're always looking for people to do jobs for them. And right now, their hired killers are locked up. There's an opening."

Alfred stared at him, unsure whether to laugh or be angry. "You want us to become... hitmen?"

Jesse nodded. "It's risky, but the only out I see. We get the right people; we make enough money to fix everything. Maybe even more than enough."

Alfred hesitated. It was a dangerous idea, but the company was about to fall apart anyway. They needed more options.

"All right," Alfred finally said. "Let's see where this goes."

At first, their jobs were small. They started with petty criminals, people who they wouldn't miss. The pay could have been better, but it was enough to get by. The adrenaline rush was something neither of them had expected.

"Not bad," Jesse said after their first job, cleaning the blood off his hands. "How does it feel, Alfred?"

"It feels... wrong," Alfred replied, wiping sweat from his forehead. "But it's done. And we're still alive."

As the days went on, Alfred was growing more desperate. Their early jobs had dried up, and they needed more profitable targets to keep their heads above water. Jesse started talking about bigger jobs—people with more influence and people with money—dangerous people, but worth the risk.

"We can't keep doing this low-level stuff forever," Jesse said one evening, pacing around the small apartment. "We need bigger targets. People who can pay well. And I know a few names."

Alfred leaned back in his chair, wiping his face. "You know how risky that is. These people have connections and power. If we screw up, we won't just be dead—we'll disappear."

Jesse gave him a look. "We've already gone too far. We either keep going up or fall hard. What will it be?"

Alfred hesitated, but then he nodded. "All right. Let's do it. But we need to be careful."

The first of their big targets was a wealthy businessman, a known mafia associate. He had enemies, but he also had money. Alfred and Jesse executed the job perfectly. Clean. No mistakes. However, it took only a short time for them to realize that bigger targets had more significant consequences. Soon, the heat was on them. People started asking questions, and they were getting closer to being caught. One night, Jesse and Alfred sat in their hideout, surrounded by stacks of cash from their recent jobs. Jesse watching his gun, his face serious. We pissed

off the wrong people, Alfred. These aren't just criminals. These are people who have power—real power. We're in deep."

Alfred ran his hand through his hair. "I know, Jesse. But we're too far in now. There's no turning back. We have to keep moving forward."

It was then that Gustavo reappeared. Gustavo had been watching Alfred and Jesse for a while. He saw the mess they were in and knew exactly how to take advantage of it. Gustavo walked into the room, his face was calm as always. He had been watching Alfred and Jesse for a while, waiting for the right moment to strike. He knew this day would come, and now was the time.

"I've been keeping an eye on you," Gustavo said, sitting across from them. "You two have done well, but you're in trouble now. I think I can help you."

Alfred looked at Gustavo with suspicious eyes. "And why would you help us?"

Gustavo smiled, his eyes cold. "I have people. People who can protect you. I can get you out of this mess. But you need to trust me."

Jesse crossed his arms, still unsure. "What's the catch?"

Gustavo leaned forward. "Just one small favor. You do something for me, and I'll take care for the rest. I'll make sure you're safe."

Alfred and Jesse exchanged a look. They had no choice. They needed help, and this was their only option.

"All right," Alfred said. "What's the favor?"

Gustavo smiled slyly as he leaned back in his chair. "The favor is simple," he said. "I need you two to take out a certain person—someone who has become a problem for me. Once the job is done, I'll cover everything else. "And who is this person?"

Gustavo's expression remained calm. "A business rival. Someone who's been trying to get in the way of my plans. He's not a big target, so I should not have many problems."

Jesse looked at Alfred, then back at Gustavo. "Why can't you do it? You've got power, you've got people."

Gustavo smirked. "I don't want to risk getting my hands dirty. That's where you two come in."

Alfred hesitated. Something about Gustavo's calm demeanor didn't sit right with him. But they were already in too deep. They needed Gustavo's protection if they had any hope of surviving. "All right," Alfred finally said. "We'll do it."

Later that night, Alfred and Jesse prepared for the job. The target was Anthony Hayes, a well-known businessman with ties to shady people. They knew where he'd be and when. It was supposed to be quick and easy—just another job to get them out of their mess.

But as they moved closer to Hayes' office, everything went wrong.

They were almost at the door when his phone buzzed. He looked at the screen and froze. "Alfred," he whispered, his voice shaking. "Something's not right."

Before Alfred could respond, a squad of police officers burst through the room. They had been waiting for them. Alfred and Jesse didn't have time to react. They were surrounded.

"Drop the weapons!" a voice shouted. "You're under arrest for murder."

Jesse turned to Alfred, his eyes wide in disbelief. "It's a setup. Gustavo... he played us."

The officers closed in, guns aimed at them. Alfred and Jesse didn't stand a chance. As they were handcuffed and dragged away, Alfred's mind raced. They had trusted Gustavo, and now they were paying the price. The plan had always been for Gustavo to betray them—but they hadn't realized how far he would go.

Alfred felt the weight of everything crashing down on him. He had wanted to protect his family and build a future for them, but now, all that seemed lost.

Once they were in the back of the police van, Jesse muttered, his voice bitter, "I can't believe we fell for it."

Alfred stared out the small window of the van, his thoughts a chaotic mess. He had thought they could turn things around, but now it was over. Everything they had done had only led them to the hell. They arrived at the station the next day; the officers wasted no time. They were marched through the hallways, past detectives who exchanged knowing looks. Alfred and Jesse were thrown into separate interrogation rooms.

Gustavo had been watching from the shadows, ensuring everything played out just as he had planned. While Alfred and Jesse were being processed, he sat in the comfort of his office, sipping on a drink. The plan had gone perfectly. Alfred now and Jesse were no longer a threat to him. They had outlived their usefulness. After hours of questioning, Alfred was left alone in a cold, empty cell. He had no way out now. The company was gone, his family's future ruined, and all because of one man's ambition—Gustavo's betrayal. They sat in their small cell the next day, feeling trapped and hopeless. But they weren't giving up. They had to find a way out.

One night, a fire broke out in the prison. It started in the kitchen, but it quickly spread. The loud alarms and confusion gave Alfred and Jesse the chance they needed. Amid the chaos, a mysterious man appeared in their cell. He known as "The Boss" around the prison. He was quiet and dangerous they had to be careful, but he offered them a way out now.

"This fire is your chance," The Boss whispered. "I can get you out, but you must move fast."

Alfred and Jesse didn't hesitate. They followed The Boss through the smoke-filled halls. They moved quickly, sticking to the shadows and avoiding the guards. When they reached the back door, The Boss gave them new clothes.

"Change quickly," he said. "The guards are too busy. Get out now."

Alfred and Jesse took the clothes and ran. The fire caused enough confusion for them to slip away unnoticed. They were free.

But freedom came at a cost. They had to change their appearance and their names. They had to be careful and couldn't stay in one place for too long. The world they knew was gone. They had to start over.

Weeks passed, and they kept a low profile. They hid in the shadows, always on the move. They stayed close to the city, watching Gustavo. They followed him everywhere, knowing he believed they were dead. They wanted revenge, and this was their chance.

One night, they followed Gustavo to an old factory outside the city. The place was dark and quiet. They watched him enter, unaware that they were right behind him.

Alfred and Jesse had set everything up. The moment Gustavo stepped inside, the doors slammed shut, trapping him inside. They moved forward, guns in hand.

"You thought we were dead, didn't you?" Alfred said, his voice cold.

Gustavo froze, his eyes wide. "You... you're alive?"

"Yeah," Jesse said. "And we're not done yet."

Gustavo's begging kept going, but it was useless. His pleas were cut short by a gunshot. Right after that, another gunshot was heard. Just when everything seemed quiet, a third gunshot echoed a few minutes later. This was the last one. Out of the two armed men, three shots had been fired. Did Alfred and Jesse each fire once, and then one of them shoot again? Or did one of them fire all three shots alone? The truth was very different. Alfred couldn't take Gustavo's voice anymore and shot him in the heart. Still shocked by what had happened, Jesse was about to face an even bigger shock. Alfred pointed the gun at him. While Jesse told Alfred to lower the weapon, Alfred didn't wait and shot him too. Then, he fell to the ground, saying, "Because of you." He kept saying this while wiping the tears from his face. Alfred knew what was coming. He would spend the rest of his life in prison, and he would have no one left. His whole life flashed before his eyes like a movie. Alfred had already decided how this movie would end. With the third and final gunshot, the movie was over.

# THE CURSED SHIP

Asude Zeynep Uzun

James and Emily, siblings, were waiting at the port for the ship they were going to travel on. James was very excited because it was his first time boarding a ship. Emily was trying to calm her brother down. Suddenly, the ship's horn was heard. The ship docked, and everyone began to board in turn. Once the two siblings boarded the ship, they went to their rooms and settled in. James, being a curious person, immediately wanted to go out and explore, but "I want to rest a little first" Emily said. James, not paying attention to his sister, began wandering around the ship. The ship was indeed very large and beautiful. It even had a water park. James was eager to swim, but then he noticed something strange about the people around him. Some were whispering constantly, while others stood staring into space, lost in thought. This caught James's attention, and his curiosity grew even more. A few minutes later, he made his way to the ship's dining hall. The hall was quite large and elegantly decorated. However, the strange expressions on people's faces were overshadowing the beauty of the surroundings.

An elderly man sitting in a corner caught James's attention. The man was carefully examining an old book and occasionally glancing around nervously. James, gathering his courage, approached him and politely asked, "Excuse me, what's going on here? Why are people acting so strangely?"

The old man, without looking properly at him, smiled faintly. "You're new, aren't you? This journey on the ship is not as ordinary as you think. My advice to you is, don't draw attention and stop being so curious."

James was even more intrigued by this response. "But why? What do you mean?" he asked. The man closed his book and walked away. James, with questions swirling in his mind, decided to return to his room. Emily was lying on the bed, reading a book when James entered. As soon as he stepped into the room, he told her what he had seen. "Emily, something's wrong on this ship. People are acting weird. I spoke to a man, but he wouldn't tell me anything. He just told me not to draw attention."

Emily smiled and nodded as she listened. "James, maybe you're overreacting. This is a big ship, and everyone can be in a different mood. Just relax a little, maybe your thoughts will pass. However, James was irritated by his sister's calm attitude.

"No, Emily, this isn't normal! I'm going to investigate. If you don't want to come, that's fine." Seeing her brother so worked up, Emily became a little concerned. "Okay, James. But be careful. If you find something strange, come back immediately, alright?"

James nodded and left the room. This time, he decided to go to the lower decks of the ship. As he descended the stairs, the corridors grew quieter. There were fewer people on the lower decks, and that unnerved James a bit. But his curiosity pushed his fear aside.

After a while, he stopped in front of a door. The sign on it read, "Staff Entrance," but the door was slightly ajar, and strange sounds were coming from inside. James, nervously, pushed the door open slightly and peeked inside. The room was filled with various devices, and several people were working on them, focused.

When an elderly woman noticed James entering, she quickly turned toward him. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" she asked sternly.

James froze in surprise. "I was just exploring. I think I came in by mistake."

The woman examined James carefully. Then she suddenly smiled and began to approach him. "Look, this area is not for passengers. Let me take you back to your room, okay?"

James was disturbed by her behavior but saw no other option. The woman gently led him toward the door. But just before leaving, James glanced at one of the devices and was stunned by what he saw. The device displayed detailed information about passengers, tracking their movements.

After the woman escorted James outside and locked the door, he hurried back to his room and told Emily everything. "Emily, something's going on with this ship! People are being watched, every movement is being recorded. I saw their information on a monitor!"



Seeing the concern on her brother's face, Emily took a more serious tone. "James, this is really strange. Maybe we should ask the authorities."

"No," James said. "I don't trust them. I think they're hiding something."

Emily took a deep breath. "Alright, then. We'll figure this out ourselves. But we have to be careful." The two siblings decided to investigate the ship more carefully. Emily went to look for another way into the staff room, while James continued observing the strange behavior of the people on the ship.

After a while, Emily found an air vent. From here, they could see into the staff room. Inside, people were discussing something while looking at monitors. From their conversation, it became clear that this ship was not just an ordinary passenger vessel, but a cover for an experiment where passengers were unknowingly involved in scientific tests. Emily and James were shocked by what they overheard. This ship was actually a research facility in disguise, and the passengers were part of experiments they didn't know about. The two siblings decided they needed to come up with an escape plan. But just then, a staff member noticed them. The staff member quickly called for security. As Emily and James tried to escape, they found themselves trapped in a room on the lower deck. While James was examining a device, he realized it was a machine that could block all signals.

Emily said, "This might help, but we don't know how to use it."

James examined the instructions on the device and managed to get it working. This allowed them to unlock all the doors and reach the control room. In the control room, the two siblings locked down the ship's systems, rendering the experiment's coordinators powerless. Although most of the passengers didn't understand what was happening, James and Emily knew exactly what they had achieved.

Finally, they found a radio device and contacted the coast guard. Shortly afterward, the ship was stopped by authorities, and the passengers were rescued. The people responsible for the experiment were arrested, and James and Emily had just survived the biggest adventure of their lives.

As they disembarked from the ship, Emily looked at her brother and smiled. "If it weren't for your curiosity, maybe no one would have noticed what was going on. But next time, you might not be so lucky—please be careful."

James grinned and nodded. "Okay, sis. But admit it, this journey was way more exciting than we expected!" The two siblings, hugging each other, began walking toward the shore. This experience had both frightened them and brought them closer together. Life doesn't always go as planned, but sometimes the greatest adventures come when we least expect them.



# VENOM OF SPIDERS

Elif Yılmaz

It was just another ordinary day for Daryl. It was January. He had returned home from his office and placed his belongings on his desk. As he buttoned up his jacket, he turned on the coffee machine. He hung his coat and sat on the couch. He read the newspaper. When he heard the clicking sound of the coffee machine, he calmly stood up and poured coffee into his red cup. He took the cup and went to his study room. He took out his belongings calmly and started looking at the office accounts where he worked as a bookkeeper.

He worked non-stop for about three hours. Just before he finished his work, his eyes fell on the bookshelves. On the top shelf, he saw a photo frame lying horizontally. He stood up curiously and turned the frame around. It was the last picture of his family before he lost his family in a car accident. As soon as he saw it, he had thousands of flashbacks. Moment of accident, before the accident. He quickly put the frame back. He sat down on the chair and started thinking calmly. In the summer, they used to go on vacation. The beach, the sea, the sand. All of them formed a whole. Suddenly, a sound frightened him. He felt many little footsteps under his feet. Looking at the floor, he was shocked by what he saw. A lot of spiders were walking under his feet. He cleaned them quickly. When he sat back in the chair, he started thinking again calmly: He and his wife watched their children while swimming at the beach.

"Hey! Dad, I found a seashell." When he felt the spiders under his feet again, he realized that the spiders increased every time he thought about the past. He decided to talk to his close friend Mark to find a solution. He got dressed and left the house.

Daryl arrived at Mark's house when it was almost midnight. He knocked on the door. Mark opened the door, and it was clear he had just woken up. "Daryl? Is there a problem, buddy?"

Breathing heavily, Daryl didn't know how to explain. "Mark, I can't stop them. They're everywhere. Everywhere, Mark."

"What do you mean everywhere?"

"Spiders, Mark, spiders." Mark needed help understanding what his friend was talking about.

"Come inside, it's cold out. Don't stand there." Daryl quickly entered the house and began pacing in the living room. Mark went to get him some water. Daryl didn't want the water.

"I need something stronger."

Mark poured two glasses of whiskey. Daryl downed it and kept walking in nervous steps.

"Buddy! What happened? Tell me."

"Oh, Mark! I came home today after working for long hours. Suddenly, I noticed the picture of Marie and the kids. And I realized that spiders were growing everywhere in my house when I thought about the past. Even if I clean them, they keep coming. Maybe they're multiplying even right now! What should I do?"

Daryl's eyes widened in panic as if he couldn't hold on to reality. With every step, the thought that more spiders would appear made cold sweat run down his body. Mark watched him, feeling as if he were trapped in the walls of a maze. He knew he had to do something but had no idea what to do.

"Buddy, you need to calm down a bit. This could be something mental. Stress, tiredness, maybe—" Daryl looked at him momentarily, but his eyes were full of fear.

"No, Mark, this isn't just mental! They are real. Everything is real! When I went to my room just now, I saw another one. Right in front of me, by the wall but what's this? I realized it could move! The spiders gather in one place, and I can only see some of them. The others are always hiding from my sight."

Mark took a step forward, trying to stay calm and searching for a way to calm Daryl.

"Look, take a deep breath. We need to do something about this. We can find a solution but first, let me ask you something."

Daryl impatiently nodded and looked into Mark's eyes. Mark continued.

"Daryl, are these spiders just a visual hallucination? Are they really out there, or are they just following you?"

Daryl reacted as if a light bulb had gone on in his head.

"I'm not sure exactly but here's something else. The moment I noticed that painting, everything changed. Now, there's always something behind me but this painting is so interesting! Marie, the kids... it feels like there's a connection between the spiders' movement and the painting's past. Like, even touching it affects me."

Mark took a deep breath and looked toward the corner of the room.

"Okay, let's try to calm down a bit more. There may be a solution. We may need to do something together. We have to try something."

At that moment, Mark suddenly remembered something while looking at the piano in the room. He observed Daryl and moved closer.

"Daryl, I have an idea. You know, there's a piano in this house. We can try to distract you for a while. Listen to some music and relax. Maybe this could help clear the spiders out of your mind."

Daryl looked at Mark in surprise but accepted the idea immediately.

"But... playing the piano... how could that help me?"

Mark smiled.

"Maybe it's about ignoring certain things. This could be a different way to approach it. Let's try. We might be able to guide your thoughts in another direction."

Daryl paused for a moment, then took a deep breath and nodded.

"Okay, I'll give it a try."

