**Dance or Die! A Collection of Distinctive Tales**

**By: Angela Loren Rolph**

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**WITCH WAY IS HOME?**

**A short romance/fantasy manuscript Written by Angela Rolph**

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**EXT. WOODS AND MOUNTAINS OF WESTERN SCOTLAND-DAY**

**HAZEL LOREN WILDWOOD, a Four-hundred-and-thirty-five-year-old witch who only looks twenty-five years old, has long, flaming red, curly hair. Hazel’s eyes are bright green with hazel specks inside them. She is slender and looks like she just stepped out of the sixteen-hundreds.**

**The Earth starts to tremble beneath her. Hazel’s eyes flutter open. She screams, and as she does, her hands shoot off green and red sparks.**

**HAZEL**

**Brothers! Sisters! Awaken from your slumber! You’ve been away too long! The Earth is in great peril. My magic has detected a distress signal from the Earth. If we don’t make haste, everyone, including you, on this planet shall perish!**

**A lone daredevil werewolf, CAMERON, appears out of the mists of the mountain. He is dark black with specs of white in his fur coat. He stands out against the backdrop of the mist.**

**CAMERON**

**Grrrrrr! I do not trust you, and I’ve heard of your power, Hazel. How do any of my allies know if we can charge you?**

**HAZEL**

**How do I know I can trust you? You’re not even in your proper form. It shows how little your faith is in me! Our magic will test your loyalty. It is the most virtuous test on Earth. It never fails.**

**CAMERON**

**If I show you who I’ve brought with me, it won’t be a leisurely picnic.**

**(MORE)**

**(CONT’D)
These creatures are fearsome**

**warriors who can kick anyone’s butt. What makes you think you unite them? They are even more stubborn than I am.**

**HAZEL**

**I’ll do my best. I’m sure you’ve heard of me, too. The Earth is dying. If we don’t unite, we will all perish.**

**CAMERON**

**Get ready to meet your worst enemies.**

**The mist starts to clear behind Cameron. Shadows can be seen creeping forward. A giant TROLL stomps his foot along the dirt and the Earth TREMBLES. A vampire’s white fangs shine brightly—a group of bright fairies sparkle.**

**A coven of witches sparks blue and green sparks from their hands.**

**More come forward. Hazel’s allies are endless.**

**HAZEL**

**It’s been a long time, my old friends. I never thought I’d see the day when our forces would need to be united to save this planet. There has been a disturbance on Earth. My magic tells me there is one who seeks to destroy our home and the mortals’ way of life. I know most of you have not needed to use much of your magic since the sixteen-hundreds. If we don’t act now, we won’t have an Earth left to pass down to our children or our children’s children! If we don’t unite now, we will all pass away to the next life.**

**Cameron turns to the onlooking group of supernatural beings. TROLLS, FAIRIES, VAMPIRES, WITCHES, CYBORGS, GOBLINS, DWARVES, GIANTS, and WARLOCKS.**

**CAMERON**

**My senses tell me we can trust Hazel. She helped us with the Witch Trials of the sixteen hundred. She has been with us through the uprising of the mortals in the seventeen hundred. She has fought with us in the Civil War and the Cold War.**

**Fairy Juanita, A sparkly blue fairy WITH bright yellow wings, a red, shiny dress, and yellow dust flowing from her wings,**

**coughs loudly.**

**JUANITA
Hazel is the most powerful witch**

**this planet has ever seen. Her loyalty has been proven.**

**En through the test of time. I stand with her. Who else stands for her?**

**Chloe Marie Caper, a short witch with long black and red hair, green eyes, and a full figure, raises her hand to**

**support Hazel.**

**CHLOE
Hazel has been my friend for many**

**years. I trust what she says is true. All of you should, too. I will follow her anywhere.**

**Fifty hands and weapons are flung into the air.**

**HAZEL
Let’s start our training then, my**

**old friends. It’ll be worth our effort in the end.**

**EXT. WEST GERMANY-NIGHT.**

**JULIUS TROY CRUMP, a fat, short man with brown hair and a beard, is twenty-five years old and hunts in the woods. Black and green sparks shoot from his fingers, killing a mountain lion. His laugh echoes into the still of the forest night.**

**LUCINDA ARGYLE, nineteen, a tall, gangly witch with blonde hair and a glass eyeball, is lagging behind him. She gets closer to him and sighs.**

**JULIUS**

**Honestly, Lucinda! I know I’ve hexed you to do as I command, but must you always be so bold? Your little sighs won’t change what will happen on this planet. If you’re lucky, I might take you as my bride to the next planet of my choosing.**

**LUCINDA
Your wish is always my command,**

**master, but must we keep such a pace as this? I’m getting tired from the trek up this mountain. Couldn’t we have flown up here on our brooms, O’ Great One?**

**JULIUS**

**Where’s the fun in that, my dear? We are on the hunt, not a trip to the nail salon!**

**A wolf HOWLS in the distance, silhouetted by a yellow moon. JULIUS**

**We must hurry if we want to destroy the world! Make haste!**

**EXT.HAZEL’S FORREST IN EAST SCOTLAND-DAY. SUPER: “Second day of training”**

**HAZEL
My friends, if we are not fighting**

**for our loved ones, who are we fighting for? Keep that in mind as we move forward today in our training. Let’s have a good day, people; look alive!**

**Grinding axes scrape their wheels. The green sparks zapping from witches’ palms sound like fifty people being electrocuted. Bats fly everywhere. Fairies sound off like an orchestra of bells.**

**Hazel teaches a group of vampires how to use**

**HAZEL**

**You must hold the bow and arrow a certain way, not just in any way you please, Victor. Your older brother Vlad would be ashamed of you if he saw you now. He was excellent with archery, honestly! Didn’t he teach you anything?**

**VICTOR**

**Do you dare compare me to Vlad? Vlad was a fool who came to a tragic end. Nobody remembers Vlad! Give this to me; I will conquer this sport!**

**HAZEL**

 **As you wish, Victor.**

**HAZEL
Okay, group, let’s huddle up! I’ve**

**seen you all, and you do excellent training with the bows, magic, brute force, nasty teeth, and invisibility. I’m afraid it will take a lot more than that. I will need your pure willpower and bravery if we want to see this through; we need to stay alive out there if we’re going to defeat Julius.**

**CAMERON
Do you want me in my human or wolf**

**form?**

**HAZEL
Your wolf form, please, sir.**

**HAZEL**

**Cameron fills up his canteen, shirtless. Hazel stares at him from afar. The sun bounces off Cameron’s bare abs. Cameron looks up and smiles at her. Hazel looks away quickly.**

**As each day passes, Cameron asks Hazel another question about his progress.**

**CAMERON
I can’t get the hang of the knife-**

**throwing. Do you think I’m doing better, Hazel?**

**HAZEL
Your throw could use a little work.**

**Team up with Victor; he could show you how it’s done.**

**CAMERON
I wish you would show me, you’ve**

**got far more experience. Victor has his head in the clouds most of the**

**time.**

**HAZEL
Very well, but just this once. You**

**better pay attention.**

**CAMERON**

 **Very well, great warrior.**

**The sets with a glowing orange hue. Hazel stops training with Cameron and sends red sparks across the camp with her hands. The supernaturals stop what they’re doing and huddle together in a large group.**

**HAZEL
The time to strike is tomorrow**

**morning. I can feel another shift in the Earth. It is screaming out for help once more. Even more of it is dying away. We will fail mercilessly if we don’t strike while the iron is hot. Sleep well tonight, for tomorrow may be your last day on this Earth. Raise your hands if one or all of you are still with me!**

**The whole lot of hands go up in unison. Angry battle cries can be heard across the group.**

**Weapons stomp up and down, making dirt and dust fly in every direction. Tiny fairies pulsate with their light.**

**HAZEL**

**Then it’s settled. Tomorrow, we fight like hell to save our home and the ones we love! We take no prisoners! It’s do-or-die!**

**Hazel shoots orange sparks from her hands that soar over the crowd. The crowd cheers and raises their weapons in unison.**

**CHLOE MARIE CAPER
You’ve taught us well, Hazel. I am**

**ready and willing to die for you in battle. You’ve been so good to me throughout the years. I trust my life completely.**

**CAMERON
As do I, my warrior in arms. I’d**

**follow you anywhere.**

**EXT. CHINA-GREAT WALL OF CHINA-DAY.**

**Julius and Lucinda begin slowly trekking through the Great Wall of China. Julius stops and turns to Lucinda. He rolls his eyes and sighs.**

**JULIUS**

**I don’t know why you insisted on wearing those black boots. You’ve been slowing us down the whole way up here. Take them off. You can hover; you’re a witch! Create yourself a new pair of shoes, like hiking boots!**

**LUCINDA**

**Men will always need help understanding women and fashion! Julius, you don’t know the first thing about fashion trends.**

**JULIUS
I don’t make it my business to**

**know. I make it my business to kill. You saw how I cared for those tourists back there, didn’t you? Ha! They were like sitting ducks for the slaughter!**

**Lucinda rolls her eyes and sighs.**

**JULIUS
I have felt a shift in the Earth.**

**Someone is after us, Lucinda; I can feel their presence. Several seek to destroy us and our mission.**

**LUCINDA
Just as you say, your highness. You**

**know I’m a puppet at your command.**

**EXT. HAZEL’S FORREST-DAY.**

**Cameron howls like a wolf scorned. He wakes up the whole camp. Arms stretch, and creatures yawn as they try to stay awake. Cameron howls again, and this time, it’s fierce.**

**HAZEL
Gather around, people. We don’t**

**have much time to lose. Julius is on the move again. He plans on making his final judgment today. He will take no prisoners. I want to protect all of you. You are my people. I respect you and care for you deeply. No man or woman gets left behind on my watch. Stick your neck out for your fellow man, and you’ll do fine. Chop! Chop! Gather your weapons. Today, we ride for battle! Take no prisoners!**

**The crowd roars as they finish putting on their armor. Their weapons are sharpened. Axes, swords, balls, chains, pistols, and pointer fingers are ready. The fairies are in stealth mode.**

**The vampires are invisible, as magical bats. Cameron is in wolf mode. The trolls, dwarves, and giants are swinging their spiked clubs. The witches are teeming with electricity from their fingers to their hair. The group is ready and willing.**

**HAZEL
Let’s ride! Death be damned!**

**The crowd marches forward, and the Earth trembles for each step they take.**

**Someone shouts in the crowd. Over the horizon, an army is marching toward them. They make no haste.**

**HAZEL
Do not be afraid! This must be**

**Julius’ army. He has created this army to destroy us. We have trained for this day, and we are stronger. I can feel it in the Earth.**

**Red electricity shoots from Hazel and her witches’ fingers. It looks like a lightning storm dancing in front of them. Cameron howls like he’s howling at the moon. The Earth TREMBLES as Hazel’s tall giants stomp forward.**

**JULIUS
Prepare to die, you fools! Your**

**little Earth is mine to destroy!
It would be best if you had never started a rebellion you were doomed to lose. Ha! Ha! Ha! You’re mine now!**

**Hazel’s allies are outnumbered two to one.**

**An ugly, fat witch who stands seven feet tall steps out of Julius’ stealthy army. She cackles loudly and then shoots her black electricity over Hazel’s allies.**

**Hazel’s allies cling together with their armor as black acid rain falls from the heavens. Their armor wards it off with glowing, red protective magic surrounding them.**

**They start to move forward as one unit; they are close, armor to armor, as they CLING together. A chant can be heard as a battle cry from among them.**

**Julius’ controlled witches move forward and are not deterred by Hazel’s army. The two crowds finally meet in the middle of the battlefield. Neither side hesitates. Blue and Black sparks fly in every direction.**

**The vampires use their surprise attack on their enemies. Fangs bite down hard into about a hundred necks.**

**The aim is not to turn them into vampires but to bite their heads off. Blood runs in rivers beneath their shifting feet.**

**A female witch lies still as she dies on the battlefield. Lucinda’s gangly figure disappears into the blood-stained ground.**

**The giants swing people around for fun before flinging them a hundred feet into the air.**

**Julius’ witches are running faster. Half of them are already gone. Some have died in battle, and some have run away from the fight. Their mind control is starting to wear off. They are lost without it.**

**JULIUS TROY CRUMP**

**Attack! Attack! Attack! They are**

**weak! We shall win this war!**

**Julius tries to create more witches with his magic. The magic around him is too strong and stifles him. Hazel’s witches form a giant coven in the middle of the battlefield. They unite their blue magic sparks together.**

**Hazel joins the lead. Their magic’s electricity sounds like sparks from hell have been unleashed. A mighty wind rushes from them. Julius’ army doesn’t stand a chance. His withes are being fried from the inside out.**