Mark sat Daryl at the piano and waited silently for a while. Daryl's hands moved over the keys a few times before silence was broken, and the soft sound of the piano filled the room. At first, Daryl played cautiously, but soon, his fingers moved faster across the keys. The music was so calming that Mark closed his eyes and let it wash over him.

Daryl slowly started to calm down and felt a strange sense of peace. It was as if each key he pressed was pushing the spiders in his mind further away.

"Mark... maybe this... is helping."

However just then, the sound of the piano changed, and as Daryl pressed one of the keys, his focus broke. Slowly, he stood up and moved away from the piano.

"It hasn't changed," he said, but in a calmer voice. "Everything is still the same but maybe we must find another solution."

Mark turned to Daryl, noticing the change in his voice.

"Okay, we need to try more. Now, I want to ask you a few questions. Did you notice anything else when you talked about the painting? A detail in the painting could be related to these spiders."

Daryl thought for a moment, trying to remember the painting.

"Yes. I think right under Marie's shadow, there's something but I couldn't tell what it was. Everything looks so complicated and blurry."

"Maybe that shadow means something but whatever is under the painting might be connected to the spiders. We need to pay a little more attention. And then... maybe we should take a different approach but no matter what, we'll solve this together."

Daryl took a deep breath, still moving around as if lost but now, a few solutions formed in his mind.

After a while, Daryl and Mark started to notice that something was changing as they walked through the house's other rooms. Daryl's eyes were filled with a sense of peace as he observed every detail in the room. At that moment, the spiders and the confusion in his mind slowly faded. Although he still had fears, the music gently calmed the storm inside his head.

One day, Mark made a surprising suggestion.

"You know, there's a piano in this house. This could be preparation for that recital. You can perform for everyone when you feel a little more secure."

Daryl paused for a moment and then smiled slowly.

"A piano recital?" he said, a bit surprised but hopeful. "I think. Maybe I can do that."

Daryl's mood, which had seemed lost initially, was slowly returning. The doubt and anxiety he had felt before sitting at the piano were now replaced with determination. Mark gave Daryl a reassuring look, and they walked toward the piano together.

A week later, Daryl's significant piano recital preparations were complete. The rooms in the house were filled with chairs for the audience, and outside, a light breeze was breaking the silence of the night. Daryl took a deep breath as he stood on stage before the piano keys. His heart wasn't racing. There was only peace in the quiet space within him.

Mark was sitting in a chair beside the stage. Daryl took one last look at Mark and touched the keys. At that moment, the spiders in his mind were completely gone. His focus shifted to how his fingers would move on the piano keys and the world slowly disappearing with each note.

The first notes began softly, each one spreading slowly like a sail moving in the wind. The music filled the room, touching everyone in the audience and bringing deep peace to each person's soul. As Daryl moved his fingers quickly across the keys, he felt every sound returning his strength. It was as if every note was pushing away the confusion, fear, and anxiety in his mind.

In the front row, the audience watched Daryl's every movement with great attention. Suddenly, Daryl found himself at the piano. This was more than just a place to play—it was a moment to overcome his past fears and confusion. This moment gave him the power to rearrange his entire life.

Slowly, the music became calmer but each note carried meaning. Daryl continued to play each melody and arpeggio, pushing further with every note, playing for himself and everyone there.

Sitting among the audience, Mark noticed that with every note Daryl played, it wasn't just music. It was a kind of healing, a rebirth. In that moment, every second Daryl spent playing the piano was both a reunion and a moment of liberation.

When the recital ended, the audience greeted Daryl with a great round of applause. Daryl smiled at the piano. His fears were behind him, and with each note, he had rediscovered his soul. He felt safe, leaving his past and dark thoughts behind. Now, he had given a gift to everyone watching.

Mark walked up to the stage and placed a friendly hand on Daryl's shoulder.

"You did it, my friend. You really did it."

Daryl paused for a moment, then simply took a deep breath and nodded.

"Yes! Finally. I did it."

And that night, the piano melody echoed through every corner of the house, as if it were ending with a kind of peace. Daryl's music, fighting the darkness, was the final point of a journey that had changed both his life and the lives of those around him.

# CATS AND THE KEY

Emine Kayra Aykaç

Pankek and Rıfkı lived in a small, sunlit cottage at the edge of a dense forest. Pankek, a round, sleepy soft gray fluffy, loved curling up by the window, while Rıfkı, a sleek black cat with sharp green eyes, was always full of mischief. One breezy morning, Rıfkı nudged Pankek awake, his whiskers twitching with excitement.

“Wake up, Pankek! I saw something shiny in the woods last night!” Pankek groaned but stretched lazily. “Shiny things can wait,” he mumbled, but Rıfkı had already darted toward the door. With a reluctant sigh, Pankek followed, their latest adventure just beginning under the golden morning sun.

Pankek trudged behind Rıfkı, the cool forest air rustling through the leaves. Sunlight filtered down in golden beams, and every so often, Rıfkı’s tail flicked with excitement. “Hurry up, sleepy furball!” Rıfkı called, bounding ahead. Pankek yawned but picked up his pace.

Suddenly, they reached a small clearing where something shimmered beneath a pile of leaves. Rıfkı pounced, scattering leaves everywhere. “Look, Pankek!” he meowed. Beneath the leaves was a tiny, silver key with intricate swirls. Pankek tilted his head.

“What does it open?”

“I don’t know,” Rıfkı replied, his green eyes sparkling, “but we’re going to find out!”

The two cats shared a glance—curiosity sparking even in Pankek’s sleepy eyes—and set off deeper into the forest, the little silver key tucked carefully in Rıfkı’s mouth.

The two cats ventured deeper into the forest, following faint trails and strange, winding paths. Rıfkı, carrying the tiny silver key in his mouth, led the way, his green eyes scanning every nook and cranny for clues. Pankek, though reluctant at first, found himself growing more curious as they explored.

The forest seemed alive with whispers, the rustling leaves carrying faint echoes of secrets. Suddenly, Rıfkı stopped in his tracks, his ears perking up. In front of them stood an ancient oak tree, its massive trunk twisted and gnarled, with roots clawing into the earth like fingers. At its base was a small, weathered door with intricate carvings, barely visible beneath a layer of moss.

“This must be it!” Rıfkı meowed, dropping the key at Pankek’s paws. Pankek blinked at the tiny door. “Why is there a door in a tree? And why are we even doing this?”

“Because it’s fun!” Rıfkı said with a flick of his tail. “Now open it!”

With a sigh, Pankek picked up the silver key in his teeth and gently inserted it into the tiny lock. It fit perfectly. With a soft click, the door swung open, revealing a spiral staircase descending into darkness. Rıfkı’s eyes gleamed. “An underground lair! I knew it!” Without hesitation, he darted down the stairs. Pankek hesitated, his fluffy gray fur bristling. “What if it’s dangerous?” he called after Rıfkı.

“You’re already here! Come on!” Rıfkı’s voice echoed back.

Muttering under his breath, Pankek padded after him. As they reached the bottom of the staircase, they stepped into a dimly lit chamber. In the center of the room stood a pedestal, and atop it rested a beautiful glass orb. The orb shimmered with shifting colors, casting a gentle glow around the chamber.

Rıfkı’s green eyes widened. “This is it! This is the treasure!” He leapt onto the pedestal, sniffing the orb. Pankek, however, eyed it cautiously. “What if it’s cursed?”

“Oh, don’t be such a—” Rıfkı’s words were cut off as the orb began to glow brighter. The room filled with a soft hum, and before they could react, the orb lifted into the air, spinning faster and faster until it shot a beam of light toward the ceiling.

The light faded, and the chamber was suddenly filled with warmth and golden light. In the center of the room, where the orb had been, now sat a small, magical portal. Through it, the two cats could see a lush meadow filled with sparkling streams, endless fish ponds, and soft, sunny spots perfect for napping.

Rıfkı and Pankek exchanged a glance. “This... is amazing,” Pankek murmured, his gray fur catching the golden glow.

Rıfkı grinned. “And to think you didn’t want to come!”

With a shared nod, the two cats stepped through the portal, their world instantly transforming into a paradise for cats. From that day on, the mischievous Rıfkı and the sleepy Pankek explored their magical new home, where every day was an adventure—or a nap in the sun—depending on Pankek’s mood.

And so, the two unlikely friends found not only a treasure but a home where they could share endless adventures together.

# THE PRICE OF TIME

Eray Kayaoğulları

Aaron's watch shop, which was hidden on a quiet street near Greenwich Park, was filled with clocks. The shop smelled of wood and old metal. He spent most of his days here, repairing broken watches that some people had discarded. It was easier to focus on clocks than on people especially after what happened with his younger brother Daniel. That evening he was working on something unusual, a pocket watch unlike any he had ever seen. Its design was complicated. The gears inside were so tiny and complex that even Aaron, with years of experience, struggled to make sense of them. He had received the watch from a stranger, who had left without giving a name or explanation, earlier that week. No matter what he tried, the watch refused to work. It was resisting his efforts to repair it. Aaron couldn't bring himself to put it down. He looked at the clock on the wall, it was past closing time. Still, something about this watch felt important almost magical. What secret did it hold? Why did it seem like fixing it might change everything?

Days passed, and Aaron's obsession with the pocket watch grew stronger. He stayed late in the shop every night, with very little sleep, and he was thinking that the watch held something hidden. But the mechanism of the watch still refused to come to life. One evening, while it was raining, Aaron found a photograph of him and Daniel which was from years ago, before their conflict. Aaron sighed and said 'If only I could turn time back'. Suddenly, the watch gave a click and started making weird sounds. Aaron looked at it in wonder. For the first time, he felt like the watch was responding to him, it was responding to him to do something. And then, his hands trembled while a thought crossed his mind, what if fixing this watch could fix his mistakes with Daniel?

Aaron became consumed by the idea that the watch could do more. He began to wonder if it held the power to fix the past. Each night, he tried to fix the watch and searched for answers which were hidden in the watch. Memories of Daniel filled his mind at this time. Especially, the day he slammed the door behind him. Aaron always thought there would be time to make things right, but time had passed away.

Aaron's frustration as the watch refused to work. He adjusted one tiny gear, only for another to slip out of place. 'Why won't you just work?' He muttered, knocking at the mechanism with his screwdriver. Suddenly, the tool slipped into a place. A click sound echoed through the shop. Surprised, Aaron froze, watching as the gears began to turn, almost as if the watch had fixed itself.

He looked at it in disbelief. 'That wasn't supposed to happen', by the way the soft ticking continued, steady and strong. The glow from the watch grew brighter, Aaron realized too late that he might have awakened something far beyond this understanding.

By the way the watch's gears started to spin faster until the shop became blurry. A rush of cold air swept through and when the spinning stopped Aaron found himself standing in the moment he and Daniel had their last fight. He froze. Daniel was there younger, angry and hurt. Aaron knew this was his chance to change everything.

He took a deep breath, Aaron stepped forward. 'Daniel wait' he said, his voice shaking. His brother turned, surprised.

Aaron hesitated, then spoke. 'I was wrong. I pushed you away because I didn't know how to handle my own problems.'

For a moment, silence hung between them. Daniel said 'I just wanted you to care'.

The room seemed to glow as the watch in Aaron's hand ticked softly. The world around him began to fade, pulling him back to the present. When Aaron opened his eyes, he was in the shop. Aaron looked up and saw Daniel. He said 'I don't know but I felt like I should come here'.

Aaron smiled 'I'm glad you did.'

# A CUP OF HOPE

Fatih Kerem Şener

As if opposing the sun's positive energy, a man in pitch black clothes stands motionless at the tip of the cliff, but an offer of tea from another man will change his whole life. The man in black, his silhouette a stark contrast against the blazing horizon, remained unmoving as if he were a shadow rooted in despair. The wind howled, but it couldn't carry away the weight of his thoughts. Suddenly, the faint clink of porcelain broke the silence.

"Here," said a calm voice behind him, offering a steaming cup of tea.

He turned slightly, startled, to see a stranger sitting cross-legged with a small kettle perched on a portable stove. "What do you want?" the man asked gruffly.

"Nothing," the stranger replied with a smile. "Just thought the view might be better with tea."

For the first time in years, the man in black took a sip of warmth and, with it, a small piece of hope.

At first, the man hesitated, but then he felt a warmth in his hands, a spark of hope he hadn't felt in years, hidden within the tea's steam.

Alca gazed at the rising steam, lost in thought. "I keep asking myself," he said, his voice shaky, "why live? Everything feels so absurd and meaningless."

Don Ritchie smiled gently, his eyes still fixed on the horizon. "Life may be absurd, Alca. But that doesn't take away its worth. Perhaps meaning is something we give to it."

Alca frowned, his voice now sharp. "Isn't that just a comforting lie? Everyone creates their own meaning, but in the end, everything is empty."

Don turned to face Alca. "Maybe life is truly meaningless," he said softly. "But when you escape from that meaning, you surrender to it. Living in defiance of the emptiness that's the first step in filling it. Instead of accepting defeat, you can impose your own meaning on this absurd existence. It may be small or fleeting, but it will be *your* meaning."

His gaze drifted to the horizon as the last rays of the sun touched the distant sky. "Don't wait for life to give you meaning, Alca. Add your own color to it. Sometimes, simply resisting can be a victory in itself."

Alca fell silent, staring at the tea in his hands, his mind racing. Don took another sip, smiling softly. "At least we can start with a cup of tea, right? It can be that simple."

Weeks passed, and each time, Alca found himself returning to sit at the edge of the cliff with Don. At first, he was silent, his questions and frustrations only echoing in his mind. But gradually, Don's simple yet profound stories, his calm presence, and the wisdom woven into his words began to crack the hard shell around Alca's heart.

Every day, he spoke a little more and listened a little deeper. Don's tales of joy, loss, and perseverance resonated within Alca, shaping his thoughts in ways he hadn't expected. One day, he carefully placed his teacup down and deeply breathed. Looking at Don, he smiled faintly and said, "Maybe... I need to start asking how to live in this absurd world."

At that moment, Alca felt a shift inside, a slight lightness that hadn't been there before.

Alca's conversations with Don became more profound as the days turned into weeks. Each word exchanged seemed to chip away at the walls Alca had built around himself. But even as light began to seep into his world, shadows still lingered in the corners of his mind.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in fiery hues, Alca broke the silence. "Don, you talk about resisting the emptiness, about creating meaning. But what if I fail? What if I'm not strong enough?"

Don, pouring another cup of tea, didn't answer immediately. He handed the steaming cup to Alca and leaned back against the rock, gazing at the first stars appearing in the sky. "Failure is inevitable, Alca," he said, his voice steady. "We all stumble, fall, and question our path. The strength isn't in avoiding failure; it's in rising again, even when it feels impossible."



Alca frowned, the warmth of the tea forgotten in his hands. "But what if I fall so far that I can't get back up?"

Don chuckled softly, the sound carried away by the gentle breeze. "Then you crawl until you can stand again. Life isn't a straight path; it's a winding trail with steep climbs and sudden drops. Sometimes, the journey is just about putting one foot in front of the other, no matter how small the step."

The words hung in the air between them, heavy yet liberating. For the first time, Alca felt the faintest glimmer of acceptance. Perhaps he didn't need to have all the answers right now. Maybe it was enough to try.

The next day, as Alca sat alone at the cliff's edge, he looked at the world differently. The waves crashing against the rocks below didn't seem as menacing, and the wind didn't feel as cold. There was a strange beauty in the chaos, a fragile balance that mirrored his existence.

When Don joined him, Alca surprised himself by smiling. "I think I understand what you mean," he said, his voice quiet but steady. "Life doesn't need to make sense. Maybe it's enough to... live it."

Don nodded, his eyes sparkling with approval. "Exactly, Alca. The world is absurd, unpredictable, and often cruel. But it's also filled with beauty, kindness, and connection moments. Those moments—no matter how fleeting—make it worth it."

As the days passed, Alca began to see those moments more clearly. A child's laughter carried on the wind, the soft glow of the morning sun on the horizon, the comforting warmth of a shared cup of tea. They were small, almost insignificant, but together, they painted a picture of a life worth living.

One evening, as the two men watched the sunset once more, Alca turned to Don with a newfound determination in his eyes. "You were right. I don't need to wait for life to give me meaning. I can create it myself. And maybe... maybe I can help others see that too."

Don smiled, his heart swelling with pride. "That's the spirit, Alca. The journey is yours to shape. And who knows? In helping others, you might find even more meaning for yourself."

As the stars began to dot the night sky, Alca raised his cup in a silent toast to the man who had pulled him back from the edge. The tea, once just a simple gesture, had become a symbol of hope, a reminder that even in the darkest moments, a spark was always waiting to be ignited.

As time flowed like the tide below the cliffs, Alca grew into his newfound sense of purpose. He didn't yet have all the answers, but he found contentment in asking better questions. The days he spent with Don became fewer as Alca ventured into the world, eager to embrace its challenges and contradictions.

One morning, Alca stood alone on the familiar cliff's edge, holding a cup of tea. The sunrise bathed the horizon in golden hues, and he felt a quiet sense of peace. Don was no longer sitting beside him; he hadn't been for weeks. The older man had moved on, leaving a legacy of quiet wisdom and an indelible mark on Alca's soul.

But this time, Alca wasn't sad. Instead, he looked out at the endless sea and smiled. "Thank you, Don," he whispered. He raised the cup as though toasting the horizon, letting the warmth seep into his hands.

Alca took his first steps toward the village that morning, his heart lighter than it had been in years. The people he met welcomed him with curiosity, drawn to the quiet confidence he carried. He began to share Don's teachings in his way through small acts of kindness, shared stories, and, of course, cups of tea.

His makeshift tea stall at the village square became a gathering place for weary travelers and lonely souls. Alca listened more than he spoke, but when he did, his words planted seeds of hope in the hearts of others. He didn't preach or claim to have all the answers; he offered a warm drink and a reminder that life's meaning could be found in even the smallest gestures.

Years passed, and Alca's presence became a cornerstone of the village. He had transformed from the shadow of a man standing at the edge of despair into someone who helped others step back from their edges.

One day, as the sun began to set, Alca noticed a young woman standing at the cliff where he had once stood, her shoulders hunched under the weight of unseen burdens. He approached quietly, the steam of freshly brewed tea curling around his hand.

"Here," he said softly, holding out a cup.

The woman turned, startled, her eyes red-rimmed and wary. "What do you want?" she asked.

Alca smiled, his gaze steady and kind. "Nothing," he said, echoing the words that had saved him. "Just thought the view might be better with tea."

She hesitated, then took the cup. The warmth seeped into her hands, and for a moment, she looked at Alca as if seeing something familiar, something she couldn't yet name.

As they stood together, watching the horizon fade into twilight, Alca felt a quiet satisfaction. The cycle of hope and connection had begun again. The journey was never truly over, but that was its beauty. For every cliff, there was a horizon. And for every shadow, there was a spark waiting to be kindled, a cup of hope to be shared.

# STOLEN DREAM

Feyza Yüreklier

It was a rainy morning. Laureate sat on the couch. She was pretending to read a book. Thea stood by the window, looking outside. The room was quiet but not peaceful. Yesterday, they had a big fight. Laureate had torn Thea's practice papers for her singing competition. Thea had worked on those papers for months. Laureate said it was a mistake, but Thea was still angry. They planned to meet their friend Finn for dinner that day, but the fight complicated everything. "Are you still angry?" Laureate broke the silence. "I already said I'm sorry."

Thea turned to her. "You didn't just hurt me. You ruined my competition work! How can I forget that?"

Laureate didn't care. "I helped you write the papers, didn't I?" Before Thea could respond, the doorbell rang. It was Finn. When he came inside, he noticed the heavy atmosphere.

"What's going on here?" Finn asked.

Thea hesitated, but finally, she spoke. "Laureate tore my practice papers. I had no copies, and I had to rewrite them. It's been stressful."

Finn looked at Laureate. "Is that true?"

Laureate rolled her eyes. "Yes, but I fixed it. If anything, I saved the day!"

Finn shook his head. "You two need to fix this before the competition. Laureate, this isn't about you." Laureate looked annoyed, but she didn't argue.

The following day was bright and clear. Backstage, Thea held her new practice papers. She was feeling nervous. Laureate stood nearby, fixing her makeup in a small mirror. "You'll do great," Laureate said casually. "Just remember, I helped you. This success is ours." Thea ignored her and focused on her breathing.

Finn came to the room and smiled at Thea. "You're up next. You're going to be amazing," he said. Thea took a deep breath and went onto the stage. The theater was quiet as Thea began to sing. Her voice was weak at first, but soon, it grew stronger. She poured all her emotions into the song: her hard work and hope. When she finished, the audience clapped her loudly. Backstage, Laureate clapped slightly but looked jealous. She wasn't happy about that Thea was getting all the attention.

"I'll show them what I can do," Laureate said. She chose a random sheet of music and walked up to Finn. "I want to perform," Laureate said confidently.

Finn rejected. "You're not a part of the competition, Laureate. You can't."

"Oh, come on! I'll entertain the audience for a bit," Laureate said and walked onto the stage before Finn could stop her. Laureate started singing, but she wasn't prepared. Her voice was forked, and she forgot the lyrics. The audience clapped politely when she finished, but they weren't impressed. When Laureate came backstage, Finn was waiting for her, looking annoyed.

"That was unnecessary," he said. "You made things harder for everyone."

"I was helping," Laureate said.

"No," Thea said, stepping forward.

"You were trying to steal the spotlight. Again." Laureate rolled her eyes. "You're ungrateful. I helped you rewrite those papers!"

Thea shot back. "You tore them in the first place! This was my moment, and you couldn't let me have it." Finn stepped between them.

“That’s enough. Laureate, you need to leave. Thea has worked hard for this, and she deserves her moment.” Laureate gathered her bag and went out.

Thea took a deep breath and smiled at Finn. “Thank you,” she said.

“You did amazing out there,” Finn replied. When Thea walked back to join her friends, she felt proud. This victory was hers, and no one could take it away.

Later that evening, Finn gathered all the competitors to announce the results. The judges assessed Thea’s performance as intimate and powerful. She smiled, thinking that eventually she had won.

Finn took the microphone. “Before we announce the winner, I want to say that this was one of the most competitive events we’ve had. Everyone showed an incredible performance.”

He paused and looked at the audience. “And the winner is…”

Thea was enthusiastically waiting to go to the stage.

“Laureate!” Finn said.

Thea got frozen, and her mind was spinning. “What? How?”

Finn added, “After Laureate’s surprise performance, the judges decided to give her a special award. Her courage was something they couldn’t ignore.”

Thea felt thoroughly betrayed.

Laureate walked onto the stage with a victorious smile. She spoke to the microphone. “This proves that I can shine anywhere and anytime I want,” Laureate said. She raised her head proudly.

Thea realized Laureate had stolen the spotlight once again.

# THE LOST RED BALL

İpek Toraman

One sunny morning, in a small village by the sea, Mutlu was happily chasing his red ball around the garden. The young kitten was full of energy, running and jumping after the ball, his little paws kicking up dust as he played. The garden was quiet except for the sound of Mutlu's playful meows. Nearby, Hamsi, an older and wiser cat, was resting under a tree, his tail flicking as he watched Mutlu with a calm and gentle look. Suddenly, Mutlu kicked the ball too hard, and it rolled into a thick bush at the edge of the garden. He stopped, looking at the bush with wide eyes, not sure what to do now. Hamsi yawned and stretched his legs before slowly walking over. "Don't worry," he said kindly, his voice calm. "We'll find it together. Come, let's start looking."

Mutlu followed Hamsi closely as they get to the bush. The little kitten's eyes were big, and his tail moved nervously. "What if the ball is really gone?" Mutlu asked in a small voice.

Hamsi shook his head with a little smile. "Don't worry, little one. Sometimes, things are just hiding. You just need to look careful and stay patient."

Hamsi pushed his paw into the bush, moving the leaves slowly. "See? Like this," he said. Mutlu tried to do the same, but his tiny paws made too much noise. "Not so fast," Hamsi said, laughing softly. "You'll scare the ball away!" Mutlu giggled too, feeling a little better now.

After a minute, Hamsi pointed with his paw. "Look there, under the leaves. Do you see it?"

Mutlu's eyes lit up with excitement. He ran quickly to the other side of the bush and jumped. "I got it!" he said happily, holding his red ball in his paw.

Hamsi sat back under his tree with a proud look. "Good job, little one," he said calm. Mutlu kicked his ball again, running around the garden, while Hamsi watched quietly, enjoying the sunny morning.

As the morning went on, Mutlu kept playing with his ball, kicking it around the garden. Hamsi watched from under his tree, his tail moving slowly as he enjoyed the peaceful garden. After a while, Mutlu stopped and looked at Hamsi with a big smile. "Hamsi, thank you for helping me. I couldn't have found my ball without you!"

Hamsi stretched and yawned, then stood up slowly. "It's nothing, little one. That's what friends do," he said with a kind smile. "But next time, be more careful, okay? Always watch where your ball goes."

Mutlu nodded with a serious expression. "I will! I promise!" he said, before happily returning to his game. Hamsi smiled as he watched him, feeling proud of the young kitten.

As the sun began to set, Mutlu lay down next to Hamsi under the tree, his red ball safe beside him. "Today was fun," Mutlu said, yawning.

Hamsi purred softly. "Yes, it was. Now rest, little one. Tomorrow will bring another adventure." Both cats closed their eyes as the garden grew quiet again.

# The Beginning Of The End

Kayra Ünal

Autumn 1514. Near Tabriz...

The Safavids were greatly defeated. They had retreated. The unit under the command of Omer Pasha was forwarding between Karabakh and Tabriz. The Janissaries were very tired. Realizing this, Omer Pasha decided to rest the army. It was decided to camp on a hill. The weather was foggy and humid. The sun was setting, and visibility was decreasing. But on the mountain opposite, a village was visible, coal smoke dispersing in the fog. It was not known whether the village was clean or not. Omer Pasha's tent was set up, but he still had not entered. He was watching the village. He looked very thoughtful as if he were sensing something, but the sun was about to set, and the village was disappearing from view. When the sunset and the fog made it impossible to see clearly, Omer Pasha decided to return to his tent.

All the janissaries and raiders were having fun as if the war was over. When Omer Pasha saw this situation, he got a little angry, but they deserved it because a great victory had been achieved. Almost the entire Safavid army was destroyed in the Chaldiran Plain, and the Sultan was very grateful to Omer Pasha for his efforts. He had rewarded him with a great duty again, and Omer Pasha was proud of it. He now had a special place among the generals. Some generals were not happy with this, and Omer Pasha was cautious about it. It was his personality always to be cautious, but this time, he let his soldiers have fun. However, still, there was something in that village that he could not understand. But what could it be? Then he realized that he had arrived in front of his tent and decided to think about it in the morning. He was also very tired and decided to rest. He looked outside in front of the tent for the last time; the joy and calmness of autumn had come. He loved this weather very much... Then he entered his tent and went to bed.

A huge booming sound... Omer Pasha woke up quickly. There were shouting sounds. He quickly ran out of his tent. The enemy was attacking. A very loud noise was heard again. The enemy started cannon fire. He ran to the command tent. He quickly gave his order to the cavalry and told the Janissaries to take out the cannons and attack. The cannon fire had begun. He quickly went up the hill to see the cavalry's advance. The enemy was attacking from the opposite village. Shortly afterward, news arrived. The cavalry had finished it without the need for an infantry attack. There were many casualties due to the area damage of the cannons, but the war seemed to have been won. Omer Pasha was angry. He had not foreseen that something like this would happen. He quickly jumped on his horse and set off towards the village.

He rode his horse without looking back. When he reached the place where the village was, there was no village left. Everywhere was burning and destroyed. His soldiers were plundering, but he could see no enemy soldiers or dead bodies. Then he heard a crying voice. He wondered. He rode his horse towards the sound. He saw a little girl next to the ruins of a house. He got off his horse and went to the girl. He asked her where the family was. The girl was not speaking. Maybe she didn't know Turkish. He looked around. There was a woman's body under the stone next to the girl. He thought it was her mother. He quickly took the girl into his arms. The little girl kicked him at first, but then she gave herself over to him. She was terrified. He asked her

what happened. The girl showed the soldiers and the janissary general while crying. At that moment, the general also saw them. The general shouted, "Kill the traitor!". Omer Pasha made the girl sit on his horse, then he jumped on his horse and ran away without looking back as the arrows flew by. He understood. The generals were not happy with him being the Sultan's favorite. They would put all the blame on him and say he was collaborating with the enemy. He was betrayed...

He was riding his horse like crazy. He was in a lost state. Then he remembered the little girl. He had forgotten everything in his anger. The girl was also frozen with fear. They had come a long way from there. They got off the horse, and he hugged the little girl. He told her I will protect you. They glanced at the little girl. But the little girl was still frozen. He seemed to have a long road ahead of them. He had to go to the Sultan and protect the girl at the same time. He was sure of this. He had to see a reliable friend, and he needed his help. After resting for a while, they set off. These places were dangerous...

Summer 1516. Ottoman Mamluk border. Near Aleppo...

They finally came to the border. Almost two years had passed since the betrayal. Omer Pasha was running away with the little girl. They were wanted everywhere in the Ottoman Empire. They have been hiding all over the country for two years. He was supposed to reach the Sultan, but he was declared a traitor. That's why he needed his friend's help, but his friend was at Mamluk State in Aleppo. The Ottomans were at war with the Dulkadiroğluları, which was between the Mamluks and the Ottomans. That's why he couldn't reach his friend. But the Ottomans had defeated the Dulkadirids and were advancing towards the Mamluks, so they had to be quick. Omer Pasha was riding his horse at full speed. He was very cautious now. He had to pay attention to everything. He checked out the little girl. They had experienced many events for 2 years and were hiding in secret places. But the little girl still hadn't spoken a word. She was still very cold. But he never left Omer Pasha's side. She was attached to him.

The city was now in sight. The Aleppo Citadel was shining with the magnificence of the city. The sun had set. It was still very hot. Despite the heat, fires were burning in the castle. That's where the shine came from. But this was a bad sign. It showed that war was imminent. The city was very lively. But there was a frightening movement. Soldiers were trying to maintain order in the streets. Fear and desire for the Ottomans were in conflict. Omer Pasha realized that he had to proceed faster. The Mamluk army was here...

Omer Pasha and the little girl were riding quickly through the streets of the city. Omer Pasha knew the city. He had been in the city in his youth. But there was serenity in the city at that time. He didn't see that now... While they were passing through one of the streets, they came across a military stop. The soldiers asked who they were. They thought they might be spies. Omer Pasha told lies. But a soldier shouted from behind. "This is the Ottoman traitor," he said. He brought a piece of paper to their heads. The leader of the soldiers approached Omer Pasha. He examined it. Even though he looked dirty and poorly dressed, he could still see the nobility. He turned to the soldiers and shouted: "We caught the big fish. The Ottomans are coming anyway; we have a chance to be rewarded.". Also, he said, "It says, ' alive or dead here. Prepare the arrows.'" Omer Pasha was surrounded by them. He didn't know what to do and immediately jumped on the little girl. Just then, a shout was heard. His soldiers were being shot with arrows. The general shouted to gather together. Then, a man approached Omer Pasha. He lifted him and the little girl up. He was his friend Fahrettin the Falcon. His friend had saved them. They hugged each other big. There was a lot to tell. They quickly fled to the shelter.

Fahrettin was Omer Pasha's military friend. They had fought in many wars together when they were young. Fahrettin was a very good archer; that's why they called him Falcon. But he was injured in the eye during a war. He could no longer do archery, which he was very good at. He could not see directly in one of his eyes. He was one of the most talented men in the army. He was sent to Aleppo as a spy. He was currently



organizing the city from within. Omer Pasha and Fahrettin told each other all the events. Both of them had experienced many events. What Fahrettin did now was also a crime because, according to the Ottomans, he was hosting a traitor, but he knew that his friend was not a traitor. He told Fahrettin that he had to meet with the Sultan and ask for forgiveness. Fahrettin said that war was coming and this place would not be safe anytime soon. He couldn't see the Sultan right now. But Fahrettin had a plan. Because he also knew the Sultan's plan. He said he would arrange a ride for them to go to Cairo, Egypt. He told him that he should go and surrender to the Mamluk Sultan. He explained the plan in detail. After their long discussion, the plan was complete. Then, after a long silence, he asked about the little girl. He didn't remember having a daughter. Omer Pasha paused for a long time, and he said, "She is my daughter". He now saw the little girl as his own daughter. He had never had any children. His wife always wanted a girl. But she died too early. He missed her so much...

After a few days of rest, the journey was ready. They would go to the desert. They said goodbye to Fahrettin. He said they would meet there. They were slowly leaving the city. The streets were empty; the soldiers were moving towards the battlefield. The sound of cannon fire was coming from far away. It was very muffled, but it still made you shudder. There seemed to be serenity in the city again. But this was the calm before the storm...

Winter 1516-1517. Sinai Peninsula. Egyptian deserts...

The season was winter. But the desert was very hot. Even in summer, Istanbul was not this hot. Omer Pasha missed Istanbul. Now, he dreamed of drinking its water with a view of the Bosphorus. They were very thirsty. The only thing that came to his mind was water. He had officially started having hallucinations. Sometimes, he saw his wife far away. His wife was signaling from a distance that he should go. But he was always moving towards his wife and disappearing. She was saying something bad was going to happen. They urgently needed to find a water source...

They were moving very slowly. Months had passed, but they still had not reached Cairo. The Ottomans had defeated the Mamluks heavily in the north. The Sultan was not stopping. He was faster than them. As if he was coming to catch them... They were pausing a lot. The people here were very warm and hosted them well. He learned from the villagers that Damascus had also fallen. The Ottomans were very close...

The little girl's condition was also getting worse. They needed to find water urgently. It was morning time. The girl started punching Omer Pasha. Omer Pasha turned quickly. The girl still didn't speak, but she showed something. There was water across. He rode the horse quickly. But the horse was not going fast. It was also very tiring. Omer Pasha quickly jumped in and ran to the water source. He was drinking like he had never drunk before. He was so absorbed in himself. His eyes searched for the little girl, but he did not see her. He shouted. Then he heard a scream from where he left the horse. He ran. Three Bedouins were plundering his horse and taking the little girl away. He ran like he had never run before to catch up with them. He quickly drew his sword. He cut down the nearby one in two moves. The other one had a dagger. He grazed Omer Pasha's face with his dagger, but Omer Pasha took care of that, too. The last man was jumping on his horse and running away. He also tied the little girl. Omer Pasha got very excited. He immediately looked around. He saw his bow. He made a perfect shot and lowered the man. He quickly ran to the girl. He checked her. Although he knew she wouldn't talk, he asked her, "Are you okay?". She saw the blood on his face. Suddenly, she hugged him and said, Father. She spoke for the first time...

The River Nile caused the desert to resurrect from death. Cairo was like a paradise in the middle of nothingness. This place was very greenery. The river lived the whole city. The rush of the city residents was evident from everywhere. Fear was everywhere. This river would flow blood. It was obvious from everywhere.

The war was coming here... The pyramids looked very remote. These pyramids were glorifying the city officially...