**The last falls silently to the ground.**

**HAZEL
Well, Julius, your magic wasn’t**

**enough to bring us down. What shall we do with you now? I don’t think death is good enough for you. I will lock you up in a tiny magical box for the rest of the time planet Earth survives.**

**JULIUS
I shall defeat you in battle, one**

**on one. Then you shall know of my greatness! You thought you could beat me? I don’t need magical creatures to take down the likes of you! Ha!**

**Cameron steps in between Julius and Hazel. He**

**growls.**

**CAMERON
You’ll have to go through me to get**

**to her. I owe this woman my existence. I will not let a hair on her head be harmed!**

**HAZEL
Please! CAMERON, don’t do this. I**

**can manage on my own.**

**CAMERON
That’s your whole problem. You’ve**

**been managing on your own for hundreds of years. I’ve never known you to know true love. All that will change from now on.**

**JULIUS
How sweet! The two love birds come**

**to die in all my glory. I’m going to have such fun with this. Two for the price of one. It’s delicious.**

**HAZEL
Let’s take him out together,**

**Cameron, I see you in a new light today. Let’s knock his block off. Forget what I said.**

**Hazel steps off from behind Cameron. Her two hands are together and over her head. White sparks flow through her fingers. Julius’ fingers shoot black sparks at her. They bounce off her tall figure.**

**She is a human shield. Nothing touches her. Julius cries in pain. His magic grows weak. He falls to his knees and starts to cry. Cameron jumps onto his chest and pins him to the ground.**

**Cameron tears off his head in one clean swoop. Julius’ black blood swims in every direction.**

**HAZEL’S allies cry out in unison. Three cheers for Hazel and Cameron! How do we fix the Earth now? Isn’t it still going to die?**

**HAZEL
We shall fix it with our magic.**

**(MORE)**

**(CONT’D)
Cameron and Chloe, please stand by**

**my side. The rest of you take your hands and rest them on the Earth. We can use our magic to heal Earth now that nothing will stop us.**

**Each of the fifty allies rests their hands in the dirt.**

**HAZEL
Please repeat after me, my friends.**

**Twirl the dirt and bend the Earth. Make all that matters worth. Heal this land and take a stand. Let no creature or mortal break the Earth. No human alive knows its worth. Hissamay, hossomo, shinta, aruna. Heal this Earth and keep its beauty! Let our magic do its duty!**

**Golden magic starts to spread on the surface of the Earth, seeping into its cracks.**

**HAZEL
This Earth will heal thanks to you,**

**my friends. I want to thank you for all your diligent work.**

**CAMERON
I’m in love with you. I have been**

**from the moment I saw you.**

**HAZEL
I tried to hide it, Cameron, but I**

**was rooting for you while checking you out.**

**They both laugh. Cameron leans in for a slow kiss. Hazel pounces on him, nearly taking him down.**

**HAZEL
Ok, wolf boy. Two of us can be**

**wild, you know. I can be your**

**tigress.**

**CAMERON
You already are, my little warrior.**

**All of us can live in peace now. We can come out of our magical slumbers, and it’s all thanks to Hazel Loren Wildwood.**

**The sunsets, and the victorious party gathers around the campfire. They dance two by two for a victory dance. Night falls, and Cameron and Hazel lie under a blanket together.**

**THE END.**

**The Secret Sauce**

**A Romance by Angela Rolph**

Day broke, and the sun shone like a beacon on the island of Sicily, Italy, where a little pizzeria, known locally as The Little Joy, smoothed with a radiance all its own. The townspeople moved fluidly like a river that sifted through time. Each morning, they prepared their business shops for the tourists and locals. The crowds jumped like huge trout when they mated.

 The Little Joy was no exception. You had to get up earlier than the crack of dawn to fool its two co-owners, Francesca Ramona and Cecil Panesco. They had been chefs together and owners for five long years. They had dreams of making their pizza skills world-renowned. When the seedy, rundown building was on the market, they placed bids on it. Sharing the limelight was something they should have counted on. Both had the heart to buy the other out, so they compromised. Their character's personalities didn’t blend well together. However, they had the dynamic selling power of peanut butter and jelly. Their skills were more potent as one, like an irresistible double glass of red wine.

Francesca was thirty-two years old. She was short and thin as a rail. Francesca had long, sleek black hair. She was as attractive as an old Hollywood movie star and always clean. She was an entitled woman. Francesca was lazy and didn’t like to work with her money. She wanted everything to be handed to her on a silver spoon. The woman was wealthy, and she loved to flaunt it around town. Francesca would strut around town like Tyra Banks in name-brand everything when she didn't work. She always reminded everyone of her classiness and sassiness.

Cecil Panesco was Francesca’s co-owner. He was a diligent worker. Cecil was a charismatic, attractive, wealthy fifty-nine-year-old Italian native of Sicily, Italy. He had black, curly hair and brown eyes and was well-groomed. Both co-owners spoke Sicilian heritage and were Roman Catholic. They both grew up going to pagan myths and religious events, including country fairs. Some events they went to were Easter, Carnival, and the Patron Saints' Day feasts. Although a hard worker, he didn't always enjoy his business partner, Francesca, despite his love of making pizza. He became envious of her because she had fewer duties, which made him do most of the work. Even with wealth, he upheld a work-for-everything-you-earn mentality.

Ignacio Fontelli was fifty-five years old. He, a tall, heinous, heavy-set man, stood there. His black hair and dark black eyes made him stand out. His living conditions were filthy, and he kept a repulsive hut with bacteria over every surface. Ignacio grew up in Sicily, Italy. His background was treacherous; he had a criminal and psycho-personality trait. Ignacio used to be Roman Catholic. Ignacio quit the church when he was ten years old. His absence from the Sicilian festivals disturbed the town. He denounced his religion at an early age. Both his parents died after a house thief killed them like savages. Ignacio was the only one who survived. Most of his hate and distrust came from his parents being murdered before his eyes on his mother’s birthday. He became homeless after that, and he turned into a life of crime. Ignacio watched the news for years about the pair’s fame and grew envious of their wealth. After that, he devised a diabolical plan to steal their sauce and fortunes.

Francesca and Cecil created a name for their pizzeria, The Little Joy, with their world-famous secret sauce. The Little Joy had brought them great fortune and great fame. Their pizzas were always fresh and delectable. They had a unique flavor that many other pizzas needed to have. People had given them rewards and were on the cover of every magazine and internet blog. They came to work each day and worked ten times harder. Cecil devoted himself to the day’s work, and Francesca rode piggyback on his hard work ethic.

 On June 12th, 2023, while Francesca and Cecil argued over how much of their sauce to garnish on one of their pizzas, the evil Ignacio cooked up his saucy plan. He strolled into their threshold, and they both jumped out of their skin. Ignacio tried to make friends with Francesca while Cecil garnished some warm, fresh-from-the-oven pizzas. Francesca cut Ignacio a luscious slice of pizza, and the smell infiltrated his nostrils. Ignacio raved about the taste of the sauce. It was sweet with a bit of tang. He asked her what the sauce recipe was. She wouldn’t tell him.

He said, “I must have the answer to this question, anyway!”

He stomped out of the threshold like his boots combusted. Something broke in Francesca at that moment. Her instincts flew to protect The Little Joy with her life like it was her baby. She would sever her right arm to save her business from going under. She gave Cecil a look. Cecil looked at her intensely.

She looked at him as if he were a mind reader. Francesca arrived late to work on January 13th. She jumped ten feet as she stepped across the kitchen when her boot crunched down on Cecil’s outstretched arm on the cold ceramic tile. She crouched down and checked his head for blood stains. She sprinted to the kitchen to grab the smelling salts. Francesca placed them under his nose. Cecil instantly woke from his premature slumber. She guided him to the kitchen table. He felt his head with his unstable hand.

“That tile sure does pack a punch! A stranger passed by the door and threw in a stink bomb. He trapped me inside.”

“He saw that I was going to pass out, and that’s when he ran in and trashed the place. I know he looked for the recipe but couldn’t find anything. I blacked out after that,” said Cecil.

“You poor dear. I should have been here. I don’t know what to say, but I’m so sorry you were hurt,” said Francesca.

“He didn’t know I kept a recipe copy in my chef’s hat. I’d like to see him find the other copy.”

Cecil cackled as loud as a rooster crow. Francesca pecked him on the cheek. He grinned and pointed again to his face. Francesca giggled like a child with a brand-new lollipop. She then told him they would call the police.

The police have yet to show up. They both searched for clues around their pizzeria for hours, like Scooby Doo, but they were clueless. As they returned, they discovered a black felt fedora at their doorway. They took it down to the police station to have forensic analysis done. They found a hair on the inside lining of the hat. The police said it would take two weeks for the testing to return.

On June 14th, around 11 a.m., Francesca waited an hour for customers to call the pizzeria. She walked away from the phone when it rang passionately. A strange man with a distorted voice said,

“If you don’t give up your secret recipe, the Little Joy will be a pile of ashes,” said the man.

Ignacio sounded like the fuzzy, distorted end of a receiver.

Francesca said, “We will comply if you meet us around the back of the pizzeria in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes came and went. The duo waited in the back lot like a cat who wanted to stalk out their prey in the dead of night. They saw a dark figure in the distance who approached them without warning. The strange man’s face was hidden. Ignacio demanded for them to hand over the recipe. The fiend pointed the cold metallic gun through his ratty trench coat.

Ignacio shouted, “Give it up, or you’re dead!”

Francesca snuck up behind him like a ninja and lunged for him. Ignacio ducked for cover like a spy with a mission. Francesca and Cecil raced back to The Little Joy to call the police again when they heard open fire behind them. The duo ducked behind a large block of cement at breakneck speed. They listened to the man flee on a large Harley-Davidson motorcycle, which whizzed by like a ball of thunder. As the duo relaxed, their heavy breaths tightened the space between them, and they backed away awkwardly. They ran to The Little Joy. After trying to squeeze each other out of the threshold, they landed on each other.

“We can’t keep bumping into each other like this,” said Cecil.

Francesca said, “I have something I’ve meant to tell you.”

“It can wait until after this minor disaster,” said Cecil.

As soon as they arrived, they realized they still didn’t have enough evidence to nail the man. Ignacio used a distortion device with his voice again.

Francesca arrived at work early on June 15th.

“Cecil, I had a bizarre dream last night that we had been poisoned by someone today. The dream didn’t reveal who it was or when it happened.” Cecil stared as he chopped his parsley. He stared at a package that was placed at the front door.

“It looks like someone gifted us a present, my dear.”

Francesca raised one tall eyebrow in worry. She opened the box and saw the two wine bottles tucked away inside. There was also an Italian Crème Cake with a note. The note read, " Pizza is the best; put your service to the test; let's not forget the rest; the secret is in the sauce. -IF”

“Cecil, let's put this wine to the test,” said Francesca.

Francesca uncorked one bottle and drizzled it into the second kitchen to the plants on the windowsill. She ran the entire bottle on all the plants there. The plants wilted and died sorrowfully before their eyes.

“All the evidence we need is in the fingerprints on this wine bottle. I bet he forgot to wipe them clean,” said Francesca.

Francesca dialed the cops on their slim white cord telephone. As soon as the cops arrived, Francesca pointed to the wine bottles. The cops arrested Ignacio nearby because they recognized him from Francesca and Cecil’s outside security camera. After the cops left, Francesca grabbed Cecil’s face and planted a big, juicy kiss on his lips. They embraced until she let go of his shocked face.

“My dear, I did not know you had it in you! I no longer see the entitled little girl I have worked with all these years. I see before me a grown woman who knows her mind. You’ve done so much in our aid to save The little Joy, and you have become my little joy.”

“My chef, it was always you; we’ve saved the store!” said Francesca.

“No, it was all you, my dear,” said Cecil.

Cecil grabbed Francesca’s hand and kissed it with a hunger from the depths of his soul. Francesca and Cecil gazed out their pizzeria window as Ignacio was hauled off as if he were a stray dog into the police car nearby. They both waved through the window and started to laugh amongst themselves.

“Who was that guy anyway? His motives were evident, but I didn’t think it was necessary to kill us off,” said Francesca.

“Killers and psychos have no motives, my dear, or sense either,” said Cecil.

The two took a break from the kitchen and joined some tourists walking in the park. Francesca held Cecil’s hand, and he stroked hers in his. Cecil intertwined his muscular fingers into hers and squeezed her delicate ones. Soon after, they sat on a nearby park bench. They talked, for the first time, about one another’s lives.

“Why do you think people love our sauce?” asked Francesca.

“My dear, I only have one thing to say about that, and these are my final thoughts on the matter.” Francesca became beady-eyed as she stared at Cecil like a young girl who received a newborn kitten. Cecil leaned in and whispered in her ear.

“The secret has always been in the sauce!”

Both laughed and smiled as they gazed into each other’s eyes with a newfound hunger for life, each other, and food. They headed back to the pizzeria.