Omer Pasha drove his horse to the palace quickly. He said he surrendered to the soldiers and who he was. He said he should talk to the Mamluk Sultan. After waiting for a long time, they received acceptance. The Sultan could not stand in place of tension. The Ottoman Empire was in the desert now. He couldn't believe it; a big army and incredible cannons were passing into the desert. He couldn't stop this power. Omer Pasha said he could help him. Mamluk Sultan asked him to tell him the location of the tent for assassination...

The war had begun very violently. The sands of the desert were displaced from the cannon sounds. The Mamluk army was helpless. They were about to be defeated. It was time to implement the insidious plan. Omer Pasha told the Mamluk Sultan where the Ottoman Sultan's tent was located. They would assassinate him. But the Sultan's tent was in another place. Omer Pasha had sent a letter to Fahrettin. Fahrettin had taken care of it. Towards the end of the war, Omer Pasha went to the Ottoman side with his horse. He had left the little girl in the house given to them. It was very dangerous for her. Fahrettin welcomed him. The Sultan accepted him in his presence. Inside his tent, there was also the Janissary general who had betrayed him. The Sultan brought him with a wave of his hand. He was beheaded there. Omer Pasha was now forgiven.

He needed to see the little girl. He was very happy. There was literally spring coming after the war. The Egyptian sun was illuminating everywhere. He loved this weather very much. He quickly drove his horse. Now, they were safe. But smoke was coming from where their homes were. The house was destroyed. There was a cannonball on the ground. When he entered the house, he saw the little girl lying on the floor. He lost as he found the girl. It was over as it started...

# CASINO

Mustafa Burak Bülbül

It was a freezing day in Las Vegas. Alex was walking on the street. He was a construction worker, and his work was challenging. He thought about his poor life when he was walking. What am I doing? I hate this job. I don't want to do this. What do I have to do? Actually, he has been thinking more about his situation in the last few days. He was working like an animal, but his salary was very low. He could only afford to stay in a hostel. He arrived at his room. He was fatigued. He went to his bed. He slept while he thought deeply. He was unaware of what would happen to him in the following months.

One day, when Alex was returning from his work, he saw a very bright, colorful place on the other side of the street. This place is called Grand Casino Vegas. He thought, *'How did I not notice this place before?'* The moment when he saw the casino, he wanted to go there, but Alex didn't know how to play; therefore, he couldn't go there. He decided to save his money to try his chances at a casino. After one month, he had enough money to play. Alex went to the casino and entered inside. This place was tremendous. He didn't expect how big it was. Everywhere was very colorful and noisy to attract people's attention. One man came next to him and asked, 'How much money you have, sir?'

'I just have 50 bucks,' said Alex.

Then the man introduced himself to Alex.

'By the way, I am Mario, sir. What's your name?'

'My name is Alex. It's my first time coming here.'

'I can teach you how to play and how to earn Alex if you want.'

Alex was a little suspicious, but he accepted Mario's offer. Then Mario took him to a poker table. Mario taught Alex to play poker, and they started to play on the first day. They earned 200 bucks, and this was amazing for Alex. Alex offered him to meet again next week.

They met together next week and started to play again. Luck was near Alex, and he won every single game with tricks that Mario gave him. They played a lot of games together, and their earnings were getting bigger and bigger day by day. Alex wasn't a poor guy now. He resigned from his job and bought a house and a sports car for himself. After weeks of winning and living a life he had only dreamed of, Alex felt invincible. He trusted Mario completely. However, Alex was unaware of a secret that would change his life again. Mario wasn't just a helpful stranger; he was working for the casino, and his goal was to lure people like Alex into a trap.

One evening, Mario invited Alex to a private poker game.

"This is a special game," Mario said, smiling. "The stakes are high, but so are the rewards."

Excited and confident, Alex agreed. He brought most of his savings, ready to win even more.

The private room was luxurious. Other players were already there, each with stacks of money on the table. The game began, and at first, Alex was winning as usual. Mario whispered strategies to him, and Alex followed them. But suddenly, the tide turned. Alex started losing, first small amounts, then bigger ones. Mario's advice no longer seemed to work. By the end of the night, Alex had lost everything. "Don't worry," Mario said, patting Alex on the shoulder. "You can win it back next time." But Alex wasn't so sure. Something felt wrong.

The next day, Alex returned to the casino to find Mario, but he was gone. He asked the casino employees and learned that Mario was an employee of the casino. His job was to teach new players just enough to make them confident, and then he tried to lose their money. Alex felt like an idiot. He had lost not only his fortune but also his trust in people. With no money left, Alex returned to his old life. He moved out of his house and sold his sports car. He found himself back at the hostel, where his journey had started. He felt so bad for the things that had happened, but his story hadn't finished yet.

One cold evening, while sitting on a park bench, Alex met an old man named David. David had a kind face and seemed to notice Alex's sadness. "You look so sad, young man," David said. "What happened?"

At first, Alex didn't want to talk, but then he told him the story. He told David everything—his struggles, rise to wealth, and downfall. David listened patiently. When Alex finished, David smiled. "I've been there," he said. "But remember, losing everything can sometimes be the best lesson."

David revealed that he had once been a wealthy businessman but had lost his fortune due to bad decisions. However, he had rebuilt his life by learning new skills and being more innovative with his money. "I can help you," David offered. "But you have to promise to work hard and stay honest."

Desperate for a second chance, Alex agreed. David taught him how to invest wisely and start a small business. It wasn't easy, and Alex often felt like giving up, but David encouraged him to keep going. Over time, Alex's efforts began to pay off. He started a construction company, using the knowledge he had gained from his previous job, and soon, it became successful.

Years later, Alex was wealthy again, but this time, his fortune was built on hard work and honesty, not luck. He often thought about Mario and the lessons he had learned from his betrayal. "I was foolish back then," Alex would say to himself. "But I've grown stronger because of it."

Alex never returned to the casino. He focused on helping others struggling, just as David had helped him. He donated money to charities and even opened a shelter for people who had lost everything. Alex had finally found not only wealth but also peace and purpose in his life.

# THE MAGNIFICENT DUO

Nur Berrak Kiper

Once upon a time, in a small town surrounded by hills and forests, there was a princess named Elara. Her father, King Alden, ruled the kingdom with a strict and cold heart. From the day Elara was born, her father decided that she would be the most educated princess ever. She spent her days learning history, languages, politics, and science. However, this came at a cost. She had no friends to play with, and she was kept away from the outside world. The castle, with its tall walls and spires, was her only home.

As she grew older, Elara became more beautiful and intelligent, Elara's connection with Leo, the son of the castle's head of security, grew over time, though it was laced with unspoken tension. He treated her like a person, not a princess, and in his presence, she felt a rare sense of freedom. They spent hours talking about life beyond the castle, they shared dreams of adventure and escape. But there was a quiet bitterness beneath it all. Elara knew she could never truly be free. And Leo, though kind and understanding, was still bound by the walls she longed to escape.

Their bond was both a comfort and a reminder of the lives they would never have, of the things that could never be.

She felt trapped in a life of lessons and expectations. She wanted more joy, freedom, and friends but her father controlled everything. The only person who spent time in the castle like Elara's growing bond with Leo, the son of the castle's head of security, was something she hadn't expected. He was always kind, treating her like an equal rather than royalty. They began to spend more time together, sharing conversations about dreams of freedom and a life beyond the castle walls. His easy smile and quiet strength made her feel seen in a way few ever had.

Though neither of them spoke of it directly, something unspoken began to form between them a quiet understanding, a connection built on shared longing and a desire for something more.

He was her age, strong and quiet, always on duty. They sometimes crossed paths, but their lives were very different for the royal princess and son of a servant.

As the seasons passed, the walls of the castle, once a prison to Elara, became a place where she slowly began to find something she hadn't expected friendship. Leo, the castle's stable boy, was different from the others. He never bowed or treated her like royalty. Instead, he spoke to her as if she were just another person, someone he could share a simple conversation with.

One afternoon, when Elara was walking through the castle gardens, her eyes scanning the books she had borrowed from the royal library, she found Leo in the stables, brushing down a horse. She stopped, hesitant. He glanced up and smiled, his hands still busy with the task at hand.

"Not the best place to read, Your Highness," he teased gently, his tone warm but without mockery.

Elara looked up from her book, a small smile tugging at her lips. "I'm not so high and mighty that I can't enjoy a little fresh air, Leo."

He grinned, leaning on the fence as he wiped his hands on a rag. "Fresh air is overrated. You could be in the garden by the fountain. It's quieter."

"I've read that garden's been overrun by bees," she said, sitting on a nearby bale of hay. "And I'm not sure I'm in the mood for a battle with them today."

Leo chuckled, setting down the brush. "Fair point. Bees are persistent little things."

For a moment, there was just silence between them, the distant sounds of the castle fading into the background. Elara tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, her book forgotten in her hands. She hesitated, then spoke up.

“Leo... do you ever wonder what life is like beyond these walls?”

He looked up, surprised by her question, but his expression softened. “I’ve wondered plenty. I was born just outside the kingdom, in a small village. I’ve heard stories of the world beyond the castle, forests, mountains, seas... freedom.” He paused, looking out beyond the castle walls as if imagining it. “But... I’m stuck here, like you.”

Elara leaned forward, her voice quieter now. “You’re not stuck. You can leave whenever you want. You don’t have to stay here.”

Leo gave a small laugh, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “Oh, I’ve tried. You think I haven’t wanted to ride off into the sunset? But there are things I can’t leave behind... like my family, the farm, my duties here. You think I haven’t dreamed of adventure? Of being free?”

Elara felt a pang of something she couldn’t name. He was right. They both had dreams of life beyond the castle, but for different reasons, those dreams were trapped in the same place which inside walls that seemed impenetrable.

“What if we could leave?” she asked, a spark of excitement in her voice. “What if we could just go, Leo? Find our own adventure? No rules. No walls.”

Leo’s eyes lit up, and for a moment, he seemed to forget the reality of their lives. “Where would we go?”

She smiled, the first genuine smile she had shared in weeks. “Anywhere. Everywhere. To the north, to the sea, to the mountains. What about you? What would you want to see?”

Leo thought for a moment, his expression soft. “I want to see the ocean,” he said quietly, his voice filled with wonder. “The horizon where the sky meets the sea. I’ve heard it’s endless.”

Elara’s heart raced as she imagined it with him, no longer a princess trapped behind castle walls, but a person free to live as she chose. “We could do it. We could go. We’d just need to make a plan...”

Leo’s smile grew wider, his voice teasing but sincere. “So, is this a plan, then? We’re going to leave the castle and run off together?”

Elara paused, surprised by his question but not by the idea. For the first time in a long time, she felt a sense of belonging, of possibility. “Maybe. It’s not impossible.”

They both sat in silence for a moment, lost in the thought of a life that could be one without expectations, without the chains of royalty or duty.

Leo was the first to break the silence, his tone lighter again. “Well, until that adventure comes along, I guess I’ll have to settle for working in the stables and watching over horses.”

Elara laughed, shaking her head. “And I’ll keep reading books about places I can only dream of seeing.”

“But hey,” Leo said with a grin, “at least we can dream together. That’s something.”

Leo admired Elara’s intelligence, beauty, and spirit. Elara admired Leo’s strength and honesty. They both wanted the same things: a life where Elara wasn’t controlled by her father.

One day, in the castle’s hidden garden, Elara shared her frustration with Leo. “I don’t want to be controlled, Leo. I want to live my life my way. But how can I do that when I’m locked away here?” Her voice shook with emotion.

Leo gently took her hand. “You deserve to be free, Elara. You should be able to choose your own path.”

But deep inside, Elara felt more than just frustration. She felt anger. She was determined to take action. She no longer wanted just freedom she wanted revenge. Her father’s strict rules had taken away her joy and freedom, and she would make him feel her pain. That night, Elara decided to leave the castle but not just to escape. She wanted to make her father understand what he had done to her. She would take away something he loved, his kingdom. Leo, though unsure, didn’t want to see Elara suffer. He promised to help her. Together, they would leave the castle, and Elara would use her knowledge of politics to turn things around. That night Elara wore a simple cloak, hiding her long hair. Leo kept watch for the guards, and they slipped out through a back gate, unnoticed. For the first time, Elara felt free.

Over the next few weeks, Elara and Leo traveled to nearby towns, speaking to people who were unhappy with her father's rule. Elara's intelligence and understanding of politics made her a strong leader. Soon, word spread about her plans to overthrow her father. King Alden, worried about his daughter's disappearance, realized how serious her rebellion had become. The princess, whom King Alden had spent years trying to control, was now a force he could no longer ignore. For years, he had kept her locked away, believing that sheltering her from the world would keep her safe. But in doing so, he had underestimated her strength, her resilience, and her ability to inspire those around her.

When whispers began to spread that Elara was no longer the docile princess he had raised, Alden dismissed them as rumors. But the truth soon became undeniable. His daughter was no longer hidden in the shadows of his control. She had started to gather those who were disillusioned with his rule those who had quietly suffered under his iron fist. She was a beacon of hope for the oppressed, and word of her cause spread like wildfire.

King Alden, furious at the rebellion growing in the heart of his kingdom, sent his soldiers to hunt her down. He believed he could quash this uprising as easily as he had controlled his daughter for so many years. But Elara was no longer the frightened girl he had sheltered. She had become a leader, not by force, but by her ability to connect with the people.

As his soldiers scoured the kingdom, Elara was always one step ahead. She met with allies in hidden glades and quiet taverns, places where her father's soldiers dared not go. The meetings were tense, every whisper carrying the weight of danger, but Elara's presence was enough to calm even the most fearful hearts. She spoke of a kingdom where people were free, where their voices mattered, and where rulers were chosen by the will of the people, not by blood alone.

In the rolling hills outside the castle, a small but determined army of farmers, merchants, and former soldiers began to take shape. They were joined by those who had long seen the cracks in Alden's reign council members who had once advised the king but now saw Elara as the future of the kingdom. Each new recruit, each new supporter, was a blow to King Alden's authority.

One night, as Elara met with her growing group of allies in a secluded wood, she could feel the tide shifting. "It's not just about reclaiming the throne," she said, her voice steady with conviction. "It's about freedom. A kingdom where no one is trapped behind walls, whether those walls are made of stone or fear." The firelight reflected in her eyes, and the group murmured in agreement. They were ready.

Meanwhile, Alden's soldiers returned with reports that only deepened his frustration. Everywhere they looked, there were signs of Elara's influence, cattle given to starving villages, supplies secretly delivered to rebel camps, and whispers of her name being spoken with reverence, not fear.

Furious and desperate, Alden ordered his men to tighten their search. But it was already too late. The kingdom had begun to shift, and Elara's followers were no longer a scattered few and they had become a movement. The soldiers returned to the castle with word of Elara's army growing, her followers becoming more organized, more determined. What had started as a rebellion now felt like a revolution.

Elara, who had once been a prisoner in her father's castle, was now the face of a kingdom's hopes for a new dawn. And King Alden, realizing the full extent of what was happening, finally understood that he had lost control. His daughter had become the very threat he had feared and yet, it was his own actions that had created this storm.

Leo stayed by Elara's side, loyal to her and her cause. Even though he knew the risks, he believed in her strength and vision. In the end, it wasn't about revenge, it was about Elara finding herself and choosing her own future. The final showdown came after months of careful planning. Elara, no longer the sheltered princess of her father's court, had become the queen of her own destiny. Her return to the castle was not a sudden act of defiance but the culmination of a quiet revolution. She had spent countless nights strategizing with her trusted followers, those who had longed for a ruler who saw them as equals rather than subjects. Together, they worked in secret, gathering support from villages, townships, and neighboring lands, each step bringing them closer to reclaiming her birthright.

In the days leading up to her return, Elara and her closest allies carefully mapped out their plan. They moved like shadows, never revealing their true intentions until the time was right. There were victories along the way,



small but significant. Elara's supporters had infiltrated key positions in the castle, spreading word of her cause and weakening the grip of King Alden's court. In the farthest corners of the kingdom, a quiet resistance grew, each victory emboldening Elara's cause.

One night, as they gathered in a hidden chamber, Elara stood before her followers, her voice resolute. "It's time," she said, eyes gleaming with the weight of their shared journey. "We are not here to fight for power, but to return what is ours, our freedom, our lives."

The day of her return, Elara walked through the castle gates not as a princess who needed protection, but as a queen in her own right, with the full support of those who believed in her. The castle walls, once built to shelter her, now felt like prisons which is symbols of her father's control. King Alden, who had tried to protect her by keeping her within these confines, was forced to confront the consequences of his actions. The people, once cowed by fear, now rallied behind Elara. They had witnessed her growth and strength, and they had seen the difference between a ruler who protected out of fear and one who led with compassion.

King Alden stood at the castle's balcony, looking down at the assembly of supporters who had gathered to see Elara take her rightful place. For the first time, he felt the weight of his own isolation. He had never allowed Elara to truly live, he had only sheltered her from a world that needed her. Now, his walls had crumbled, and the reality of his decisions stood before him.

It was not a battle of swords or armies, but of ideals. Elara, with a calm strength, stepped forward. "Father," she said, her voice clear, "you built walls to protect me, but those walls kept me from living. Today, I reclaim my life and my kingdom."

Alden, faced with the undeniable truth of his daughter's strength and the unity of the people, had no choice but to step aside. The walls that had once imprisoned Elara now stood as a symbol of the past, and with a heavy heart, he realized that it was not through protection that he could truly safeguard his daughter, but through trust and freedom.

In the end, Elara didn't use violence or hatred. She showed her father that true power comes from love, freedom, and respect. A ruler who doesn't understand these values will lose everything. As the kingdom began to heal, Elara and Leo stood together, not just as lovers, but as equals, ready to lead. They created a new age for the kingdom one where freedom, love, and knowledge were the most important values. We're told that Elara, once trapped in her father's shadow, became the queen of her own destiny and ruled with compassion and understanding, but we don't get to see those changes unfold through her actions or experiences."

# CAMP TRIP

Rümeysa Laçın

The rain was drizzling lightly. Amy, Nick, and Hannah were searching for a suitable spot in the forest to set up their tent. After walking together for a while, they finally found a dry and spacious area. Nick helped Amy take the items out of the camping bag. Amy had a somewhat introverted personality—not exactly antisocial, but not particularly outgoing either. She didn’t make friends easily. Hannah was one of Amy’s few close friends. Their friendship had started in high school and was still going strong. Nick, on the other hand, was Amy’s boyfriend, and it was his idea to come on this camping trip. At first, Amy wasn’t enthusiastic about it, as she didn’t enjoy such activities, but she couldn’t resist Hannah and Nick’s persistent persuasion.

While Nick was setting up the tents, the girls were unpacking the bags and arranging the seating area. Strange animal sounds echoed through the forest, sending a chill down Amy’s spine. She hadn’t wanted to come camping in the first place, and these noises made her scrunch up her face involuntarily. Noticing her expression, Nick realized she was scared of the animal sounds. He nudged Hannah and pointed at Amy, letting out a small chuckle. When Amy realized they were laughing at her, she pouted even more, but Nick managed to make her smile by handing her a small flower he had plucked from the ground.

The trio settled into their campsite as the drizzle continued, and soon the rain tapered off, leaving the forest damp and fragrant. Hannah pulled out a portable lantern and set it on a stump to provide light as the evening descended. Amy busied herself preparing a simple meal using the portable stove, while Nick gathered some dry branches for a small campfire. Once the fire was lit, its warm glow created a cozy atmosphere, despite the eerie backdrop of the forest.

“Alright, dinner is served,” Amy announced, handing out plates of steaming noodles. They ate in relative silence, broken only by the occasional chirping of crickets and the distant hoots of an owl. The earlier tension from the animal sounds began to dissipate as they shared stories and jokes, their laughter mingling with the crackle of the fire.

As the night deepened, Nick suggested exploring a nearby trail for a short walk. Amy hesitated, glancing nervously into the darkness beyond their campsite. “Do we have to? It’s already dark, and who knows what’s out there?”

“Come on, Amy,” Nick urged, holding up a flashlight. “It’ll be fun, and we’ll stay close. Just a quick walk to stretch our legs.”

Hannah chimed in with a reassuring smile. “If it gets too creepy, we’ll turn back. Promise.”

Reluctantly, Amy agreed, and the three set off with flashlights in hand. The forest seemed different at night, its shadows longer and its sounds more pronounced. Every rustle of leaves or snap of a twig made Amy’s heart race, but she stayed close to Nick and Hannah.

“Look at the stars,” Hannah said, pointing up through a break in the canopy. “You don’t see skies like this back home.”

Amy glanced upward and couldn’t help but marvel at the sight. The sky was a canvas of twinkling stars, their light undisturbed by city pollution. For a moment, she forgot her fear and allowed herself to enjoy the beauty of the night.

As they walked, they came across a small clearing where a fallen tree served as a natural bench. Nick suggested they take a break, and they sat down to catch their breath. The air was cool and crisp, and for a moment, everything felt peaceful.

But the peace was short-lived. A faint sound reached their ears—a low, rhythmic thumping that seemed to come from deep within the forest. Amy stiffened, her flashlight beam darting around nervously. “What was that?” she whispered.

Nick shrugged, trying to appear unfazed. “Probably just an animal. Maybe a deer or something.”

Hannah frowned, listening intently. “That doesn’t sound like any animal I’ve heard.”

The sound grew louder, accompanied by a rustling that seemed to move closer.

Amy's grip on her flashlight tightened. "I... I think we should go back," she said, her voice trembling.

Nick hesitated, but the urgency in Amy's voice convinced him. "Alright. Let's head back."

They retraced their steps quickly, their pace increasing as the sounds persisted. The forest, which had felt almost magical moments ago, now seemed ominous and suffocating. Amy's heart raced, her mind conjuring images of unseen threats lurking in the shadows.

When they finally reached the campsite, they breathed a collective sigh of relief. The fire was still burning, its light a welcome beacon of safety. Amy sank into a camping chair, her hands shaking slightly as she tried to calm herself.

"That was probably nothing," Nick said, though his tone lacked confidence. "Maybe just the wind or an animal."

"Whatever it was, I'm not going back out there tonight," Amy declared firmly.

They spent the rest of the evening huddled around the fire, their earlier lightheartedness replaced by a tense silence. Even Nick's attempts to lighten the mood with a few songs on his guitar couldn't fully dispel the unease.

As they prepared to sleep, Amy insisted on keeping the lantern on inside her tent. Hannah agreed, and the two shared a tent while Nick took the other. The forest outside seemed to come alive with noises—the rustling of leaves, distant howls, and the occasional snap of a branch. Amy lay awake, her eyes fixed on the tent's ceiling, every sound amplifying her fear.

Hours passed, and just as Amy began to drift off, a loud, piercing cry echoed through the forest. She bolted upright, her heart pounding. "Hannah, did you hear that?"

Hannah, equally startled, nodded. "What was that? It sounded close."

Nick's voice came from his tent. "Stay inside. I'll check it out."

"No!" Amy shouted. "Don't go out there alone."

Nick hesitated, then unzipped his tent and emerged with a flashlight. "Fine. We'll all go together. But stay close."

The three of them ventured cautiously into the forest, their flashlights casting long beams of light. The cry came again, louder this time, sending chills down their spines. They moved toward the sound, their fear mounting with every step.

They reached a small clearing and stopped. In the center stood a figure, its silhouette barely discernible in the dim light. Nick took a cautious step forward. "Hello? Is someone there?"

The figure didn't respond. Instead, it turned slowly to face them, revealing a face that was pale and expressionless. Amy's breath caught in her throat, and she stumbled back, her flashlight slipping from her grasp.

"Run!" Nick shouted, grabbing Amy's hand and pulling her with him. Hannah was already sprinting ahead, her flashlight beam bouncing wildly. The forest seemed alive with movement, branches clawing at them as they fled.

They didn't stop running until they reached the campsite. Gasping for breath, they huddled close to the fire, their faces pale and their bodies trembling. The figure hadn't followed, but its image was burned into their minds.

"We're leaving at first light," Nick said, his voice firm. No one argued. The forest, once a place of adventure, had become a prison of shadows and fear. They could only hope that dawn would bring safety.

# JESSICA REDWOOD

Sude Ozdemir

With her birthday just days away, Jessica had already decided exactly what she wanted for her birthday present.

As the days passed, she was very aware of her family's attitude towards the gift she wanted, so she tried to find a solution. Her parents were well-educated and responsible people, for example, her mother was a doctor and she was the one who was the most against Jessica getting such a gift. Both of her parents knew that buying a smartphone for a 7-year-old child could be dangerous, because it could even harm her if they could not track her activities on social platforms. However, Jessica made it very clear that she would not be happy with any gift other than a smartphone, she always said that almost all of her friends used smartphones but she did not. She even told her family that she was excluded from her group of friends and was not informed about daily events.

Finally, on her birthday, the whole family got together. And her family got the phone but every time the phone was on, Jessica was teleporting to other places and she was away from her family for a while. Because she missed them so much, she did her best to get them too, but she could only go by herself and she tried to do this throughout her life.

# ROBBERY

Yiğit Malçok

Jason is a security guard working at a casino in Monte Carlo. He believed that everyone who gambled with high amounts of money in Monte Carlo was a criminal and that they had that money by exploiting the public. One summer day, Jason the casino's technical staff, told her plan to trainee Serena and electrician Dwayne. This plan worked for them because they were all tired of serving rich old fat and criminal men for hours every day. They prepared a good plan. Jason asked for the night shift that day with the excuse that he was going on vacation and became the head of the security team that night. However, the boss received intelligence that an inside group was preparing to rob the casino that night, and the entire security team was ordered to be on duty that night. If they tried to rob that night, they would be exposed. If they did not quickly come up with a new plan, the likelihood of attracting suspicion would increase. While they were thinking desperately, they chose the second option and quickly decided to make a more comprehensive and well-thought-out plan.

Then they waited for a while, about a month later, they decided to make the striking move before the end of the summer season. This time they prepared a much more flawless plan, they were a complete robbery team that day with all the equipment they would use, their spare costumes and everything. But this time Jason could not get the security chief position, the boss's right-hand man became the chief that night, they came to the casino as usual and started working like a normal day, then Vanessa, the technical staff of the team, stepped in during the busiest hours of the night's money transfer. Between eleven thirty and two thirty, she disabled all the security cameras, there was nothing to record and follow them anymore, at this point the big man Dwayne brought the electrical breakdown personnel to the casino, but as soon as the electricians entered the technical room, they collapsed on the floor, Dwayne eliminated them all.

At that time, the boss was going crazy, his hands were shaking from stress. The security cameras in the casino had not been working for hours and there had been no electricity for a while. The head of security was also affected by this situation. The relationship with the boss had entered a very serious state of turmoil. In this situation, the person who would step in was of course Serena. Serena distracted the boss nicely at that time, while Jason took control of the security as his right arm was with the boss and started the process completely. They quickly went down to the vault and blew up the safe.

Serena distracted the boss nicely at that time, while Jason took control of the security since his right arm was with the boss and started the process completely. They quickly went down to the vault and blew up the vault, then they noticed the boss coming towards them while they were leaving the casino, at that moment Vanessa activated the emergency plan, while the team quickly headed for the emergency exit and blew up the rest of the building.

# A DARK DECISION

Zeynep Yilmaz

It was a cold winter evening, and Oliver walked alone through the empty streets of the city. The freezing cold was numbing not only his body but also his mind. He pulled his old patched coat tightly around him. His thoughts were heavy, and his heart was restless. Life had been cruel to him. He had no money, no family, and even no future anymore. But tonight, an idea began to grow in his mind.

He thought of the wealthy old woman who lived in the building next to his. She was cruel and brutal. Oliver stopped and looked up at her window. His mind was filled with evil thoughts. How could this woman prevent his pain?

Oliver hesitated, his breath seeming icy in the air. His idea of ending his suffering was strengthened by taking what did not belong to him. He looked up at the dim light in the old woman's window, his fists clenched. The woman's cruelty had left him alone; no one would miss him. Still, the feeling of guilt gnawed at him. Could he really cross such a line?

His hunger and desperation screamed louder than his conscience. He approached the building slowly, the snow crunching under his boots. He froze when he reached the door. A shadow moved behind the curtain. His heart was beating rapidly. Was it him or someone else?

Oliver stood frozen, the shadow behind the curtain moving again. The door creaked slightly and the old woman's cold, sharp voice pierced the silence.

"Who's there?"

"It's just me, ma'am," Oliver stammered, his breath visible in the icy air.

The door opened further, revealing the woman's thin body wrapped in a shawl. Her sharp, distrustful eyes pierced him.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I... I haven't eaten in days," Oliver whispered, his voice shaking. "Please, something you can give me."

The woman grinned sarcastically. "Why should I help you?"

Oliver hesitated, then said quietly, "Because there's no one else I could ask."

The old woman stared at him for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then, without a word, she slammed the door and left Oliver alone in the freezing night.

# GOOD BAD WORLD

Ömer Şen

“I will totally tell this to other girls; they will laugh like pigs.” the girl said.

“What?...I....don’t understand.”

“Did you really think that I would go out with a disgusting guy like you?” the girl replied with a smirk on her face.

“You...I...”

Philip couldn’t say a word. He wasn’t expecting such a cruel rejection. He felt like his eyes were burning. He was about to cry and decided to hide his face. Then, he thought that was the dumbest thing that he can do right now. When the tears started dropping, he turned his back and started to run away. The girl shouted some words behind him, but Philip didn’t hear anything. It was probably mocking and insults.

Philip knocked on the door after wiping the last drops off his eyes. His mother opened the door after a while.

“Where were you, Philip? Were you hanging out with your friends again? You don’t care about your lessons at all.”

“Mom, I-”

“Mr. Principal called me today. He said your teachers were not happy with your current situation.”

“But-”

“Your dad and I are working for your future, Phil. But, all you do is slack off all day.”

Philip started to cry again. It was too much for him to handle. He thought that nobody liked him, and if he disappeared it would be a favor for everyone. His father was probably waiting for him to come home to humiliate him while watching TV. Philip didn’t want to go inside of the house. He became sick of this routine. He turned around again as he did a couple of minutes ago. He went downstairs to leave the apartment. His mother shouted some words down the stairwell. She was worried about him, but again, Philip didn’t hear a word she said.

After leaving the apartment, Philip felt relieved a bit. He took fresh city air into his lungs and tried to stop the tears from coming out. He got onto his bike and cycled through the dark streets. He always felt peaceful while riding his bike. There was nothing on his mind at that time. All he cared about was the streets. He saw a stray cat walking through the sidewalk and smiled. The cat went to the garbage container to find some food. Then, Philip remembered what he should do. He took a turn to the left and started off to the forest nearby.

The forest was close to their town. It took about 10 minutes with a bicycle. Philip got off his bike, leaned it to a tree, and started to walk deep into the forest. Whenever he felt lonely or stressed, this forest was his savior to empty his mind. The hooting of owls and the chirping of crickets made him feel more peaceful than earlier. There was a little wind, and feeling it on his face was relaxing.

He started to think about what had happened earlier today and in his life. He thought that girl was the one he dreamed of. He still could not believe that she was that kind of person. Besides, he was a good-looking guy with a great body and height. Why were all the people around him acting this cruel? Actually, he could understand his parents’ behavior a little bit. Still, it wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t understand the lessons. High school is hard, he thought. “I wish I could leave this world,” he mumbled. Then, he heard a sound deep from the forest: Your wish is granted.

“Wha- What? Who is there?”

No one answered. Philip got scared. He has never seen somebody here at this hour. So, he thought that nobody would be here. He started to go back while trying to not make a sound. His fright increased with every step he took. Seconds have passed, but he couldn’t get to his bike. He started worrying, although he was sure that he was in the right direction. Then, he saw a light. It seemed like it was coming from a campfire. He was overcome by his curiosity and started to get close to the fire. He hid behind a tree and peeked a little. There was a small



fireplace and nothing besides it. Philip approached the fire and saw a giant white cat next to it. The cat was asleep. He got confused. What was this cat doing here? Why is it abnormally huge? And who lit the fire?

"Is there anybody here?" Philip said.

"Dude, be quiet. I'm trying to sleep," a boyish voice responded.

"What? Who said that? Where are you?"

"I'm literally next to you."

Philip turned to the direction the voice was coming from, and he came eye to eye with the cat. The cat's eyes were shining greenly in the dark. "Hello, big guy! Where is your owner?" he said while leaning down to pet him. The cat suddenly jumped back and stood on his legs.

"That's rude man! I'm an individual, not a slave!"

"Who? Wha- you?"

"Yes, me?"

"You- you can speak?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You are a cat."

"So what?"

"I don't understand," Philip said. "How can you talk?"

"I didn't give it much thought, I don't know. Because I have a mouth?"

"I've gone crazy," Philip was sweating like crazy. "I'm hearing things."

"Dude, that's serious. You should seek some help. Maybe I can help."

"I'm literally talking to a cat at night deep in the forest. I need to get to my bike."

Philip turned his back and started to search for his bike.

"You were the one who woke me up and are complaining about it. Didn't your parents teach you manners? Besides, what is this bike thing you are searching for?"

"How can you not know what a bike is? I left it at the entrance of the forest; it should be around here."

"It can't be around here because we're in the middle of the forest. It would take hours to leave on foot."

"I don't believe in you, cat. You are not real."

"Firstly, my name is Niko, not Cat. And secondly, I am real."

After saying that, Niko jumped and scratched Philip's arm. Philip screamed loudly.

"Why did you do that? Ahh... You are real."

"You seem like you had a rough night, kid. Stay and rest in here for the night."

"I still can't process these things, but you are right. I will stay, Niko. My name is Philip, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, pal. Snuggle down here and just forget everything on your mind."

Philip lay down on the grass beside Niko. He felt the warmth of the fire. He realized he hadn't felt this relaxed in a while.

"Good night, Niko."

"Good night, Philip."

Philip felt like he was on a feather bed. There were no worries on his mind. They both went to sleep about in a minute.

"Hey! Wake up! We gotta move."

Philip woke up to the sound of Niko. Sunlight was passing through the leaves of the trees. It was morning.

"It wasn't a dream," Philip said. "You're real."

"Didn't we talk about this last night? Whatever. We gotta leave this place; hurry up!"

Philip stood up and yawned while stretching his arms and legs.

"Why, what's the problem?"

"It's the forest elves, I am not on good terms with them."

"Elves? Oh, I think I understand. The voice from last night... My wish came true; I am in another world. That explains everything."

"A wish?" Niko replied. "I think I know what's happening, but we have no time. Come, follow me!"

Niko went on all fours and started to run through the trees. Philip followed him. While they were passing beside the trees, Philip saw some little winged fairies up the trees. There was a fairy that looked smaller than the others. It was probably a child. Philip smiled at them. They got scared and flew to the top and disappeared among the leaves. Then, he remembered his family. He hadn't spent the night outside of his house without informing them. They must be worried about him.

"Hey...Niko!.." Philip shouted while panting for breath. "Why are we escaping anyway? Why are they after you?"

"Well...actually...I-" Niko suddenly fell to the ground.

"Hey! What happened? Are you okay?" Then Philip saw an arrow stabbed at the back of Niko. He turned his back to see where the arrow came from. There were only trees behind them. Then, he felt a pain in his leg. He looked at it and saw a similar arrow shot to Niko. It wasn't so deep, but it was painful. Philip wanted to scream, but he couldn't. He suddenly felt sleepy. While he was passing out, he understood that the arrow was poisonous. But it was too late. He lost consciousness.