“Let’s go get a gelato instead. I want to know what makes your engine fire up, my chef,” said Francesca.

“Gelato’s one of them, my dear,” said Cecil.

They spent the remainder of the day at a mom-and-pop gelato shop named Giuseppe’s Love and Ice Crème. The waiter served them pistachio and chocolate gelato. The lovebirds talked until it was almost nightfall. Francesca clung to his words like misty dew on the bean vine. His eyes were infused with hers; they fell for each other long ago. The two were glued to each other like a fly to honey. Both were unaware of the time. It stood still for them. Francesca’s watch buzzed for an alarm to close the pizzeria.

“It's nightfall, my chef; we’ve been away from Little Joy all day. We’re awful business owners,” said Francesca.

“We can afford to be that way; we’re rich and now even richer because we’ve found one another,” said Cecil.

Francesca grinned like she was named the beauty queen of Italy.

“I can think of a place where no monsters can get us, my chef, unless there’s one hiding under the bed,” said Francesca. She kissed him as she shoved him out the door.

The following day was June 16th. Francesca gingerly sat on the edge of her California king-size bed. Cecil snored like a freight train losing tracks in his sleep. Francesca was deeply smitten. She adored this man for so long, and now he was finally hers. She would keep him forever, and she wouldn’t share with anyone. He was her chef, and she was proud of him and all their accomplishments.

“My chef, you have slept your alarm for the first time!” said Francesca.

“I thought you were my alarm, my dear,” said Cecil.

“I may indeed bring you cause to alarm, baby. We must get moving,” said Francesca.

“Now you are the early one, my dear, and I’m the lazy, entitled one,” said Cecil. Francesca chuckled to herself.

“You’re full of yourself today, my loveliest,” said Francesca.

“No one could be any more lovely than you, my little joy.”

Francesca arrived at work ahead of Cecil. She felt joyous. Cecil walked in ten minutes late for a change. He walked like a proud rooster who was king of the walk. He got his instruments from the cupboard and smiled like a Cheshire cat. The two love birds thought they were safe. They didn’t know how bad their day would get. Midway through the day, they took a brief break from work. Cecil held Francesca’s hand and kissed her with enthusiasm. After Cecil devoured her, he pulled away from Francesca.

“My dear, I have ruined your makeup,” said Cecil.

Francesca giggled and headed to the bathroom to fix it. As she arrived, she noticed the back door outside the bathroom was ajar. She went to the restroom first. After she was done, she opened the door, but it was stuck. A hand reached in and yanked her out onto the floor with a violent crack that sounded like a skull being shattered as it split the white tile. Two muscular, hairy arms reached around her neck and tried to strangle her from behind. She gasped for air and cried out, but her voice was gone, like an old television that was muted in static. Her arms were dead weight as they hung stiffly around her. Francesca’s feet kicked the cold white tile as her body struggled in vain. Her life force almost left her like a flame snuffed out. Cecil busted down the bathroom door and thrust Ignacio into the bloody white tiles. He gave him an aggressive boot stomp to the nose. Cecil noticed the man was as still as a freshly frozen lake. He checked the back of his head, and it was bloodstained. Warm, deep red, thick blood ran into the cold, white tile cracks. The mysterious man was stone-cold dead. He was never to haunt them again. He would no longer hurt Francesca on his watch; no one would again. His little joy had become the love of his life, and he would die to protect her from that moment on.

Cecil scooped Francesca in his arms like a child and ran out to his Fiat. He obeyed no traffic laws in his plight for Francesca’s safety.

“Ti Amo, I love you, and I always shall. Please don’t leave me, not now, never.”

Cecil spent two days at Francesca’s hospital bedside. As soon as the day broke, he alerted the nurses to go, as he would take care of her for the rest of her stay. He was by her side day and night. He didn’t sleep for two days. As he watched her sleep, he remembered how he almost lost her. After that, he took a vow. Cecil loved in every sense of the word, from now until forever.

On June 19th, Francesca checked herself out of the hospital, and they went to her bank in Ireland. They went inside the bank and headed up to the bank teller. He told them someone had broken into her vault. The teller told them it would take a year to recover Francesca’s money, if at all.

“It's time to pickpocket a dead man today, my chef,” said Francesca.

“Good thing we stuffed the poor sap in the deep freezer next to our secret sauce, my little joy,” said Cecil.

Cecil chuckled like the cat that swallowed the canary. The pair headed back home for a new life together. Around eleven a.m., Francesca fell asleep as her hand slipped out of Cecil’s.

“Cecil,” she moaned in her sleep.

As he trekked the lengthy drive, he knew his drop-dead gorgeous bride was forever beside him. A lifetime of fresh adventures awaited them.

Bonita The Elite

Fall hung crisply in the air in 2023. The woods were filled with an unearthly deep and dark magic. The trees oozed the magic from the earth within these haunted woods. Bruce Pierre’s castle was haunted. It was perched in the woods on the outskirts of the village of Conques in the Averyon in southern France. The creatures turn into unsightly beings on Halloween. Rumors told of visitors to the castle going off the radar and were never heard from again. The kids in the village heard rumors about the noises and spooky creatures that lived there. They knew of a boy five years ago who thought he could explore the castle on his own on Halloween night; his father went to fetch him the next day and vanished without a trace. Bonita was a little blonde girl.

Bonita didn’t believe it was haunted, so they sent her to find out. She had to come back and tell them what she saw. They all waited for her to vanish, too. They knew it was just a matter of time. That was always the curse on Halloween night. No one was safe from it. Everyone feared it.

Gargoyles had come to life on their outside stoops. They were unpleasant the most on Halloween. One of their names was Grimley. He was a foul one. He patrolled the interior of the castle and the grounds constantly for intruders. He was always at the ready. Another creature that wasn’t a gargoyle was a werewolf named Lucifer. He transformed himself at will to frighten Bonita. His transformation was always hideously gruesome. There was a vampire named Fang who would terrorize anyone. He was inches away from biting Bonita. These creatures were child monsters and had a strange playfulness about them.

Unless someone broke the castle's spell, they were cursed to be child monsters for life. An enchantress had cursed them and Bruce to be monsters forever unless the beast had found true love. The house had been haunted for three hundred years, and everyone in it had remained frozen in time. Bruce’s birthday was coming up again, and if he couldn’t find true love on his 321st birthday, he was doomed to remain a monster for all time.

The haunted castle was full of creatures, including ghosts, ghouls, trolls, fairies, vampires, werewolves, and goblins. Bonita was exploring the castle grounds and was immediately spooked when she heard menacing howling coming from the castle. She decided to explore the castle. She wasn’t prepared for what she would find. Bonita walked up each step to the top floor of the castle. Every step creaked like a rickety piece of wood on its last leg. Dust and cobwebs made the castle look ancient.

‘The castle needs some serious TLC,’ thought Bonita.

She tenderly stepped on the creaky floorboards and went to a hallway upstairs when she saw a prominent, dark, hooded figure at the end of the hall. She was dead curious. She treads lightly, closer, inch by inch. She finally reached the end, shining her flashlight brightly in the creature's sleepy face. A small creature stepped forward. He was her size but looked like a bear cub with a giant horn on his forehead. He had feet like a platypus. His tail was that of a lizard. She jumped back ten feet in fear.

“What are you?” she spoke.

He growled, “I am a monster and nothing more. Take no pity on me.”

“I’ve never seen anyone like you before, she said.

“Let me take you on a tour of the castle, and you can see what hellish beings live here. Maybe then you’ll know who you’re dealing with,” he said.

“These creatures have a bark worse than their bite,” said Bruce.

Bonita stepped back. She didn’t know what to expect. A short, thin, wiry woman tried to bite Bonita on the neck with her razor-sharp fangs. Bruce stopped her in the nick of time.

“Graciela, you know that’s not allowed in this castle. What would Ramon think of you? Ramon is her favorite vampire friend. When we were humans, they were in love and married,” said Bruce.

“Ramon doesn’t tell me what to do, Bruce. I run the show, not him. He’s too lazy now, always eating too many bonbons.”

 Bruce rolled his eyes viciously at her. Bonita looked around and touched the railings on the stairs. She ran up and down the stairs as someone precisely her age would. She saw a cluster of dark and light fairies. Her eyes widened, and the reflection from the light of the glowing fairies lit up her enlarged pupils. Bonita’s eyes became full of wonder. She hadn’t seen anything as magical as this place in her brief life.

“Bruce, you must adore it here,” said Bonita.

“Love is a strong word,” said Bruce.

“I could stay here forever,” said Bonita.

“That just proved you don’t know how long forever can be,” said Bruce.

 Bruce’s gaze was on the dusty floor as it reached the top of the staircase. The gargoyles hadn’t arisen. They were still napping and drooling. They terrorized the whole room when they woke up, banging and clanging into everything. They swung their ball and chains through the decrepit staircase wood. When they slept, it was all fixed again. The beauty and curse of the castle ran deep, and it was apparent in everything on the castle grounds. Bonita was getting her first taste of castle life.

“Do you have family in town?” said Bruce.

“My mother lives in a cottage near town. I know she will look for me tomorrow if I don’t return. Her name is Lucinda Dubois, and mine is Bonita Dubois,” said Bonita.

“My full name is Bruce Pierre. I’ve been a slave to this curse and dark ancient castle for over three hundred years. I’ve remained a child beast, as have all my friends and family. A horrid, wicked witch cursed me and everyone I love. If I don’t find someone to teach me to become a better boy and to show me love, I’ll be doomed to stay a boy monster forever and never know what true love is,” said Bruce.

Bruce hung his head low and shuffled his feet like iron balls before him. He never glanced at Bonita. Bonita reached out and held his hand tightly, but he didn’t say a word. What could she say at that moment? Bruce flopped his platypus feet up and down, and they sounded like falling fish hitting cement. His tail swayed back and forth wishfully, and Bonita noticed the beautifully colored scales that decorated it. She smiled, and her eyes lit up the room. Bonita planned to aid Bruce but wouldn’t reveal her plans.

“We should have a Halloween party here tonight,” said Bonita.

“A what?” said Bruce.

“You do know what Halloween is, don’t you?” said Bonita.

“It’s something they celebrate in the United States, not France,” said Bruce.

“You’re way behind in the times. Our village is more modern now, and we have picked up customs from visitors from other countries,” said Bonita.

“Attention all scary creatures. We’re going to have a party here tonight. I will return to the village to bring all my friends here. I’m going to show them that this place is magical, and there’s nothing to be afraid of here,” said Bonita.

“They won’t come. No one ever does. They are too scared,” said Bruce.

“Give me this evening to change their minds,” said Bonita.

“These woods aren’t safe, Bonita. There is truly evil magic that the witch created to guard the castle. You came here before the sunset. All the magic happens at night in the woods, especially on Halloween. It’s also a blood moon tonight, and the other witches come out to claim their next victims. No one would be safe in those woods. I can’t let you go,” said Bruce.

“Very well, I will remain here for a month. I’ve got some surprises in store for you, Bruce. After the month ends, you shall never see me again,” said Bonita.

“First, let’s get to know each other, Bonita. You never told me how old you are or your grade. I’m ten years old,” said Bruce.

“So am I,” said Bonita.”

“If you break the curse, do you think the witch will give you a second chance at being a kid? Do you think that might be something you want? Would you want to start from scratch again?” said Bonita.

“I haven’t thought about if I’d have that option. It would be something to think about. I loved my childhood, and I wouldn’t mind having a re-do of it. A child’s life is so pure. I would love to have the option to remain a child but not a monster,” said Bruce.

“I would, too. A monster’s life is so lonesome, and I wouldn’t like to be feared by others. Bruce, I don’t fear you. I hope you know that.” said Bonita.

 Bruce smiled a toothy grin that stretched from ear to ear. His lizard tail swayed with wild passion on the old floorboards. His platypus feet did a little tap dance, sounding marvelous as if set to music. If you listened closely enough, they might have said like they were mimicking his heartbeat. The rhythmic thuds echoed cheerfully on the ancient floorboards. The hairs on his chest stuck out like a bear freshly awoken from hibernation.

 Bonita giggled and clapped her hand tightly over her mouth. All the air was released out of Bruce like a deflated tire. His head hung low, and giant teardrops washed in droves through the cracks of the floorboard to the corridor below them. He turned around and began walking back to his room.

“What have I done? Have I offended you? Whatever I did, I’m sorry,” said Bonita.

 Bruce slowly shifted back around and stared at her blankly.

“You’re making fun of me. You’re just the same as all the others. There’s no hope for me. There never was,” said Bruce.

 Bonita took a step back.

“I can’t believe that. I will prove to you just how valuable you are and worthy of being loved,” said Bonita.

 Bonita ran down the steps and through the downstairs corridor to the bitterly cold night outside. She planned on saving Bruce somehow. She found a discarded witch broomstick lying just beyond the castle’s iron gate.