The first thing he saw was Niko when he awakened. They were in a bamboo cage. The cage seemed hard to break out. Then, he looked around. There were little wooden huts around them, and in the middle, there was a great fire. The cage was surrounded by elves. They looked almost like a human to Philip. The only difference was their height. They were surprisingly short despite the common belief in fantasy games and movies. They were approximately 1 meter long, about the same as Niko. Their hair was long, so they were invisible, but Philip guessed they had longer ears than humans.

Then, he remembered he got shot in his leg and immediately checked it. There was only a little scratch, and he wasn't feeling any pain. Niko was the same. It was probably elf magic. Philip got close to the bars and tried to break free, but it was very strong, so he couldn't.

"Hey! Why did you lock us? Let us out!" Philip shouted.

An elderly-looking elf with a strange red crown on his head walked into the front.

"You are acting impatient, young lad. Let me explain it to you. My name is Eldrin, and as you may have guessed, this is the elf village."

"I am Philip, and I still don't know why we are being kept here."

"I think you know the reason, boy," Eldrin said while staring at Niko.

"Hi, Eldrin. How are you doing?" Niko said nervously.

"Thanks to you, we are not doing well."

"Hey! I'm still here and don't know why am I here. He might did something bad to you, but I didn't. I met him yesterday," Philip interrupted.

"Sorry for my people's tempered behavior, Philip. They assumed you were his friend, so they shot you. We took care of your wounds, too. As soon as we deal with him, we will release you." Eldrin replied while pointing out to Niko.

"You are being selfish, dude. I gave you a place to sleep yesterday. At least be grateful." Niko said.

"Well, I don't know you, but I don't want to die like this," Philip whispered.

"Don't worry, child, we will not kill or harm you," Eldrin said. "Also, elves have great hearing skills, so whispering is useless."

"So, what must we do to get out of here?" Philip asked.

"It's simple. You just need to-"

A wild and womanlike voice screamed loudly. A shadow passed next to the cage, and a crackling sound echoed in the forest. Then, the cage shattered to pieces, freeing them out. Suddenly, all the elves raised their bows and circled them. Philip thought they would shoot them, but they were aiming for another point. At someone behind Philip and Niko...

"We don't want to fight. Please lower your bows, or I will fight back." a girl shouted from right behind Philip.

Philip didn't want to get shot, but his curiosity forced him to turn his head. There was a warrior-like girl behind them holding a wooden sword. She was about the same age and height as Philip. Her skin color was yellowish green, and she wore clothes made of leaves. Her hair was long and green with so many colorful flowers on it.

She looked angry, and her brown eyes flashed with anger, but Philip thought she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

“Iris! You came to save us. I can’t believe this. I will do whatever you want once we get out of here,” Niko shouted.

“Shut up, Niko! Or I will leave you to death here,” the flower girl, whose name is probably Iris, replied.

“Hey! I think there is a misunderstanding here. They were not going to kill us; we were just trying to reach an agreement.” Philip interrupted.

“The boy is right. There is no need to fight.” Eldrin said. “Please, lower your weapons.” Elves started to lower their bow one by one.

“Okay, then. What’s the problem? Why were they in the cage?” Iris said while sheathing the sword.

“We had a problem to settle with Niko, and because he was escaping every time we saw him, we had to imprison him like this,” Eldrin replied.

“What did you do again, Niko?” Iris growled.

“Erm...I...”

“He ate the big cake we made at the Forest Appreciation Day,” Eldrin said.

“What? Was all this mess over a cake? I can’t believe it.” Philip said.

Grumbling noises raised upon the elves.

“Silence! It seems like you don’t know about elf traditions, boy. I recommend you to not speak without thinking,” Eldrin said angrily.

“I’m sorry for what I said. I’m really sorry. Probably Niko has something to say, too.” Philip replied.

“Yeah, I’m sorry! I was really hungry. I didn’t know it was important. I’m ready to take my punishment.” Niko said while closing his eyes and opening his arms.

Iris bonked his head and said: What are you doing, idiot?

“Oof! That hurt! What is my punishment, anyway?”

“You need to make a hundred cakes for us, about the same size,” Eldrin replied.

“What? You are kidding me. It would take years to make a hundred cakes,” Niko said.

“Then, you will stay here for years,” Eldrin replied.

“I’m not helping you with this, Niko,” Iris said.

“Me neither,” Philip agreed.

“Oh my god! Thank you, friends! When do I start, Eldrin?” Niko said.

Suddenly, Eldrin burst into laughter. Then, all the elves joined him.

“What? Is it that funny?” Niko asked.

“I was just joking with you, Niko. You don’t need to make a hundred cakes for us; just one is enough.” Eldrin answered while trying to stop his laughter.

“How lovely of you! I was scared, you know!” Niko said angrily.

“I’ve known you for a long time, Niko. I know your intent, but stealing is not good. You still need to make a cake for us to apologize.”

“I know, I’m sorry. Should I start right now?”

“Yes. Follow these little friends; they will show you the kitchen.” Eldrin said while pointing out to the children of the village.

Niko followed the children and went inside a hut while whining about cooking.

“Welcome to our village again, friends. Come, have a sit.” Eldrin called out to Philip and Iris.

“Sorry for bringing along you with Niko, boy. I appreciate your bravery, little girl.” Eldrin said while sitting at the table.

“We are sorry for the trouble,” they replied, embarrassed.

“We didn’t meet with you properly,” Iris turned to Philip. “I’m Iris.”

“I’m Philip, but you can call me Phil.” Philip blushed. “Nice to meet you.” They shook hands.

“You are the first human I saw in my life,” Iris said.

“I haven’t seen a human for a while, too,” Eldrin said.

“Well, in my world, there are only humans. I haven’t seen this kind of thing before. Animals can’t talk in my world, only some kind of birds.” Philip explained.

“That’s strange. Another world? I cannot even imagine what is that.” Eldrin was confused.

“I want to ask because imaginary elves are different in my world. What is your age?”

“I’m 481 years old. Our eldest is about 800 years old, which is our average lifespan.” Eldrin answered.

“Wow, you are very old. I’m 16, and humans live around 80 or 90 years. What about you, Iris?”

“To be honest, I’m quite young, according to you. I’m 3 years old.” Iris replied.

“What? How?” Philip was very confused.

“Actually, I don’t know my parents at all. I was born in the Dark Forest from the south. I lived together with plants, trees, and animals. They couldn’t talk, but I could communicate with them.” Iris explained.

“You must be the protector of the Dark Forest,” Eldrin said.

“What? I don’t understand anything you say. Remember, I arrived in this world yesterday night.” Philip asked.

“Every forest has a protector. They are souls created by the forest itself. Their mission is simply to protect their forest. Elf Forest has a protector, too. He visits us once a year and wanders around the forest the rest of the year. He has been our protector for a very, very long time.” Eldrin explained.

“I didn’t know any of this stuff. I guess I was very young. So, old trees didn’t explain this to me.” Iris looked sad.

“I’ve heard the protectors live about hundreds of thousands of years. Your previous protector must be dead, so you’re created. It makes sense that the Dark Forest is the oldest forest. Rumors say there are horrible creatures in there, so no one goes there. Is that why you are here? Usually, protectors don’t leave their forests.” Eldrin asked.

“Firstly, there are no horrible creatures in there; there are just regular animals. And secondly, my forest is destroyed.” Iris’ eyes were shivering with anger and sorrow.

“What? The Dark Forest is destroyed? How did that happen?” Eldrin was shocked.

“It was a regular day in the forest. I was talking to one of my best friends, a tree named Hawthorn. Then, suddenly, a male figure appeared. He sliced and burned every tree with a move of his hand. He started to kill animals by just looking at them. I wanted to fight him, but Hawthorn stopped me. Then she hit me with a branch and left me unconscious. When I woke up, there was no living being around me. Only this sword had a sense of living in it. Later, I learned that Hawthorn created this sword from herself, so it has a part of her soul.”

“Oh my! I’m really sorry for what happened to you.” Eldrin said.

“Losing everyone you know must be difficult for you. I’m sorry for your loss.” Philip agreed.

“Thank you. It happened several months ago. Let me continue with my story. Then, Hawthorn lead me to the north. I tried to help everyone I met along the way to stop the destruction, and ended up here a month ago. Hawthorn said I need to meet with someone in this forest, so I’m wandering around here for a month. I met with Niko a couple of days ago. He’s been nice to me and helped me several times. And finally, I’m here.”

“I think Hawthorn is trying to lead you to other protectors, to learn how to defend yourself and the others,” Eldrin said.

“Probably,” Iris agreed.

“What about the guy who destroyed your forest? Who is him?” Philip asked.

“All I know is he’s destroying everything on his way, and I don’t know why. Some folks call him the Dark Lord, but I call him scumbag. And I’ll definitely make him pay for what he did.” Iris said angrily. “Also, he will probably come to this forest, too. So, I recommend you to run away.”

“You might be right, but I don’t want to panic my people. At least today... How about joining us for the feast?” Eldrin asked.

Iris and Philip agreed. All the elves sat at the big table, and food started to come. It was quite different from human food, but it was really tasty. After the food was finished, Niko came with a massive cake in his hands.

“You started without me. How rude! At least I managed to catch up on dessert.” He put the cake on the table, and everyone dug in immediately. A few minutes later, everything on the table was finished, and everyone was full.

"I forgot to ask you, Niko; you said you know something about how I came here," Philip asked.

"Yeah, I know. It was probably Giuseppe," Niko said.

"What? Who is that?" Philip asked.

"He is a guy who can make wishes come true, but he can do just one favor."

"How can I find this guy?" Iris jumped in.

"He is a close friend of mine, but he shows himself only when he wants to," Niko said.

"That's a shame; extra help would have been useful to you, Iris," Philip said.

"No worries, Phil, I'll figure it out. What about you? What will you do from now on?" Iris asked.

"I don't know. I really liked this place, but I probably should return back to my parents. They must be worried about me. But I don't know how; I already used my wish to come here." Philip was confused.

There was a moment of silence for a short time.

"If nobody has a suggestion, I have one. My people usually travel north to sell goods and buy items. Last week, some heard rumors about a wizard at the village in the north. The rumors say the wizard helps people with their problems. I think it is worth checking," Eldrin suggested.

"It's the only clue I have, I should go there," Philip said.

"I'm coming with you, pal. I got bored of this forest; a change of place would be good," Niko said.

"And I should search for this forest's protector," Iris said.

"Seems like I can't hold you in here anymore. Then go, fellows," Eldrin said.

Philip, Niko, and Iris got up from the table. They thanked all the elves for their hospitality and promised Eldrin to return to the village again.

As they were walking towards the north, they talked about how their lives were before they met with each other. Philip learned that Niko left his home because he had become an adult, so he had been living in the forest for a while. They walked until it got dark and didn't notice because of the chatting. Suddenly, Iris stopped walking.

"What's wrong?" Philip turned his back and asked Iris.

"I must go. The protector is nearby; I can feel it," Iris said.

"Here we part ways, then," Niko said.

"No. This is just a short separation. Our parts will cross again. Until then, see you guys!" Iris said.

"See you!" boys shouted behind her as Iris walked away.

"You like her, don't you?" Niko said to Philip while grinning.

"What? Don't be ridiculous. Besides, despite her look, she's just 3 years old," Philip replied with a red face.

"Come on, man! Is it the only concern? Age does not matter between other species. Also, she is more mature than you."

"You would be in jail if you said these words in my world. Whatever! Can we just not speak about this matter anymore?" Philip was irritated.

"Young boy is shy," Niko laughed. "Okay, okay! However you want."

"Thank you!"

"I think we should settle for the night. It got dark before we knew it," Niko suggested.

"Yeah, you're right. But do we have any equipment?" Philip asked.

"The forest provides everything we need. Look, there are some leaves on the ground. They are our pillows. And there are some sticks lying around. That makes our fire."

"I'm starting to regret this," Philip grumbled.

"Don't be such a worrywart! Come, I'll teach you how to make a fire," Niko said.

An hour passed, and they just rubbed sticks together for this time.

"You don't know anything about how to make a fire, do you?" Philip asked.

"Just wing it, dude! Eventually, it's lit."

"Please, can we go to sleep?"

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel tired."

They both lay down and went to sleep after saying good night to each other.

Philip woke up because of the sunlight passing through the leaves. The fire was extinguished. He turned beside to look for Niko. There was a little squirrel on Niko's head. It was eating nuts while sitting on his forehead. Crumbs of nutshell spilled on his face. A little piece of shell got inside of Niko's nose. Then, suddenly, Niko sneezed loudly, which caused him to wake up. The squirrel got scared and ran up to the nearest tree.

"Oh, good morning, Phil! You are early." Niko stood up and yawned. Then, he saw the nuts the squirrel left behind. "Thank you for your blessings, Mother Nature! It's our breakfast, Phil. Thank her!"

"Thank you, Mother Nature!" Philip said while laughing.

They ate the nuts, which were less than a dozen, and continued their walk.

After walking for an hour or so, they left the forest. There was a little path in front of them; apart from that, everything they saw was wheat fields. There wasn't even a mountain in sight. Then, they saw a little shiny thing on the horizon.

"Look, something is flashing there," Philip shouted. "That might be water; I'm really thirsty right now."

"I hope so." Niko agreed.

They walked for several hours, and with every step they took, they felt hopeless. It was a metal sign standing in the middle of nowhere.

"I think I am going to die because of thirst," Philip complained.

"I have great hopes for that sign." Niko was hopeful.

As they approached, the sign became readable. "Rivermouth, 1 day walk from here."

"Rivermouth? Is that the town Eldrin has mentioned? There might be a river nearby. I hope it's drinkable." Philip said.

"Dude, I don't want to walk for a day. I'm tired; give me a break!" Niko complained.

"It's our only hope; we gotta keep moving."

"Okay! However you want."

They continued their walk. The sun rose to the top. They felt like they were burning alive. Both of them didn't say a word to keep the water in their body. Hours had passed, and the heat increased gradually. Their speed got slower with the increasing heat. Suddenly, Niko fell to the ground.

"Hey! What happened?" Philip could hardly talk. Niko didn't answer. "Did the elves shoot you again?" Still no answer. "Oh, god!"

Philip held Niko from his legs and started to drag him behind. His steps got slower as he was panting with every step. After a few steps, his legs couldn't hold him anymore, and he fell to the ground.

"No, we can't die like this!" He whispered. His sight became blurry. "God, please help me!" He shouted.

A gray cloudy thing appeared in the sky. Then, Philip heard the voice of a man.

"I really can't let a boy die like this." the voice said with a fed-up voice.

Water started to drop from the sky to Philip's wide-opened mouth. A few seconds later, he was perked up. He stood up and looked at the thing that gave him water. It was like a little cloud of smoke with constantly changing shape. It had two funny-looking eyes and was about the same height as Philip.

"Thank you! I owe my life to you. Can I learn who you are?" Philip shouted at the sky.

The cloudy thing descended right next to Philip.

"Don't take it personally, boy. I was just passing by and saw you two. Niko is a close friend of mine, so I helped you," the cloudy thing replied. "Can you help me and open his mouth?"

Philip leaned down to Niko and opened his mouth with his hands. The cloudy thing flew upon Niko and squeezed some drops from itself. After a few drops, Niko started to cough and slowly opened his eyes.

"What's happening? Am I dead? I'm sorry for letting you down, Phil," Niko said.

"Don't worry, we are not dead. Your friend here helped us." Philip pointed out to the cloudy thing.

Niko lifted his head and looked at the cloud.

"Oh! Giuseppe! Thank you, pal! You saved our lives," Niko shouted.

"Giuseppe? The wish guy? Are you the man who brought me here?" Philip asked.

"Yeah, yeah. That's me, alright. What were you guys doing here in the middle of nowhere?" Giuseppe asked.

"We're heading to Rivermouth," Niko answered.

"That place sucks. Well, see you later, then!" Giuseppe started to dissolve into the air.

"Hey! Wait!" Philip shouted.

Giuseppe came back to his previous form.

"What? I was reading an exciting romance novel, so I hope it's important." Giuseppe asked angrily.

"How can I go back to my world?" Philip asked.

"I don't know, I don't care. You wished for this," Giuseppe said.

"Hmm... So, if someone would wish me to return to my world, would you make it happen?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Giuseppe answered.

"Hey, Niko! Would you use your wish for me?"

"Sorry, but I already used mine," Niko answered.

"Really, what did you wish for?"

"I wished for 9999 bottles of milk," Niko answered proudly.

"You did what? That's the dumbest thing I've heard." Philip shouted while confused.

"Well, you can't find milk that easily. It's hard to come across a cow these days, and most are unwilling to give their milk away," Niko explained.

"It still doesn't make sense. So, why didn't you ask for a life supply of milk?" Philip asked.

"You can't ask for unlimited things, boy. There should be a limit," Giuseppe explained.

"And 9999 is the biggest number I know." Niko seemed a little bit sad.

"We will talk about this later. So, somebody else can wish for me, right? What about Iris? But she has her own problems to deal with. It would be selfish to ask her." Philip was talking to himself.

"Is it over? I need to continue with my novel." Giuseppe said.

"Okay, okay. One last thing... Could you please look for Iris and see if you can help her? She is the protector of the Dark Forest, and she is currently in the Elf Forest. I think she might need to use her wish to be stronger," Philip requested.

"Philip is in love!" Niko shouted happily.

"Please shut up!" Philip felt embarrassed. "What do you say, Giuseppe?"

"I can do that. If I came across to her. But I won't look for her particularly. So, is it over? Can I go now?" Giuseppe sighed.

"Yes. Thank you again for your help," Philip said.

"See you later, Giuseppe!" said Niko.

"See you!" Giuseppe suddenly disappeared.

"What a jerk!" Philip shouted behind him.

"He probably heard you, but he won't mind. If you knew him better, you would have loved him," Niko said.