Since the magic was still strong on Hollow’s Eve, the broom still had a flying spell anchored to it. Bonita hopped on and zoomed like the witches of old, far above the misty castle grounds. She knew she had to stay clear of all the dangers on the ground, so she soared high in the starry night sky. As she raced away into the night, she looked down on the woods and saw unspeakable nightmares unfolding. She cried out as she saw women and children being robbed and men being killed by Satan’s creatures. Bruce had warned her of all that she might encounter. She was not prepared. She couldn’t believe there could be so much evil in the world. She was still young and naive. She had much to learn and hoped she had many years ahead of her to know. She found a setting on the broomstick to set it on autopilot. Bonita closed her eyes to the world around her and let the old broomstick fly above all that was ungodly. She would soon be in the arms of her loving mother.

Bonita had fallen asleep on the broom, but her hands were still firm around the broomstick. The broom was getting lower, and she spotted her cottage at last.

‘My home, my beloved cottage. My mother will have been so worried.’

She hopped off the broom as it descended. Bonita pushed her front door open, but it was already cracked.

 “Are you here?” said Bonita.

 The cottage was empty. She went to the village to ask around for her mother. She found her schoolmate Timmy by the toy shop.

“Timmy, have you seen my mother?” asked Bonita.

“You came back from that Castle alive?” Timmy asked her.

Bonita glared at him.

“Please tell me where she is,” said Bonita.

“She went looking for you. I think we gave her a good scare,” said Timmy.

He laughed like a hyena.

 Bonita stormed off toward her cottage. She hopped on her broomstick and took off toward the forest. She flew low and scanned the woods for her mother. She saw steam coming from an old witch’s cauldron. Her mother was tied up against it. She zoomed down like a speeding bullet. A witch came out of her cottage. The witch wasn’t fast enough. Bonita had her mother’s ties cut instantly, and she had her on the broomstick with her before the witch could think twice about it.

As Bonita and her mother returned to their cottage, her mother patted her back and told her she was proud of her. Bonita smiled and felt a sense of pride swell inside her.

“Mom, what were you thinking about coming after me in the forest? It’s dangerous and vile out here,” said Bonita.

“I’d fight off any monster day or night to save my baby,” said Lucinda.

“I love you very much, Mom,” said Bonita.

“I love you more,” said Lucinda.

Bonita told her mom why she didn’t come home and everything she was going through. She told her she was trying to break Bruce’s curse.

“It sounds like a lot to handle by yourself. I know you’ll try your best. Remember to try, try, and try again,” said Lucinda.

Bonita returned her mother to their cottage, hugging and kissing her. She bounced back onto the broomstick and rode ahead, more determined than ever to succeed.

‘What happens if I don’t pull this off? All the poor souls in the castle are doomed for an eternity of hell.’

It took Bonita two hours to reach the humongous castle. Bonita came down by the gate. She ran to the front door like lightning struck and slowly pushed the solid frame open. It creaked like a greasy, squeaky hinge. She looked around the room and saw no one. She ran up the stairs to Bruce’s room and found him sitting on the side of the bed. He held his face in his hands. She touched him on his shoulder as lightly as a feather. He looked up wide-eyed and startled. Bruce embraced her and spun her around the room.

“I thought something had happened to you,” said Bruce.

“I’m fit as a fiddle,” said Bonita.

“What took you so long to return?” said Bruce.

“My mother was in grave danger, and I had to save her life in the forest,” said Bonita.

“Neither one of you should have been there,” said Bruce.

“She was trying to save me; she came after me because she thought I was in peril. The school kids scared her,” said Bonita.

“Don’t scare me like that again,” said Bruce.

“I promise I’ll be good,” said Bonita.

 Bonita walked outside near the frozen turquoise pond. She sat along a hard gray stone bench. She fed the geese nearby while she pondered how she would save the castle. The following day, she thought she ought to get her creative juices flowing by cleaning the dust and cobwebs from the castle rooms. She washed the stairway railings and the corridor floor and finally found a magical mop to do the rest for her. She decided to go to the attic to clear out some junk. Bonita sifted through some old pictures and curtains when she saw something gleaming from the floor. It was halfway hidden under a moth-eaten blanket. She yanked the blanket back, and she saw a humongous sword. There was a button on its hilt. She pressed it, and a magical hologram appeared. A wizard was in the hologram.

“My dear, you’ve got your work cut out for you. If you want to save Bruce and this castle, you only have three days to do it. It would be best if you listened to everything I say. If you don’t, all is doomed,” said the wizard.

“Who are you?” said Bonita.

“I am the wizard of time, my dear; we have little left. My name is Ivan the Fateful,” said Ivan.

“I’ve never heard of you,” said Bonita.

“You never would. I’m only visible to those who truly need me,” said Ivan.

“What must I do to make Bruce be able to love again?” said Bonita.

“The first task is simple. It would be best to eliminate the dark magic surrounding this castle. It’s slowly seeping toward the castle. If it does, it will kill its inhabitants before the curse ends. Secondly, you must defeat the dark creatures in the forest. Finally, it would be best to instill good magic where bad has roamed. There is a thousand-year-old evil dragon that you must slay with this sword. It lurks in a cave by the forest’s edge. Then, for the fourth task, you must tell Bruce what you have done to strengthen his love for you. My dear child, it would be best if you become like the knights of old,” said Ivan.

“I must do all this; I’m just ten years old. What are my weapons?” said Bonita.

“I am your only weapon, child. You’d be surprised as to what I can do,” said Ivan the Fated.

“Do you think I’m worthy enough to beat the curse?” asked Bonita.

“My dear, you were chosen centuries ago for this task. You are called the elite. You’re the only one who can break this curse,” said Ivan the Fated.

“He doesn’t think he’s able to be loved. He thinks he’s a monster. I don’t see a monster when I look at him. I see beauty and goodness. I see someone who’s pure and honest. Doesn’t he know beauty is not just on the skin’s surface? It goes deeper. It’s what drives us forward. I need to make him see that,” said Bonita.

“My child, he’ll come around. As soon as he sees the beautiful child you will become and all you will accomplish in the name of what is good, he’ll change his tune,” said Ivan the Fated.

“What if something happens to me? My mother will come to harm,” said Bonita.

“I shall put a magic shield around you. It will only protect you if you believe it will. You can’t second guess every decision you make,” said Ivan.

“I promise I won’t,” said Bonita.

“Enough with that old broomstick, my child; stand back as I create you a magical scooter. You didn’t think I was hip enough for that, did you? You can use it to fly just like a broomstick,” said Ivan.

A magical scooter appeared out of thin air. Bonita laughed as she couldn’t believe this was happening.

“There are stranger things in this world than me, my child. You may want to prepare for them now,” said Ivan the Great.

“Oui Monsieur, au revoir Ivan,” said Bonita.

“So, you can speak French too. A little girl of many talents, I see,” said Ivan.

“My mother didn’t teach me much French, Ivan. My father is Hispanic, and I learned Spanish from him. I speak three languages,” said Bonita.

Ivan smiled proudly at her.

“Go fight for your birthright, my child, and never give up. Remember what your mother taught you: Try, try, and try again. You’re not just saving the castle but everyone: the castle, your cottage, and the village. All of you are fated together and intertwined with one another,” said Ivan the Fated.

Bonita gulped. She ran down to the top of the castle staircase. She hopped on her magical scooter and raced toward the door. She forgot the door was closed. The scooter magically morphed her through the doorway with a pop! She had the sensation of being stretched like taffy through the entrance crack.

‘This is awesome she screamed. It’s so much better than an old broom! Woohoo!’

Bonita soared far above the forest to scope out any wrongdoers. She first spotted a gang of ten witches gathered around a giant cauldron. It was enough to fit ten people in it. Bonita squinted. She recognized Timmy in the middle of the cauldron.

‘What is he doing out this far? I bet he decided to see what the castle was all about for himself. He’s so foolish. I’m glad I’m not that way. Mom always said I had a good head on my shoulders.’

Bonita swooped down and knocked the chubbiest witch in the head with her scooter.

“What the devil is this? Who do you think you are? I could have you for breakfast with a one-word girl! Don’t be a fool,”

“The only fool here is you! What has this innocent boy done to you to deserve death? Did he even have a fair trial?” said Bonita.

“He deserves none! The little menace was caught stealing potions from my house! He doesn’t even know what to do with them,” said Hazel.

“I bet he knows better than you,” said Bonita.

Hazel took a step toward her and slowly went for her wand. Before she had her hand out of her pocket, Bonita withdrew her sword. The gang of witches screamed and ran far away. Ivan the Fated appeared before Bonita.

“It’s already noon on the first day. It would be best if you acted quickly to rid this forest of monsters in today’s time,” said Ivan.

 Ivan disappeared, and Bonita sat on the nearest rock. She heard Timmy mumbling from the cauldron. She pulled him out and untied his bonds. She removed the gag from his mouth.

“What were you thinking, Timmy?” asked Bonita.

“I was worried about you, Bonita. The truth is, I like you. The other kids said you’d never come back, and I knew I had to rescue you,” said Timmy.

 Bonita stepped back.

“You liked me all along, Timmy? Why did you tease me the whole time?” asked Bonita.

“Don’t good girls like bad boys?” asked Timmy.

“Not this one,” said Bonita.

“You can spend the day with me as I vanquish the villains of this forest, and after that, I have to take you back to the village,” said Bonita.

“So, I can be your friend now?” asked Timmy.

“More like frenemies, Timmy,” said Bonita.

Bonita and Timmy devised a plan to rid the evil magical creatures from the forest. They were running out of time. Bonita started a magical fire that would purge the magical creatures from their homes. It destroyed the magic from the centaurs, evil lions, goblins, trolls, vampires, witches, warlocks, dark fairies, werewolves, ghosts, and goblins. Ivan the Fated appeared before Bonita and Timmy.

“One creature is left. The dragon lurks at the edge of the woods. He lives down the mountain inside a cave by the ocean. You cannot destroy his magic with a spell. They call this dragon the Ancient one. This sword is the only thing that will kill him. It was forged ten thousand years before he was born. Bonita, once you have destroyed the curse, I have a special magical spell I want to bestow upon you and Bruce,” said Ivan the Fated.

 Bonita nodded. She hopped on her magical scooter. She had created a ride-along for Timmy. Timmy enjoyed every moment of his mystical experiences.

“We’re going to slay a dragon. This is amazing, Bonita. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,’ said Timmy.

“This isn’t an opportunity, Timmy. It’s a quest to break a three-hundred-year-old curse. We may not even survive this,” said Bonita.

“Well then, let’s die fighting,” said Timmy.

 They both laughed. Timmy leaned forward like he was controlling the magical driving. He had his steering wheel for kicks. Bonita thought it would amuse him. Over two hours had passed, and they smelled ocean water up ahead. They heard seagulls cawing and circling the beach. The scooter landed on the soft sand.

“He’ll detect our magic if we don’t make a swim for it from here. We can’t use magic until we’re right over his heart or neck,” said Bonita.

 They took off their shoes and dove into the frigid waters. Luckily, the cave was not too far away. Before they reached the cave entrance, Bonita signaled Timmy to dive under the water’s surface. They swam under the water for about a minute. They slowly came to the surface. Bonita signaled to Timmy to stand back. Timmy backed up against the cave wall. He hit the wall too hard. An avalanche of rock came tumbling down. Timmy ducked out of the way just in time. It was too late. The monstrous beast awoke from its slumber. The Ancient One was so ugly and so old. His scales were peeling off. They had been scattered around the cave for a thousand years. The dragon’s feet pounded the water and the stone below it. It sounded like hundreds of trees collapsing at once. He was slow due to his weight and age. The dragon reared back its ugly head and breathed boiling fire toward her. She didn’t have time to shield herself. She remembered what the wizard said about having a magical shield around her if she believed it was true. She stood there, puffed out her chest, beat on it, and roared like a lion.

“You will not defeat me, Ancient One. I am Bonita, the Elite. I was sent to beat you. I was destined to kill you. So, let’s get it over with swiftly. No muss, no fuss,” said Bonita.

 They both laughed heartily.

“You are a puny child. What makes you think you can defeat me? I am mightier and stronger than you’ll ever be. I can wipe the floor with you, and you know it,” said the Ancient One.

 “Fat chance!” said Bonita.

She took her sword out and quickly pressed its button. It made her feet fly forward, and she lunged straight into the heart of the Ancient One. Timmy pumped his fists into the air and cried out. The dragon tried to breathe fire again but was too weak. It fell forward into the water with a splash like a whale’s. Bonita withdrew the magical sword from the dragon’s chest. Light blood turned dark in the cave’s pools. It was time to go.

“You are amazing, Bonita. You keep slaying everything in sight. You’re better than a grown man. You could go to battle if you wanted to,” said Timmy.

“You’re giving me way too much credit, Timmy. I’m not ready for that yet. That’s a big task for a little girl,” said Bonita.

“Bonita, you’re not little at all. I was wrong to misjudge you before. You are destined for great adventures ahead of you,” said Timmy.

“First, I have to break this curse for the one I love,” said Bonita.

“So, you love him? Isn’t he a monster, too?” said Timmy.

“Timmy, he was never the monster. All the creatures in the woods were monsters. I’ve never known anyone like him,” said Bonita.

“Just be yourself. If he doesn’t love you for who you are, then he doesn’t deserve you,” said Timmy.

 Bonita said goodbye to Timmy and rode the scooter off into the night. The sword glowed in its sheath. She heard Ivan’s voice before the sword was pulled out.

“You must remember, child, Timmy was right. You must be yourself and let Bruce see you for who you are and all the good you’ve accomplished. He must decide now or lose you forever. Remember that it’s okay to walk away if he doesn’t return equal love for you,” said Ivan.

“You mean I shouldn’t force my love on him,” said Bonita.

“Love is never forced, and love doesn’t insist on its way,” said Ivan the Fated.

“I’ll remember that. Thank you,” said Bonita.

“This is where we part ways, deary. You’re on your own from now on,” said Ivan.

 The sound was as loud as fireworks, and the sword vanished into thin air. Bonita spun all around, and she couldn’t find it anymore. She chuckled to herself.

‘I know what I must do. I hope he loves me in return.’ said Bonita.

 She once again pushed the ancient, solid wooden doors. She ran up the wooden staircase to Bruce’s room. She threw open the door. Bruce was sleeping in his bed. She slowly walked to his bedside. She leaned down and kissed him tenderly on the lips. His eyes slowly opened, and he pulled back his lips from hers. He sat up in the bed.

“Let me tell you all that I’ve accomplished, Bruce. I’ve restored the forest to its former glory and slayed a menacing dragon,” said Bonita.

“Bonita, I thought you were dead. I didn’t know what happened to you. I’ve been worried sick,” said Bruce.

“Don’t you care about my accomplishments?” asked Bonita.

“Love doesn’t boast.”

 Bruce leaned forward and gently kissed her lips, which she would not forget for many years to come.

“What are we to do, Bruce? If we break the curse, I will be a child, and you will be a human. It will not work,” said Bonita.

“I will choose to be a child with you than to be an adult any day of the week,” said Bruce.

“Oui?”

“You know it, baby.”

 The sword materialized on the bed beside them.

“I have a surprise for you both. The curse is broken by the second day. You will both have a spell over you to live an eternity on Earth together forever. Bonita and Bruce will have many more adventures to come. Bonita smiled at Bruce.

“We’ll return home to Mother, Bruce. She’ll love you as much as I do,” said Bonita.

Ivan disappeared forever. The castle became beautiful again. Its inhabitants became humans. Bonita’s Bruce transformed from a monster to an ordinary, handsome ten-year-old boy with blonde hair. Bonita and Bruce kissed.

“You taste like Coca-Cola,” said Bonita.

“You taste like chocolate,” said Bruce.

“We’re stronger with two rad flavors together,” said Bonita.

Bruce winked at her like a sly dog.

Beautiful Beholder

A Romantic Fantasy by: Angela Loren Rolph

 The scorching heat of the summer of 2072 in Cape Canaveral, Florida, was beyond brutal. The palm trees swayed dreamily in the warm Florida winds. Thatcher Henry Ebarb was tall, slim, and muscular. He had black hair and brown eyes. Thatcher was of Native American descent. He had just graduated high school and earned the chance to go to outer space to prove himself worthy of his internship with NASA.

NASA would monitor his every move, but they wanted to test his abilities. Thatcher was a super genius and had his whole future ahead of him. NASA needed a man like Thatcher on their team. He was eager to go on his first mission. NASA wanted to send him to a nearby planet called Zyron. They needed him to collect rock samples from the Earth. It was a simple mission to prove his worth.

 Planet Earth had flying machines. They were called Extronics. They came in bright colors and shiny metallic shades. They resembled a mini version of NASA’s rockets. Extronics were shaped like bullets, and they were much faster than them. Extronics could take you anywhere on the planet, but NASA’s rockets were the only things to have a license to reach the stars.

The modern man or woman had another method of transportation that was even faster. It was called therapy. Qualified individuals needed another special license to transport from building to building for work or school. They could purchase a hand-held device operated by a hologram image. With the click of a button, a hologram would appear to help you vaporize yourself for business purposes. It would transform you into a million tiny pieces in between solid matter. The feds thought this was dangerous in the wrong hands, so only certain people could use it.

Men and women dressed in iron suits called Centromps that worked like the old-time Inspector Gadget suits. These suits were different. They gave special people's superhuman abilities. The FBI and police used these suits to keep law and order. A unique individual must have a highly specialized license to use them. The technical gloves shot fire, electricity, water, and ice. They also had iron fangs that came out of the end, as well as bullets and grenades. The Feds loved these suits, and they were high-dollar suits. They would dissolve back into your regular pocket at the press of a button.

Thatcher was as scientific as they came. He always believed science could prove anything and everything. He didn’t believe in foolish ideals. He was agnostic. His parents weren’t religious. Thatcher never ruled religion out. He hadn’t learned about Christianity. He sometimes felt lost and knew nothing about his self-worth and value. Love was a foreign concept to Thatcher. His father had treated him horribly when he grew up, and his mother had stood back and tolerated it. He had never been in love with a woman. He had many desires, but he never acted on them. Many girls in his high school had crushes on him, and he did his best to ignore them. Thatcher had no friends in high school. He was a loner. The high school girls had an enormous crush on him because they thought he was afflicted.

 Thatcher interned with NASA because he desperately wanted to believe in himself. He wanted to see confidence in himself. He saw no beauty in himself. His flaw was that because he couldn’t see beauty in himself, he couldn’t see it in others. NASA was putting all their eggs in one basket with Thatcher because they were confident and believed in him and the beauty of his genius.

 On January 17th, Thatcher woke up and pressed the button on his floating nightstand. He called this invention his Luck-luster. A spark of fire would ignite a fuse. This fuse would send a tiny rocket to bump into a single domino. The domino would tap into rows of other dominoes. These dominoes would tap into a small hot air balloon. This hot air balloon held Thatcher’s breakfast.

His breakfast would be delivered to the microwave. The microwave was automatically turned on when Thatcher’s breakfast was ready to be microwaved. It automatically started cooking according to Thatcher’s pre-set timer and temperature settings. Thatcher had many inventions to aid him like this throughout his technology-driven household. He had patented some of them but hadn’t gained notoriety yet. He was still eighteen and didn’t have credibility yet.

Thatcher was more excited about that day than a kid getting a puppy on Christmas day. He longed to go to outer space. Thatcher knew this was a once-and-a-lifetime opportunity. He hoped within his heart of hearts that he didn’t screw it up. He wanted to work for NASA more than he wanted air to breathe. This opportunity was vital to him. He wanted the job since he first learned about being an astronaut as a kid.

‘I hope I’m good enough for this job. I must summon the courage to complete this mission. I must be sure to know all the terminology of the ship and equipment. I must always stay on my toes,’ said Thatcher.

Thatcher used an automatic shuffler machine to sort through his suits and ties until he landed on the perfect one.

‘Royal blue always looks good for first impressions,’ said Thatcher.

 Thatcher pressed the button on his flying briefcase, called the Briefly. It followed Thatcher to his royal blue Extronic flying machine. In two minutes flat, Thatcher reached NASA from his suburban neighborhood near Cape Canaveral.

‘Perfect timing,’ said Thatcher.

 Unlike his inner self, he wanted everything to be perfect. As soon as he walked into NASA, he approached the secretary’s desk.

“May I help you, sir?’ said Mrs. Cutright.

“My name is Thatcher Ebarb. I’m looking for Mr. Newman. I must report to him today,” said Thatcher.

“Can I see some identification, Mr. Ebarb?’ said Ms. Cutright.

“Yes, you can,” said Thatcher.

He pulled out his WARP card. Ms. Cutright inspected it thoroughly and walked him to an office door in the back section of the offices. Thatcher slowly pushed the door open. Mr. Newman had his back turned to Thatcher and was on the phone. It seemed like critical NASA business. Thatcher didn’t want to impose. He tried to exit the room when Mr. Newman turned around and slammed down his holographic cell phone. These cell phones were called Holiopaths. They were called Holios for short. NASA had the latest versions, making them accessible to employees and astronauts.

“My boy, you’ve finally arrived! What took you so long? Because you’re so skilled, we’ve decided to advance you to be an astronaut tomorrow,” said Mr. Newman.

On January 19th, Mr. Newman gripped Thatcher’s hand with the firmness of a gorilla.

“You should be proud, boy. You’re officially a NASA astronaut now,” said Mr. Newman.

Thatcher was so overwhelmed he couldn’t speak. Tears of joy streamed down his face as he clapped a hand over his mouth. Mr. Newman beamed with pride. He ignored protocol and hugged Thatcher.

“My boy, some only dream of this. We’ve handled the press, so when you’re ready, we’ll get you equipped with the newest spaceship, 90217 Tigress,” said Mr. Newman.

 Thatcher took a few minutes to calm down. He strutted down the long walkway to the Tigress. There she was in all her glory. She was far more beautiful than what Thatcher had seen of her in pictures. She glowed like a new penny. Thatcher was proud to be piloting her. At the end of the walkway, two astronauts were waiting to show him inside the spaceship. A lieutenant, James West, and Cristina West greeted him with radiant smiles. Cristina was the first to stick out her tiny hand.

“I’m honored to meet you, Thatcher. We’ve heard so much about you. We know you’ll do us all proud on this mission. Remember, this is a mission to test your endurance and skills. Don’t try to be a hero if you’re stuck in an emergency. If you need help, always communicate with Mission Control. James will show you what you’re going to eat, and he will also show you all the control switches. After that, he’ll show you anything else you need to keep up with and what you should be aware of in outer space. There are so many dangers out there. You must be on your toes at every moment,” said Cristina.

 Cristina stepped back, and Thatcher shook James' hand heartily. James had a firm grip. James was a tall man, standing at six feet six inches.

“You’ve got to run a tight ship up here, Thatcher, if you want to survive. I mean it. You can’t take anything for granted and must pay close attention to everything—one little slip-up, and you could be done for. Come over here, and I’ll show you what you will eat in space,” said James.

 James opened a tall cabinet with individual cubby holes. Each cubby had freeze-dried food, and nitrogen gasses were emitted from it. James, wearing special gloves, opened the first cubby to show Thatcher. In it were freeze-dried fruits with beef jerky. There was frozen broccoli, too. He showed Thatcher a few more before closing the cabinet.

 He proceeded to show Thatcher the different controls and parts of the ship. He also showed him emergency protocol and how to contact mission control. James led him in releasing the three fuel tanks into the ocean on the way to outer space. He also showed him what to do to contact the Russian space station.

“We also have the Chinese space station on Jupiter, you know. I wouldn’t recommend them. You’ll be too far away if you need to land there. The new Russian space station on Mars is your best bet if you need supplies. I think you’re all set here. I’ll give you two and a half more hours to get everything set up, and then you’ll be off,” said James.

 Cristina and James left the ship, and Thatcher sat in the pilot’s seat. He was impressed with all the bells and whistles. Thatcher felt like a kid seeing Christmas presents around the shining Christmas tree for the first time.

‘I won’t let myself, NASA, or my country down,’ said Thatcher.

 A few hours passed, and Thatcher felt ready for the mission. Mission control came in through the speaker.

“We’ll get this show on the road, Thatcher, when you’re ready. Let’s test the rocket thrusters. Hit the button called Thermos,”

 Thatcher found the switch easily. It was a big red one right in the center. A sound like a thousand fireworks firing below him roared like a hundred angry lions. Thatcher was impressed. He waited a few minutes for the pressure to build in the thrusters. Mission control came back on the speaker system.

“We’ve got t minus sixty seconds for you to take off, Thatcher; after that, this Tigress is on the loose,” said mission control.

“I understand,” said Thatcher.

 Forty-five seconds had passed, which led him to become nervous—seven more seconds had passed. He was on his own now, in outer space. He was just eighteen years old.

“T minus eight, seven, six, five, four three, two, one!” said mission control.

 Thatcher pushed the button that said ignite power. He was amazed at the sound of the thrusters. He had never heard anything like it before. He had heard it on television, but everything failed to compare to hearing it in person. He was thrust backward in his seat and hung on a metal bar nearby.

 He watched the picture in front of him on the holographic screen. As soon as he was over the Pacific Ocean, he dropped the fuel tanks by pressing the button labeled F1.

“You’ll reach space faster in the Tigress, Thatcher. You’ll be close to Mars in about an hour. You can turn on microgravity now,” said mission control.