"I don't think so. But I'm grateful to him for saving us. Come on, let's continue."

They continued their walk as if nothing happened. Hours had passed, and the sky got dark.

Then, they saw a light in front of them.

"Look, it's probably Rivermouth," Niko shouted.

"Yeah! I bet that place is like a paradise; Giuseppe was talking nonsense," Philip said.

"We'll see."

"By the way, what did you do with that much milk?" Philip asked.

"Well, I owe my life to that milk. I was starving to death when I met Giuseppe. Then, you know, I wished, and he granted. There were bottles everywhere. I just drank milk and laid in the forest for like a month."

"Did you finish all that milk in a month?" Philip was shocked.

"No, no, listen! Apparently, some animals or other forest folk were stealing the bottles. But I didn't recognize it because there were so many bottles. I thought I was drinking so much. And one day, when I woke up, all the milk was gone. I searched for it around, but I only found empty bottles."

Philip burst into laughter. "You are more stupid than I thought."

“Hey!”

“Look, we got closer! Whoever arrives first wins.” Philip started to run.

“Hey! Wait for me!” Niko went on all fours and passed Philip a few seconds later.

They arrived in the town. Despite its name, there were no rivers. The town was almost like it came from a Western movie. It was in the middle of the desert, and there were a few old wooden houses. There was a creaking sound coming from the houses because of the wind.

“I win!” Niko shouted.

“Sadly...Giuseppe...was right.” Philip was out of breath.

“Yeah! This place really sucks!” Niko agreed. “Listen! There’s music coming out from that building; let’s check it out.” Niko pointed out to a building that looked like a tavern and started to run towards it.

“Hey, wait for me!” Philip shouted behind Niko.

They entered the tavern through a creaking wooden gate. Suddenly, everyone went silent and started to stare at Philip and Niko. Philip got scared, didn’t look at anyone, and went directly to the bartender. The bartender’s back was turned. He was cleaning the glasses.

“Excuse me, sir!” Philip said.

Then, the bartender turned to him. Philip was expecting a human, but a pig was staring at him instead.

“What do you want?” the bartender asked.

Philip couldn’t hold his laughter. So, he turned his back to hide it. But all the customers were pigs, and everyone was staring at him. Niko jumped and hit Philip in the face to prevent from laughing. Philip said ouch.

“Excuse my friend’s behavior. We are looking for a place to stay. Also, we heard about some rumors about a wizard.” Niko explained.

The bartender didn’t say anything but signaled to a table with his eyes.

“Thank you!” Niko said, pulling Philip with him to that table.

There was a fat man and 2 women sitting at that table. Behind the man, another man was standing and staring at them. The man behind had tattoos all over his face and arms. Every kind of food was available on the table. The women were feeding the fat man with their hands. Both women were quite beautiful among other pigs, but the boys didn’t realize it because they looked all the same to them.

“Can we sit?” Niko asked.

The fat man pointed out to seats. Philip and Niko sat down nervously. The fat man gave a hand signal, and somebody continued to play the piano.

“So, what do you want?” the fat man asked.

“I’m Niko, and he is Philip.” Niko pointed out to Philip. “May I learn who I am speaking to?”

“I liked your bravery, little cat. I’m Hoggie Daniel, but you can call me Daniel. I’m the mayor and sheriff of Rivermouth,” the fat pig said with a humiliating smile.

Philip found the pig’s name really funny, but couldn’t laugh because of the man with tattoos standing behind.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Daniel. Actually, Philip and I were looking for a place to stay for the night. We are travelers, and we heard about this town.” Niko explained.

“Well, we don’t have many guests here except the elves and sometimes giants, but you’re welcome.”

“We are coming from the elf village. They mentioned a rumor about a wizard.” Niko said.

“A wizard?” Daniel turned his back and said something to the tattooed man. The tattooed man nodded and went to other tables in the tavern.

“My best man, Chris Bacon, is investigating that issue right now,” Daniel said. “Do you want drinks?” he added.

“I can get water,” Philip said.

“Yeah, water is good,” Niko agreed.

“Sorry, but we don’t have water in Rivermouth. We got some with trading with elves, but I can’t offer you that water. It’s for my people. I can get you wine if you want,” Daniel said.

“Thanks, but I don’t drink,” Philip said.

“That’s a shame!” Daniel said disregardfully.



The tattooed man, whose name is Chris Bacon, came back to his previous position. Then, he whispered something to Daniel.

“That guy!” Daniel shouted loudly. “Where is he right now?”

Chris Bacon shook his head to show that he had no idea. Daniel angrily turned to the boys.

“There is a guy who started to come here recently. He always wears a dark knight suit and carries a sword with him. I don’t think the sword is real, and he is not from my folk either. I don’t know where he lives, but he comes here and shouts some words and nonsense. Then, leaves without drinking anything. We got used to him, so nobody bothers.” Daniel explained.

“Is that the man who started the rumors about the wizard?” Philip asked.

“Yes, and before you ask, I don’t know how to find him.”

“Damn it!” Niko shouted. “Guess we’re going to stay here for a while. Is that okay for you?”

“As long as you pay for it,” Daniel said with a smile.

“We don’t know how long we’re gonna stay. So we will pay when we leave, okay?” Niko suggested.

“It’s okay for me. You’re going to stay at Chris’ house. If it’s over, he can lead you there?” Daniel asked.

“Yes, thank you again!” Niko said.

They left the tavern after Chris Bacon. The streets were dark, so they couldn’t see anything on the way. Chris didn’t speak a word until they arrived at the house. The house was small, after the entrance there was a narrow corridor and 3 closed doors. As they were walking through the second door, Philip saw an eye looking at them through the doorway. He thought it was probably Chris’ wife or something, so he didn’t give it much thought. When they arrived at the 3<sup>rd</sup> door, Chris showed the door to them.

“Thank you, Chris!” Niko said.

Philip and Niko entered the room, and Chris shut the door after them.

“Do you really have any money to pay to Daniel?” Philip whispered.

“No, we will just escape without paying,” Niko said proudly.

“I don’t think we can, but we’ll see.”

“Come on, let’s just sleep. I’m tired of walking.” Niko lay down on the ground.

Philip saw a bunch of hay at the corner. He laid down on top of the bunch and went to sleep immediately.

They woke up at noon because they walked all day yesterday. There was no sound at the house, so they left to look for food. Niko suggested going to the tavern from yesterday to find something to eat. Philip agreed, but they didn’t know how to go, so they randomly wandered around in the streets. The streets were completely empty, and they couldn’t ask someone for an address. After walking for a minute, Philip saw a shadow passing in a narrow street.

“Look, there’s someone!” Philip shouted and went through the street. Niko followed him.

They took a right turn and faced up against a dead end. At the end of the street, a man was standing as Daniel described. A man with black-colored knight armor... He was wearing a helmet, too, so they couldn’t recognize which species was him.

“The world shall be destroyed! A new era will start under the guidance of the Dark Lord!” the knight shouted.

“Erm... Excuse me?” Philip said, unsure of himself.

“Suffering and destruction will come with the full moon!” the knight shouted again.

“We wanted to ask questions about a wizard,” Philip said.

“All shall die!” the knight shouted and jumped between the walls. He jumped over Philip and Niko and suddenly disappeared before the shadows.

“Hey! Wait!” Philip yelled behind him, but he was gone. They ran after him but couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Darn it!” Philip said.

“Don’t worry! We’ll find him again.” Niko tried to relieve Philip a little bit. “Come, let’s find the tavern.”

After walking for a while, they found the place. They sat at a table and ordered some food. Niko said he would pay for the food later, so they ate a lot. They decided to relax for the day, so they chatted with the people

around and got information about the town. Apparently, the town's name was Rivermouth because there was a river passing through the town years ago. The other information they had gathered was unimportant, so it is not worth mentioning.

While the sky was getting dark, president and sheriff Hoggie Daniel entered to the tavern. Chris was behind him. Daniel saw the boys and sat at their table.

"How are you doing, kids? Are you enjoying our town?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, it's good," Philip replied. "Actually, we came across to the knight today."

"Well, how did it go?" Daniel asked.

"We couldn't get our answers; he just said nonsense about the Dark Lord, destruction, and full moon," Philip explained.

"Full moon? That's tonight. That guy might do something crazy." Daniel turned to Chris. "We should be careful about this, Chris. Warn people and stay on alert."

Chris nodded his head, and he was about to leave.

"Wait!" Philip shouted. "What about Chris' wife? She is probably at home alone. I think Chris should look for his wife." He suggested.

Daniel laughed. "Chris isn't married, boy. Don't worry."

"But, there was someone in his house yesterday. Maybe his girlfriend?" Philip looked at Chris. Chris' eyes got bigger, and he got more serious.

"What?" Daniel said. He was confused. Then, suddenly, his face had changed. He turned around around and looked at Chris. "You!" He shouted. Chris punched Daniel in the face with all his power and left him unconscious on the floor. Philip and Niko were shocked. Everybody in the tavern started to scream, and some guys surrounded Chris with angry faces.

"That knight guy is staying at your place," Philip shouted. "You are planning to do something bad tonight." Philip understood the whole situation. "Attack!" He screamed. Then, all the pigmen jumped at Chris. He punched some of them, but the difference in number was significant. He scuttled through the army of men and left the tavern while everyone chased him.

Philip leaned down through Daniel, checked if he was alive or not, and figured out he just passed out. Philip stood up. "We must warn the people," he suggested.

"Everyone! Chris and the knight guy are planning to do something bad. Please, be careful and warn everyone." Philip shouted.

"Let's get out of here and warn other people," Niko said.

They both left the tavern and started to shout out to people inside the houses.

"You shall not continue!" There was a man standing in front of them. It was the knight. "I will end your misery right now!" The knight charged through Philip while lifting his sword to the boys. Philip didn't know what to do and just stood there in fear. He couldn't escape to anywhere. The last thing he saw was the sword in front of his face. He closed his eyes and accepted his destiny. But nothing happened. When he opened his eyes, he saw the knight standing before him and couldn't move. Then, Philip realized there were vines coming out of the dirt, holding the knight in his place. The knight tried to cut out the vines.

"Hey, Phil!" Iris shouted behind them. "It seems like you need a sword." Iris threw her sword, Hawthorn, to Philip.

"Iris! You can use your powers!" Philip said with excitement. He caught the sword mid-air and said thank you to Iris.

"I have powers now; I can manage on my own without a sword," Iris said proudly.

"We will handle this guy," Niko shouted in fear of what happened earlier. "There's a tattooed man named Chris; you follow that guy. He's planning to do something."

"I trust in you!" said Iris and slid on the grasses and leaves she created.

"Focus on me!" the knight screamed, swinging his sword through Philip. Philip countered the attack. They both clashed for about a minute, while Niko watched them in fear. Suddenly, Philip's sword flew from his hand, leaving him vulnerable to attack. While he was trying to reach out for his sword, the knight wanted to attack him. With an adrenaline rush, Niko jumped to his hand and tried to block him. The knight got distracted

and tried to hit Niko. Niko dodged the attack, jumped to his head, and started to claw the knight's helmet. The knight held Niko with his left hand and threw him back. While he was doing all that, Philip had already retrieved his sword, and rushed towards him. Unfortunately, the knight couldn't do anything, and the Hawthorn was stabbed in his belly now.

The knight screamed in pain. Philip felt awful at the thought of killing someone, but it was too late.

"I'm sorry," the knight said. "I was an idiot. I tried to destroy this town just for show."

"Why? Why did you do that?" Philip asked.

"I thought that Dark Lord thing was cool, and I tried to do the same. But, I'm a failure in every way."

"It didn't have to end this way," tears started to drop from Philip's eyes.

"I know, I know. There's nothing you can do now." The knight coughed; he was out of breath. "My last wish... Please, do not lift my mask. I don't want you to see my face."

"Wait! Wait!" Niko shouted. "What about the wizard? How can we find him?"

"Look...for...Grendor," the knight passed out.

"Who is Grendor?" Niko asked. "Hey!" He shouted again. Then, he realized it was useless.

Philip felt terrible. He took a man's life with his hands. He fell on his knees and started to cry.

"Hey, man!" Niko held him on his shoulders. "Don't be sad. You saved those people's lives."

"Thank you, Niko," said Philip. He stood up and wiped the tears away.

Then, they saw Iris coming through with a crowd behind her. Town folk were following her, and she was dragging Chris behind her. Chris' hands and legs were tied up with ivy. When the crowd arrived at the place where the boys fought with the knight, Iris threw Chris in front of them.

"The Dark Lord is our savior! You cannot stop his destruction!" Chris shouted.

"This isn't the right path, Chris," Philip said.

"You are just sacrifices for a new world. I don't regret anything I did. I only regret not burning this town to ashes," Chris shouted again.

Hoggie Daniel arrived at the scene.

"Thank you, boys," Daniel said. "And milady... We will take care of this situation from now on."

Daniel saw the knight-armored man stabbed in the belly, lying on the ground.

"Interesting! There's no blood." Then, he went near to the dead body. "I wonder who that is."

Daniel leaned down and tried to lift the man's helmet up.

"No! Stop!" Philip shouted and ran towards him. "His final wish..."

But it was too late. Daniel lifted up his helmet.

"What?" Philip said. There was nothing inside of the armor.

"Well, he was a mysterious guy from the start." Daniel didn't seem surprised.

Philip removed the sword from the armor and gave it back to Iris.

"Thank you," he said.

"Wow, you look different, Phil," Iris said. "If it's about the knight, don't worry. Look, there's nobody inside of it. Probably, it was a magical puppet or something."

"I hope so," Philip replied.

"Thank you again, children," Daniel said. "Thanks for your efforts. You can stay here as long as you want. Chris's house is empty from now on, so you are welcome! Put Chris in jail," he shouted to some guys in the crowd.

Pigmen dragged him somewhere else while Chris was talking nonsense about Dark Lord.

"Excuse me, sir!" Niko jumped in. "Can we ask you one last favor?"

"Of course you can, anything you want," Daniel said.

"Do you know something about 'Grendor'?" Niko asked.

"Oh, Grendor! Yes, I know him. He's a giant about 100 meters long. He comes here once a month and does some trading with us. He comes from the Giant City. He said that place is really huge according to this place. Unfortunately, that place is so far away from here that nobody from our people tried to go there. Only Grendor comes here from there because he has bigger steps from other giants. At least, that's what he said." Daniel explained.

“Wow! Thank you for all that information,” Niko said. “Seems like our journey ends here, Phil. I’m sorry. I’ll return to my family and rest for about a year. Would you like to come with me?”

“What? Is it over like this?” Philip was confused.

“He said nobody has gone there, so, yeah. It’s over.” Niko yawned. “I need to sleep.”

“Come on, man! We can try,” Philip suggested.

“Nope! I’m going back to Chris’ house; it was comfy.” Niko turned his back.

“Wait! I can seek help from that wizard, too. I’m not strong enough to face the ‘Dark Lord’ yet,” Iris shouted behind Niko.

“So?” Niko turned again and asked.

Iris started to move her hands strangely. Grass began to grow under them. Then, some tree-like things started to grow. Seconds later, a bird-looking plant stood in front of them.

“We can fly with this,” Iris suggested while pointing out the thing she just created.

“Wow! It’s very cool.” Niko ran towards the bird-looking plant, and jumped at its back. “Come on, let’s fly!”

“Okay, we are going, then,” Iris said.

Iris and Philip got onto the bird, too.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Daniel. Goodbye!” Philip said.

“Thank you for saving the town kids! Be careful on your way out!” Daniel replied.

“Your town sucks, Piggie!” Niko shouted downwards as they were rising. “I won’t come to your stupid town again. I wasn’t gonna pay you anyways.”

Daniel shouted something at them, but they couldn’t hear it.

“Goodbye, losers!” Niko shouted as they were departing from the town.

Philip and Iris laughed at Niko.

“Dude, that was rude!” Philip said. “But I agree with you.”

Everybody laughed again. It was nighttime already.

“I’m gonna sleep, guys. See you later in the morning,” Niko said.

“He wouldn’t fall, right?” Philip asked to Iris.

“No, it’s fine.” Iris created a barrier with wood and a bed with leaves.

Niko went to sleep immediately.

“We couldn’t talk at Rivermouth. So, how did your training go?” Philip asked.

“After I left you guys, I found the protector of the forest. He was a nice and very old guy with a long beard. He kinda looked like me, actually. But he was more wise and boring,” Iris said with a smile.

Philip laughed at her. “But you learned so many useful skills from him in a very short time, didn’t you?”

“Actually, I didn’t learn anything from him. He only taught me how to ‘embrace the forest’ or something like that.” Iris explained. “The rest is my imagination.”

“That’s cool!”

They continued talking for a while. Philip realized that was true love he was feeling towards Iris. She was a kindhearted girl, and they both understood each other. Simply, he was enjoying this conversation they were having. She was a good friend, and that’s what Philip had wanted for years.

After a while, they both got tired and went to sleep.

“Wake up, you sleepyhead!” Philip and Iris woke up to the sound of Niko, who had woken up earlier from them.

It was already morning. The air up there was beautiful. They were flying below the clouds, and with endless green fields below them.

“Good morning! This feels so good!” Philip took a deep breath.

“Good morning!” Iris held the plant bird with her hands and closed her eyes. A couple of seconds later, “We’re almost there.” she said.

“The bird told you that?” Niko asked with an amazed face.

“Yep! I can talk with any kind of plant or animal.” Iris answered.

“That’s so cool!” Niko shouted.

“Well, I can talk with a cat, too,” Philip added.

Iris laughed.

“Ha, ha! So funny!” Niko was irritated.

“Look!” Iris pointed out the direction in which they were going.

Everybody looked there and saw a bunch of really long and big buildings over the horizon.

“Those giants must be really long. Look at those buildings.” Philip was amazed.