 Thatcher found the switch that said micro G. Everything in the room that wasn’t bolted down, including Thatcher, began to float upward.

‘This is amazing. How many people get to experience something like this? I have two hours until I reach Zyron. I’m going to have some fun before I land,’ said Thatcher.

 He began to air swim around the ship like he’d seen them do on television. When he was done, he floated to his food cubby and picked out the freeze-dried beef jerky. It was salty with its preservatives. It didn’t taste anything like the beef jerky on Earth. Thatcher was as starved as someone who hadn’t eaten in three days. He devoured every bit of it.

After he was finished, he checked the controls to see if everything was going smoothly. The spaceship ran as smoothly as a well-oiled machine. Thatcher was so impressed with the ship that he didn’t notice a tiny orange button on the side of the controls blinking. After ten minutes, it started to emit a loud, annoying beep. It had been almost two hours since Thatcher took off. Thatcher detected that Zyron was nearby. He tried to contact mission control.

“Commander Thatcher to mission control, mission control, can you hear me?’ asked Thatcher.

 There was no response. Thatcher tried again.

“Mission Control, mission control! I’m going to have to make an emergency landing on Zyron. It might be a while until my return. I must figure out how to fix one of the thrusters. I hope you’re right when you said this planet wouldn’t be occupied. If I don’t come back, tell my dad I forgive him and tell my parents I love them both,” said Thatcher.

 Thatcher hit the emergency landing button labeled ELX. The thrusters were losing power. The spaceship landed with a colossal crash on Zyron’s rocky surface. Thatcher’s microgravity had failed. He had floated to the front of the ship and fell with a heavy boom to the floor of the spaceship. Thatcher put on his helmet and space suit. He was prepared to roam the planet’s surface. He pulled out his specialized laser gun that he found hanging on the ship's wall. He connected his cord to the boat. Thatcher cautiously opened the hatch to outer space. His feet nervously tapped on the edge of the hatch.

 As soon as the hatch was open, Thatcher used his gravity button and jumped down to Zyron’s surface. He stared around the surface and saw nothing. He walked for an hour until he was far from his ship. He noticed something orange in the distance, like a Russian spaceship. He ran toward it. His gravity belt busted. He deployed the gravity activation in his boots. When he approached the ship, he saw it had also made a crash landing. It had been sitting there for a while. He didn’t think it had been there a year.

 He knocked on the ship's window, and there was no answer. It was abandoned. Thatcher heard a cry in the distance. A beautiful astronaut strolled toward him. When she got close, she stood ten feet apart from him. She was gorgeous. She had golden blonde, shoulder-length hair. Like Marilyn Monroe, she had a freckle on the right side of her face. She was five foot two. Another cry was heard in the distance. Another woman ran up beside the first. She was five foot seven with short brown hair. She was a plain woman with no distinguishing features.

 The first woman spoke.

“My name is Virginia. My fellow friend and astronaut Bianca and I have been stranded here for a few months. We crash-landed here after something in our engine failed. We are from Russia,” said Virginia.

“You don’t need to come close to us. We’ve contracted a disease after digging in Zyron’s surface. We think it must have been the dust. This planet seems deadly, and we think that’s why there’s no life here,” said Bianca.

“If you come near us, you’ll catch it too. We haven’t been able to clean our space suits of the disease. Our cleanser machines still detect the disease there,” said Virginia.

“My days are numbered on this planet. We have no idea what the next stages of the disease are. If we don’t find a cure for this disease, Virginia will die too,” said Bianca.

“If we don’t find a way back, our supplies will run out, and we’ll all die anyway,” said Thatcher.

“This is quite the predicament,” said Virginia.

“Have you found any leads to where to look for the cure?” asked Thatcher.

“None of our computers have helped find an herb to cure this from the planet. Everything on Zyron is foreign to our computer systems, and its substances haven’t been discovered yet,” said Virginia.

“There is a jungle a few hours from here, and we’ve been testing as many plants as possible. It’s hopeless. We are lost,” said Bianca.

“There’s got to be more than one jungle. Let’s get to work; there’s got to be a cure somewhere,” said Thatcher.

 Thatcher and Virginia walked as far as they could. With each step, they grew more and more weary. After three hours of walking, Virginia collapsed beside him.

“Forgive me; this disease has taken its toll on me. I don’t have the energy of a young woman anymore. I’ll have to rest a little while,” said Virginia.

“Take all the time you need,” said Thatcher.

 He plopped in the orange dust beside Virginia. Clouds of dust gathered all around them like a cloudy mushroom. Thatcher tried to swat the dust from his helmet as the dust settled.

“If that dust gets inside your suit, you have a good chance of contracting the disease,” said Virginia.

“You could have warned me sooner, Virginia,” said Thatcher.

“I tried to. We’ll have to work faster to find the cure. What do you think? Do you think we’ll make it out alive?” asked Virginia.

“Your Russian accent is beautiful,” said Thatcher.

“Thank you, Thatcher. My father was Russian, and my mother was American. He died when I was ten. My accent doesn’t always come out. It does come out when I’m nervous,” said Virginia.

“Look ahead, there’s a jungle up ahead unless that’s a mirage,” said Virginia.

“We might be seeing things at this point,” said Thatcher.

 Thatcher picked Virginia up, and he walked swiftly toward the jungle.

 He stumbled over a humongous tree root. She radioed to Bianca, but Bianca didn’t answer. She tried to radio her again. After five minutes, she got a radio from her.

“I’m on the next stage of the disease, Virginia. It turns you into a monster, and then your body becomes limp. You’ll never be able to find my body. I don’t even know where I am.

Bianca said, "Please tell my little sister that I love her, and I'm sorry I couldn't return to her."

 The radio died.

Virginia and Thatcher had no words. Virginia fell to her knees, and tears of sorrow streamed from her face like a heavy rain. Thatcher waited a few moments before he hugged her and touched her shoulder. She reached out to touch his hand. Thatcher’s heart yearned for Virginia. He was heartbroken for Virginia. There was nothing he could do. Her fate would be decided if he didn’t get her out. Virginia wept like a baby.

 Virginia stood up, turned around, and hugged Thatcher as tight as she could. Thatcher felt the sorrow in her embrace, but he also felt something else. He couldn’t put his finger on it. He knew he wanted to continue to get to know Virginia. How much time did they have left together? They could be the last two people that they’ll ever see. If Virginia died, he would probably not make it out alive, either. He knew from studying contagious diseases that he’d likely already contracted the disease.

“Let’s take a rest for the day. It’s been a hard day for you, Virginia. I can’t imagine your pain. Please lay down beside me,” said Thatcher.

 They both lay beside two tree stumps. They talked about everything. They talked about Bianca and what a great person she was. Virginia spoke about her life and her family in Russia.

“My poor mother must think I’m dead,” said Virginia.

“I haven’t heard about you on the news,” said Thatcher.

“No news is good news, I guess,” said Virginia.

“Not necessarily,” said Thatcher.

 Virginia said she was exhausted, and she fell asleep. Thatcher lay awake and stared at the stars. After an hour, he got sleepy. He awoke suddenly ten minutes after resting his eyes. Virginia was clutching her stomach in pain. She wasn’t facing him. He flipped her over. Her skin was mangled like a burn victim’s. Her beautiful face was unrecognizable. She looked more like a creature than a human.

“Virginia!” screamed Thatcher.

 He had never seen anything like her. Her hideousness disgusted him, but he knew he must save her life. Deep inside, he knew she was indeed a beauty to behold. He must overlook what is on the outside, and he knew it.

He rested Virginia’s gently in the dirt. He had to devise a plan to save her and get her back to Earth. He didn’t have much time. Bianca only had a few hours or less before she died. How much time would Virginia have? He didn’t have time to figure it out. He had to move, and he had to move now.

Thatcher ran for the jungle. He remembered he had an examiner machine in his pocket. He put it in his pocket when he exited the ship, and with all the excitement, he forgot about it. He used it to do a landscape scan of viable medicinal plants in the jungle. He found five that might be of some use. He took some dust off his helmet and began testing the dust with the plants using the examiner. The examiner also worked as an equation tester. It was a supercomputer that could test all theories known to man. After trying all five plants, Thatcher got the results he needed. The properties of one plant stood out the most to him. It was a tall purple plant with feelers that felt like velvet.

“This little bad boy may be our cure, Virginia,” said Thatcher.

 Thatcher walked over to the plant and plucked a long leaf.

‘I’m on my way, sweet Virginia,’ said Thatcher.

 Thatcher ran for a lifetime. He finally saw Virginia’s space suit up ahead. She didn’t stir. He thought he was too late.

‘If she dies, I’ll never forgive myself.’ said Thatcher.

 He ran ahead and collapsed beside her. He took a minute to catch his breath. He turned her suit over and noticed she had her eyes almost closed. He was too late. The suit she had on would absorb the plant into her skin if he rubbed it on the outside of it. He made a poultice of it and rubbed it all over her suit. He waited.

 Thatcher waited a couple of hours, and it appeared as if nothing happened. He slumped himself in the dirt. What had he done? Maybe if he had been quicker, this wouldn’t have happened. He was next. All hope was lost. There was no way out of Zyron.

 Thatcher hung his head low. He wept like an abounded child in a supermarket. He stretched himself over the orange dirt. Dust flew everywhere, but Thatcher didn’t give a care in the world. He closed his eyes in defeat.

 He heard a cough. He whipped open one eye as fast as a speeding bullet. He focused on a soft, faint, and feeble cough. This couldn’t be. Was she? Was she alive?

 He jumped to his feet and raced over to her. Virginia's eyes were open, and she was still coughing. The plant’s poultice had saved her life. Half of her face had been restored to normal. He could see the plant’s poultice had taken effect on her face. In every minute that passed, her skin was restored. This plant was not typical. It seemed to have some magical quality to it. He thought it seemed like a healing plant. They would never believe this back on Earth.

“Am I still dying?” asked Virginia.

“You’re very much alive. And the plant I found healed you,” said Thatcher.

“A healing plant?’ asked Virginia.

“You're one hundred percent correct, my dear; we’ll have to take a sample back home,” said Thatcher.

“Oooh, You have a little crush on me, Thatcher.

“Yes, I love Russian women and their saucy accents, you know? American women are so vain,” said Thatcher.

 They waited thirty more minutes to see if Virginia’s body would heal. The effects had been miraculous. There were no signs that the disease had even touched her face. Virginia hugged Thatcher and nearly knocked him over.

“Let’s go see if we can fix my ship,” said Thatcher.

 They arrived at Thatcher’s ship. They still didn’t think they would make it home. Virginia bolted toward her boat. An hour later, she returned with the part for the thruster called the Langonos. Virginia would keep her promise to Bianca’s sister.

 Virginia planted a massive kiss on Thatcher’s lips when they took off their helmets upon returning to the ship.

“I fell for you from day one, Thatcher. There was always something about you I couldn’t resist, even if I tried. I tried. You are charming in every sense of the word; I love you, Thatcher,” said Virginia.

“Virginia, I feel the same way about you. You’re irresistible. Plus, you being smoking hot helps things,” said Thatcher.

They both laughed.

“I feel you something I’ve never felt before for anyone. You are my home, the love of my life,” said Thatcher.

Virginia placed a kiss on his forehead. She kissed him deeply and passionately. He dipped her low to the surface of the planet. When he pulled her back up, she was breathless and overwhelmed.

“Do you think this ship will stay fixed until we make it home,” asked Virginia.

“It better, after all it put me through,” said Thatcher.

“That would be our luck if it didn’t, “said Virginia.

She chuckled. They climbed aboard the ship and crossed their fingers.

“I’m scared we’ll die,” said Virginia.

“If we do, it won’t be before I do this,” said Thatcher.

He pulled out a rubber band and put it around Virginia’s wedding ring finger. She gasped.

“Yes, a million times yes,” said Virginia.

“I’ll buy you a real wedding ring when we get home; that’s a promise because we’ll make it, my love. I will love you with everything I have for the rest of my days. That’s a promise. If we die before that, well, at least we’ll be in heaven together,” said Thatcher.

“You believe in heaven?” said Virginia.

“You’re my heaven on Earth, and you will sustain me until I get to Heaven, my angel,” said Thatcher.

“I love you so much it hurts,” said Virginia.

“Let me ease your pain, dear,” said Thatcher.

He kissed her gently on her right cheek, left, and slowly on her forehead. They were traveling in the ship at the speed of light. Thatcher smiled, and Virginia smiled as well.

“I miss Bianca,” said Virginia.

“I know how much you love her,” said Thatcher.

“Death never gets any easier, does it?” asked Virginia.

“No, it doesn’t, but we will be reunited with her in heaven; I know we will,” said Thatcher.

Virginia smiled broadly. Her chest heaved. She looked out the window and gently touched the glass. Thatcher rubbed her hair softly over and over.

“Shall I sing your song to soothe you, my love?” asked Thatcher.

Virginia nodded. She kept her eyes focused on the window.

“Sleep tonight, sleep, and you’ll be alright. If you nod, my love, I’ll hold you tight. I’ll hold you tight and tighter, my angel—no need to cry. You’ll never have to tell me goodbye, “Sang Thatcher.

He watched Virginia’s head nod. He picked her up gently and put her in the nearby sleeping cot.

“My love, you’ll never have to be lonely again. I will take care of you for the rest of our lives. I’ll always put you on a pedestal. You’ll never have to want for anything,’ said Thatcher.

The spaceship traveled all night to reach its destination. The next day, they would make history, and their lives would never be the same. They would become famous and wealthy. They would arrive home on January 23rd. Both would be in the history books and become heroes.

As soon as they stepped out of the ship, Thatcher took Virginia to tell authorities that Bianca didn’t make it. They had a memorial for her to commemorate her life. It was beautiful. Thatcher knew it would take a long time for Virginia to heal from her death, but he’d be there for her every step of the way. Thatcher and Virginia were married in a quaint church Virginia picked out in a small town. The ceremony was so beautiful. There were white lilies decorated everywhere. That day, Virginia shed so many tears. She whispered something to Thatcher that he never forgot.

“I’ll love you now, forever, and I’ll love you after I’ve left this world. That’s a promise, my angel,” said Virginia.

“Do you promise?” asked Thatcher.

“You know I do, forever and always,” said Virginia.

“You’ve made me so happy on this beautiful day, my dear,” said Thatcher.

Virginia leans in to kiss her husband. She ran her fingers through his thick hair. She hugged him as tight as she could. He squeezed her hand.

“I’ll love you forever, always, and beyond that,” said Virginia. Thatcher smiled and brushed her hair with his hand.

“Let’s start our lives together, my angel,” said Thatcher.

Killer Boots

 Rachel had blonde hair and was as attractive as a flower in bloom. She had multiple personalities. She stood at five feet four inches tall. She was slightly muscular and had a slender build. She lived in a small apartment in New York City. On a bitter January night, the moon was burning its midnight oil. She used to have insomnia that drove her to madness every night. Rachel heard car horns tooting loudly in the distance, which resembled "Pink Elephants on Parade.” Rachel remembered a package she had forgotten on her doorstep. She had big plans for the contents of this package.

 Rachel flung open the door, and, with the force of a striking python, she sprung upon the unsuspecting victim. She raced back inside to dissect her prey. Rachel screamed like a toddler with a shiny new toy. She held the shiny metallic boots by the firelight to see their beauty in all their glory.

'Once again, the city will soon be safe from mayhem. When I’m done with my special fashionista superhero suit, Old Money Bags won’t have a leg to stand on. His time running the city's people into the ground will come to an unsavory end. I’d like to see him begging on all fours,’ said Rachel.

Rachel threw her head back and laughed like a hyena on steroids. She heard her five-year-old calling out to her.

“Mommy, where are you? I had the dream again,” said Veronica. Veronica, with long black hair and brown eyes, was as cute as a button.

“I’m here, baby girl. Should I tell you a story? Would that make you feel better?” said Rachel.

“Yes, Mommy, I’d love that,” said Veronica.

“OK, I'll tell you about the female superhero who wanted to protect her city from a powerful man. Now, she stepped up when no one could defend the city’s people.”

Rachel told her daughter her brilliant plans to defend the city disguised as a clever story. She described how the hero won in the end and defeated the madman. Crowds gathered, and everyone cheered. She didn’t tell her how she longed to have the money. She was neglected as a child and suffered from insecurities.

“Mommy, is this a true story?” Veronica asked.

“Maybe one day it will be,” her mother said.

 Veronica yawned, and soon, her head bobbed to one side. Rachel silently slipped out of the room. The hours she slipped away as snow fell off their roof into the night, silent and stealthy for Rachel. Rachel decided she must make Money Bags pay before he implemented the new tax the next day. Many people would lose their homes if it were enforced. Rachel could see New York City becoming decimated into another Great Depression. The man was out of his mind. She was Robin Hood, and she needed to save her people.

 Morning arose with the hustle and bustle of the city in Rachel’s ears. She worked with due diligence on her costume until around five p.m. She made it have flaming sleeves and laser goggles. The suit would give her superhuman strength. The final touches were on her prized possessions, her killer boots. She added knives that eject from the toes of the shoes. Next, she took out and made the boot's heels with a retractable blade. She planned on hurling the metallic, sexy silver boots into her victim and having them drip with the crimson-gushing blood of her prey. Rachel didn’t come to play games today. Her suit was fashionable. It was a black leather suit with a red cape. Rachel was also a technological whiz kid, packing some state-of-the-art gadgets. She was tracking Money Bags where his no-good butt stood. Tomorrow, he would pay the piper.

 ‘Money Bags, I’m going to ruffle your feathers. You’re going to give back everything you owe to these people, or else it’s curtains,’ said Rachel.

 Money Bags always had his ear to the ground. He was a balding, middle-aged man. Today, he was wearing his power suit as per usual. He had been working for over a month to create a suit that would destroy Rachel. He heard through the scuttle what Rachel was up to. He knew she was following him and had set a trap for her. He reclined in his office while eyeballing his Kraken suit of death in the corner.

Rachel was about to burst into his office when boom! She flew backward through the wall of the building, and her head hit the icy pavement of the street. She tried to raise her head and felt the deep gash on her neck. Deep-colored amber blood seeped into the pavement. She never thought it would be her blood. A beast slithered out on all eight tentacles.

“I’ve been ready for you a long time, Rachel, and so has she,” said Money Bags.

“Mommy, help me, please! I’m scared, Mommy,” cried Veronica.

“Let go of my baby, you sicko,” screamed Rachel.

 Rachel almost passed out. She lay on the pavement as she pondered their fates. Her eyes closed and opened. She was slipping into a coma. She had to fight with everything she could to save her daughter and the town. Rachel clung to her insanity as she pried herself from the cold pavement. Money bags dangled Veronica high above death’s reach.

 “Let her go; you're dead where you stand, Money Bags. They’ll be writing your obituary tomorrow,” screamed Rachel.

 “Let’s test that theory,” said Money Bags.

 He shook poor Veronica from one of his highest dangling tentacles.

 Rachel used the speed adjuster on her suit and dove just in time to catch Veronica. She then used her laser vision to light Money Bag’s suit aflame. He jumped out of it as fast as he could. He fell onto the pavement and was a feeble older man. Rachel walked over and dug her heel knife into his stomach. His strawberry-red blood clung to every pore of the streets. She had the cops' number on speed dial and called them to arrest Money Bags. Rachel returned the money he stole from the people. Was she now the hero or the vigilante?

Alternate Ending

 Money Bags died, and Rachel grabbed the money from the police. The money was meant for the people. She snatched Veronica and fled town. They were never heard from again. Killer Boots lives in infamy, a fear to New York City's people and its finest men in blue.

**CYBORGS AMONG US**

**Written by** **Angela Loren Rolph**

**A Tragic Science Fiction Romance**



INT. HARBOR ANN UNIVERSITY. SAVANNAH, GEORGIA-DAY Super: August 11, 2057

Digital Pencils thumps like thunder on half-written notes in protest to the biology teacher who smelled of festering fungus and moldy gym socks. Half of the one hundred and ninety-five students drifted on their way to sleep partly because the Shara heat that summer drifted in from the window was accidentally left ajar. A handful of students kept trucking on through the most boringly mind-numbing lecture. An over-eager hand suddenly flies into the air with the strength of a jungle cat’s prowess. This slender hand belongs to Andrea West-fall, the University’s most beloved all-star pupil.

Andrea West-fall, twenty years old, five foot seven, red hair, blue eyes, slim figure, attractive, bright as a shiny penny, wearing a stylish yellow plaid jumper and matching yellow flats, answers the professor’s question like she’s reciting an encyclopedia to the speed of a race car.

ANDREA
You see, professor, and that is why

crocodiles cannot stick their tongue out.

Professor Brunswick is fifty-seven years old, tall, with gray hair, glasses, and a medium build.

PROFESSOR BRUNSWICK
You are correct, Andrea. The rest

of you can learn a thing or two from Andrea.

Professor Brunswick slaps down an iron-clad hand on sleeping Tommy Finnigan’s desk. Tommy falls from his chair onto the ice-cold floor with a humongous boom! The entire class bursts out laughing and pointing at Tommy.

PROFESSOR BRUNSWICK (CONT’D): You will leave my class, Tommy, and

try again to conduct yourself tomorrow. You’re skating on thin ice with me, young man.

Biiinnng! The laser bell rings with an ear-piercing cry. The class almost mauled each other, trying to race down the steps and out the door. It sounds like ten herds of elephants running for water after being locked away for ages.

ANDREA

*Well, there goes another day at Harbor Ann University.*

(MORE)

ANDREA (CONT’D)

*I’m sure no one noticed me, as per usual. I know one person who will be excited to see me when I get home: my boyfriend and cat Rudy. I hope Rudy hasn’t torn up the curtains again.*

Andrea starts to walk towards the classroom’s exit door. She doesn’t realize that a tall black man in a dark corner in the back of the room is spying on her. He’s been on her trail all day like a bloodhound. He waits until she has left the classroom for a couple of minutes. He slowly and painstakingly stalks her out of the building into the school parking lot. He pauses in a dark corner of the school awning. He watches in silence. He takes out his binoculars.

The man in black, six foot tall, medium build, muscular, fifty years old, dressed from head to toe in solid black, wears his hair dyed and slicked back.

Andrea walks up to her old yellow Mustang. She takes out her keys and fiddles with them like a cat would fiddle with his prey as Sylvester toys with the tweety bird. She drops them on the ground with a clunk! The man in black’s eyes bug out like an orangutan who found a nice juicy bug.

Twenty minutes later, the man in black slowly follows Andrea down the highway. As soon as he’s found out where she lives, he takes off and out of sight.

THE MAN IN BLACK
At last, I have found the one they

call Mrs. Muscles. As soon as she comes in for her surgery to fix her teeth, I will steal her away and perform my special operation on her. Her kind will quickly change the face of this planet for our benefit.

Andrea walks into her apartment, and her cat Rudy runs to greet her.

Phillip Dew is twenty-two years old, tall, with a slim frame and brown hair, and is attractive.

PHILLIP
Is that you, sweetie? I’m working

on this giant car puzzle. Now, if only I had a fancy Cadillac. I got off work at four p.m. I ordered a pizza with pineapples, ham, and bacon, your favorite, baby.

2.

ANDREA
You’re a lifesaver, baby! The

school was so horrible today. No one hung out with me or talked to me all day. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.

PHILLIP
If they don’t like you, baby, they

can stick it where the sun doesn’t shine. You’re not doing anything wrong. Please don’t give it a second thought. Come sit down and eat with me. We can sit on the carpet and eat by the coffee table. You know, like the royalty do.

ANDREA
Thank you, sweetheart, you’re

always there for me. I love you. Don’t make me laugh today, baby; I want to feel my sides hurt and wallow in my self-pity for a while.

PHILLIP
You know laughter is life’s best

medicine. It will cheer you up; it always does. I love you. Always and forever, and to infinity and beyond.

The two take a piece of pizza each and tap them together like they are clinking their champagne and toasting their future lives together. The ranch and marinara sauce come gliding in on a tray too late.

ANDREA
I’m worried about my surgery

tomorrow, baby. Do you think it will go well?

PHILLIP
No, I don’t love you; I think you

will be turned into a cyborg machine who will take over the world one day. I think it will go more than well, baby. Don’t worry so much. You’ll be fine.

ANDREA
If you say so, baby, if you say so.

3.

INT. ANDREA AND PHILLIP’S BEDROOM. DAY. SUPER-AUGUST 12, 2057.

Andrea wakes up, realizes what time it and quickly slams her clothes on her like she’s changing clothes out for a Broadway show. She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek to her boyfriend Philip and races out the door like an agile cheetah running in the Olympics.

ANDREA

*What if the surgery goes wrong? I hate dentists with such a passion. I get so nervous going into surgery. What if I never wake up? Maybe they’ll scar me for life. That’s it! I’m not going. I have to go; I have to get these teeth fixed.*

Andrea arrives at Millicent Dentistry. She hears a car backfire. She doesn’t realize that the black man lurks quietly at the end of the parking lot with his binoculars pointed directly toward her like a Russian spy.

Andrea checks in at the dentist’s office. She sits down to read the latest magazine. Ten minutes later, they called her back. The nurse puts an IV in her with the anesthesia. Andrea quickly drifts off to never never land. A minute later, one of the nurses goes for a coffee break. The man in black hijacks her with a gun pointed at her head.