“I wanna climb to the top of that building,” Niko said happily.

“We’ll see what we can do,” Iris said.

The bird started to descend.

“Hold on, boys!” Iris shouted.

Everybody held on to the wooden rails Iris created. It was a rough landing. They were in the middle of a vast street now, and if there was a giant around them, they would be crushed. But, since their landing, nobody saw a giant around the city.

“Strange, it seems like there’s nobody around,” Philip said.

“Hello! Is anybody around?” Niko shouted. But his voice faded away in the big street.

Iris transformed the bird into a huge wooden megaphone by touching it.

“Is there anyone around?” Iris shouted while holding the megaphone in front of her mouth.

The sound echoed, and their ears couldn’t function for a while.

A few seconds later, the ground started to tremble. They knew that it was because of a walking giant.

The shaking grew and grew until they saw the giant before them.

“Hey! We are down here! Don’t step on us!” Iris shouted with the megaphone.

The giant looked down and saw them. He smiled and lowered his hand to them. They jumped on his hand, and the giant lifted them to his shoulder.

“This way, you don’t need to shout,” the giant whispered. His whispering was really loud, according to the group.

“You look like a human but a very tall one!” Niko said.

“Yeah, you can say that, little cat,” the giant whispered.

“We didn’t meet properly. I’m Philip; this is Niko and Iris,” Philip introduced the group to the giant.

“Nice to meet you, everyone. I’m Grendor,” the giant introduced himself.

“Oh! You are the giant the knight and Daniel mentioned. We are coming here from Rivermouth,” Philip explained.

“Rivermouth! I love that place. It’s so lively, not like here...” Grendor looked sad.

“That place sucks, man! Especially Daniel. Your city is so much better. It has tall buildings, and it’s not in the middle of the desert,” Niko said.

“Thank you, Niko! But sadly, it’s so lonely in here,” Grendor said. “How about we go to my place, and I can offer you some food? You must be hungry coming from that far.”

“Of course, man! I am starving,” Niko agreed.

Grendor started to walk to the way he came.

“Hey, Grendor! Isn’t there anybody else in this city? Daniel said something else to us,” Philip asked.

“No, I lied to them. I’m the only one in here for a long time. I’m longing for guests, so I said that to them. Sadly, nobody came here for a while,” Grendor explained.

“What about other giants? Where are they?” Iris asked.

“They were in this world a while ago. But the earth was too small for them, and they were interrupting other creatures. So, they jumped out of this planet and went up to space. I was too young then, so they told me wait a while to grow bigger. I’ve been waiting for centuries, but it seems like I can’t grow anymore. And my height is not enough to jump out of this planet. Simply, I’m stuck in here,” Grendor explained the situation to them. Then, “We arrived,” He said. They entered a big building. Grendor sat down at a huge round table and put the others on another human-sized table, at his head’s level. They continued their talk while eating the food on the table.

“Grendor, I have a suggestion for you. There’s a guy named Giuseppe; he can grant wishes. What about you finding him and asking to leave this planet?” Philip suggested.

“Don’t remind me about him.” Grendor looked sad. “I met him years and years ago. At that time, I had thought that I would become taller. So, I used my wish to create a friend. I was an idiot.”

“Oh! Don’t think like that. At least you have a friend. Where is he now?” Philip asked.

“He’s gone.” Grendor was sadder than before. “He was a guy made out of dirt. He couldn’t move at this time. And one day, he met with Giuseppe. And he wished for a stronger human-like body. That guy gave him black knight armor. After that, his previous body turned into a speck of just normal dirt. Then, he left this place with the purpose of seeking adventure. I’ve never heard anything about him later.”

Philip was shocked; he couldn’t say a word. Niko patted his back.

“Don’t worry! Remember, you did the right thing,” he said.

“I think we should tell this to you,” Philip said.

They explained what happened at the Rivermouth. Grendor got sad but didn’t get angry at Philip. He said he could understand the situation, and didn’t blame Philip.

“Anyways, we shouldn’t talk about depressing stuff.” Grendor changed the subject quickly. “You guys want to learn about the wizard, right?”

“Yes, it would be quite helpful,” Iris said.

“I met him years ago. He was living in a cave on a mountain close to here. He is a very grumpy guy, but, on the contrary, he has a very kind heart. He asked me what I wanted from him so I could leave him alone. He built this city for me in a minute and told me not to bother him again.”

“Wow! Do you think he will help us?” Philip asked.

“Absolutely! As I said, he’s a kind person. Well, I offered him food sometimes, but he just told me to go away every time. I didn’t visit him for a while, but I think he will help.” Grendor said.

“I will want milk from him,” Niko said. “I’m too excited for this.”

“I can carry you there if you want,” Grendor suggested. “It seems like you are in a hurry.”

“Thank you for everything you did for us, Grendor. We owe you a lot.” Philip thanked.

“I can fly us there; you don’t need to come, Grendor. Thank you!” Iris said.

“At least I can give you a boost,” he suggested.

“It could be good.” Iris agreed.

They left the building together, and Iris created the same bird as before. Three of them got on to the bird. Then, Grendor took the bird in his hand.

“Thank you for the food, Grendor! I will definitely come back to see you.” Niko shouted.

“I’ll be waiting,” Grendor said, throwing them into the air with all his might.

Nobody said a word after they left. They flew a while and eventually arrived at the mountain. They jumped out of the bird and saw the big cave before them.

“I think this is the end,” Philip said.

“Don’t be sure about that, pal,” Niko said. “Is there anyone in the cave? We are looking for a wizard,” he shouted.

The sound of footsteps echoed inside of the cave. Then, a figure of a man came outside.

“You!” Iris was trembling in fear. “Where is the wizard? What did you do to him?”

“What are you saying, Iris?” Philip was confused.

“I...am the wizard.” the man said.

“You destroyed my home; you killed innocent people in front of my eyes,” Iris shouted. “You are the so-called Dark Lord.”

“What?” Philip and Niko said at the same time.

“I...I...didn’t do...anything,” the man was confused.

“I will kill you!” Iris shouted. Then, she drew her sword and ran towards the man.

“Hey! Stop!” Philip shouted behind her.

Suddenly, the man's eyes went dark. When Iris was going to hit him with the sword, the man suddenly disappeared. Then, he appeared behind Iris. The man reached out to her and touched her back. Iris vanished before their eyes. She suddenly turned into a seed and her sword dropped when she was gone.

Philip stood there speechless. He didn't know what to do. Seconds later, he started running towards where Iris had just been standing.

"No! Stop!" Niko shouted behind him.

Philip went past the Dark Lord and grabbed the seed that dropped from Iris. The Dark Lord did nothing and just stared at the ground. Philip cried and cried while holding the seed and Hawthorn in his hands. He turned his back in tears and said, "You killed her!" to the Dark Lord. The man's expression was clueless.

"I'm a wizard now. I'll save lives," the man said with empty eyes.

"You killed her!" Philip shouted in tears. "You monster!"

"I'm a wizard now. I'll save lives," the man repeated with the same monotonous voice.

Philip grabbed the Hawthorn and ran towards the man with anger. The man suddenly countered the attack with his hand and didn't get a scratch. Hawthorn flew up from Philip's hand to very far away. Philip fell to the ground. The Dark Lord remained still, saying nothing. Niko ran to Philip and held him in his arms to drag him to safety. The man turned his head to them. Niko understood that this was the end. But, suddenly, the ground started to shake. When they looked at their behind, there were people everywhere. Everyone they met along the way, including others they didn't know, came from the valley below. Niko recognized the elves, pigmen, and Grendor among the crowd.

"Grendor, what are you doing in here?" Niko shouted. His voice echoed thanks to the mountains.

"These people came to my city, seeking revenge from the Dark Lord. Revenge for the towns he destroyed and the people he killed. We need to stop this madness before any more destruction is caused," Grendor said.

Then, all of a sudden, a great war started. Every kind of creature was on the battlefield. First, the ranged battlers started. Elves were among them. They began to throw arrows at the Dark Lord. But with a move of his hand, all of the arrows returned to the senders. It was a scene of carnage. With all that happening, Philip was looking at the seed dropped from Iris and crying.

"Dude, we gotta do something. Everyone is dying," Niko said to Philip. He didn't reply.

Niko looked at the battlefield again. Pigmen were attacking the Dark Lord. But it didn't affect him a bit. Niko saw the chopped head of Hoggie Daniel on the ground lying around. It was disgusting, but he felt sorry for the man. Then, he saw Chris Bacon running towards the Dark Lord. He had somehow escaped from the jail.

"My lord! I once tried to destroy the town, Rivermouth, but I failed," Chris bowed in front of his lord.

"Please forgive me, my lord! Let me join yo-," His head fell in front of his feet before he finished his sentence.

Niko turned again to Philip. "Dude, stand up! People are dying. We must stop this," Niko said to him.

"Iris is gone," Philip said while crying.

"More people are dying right now," Niko said in despair.

"This madness has to stop!" He heard the voice of Eldrin, the leader of the elf village. "You destroyed our town, our forest. You killed our people, our protector. You need to stop this." Then, an arrow stabbed Eldrin in his forehead. He fell to the ground.

Niko screamed. "He...he...is gone."

"Everywhere I go, I cause problems for people around me. I wish I was never born," Philip continued to cry.

"Did somebody wish something?" Giuseppe appeared behind them.

"Giuseppe! You need to stop this," Niko yelled.

Giuseppe looked at the scene. It was already over. He saw Grendor falling to the ground, and the earth beneath them shook.

"The war is almost over! I don't think I can do something," Giuseppe said. "But, I think I have a plan. You need to convince the boy to talk to the wizard."

"What! Are you sure?" Niko was confused.

"Yes. You need to hurry."

Niko leaned down to Philip.

"It's all because of me." Philip was blaming himself.

Niko slapped him in the face. "No! It's not your fault."

"But...she died...because of me. Everything is going wrong. It's a nightmare."

"Look at me, Philip! I know you have been through lots of stuff lately, but it's not just you. Life is hard. And problems occur to everyone. You must face the consequences and keep going forward no matter what."

"But-"

"Look! My brother died last year. It was painful, but I continued living. Even if it was painful to live, I stood up again and again. If I didn't, I couldn't have met you. And I don't regret anything in my life, even my mistakes. So, you need to stand up for the people who love you and people you love."

Philip wiped his tears away.

"But... What can I do?" He asked.

Giuseppe flew through his side.

"Listen carefully, boy! We don't have much time, so I'll explain only once."

"I'm ready!" Philip said with enthusiasm.

"So many years ago, there were humans living in this world. Their numbers were very great. But, suddenly, an epidemic had spread. All the humans started to die one by one. So, one day, a human boy came to me. He wished for magical powers. He wanted to save his people. I gave him the powers, but it was too late. All the humans except him were dead. He was in a state of misery. Then, he realized he could use his powers to help other creatures. He was loved by all the species that ever existed. But, day by day, the magic started to corrupt his mind. He wasn't acting like himself. He decided to hide himself so as to not harm anybody around him. So, he has been living in this cave for years. But, in recent days, he totally lost himself. He's beyond saving. I regret giving him powers and not controlling them regularly. I won't make the same mistake again."

"I understand the situation. So, what should I do?" Philip was confident of himself.

"You need to remind him that he was a human once. Go, talk to him!" Giuseppe said.

Philip walked towards the man. There was a scene of carnage beside them, but he didn't mind. He stood up in front of the man.

"Hello, great helpful wizard!" Philip said. "How are you doing?"

The man looked at Philip. Philip felt a pressure on himself.

"It's been a while since I last saw a human like myself," Philip said.

"A human?" the man was confused.

"Yes! I'm a human like you. And I need your help," Philip responded.

"I..." the man screamed in pain. "Help...people..."

"Yes! My friends are all dead. Can you somehow revive them?" Philip gave him the seed that dropped from Iris.

"I...remember..." the man said in a painful voice.

He got on his knee and planted the seed in the dirt. Then, he created water with his magic. Suddenly, a plant grew out of the ground and raised. It had huge green leaves, and it seemed like a cocoon. The cocoon opened, and Iris walked out of it. Philip smiled at her and turned back to the man.

"Can you revive the others?" He asked.

The man screamed in pain.

"I'm sorry, boy," the man said. "My consciousness is fading away. Please, just end my misery." He begged him.

"I can't do that," Philip said sadly. "I can't kill a human."

"I can." Iris walked to Hawthorn and grabbed it. "I understand you." She said. "I'll end your misery and create life with you."

"Thank you!" the man said and smiled at her.

Iris stabbed her sword to his belly. The man continued to smile and didn't even budge. Then, roots started to grow from the sword and swallowed the man. It continued to grow and turned into a fruitful hawthorn tree. The



ground around the tree turned green, and flowers popped out of the dirt. The place around them turned from a battlefield to a garden.

"It's finally over," Philip said with a bitter expression. "What about the other people? He couldn't revive them." He asked.

"This chaos is mostly my responsibility, so I'm taking action," Giuseppe said. "I'm using my only wish."

"What? Does it work like that?" Niko asked.

"I don't know. We'll see." Giuseppe said. "I wish for all the living beings who died because of the Dark Lord to come back to life."

Then, a light appeared on the battlefield, and all the people there started to turn back to life.

"It worked!" Philip shouted.

Grendor stood back, and the floor shook. The knight guy was on his shoulder and was chatting with him. Eldrin and the elves were alive again. Eldrin was talking to the protector of their forest, which looked like what Iris had described. Hoggie Daniel was beating up Chris Bacon with the other pigmen. And all the other creatures who died were celebrating their victory.

"It's now over," Giuseppe said.

"Not yet!" Niko interrupted. "There's one last thing we should do." He pointed out to Philip.

"I wish for Philip to go home," Giuseppe said. Nothing happened. "Well, I had only one wish, apparently. There's no exception for me."

"I have a wish," Iris said. "And I thought about it for a while. I think I'm ready." Iris looked at Philip and smiled at him. "I want you to create a gate between our and Philip's worlds."

"Wow! Clever girl!" Giuseppe said. "I'm impressed."

Giuseppe created a gate in front of them.

"Thank you, Iris!" Philip said. He hugged her.

Iris hugged back.

"No need! This way, you can visit us anytime you want."

Philip went to the door. He stood there and turned his back.

"Actually, I want you guys to come with me. I can introduce my parents to you, and they will believe why I was gone for a long time." Philip said.

"I can come; you can show me the forests in your world," Iris agreed.

"Sadly, I can't," Giuseppe said. "I'm a responsible person now. I need to look after the people."

"What about you, Niko?" Philip asked.

"I don't want to. I'm tired," Niko replied.

"Don't be lazy. Come on! Besides, we have lots of milk in my world." Philip smiled.

"Really! What are waiting for then, then?" Niko jumped with excitement.

They walked in front of the door. Philip turned his back one last time.

"I'll be back." He said goodbye to the world and the people he loved a lot.

Then, he opened the door.

# MISSED BONDS

Aslı Naz Atay

It was a sunny spring day. The weather was so lovely that it made people want to go outside, except for one person. Olivia was spending her time in a small room on the floor of her house, where bookshelves covered the walls and her curtains drawn. She was sitting in front of her computer for over 10 hours. Olivia couldn't find any topic but wanted to write a book. She was fatigued and couldn't see the words anymore. Olivia lived alone and always avoided socializing. She couldn't trust people. When her only friend betrayed her in high school, Olivia didn't want a friend in her life. Despite being betrayed, she missed her friend sometimes. Olivia stopped thinking about the past and noticed she finished her coffee. Olivia went downstairs to refill her coffee but couldn't find it. She went to the coffee shop, where she always bought her coffee. She planned to purchase coffee and return quickly, but someone called out her name. Olivia was shocked because the girl who called out her name was her old friend Daisy.

Daisy's eyes were red like she was crying. When Olivia saw her, she understood how much she missed her old friend. Daisy smiled and said, "Do you want to hang out? I wished to talk with you about my past mistake." After hearing that sentence, Olivia couldn't even close her mouth.

"Sure, we can sit here," Olivia said. Daisy bought two coffees and found an empty table. After they sat, Daisy started playing with her hands and looking around.

"I shouldn't have dated your crush in high school," she said. "I'm so sorry. I was a teenager and didn't think logically. I hope you can forgive me." Olivia had finally heard words that they wanted to hear for years. Olivia hugged her because she didn't want to stay away from Daisy anymore.

"I forgive you, Daisy. It's been five years since you betrayed me. I missed your friendship," she said with a smile. Daisy's eyes filled with tears.

"I missed you too," Daisy said. They hugged and felt happy to be friends again. They talked in the café for hours, and then Olivia invited Daisy to her house. After they went to Olivia's home, they started talking in Olivia's garden.

"My life is boring," Olivia said. "I don't make any friends. I usually hang out by myself."

After that Daisy said, "I feel like it's my mistake. I caused your trust issues. It would help if you were more social. Start living your life." Olivia listened carefully. "Maybe socializing will help you find the story you want to write."

"I think you're right. I should..." Olivia's sentence was interrupted by the phone ringing. "I'll be right back." Daisy looked at her like she was saying goodbye. Olivia entered the house and picked up her house phone. It was her mother.

"Hi, Olivia, your old friend's mom called me," she said. Olivia was shocked at her mother's words. She dropped her phone and couldn't understand what was happening. Her mom said her friend, who she had hung out with all day died in a car accident the last day. Olivia ran out to the garden and started crying. Daisy was gone, and there were daisies in the grass where Daisy had been sitting. Olivia cried in the garden all night. By morning, she had calmed down and thought her friend wanted to say goodbye to her. Olivia was happy because she could talk and be friends again with Daisy. Olivia wiped her tears. After that, she took water from the kitchen and watered the daisies. Then she went to her room, opened all the curtains, and sat at her desk. She finally found her story and wrote the title. MISSED BONDS...

**END.**