THE MAN IN BLACK
Tell me where the patient is named.

Andrea West-fall is now! Or you’ll never see your family again!

Nurse Jessica is thirty years old, short, slender, blonde-haired, and slightly attractive.

NURSE JESSICA
She’s in room number seventeen; I

swear she is! The doctor is about to operate on her teeth. You can’t go in there, sir!

The man in black cock’s his gun one last time, and Nurse Jessica points quickly in the direction of room number seventeen.

THE MAN IN BLACK: That’s precisely what I thought!

4.

The man in black runs like his life depends on it and charges into room seventeen like a bat out of hell. The double doors slam apart with a fierce thrust. Booosh!!!

THE MAN IN BLACK (CONT’D) Lay one finger on her, and you’re

dead, and I will burn this hospital down until there’s nothing left but ashes and melted medical utensils.

Dr. Stevens looks up blankly. He and the nurses in the room put their hands up in utter and dismal surrender.

DR STEVENS
Please don’t hurt us. We’ve done

nothing wrong, sir. I only cheated on my MCATS, but that was it! I promise!!!

The man in black thrusts his finger harshly towards the exit for them. They all run for their lives.

The man in black is finally left alone with the sleeping beauty, Andrea. His medical supplies are secretly hidden in the building, and he presses a button on his five-hundred-thousand-dollar watch. The supplies race to him from down the hall on a portable conveyor belt.

THE MAN IN BLACK
Your life will never be the same, Andrea. Soon, you will be able to have all kinds of abilities to go

along with your superhuman strength. The world will have to get ready.

The man in black laughs loudly like a warden who has beaten his prisoner to death in cold blood.

Eight hours slowly crawl past the clock on the wall above Andrea.

Andrea finally starts to open her eyes, and as they adjust to the room, she feels something different about herself. She quickly pulls back the sheet and grasps her torso like she’s on fire, and the flames are melting her flesh.

ANDREA
Oh my god! What have they done to

my body? I was supposed to get my teeth worked on. I feel like half of me is made of steel! I’m a freak. I’m going to make a quick run towards the exit.

5.

The man in black enters the room as if he’s finally achieved his life’s work.

ANDREA (CONT’D)
Who are you? What have you done to

me? I will sue you for all you’re worth. I will kill you!

THE MAN IN BLACK: You’ll do no such thing, Andrea.

You are now under my control until I turn the switch off. I will only do so if you’re doing what I say.

ANDREA
What? Who do you think you are? You

can’t keep me here against my will. You’re a madman! I’ll scream!

THE MAN IN BLACK
Go ahead! No one will hear your

feeble cries for help. Now, you’re to do everything I tell you to, or else! When I say you jump, you say how high? When I ask you to turn invisible, you say yes, sir! Andrea, you have a flamethrower, you can fly, your body can turn into a liquid, and you have even more super strength. Did I mention you can camouflage into anything? You’re the perfect spy and villain, anything I and my company want you to be. We are called Thamos. We will soon be ruling the world with copies of your DNA. We’re still discovering all the things your new body can do.

ANDREA
You’ve destroyed me! How am I

supposed to go back to my life? How am I supposed to let my boyfriend know? You’ve taken my life from me.

THE MAN IN BLACK
That’s your problem now, not ours.

You’ll soon adjust to your new life.

ANDREA
Can I please make one final phone

call to my boyfriend? He will be out of his mind by now.

6.

THE MAN IN BLACK
If you must, but make it quick!

Andrea slips her phone out of her purse and quickly calls Phillip.

ANDREA
Phillip, you were right, honey.

They made me into a cyborg; my life was ruined.

PHILLIP
Honey, what do you mean? Are you

ok? I think the drugs they gave you are still in your system. You’re not making sense, sweetie.

ANDREA
No, Phillip, I”m being dead

serious. They’ve made me into a cyborg monstrosity.

PHILLIP
I’m coming now. Don’t worry,

everything will be fine.

Phillip calls his boss to give him a ride to the dentist. His boss is speeding in his new Gipro 367 and drops his phone as they are close to the dentist. He grabs his phone and takes his eyes off the road for a second. An eighteen-wheeler screeches as its iron frame slams into Phillips’ boss’ car with a crash that could be heard worldwide. The eighteen-wheeler and the Pontiac are strewn across Fifth Avenue, with no survivors from the Pontiac. Phillip dies holding out as long as possible but finally lets go of the will to live.

Two hours later, Andrea gets a phone call from Phillips’s mother, Samantha, who is sobbing. Andrea drops the phone and blacks out when she comes to. She takes off running outside, breaking through doors and walls in her stride like a cyborg scorned. She slumps to her knees and cracks the concrete in half on the curb near the dentist’s door. She cries so hard her eye laser beams come on, and she disintegrates a couple of ant hills. She stands up and starts looking at the different buttons on her new body. She tries one out, and she becomes invisible.

ANDREA
Oh, Phillip, I will see you again,

I will! I have to find a way to be with you again. I thought I might be of some use to this body, and I might change the world for the better.

(MORE)

7.

ANDREA (CONT’D)
I can only do it if you can help me

through it. I’m forever lost without you here. I’ll be a mess without you. I’m so lost.

After she stops sobbing, she looks to her right at a trash compactor. Without a second thought, she climbs to the top, where she sees an opening.

ANDREA
If this is the only way Phillip and

I can be together; I’ll take this opportunity to be reunited again. If I don’t, I’ll be a freak for all eternity.

Andrea dives into the trash compactor. The compactor churns and makes odd noises, finally spitting out three huge metal squares. Kerplunk!!! Scraps are spat out afterward like confetti on the sidewalk of Ninth Street.

The man in black races outside. He stares at the scraps of metal.

THE MAN IN BLACK
What has she done? My beautiful

creation. Oh, yes, I still have her DNA. I will be even filthier richer now. I’ll tell Thamos they will soon be able to raise an army of cyborgs at their command.

The man in black pulls out his expensive phone and calls Thamos.

THE MAN IN BLACK (CONT’D) Put our plan into action

immediately, but the girl is dead. We can now change world politics and bend the economy to our diabolical will. We will beat the world into submission.

**THE END.**

**Memory and Moonlight**

 Maggie Madison thrived on ambition. She was thirty-three years old and lived life on the razor’s edge. Maggie had always been attractive. She was a redhead and full of zest. Maggie was slim, and she loved to wear fashionable clothing. She adored anything designer and was always searching for vintage designer purses. The year was 2024. It was spring, and New York City was buzzing. Maggie’s aspirations were always the number one thing in her life; they kept her going in good and rough times. She worked at a fashion magazine called Dress to Impress You. Maggie had a seven-year-old daughter named Meredith. Meredith was the spitting image of her mom; she had short red hair and freckles and was adorable.

 Maggie had already dropped her off at school and ran late to the office. Today was like any other day, except it wasn’t. Maggie’s life was about to change forever. Maggie was driving the Porsche and stopped at the red light. She turned on the radio while she waited and ignored what was happening at the light. Maggie lifted her head to the sound of scraping metal that sounded like a shrill oncoming train. A log had dislodged from a log truck up ahead. An eighteen-wheeler caused the car to be flung backward by the impact. Maggie never saw it coming. Her life didn’t flash before her eyes. There was no fanfare, no parade. She closed her eyes as if she could stop it.

After that, she remembered nothing, felt nothing, and was nothing. She felt herself floating away and was afraid to open her eyes.

 Maggie was as light as a floating feather.

 ‘Where am I?’ said Maggie.

 Maggie looked down from her feet and didn’t see land below her. Everything around her was white. She knew she was floating. She continued to drift forward. Maggie didn’t know how far she traveled but knew when she arrived. She came to an abrupt stop in front of two yellow doors. Maggie couldn’t put her finger on it, but she had a strange feeling that what was behind these doors was part of her. She reached out her hand to touch the first one. It was locked. She tried both, and both were locked.

 ‘Why am I here? Who’s running this show? I want to go home,’ said Maggie.

 “Home is where the heart is! You must choose your destiny or have it chosen for you. Hurry up; you don’t have much time left,” said an unknown voice. Maggie slowly turned the knob of the first door. She pushed the door open with all the caution of a mother bathing her newborn for the first time. Once the door was open, a powerful mist came from the clouds of this new world. It enveloped Maggie so entirely that her senses were blurred. She closed her eyes and found herself floating above water once she dared to open them. She had no control over where she was going.

 Maggie let out a silent scream. She didn’t have control over her hearing or vocal cords. Maggie was unaware of how long or far she traveled. Was it days? Was it weeks? She couldn’t tell. She felt herself floating down over a hillside. Her hearing and voice came back to her, thank God. Maggie quickly realized she had been far away from a town. The woods were thick with trees as far as the eye could see. She reached out and tried to touch one, but her hand went right through it. Maggie screamed as shrilly as a train whistle.

 ‘What’s going on here? Why am I here? I don’t know where I am,’ said Maggie. She clutched her person, and her hands went right through her chest. Maggie felt herself being pushed forward again. Her body was moving as fast as a crow flies. She saw a trailer down below her. She was willed toward the ground. Maggie realized her mom was moving from the trailer. Boxes lay askew everywhere on the front porch. Two children were playing on the swing set nearby. Maggie didn’t recognize them. She felt her body begin to shrink. Maggie had become a child and looked like she was five years old. She still had her grown-up mind.

 Maggie’s mom motioned her toward the playground, where two kids were playing. Maggie sat on a swing beside an eager-looking boy.

 “Hi, I’m Michael. What’s your name?” said Michael.

 “My name is Maggie,” said Maggie.

 “It’s nice to meet you, Maggie. This is Mandy,” said Michael. Michael pointed to a small girl with brown hair and green eyes next to him.

 “Where are you from?” asked Mandy.

 “I’m from New York City,” said Maggie.

 “You mean the Big Apple?” asked Michael.

 “The one and only. What town is it that we’re in?”

 “This is Hepzibah, Georgia. It’s not very big,” said Michael.

 “What year is it?” asked Maggie.

 “1996,” said Mandy.

 “Are you sure you didn’t bump your head, Maggie?” asked Michael.

 “You have no idea,” said Maggie.

 Mandy and Michael stared at her with eyes that popped out and were more comprehensive than saucers. Mandy swung slowly and gained speed like a daredevil. The other two were swinging, too. They were competing to see who would go faster. Michael gave one final push and landed on his feet, making the dirt below him billow in the breeze. Maggie was being called home. She said her goodbyes and raced inside with her mom.

 After Maggie and her mom ate dinner, she was tucked into bed. As Maggie lay in the dark, she heard a small voice.

 “Maggie, tomorrow I want you to choose between Michael and Mandy to take back to the portal. Michael will be the one you love, and Mandy will be your best friend. Choose wisely; you won’t get a re-do. I know you may not understand now, but you will.” said the voice. Maggie felt herself nod off to an unknown world.

She dreamed of her and Michael’s future life together. She knew he was her person and wanted to keep him forever. How was she supposed to tell Michael? She would be sent to the looney bin, and Michael would fearfully run away. Maybe the mysterious voice would help her now.

After breakfast, she went to the playground and found Michael swinging alone on the swing set. She tapped him fiercely on his shoulder. As her finger landed on his shoulder, a strange thing occurred. Time was frozen like a clock frozen in the sands of time. Michael was frozen, too. Before Maggie could blink, a gust of wind came up like a hungry, roaring lion. It took Maggie and Michael away to the holding world instantaneously.

Maggie saw Michael become unfrozen. Michael looked like he was her age now. He had beautiful black hair, and he was tall and attractive. She was back to her correct size and age.

“Michael, I can explain everything. I almost died the other day. I still don’t know if I’m dead now, but I know you and I have a future together, and that’s why we must go to the next door together. It will take us to our next world. I believe it will be our future. If you trust me, you’ll understand soon enough,” said Maggie.

“I trust you, Maggie, as crazy as that sounds. I’m ready to know more about you. I like you. We didn’t have much of a childhood together; maybe our future will be brighter,” said Michael.

Maggie and Michael shoved the door open with an alarming force. They were swept swiftly off their feet and fell to the ground like a bird knocked from its nest. Maggie spit dirt out of her mouth.

“Pwah!” said Maggie

“Do you think Mandy will be ok, Michael? Do you think we’ll ever see her again?” asked Maggie.

“She’ll turn up, just like you did,” said Michael.

“I have a feeling we’ll only be allowed to spend a short time here, too, Michael,” Maggie said.

“Let’s make it count,” said Michael.

“Look, there’s a house up ahead,” said Maggie.

“I have a feeling it’s ours, Maggie,” said Michael.

The two raced inside to see what it looked like. As soon as Maggie flung open the front door, she heard a gigantic Surprise!

“What’s the surprise?” shouted Michael.

“Your twentieth wedding anniversary, silly,” said Mandy.

Maggie and Michael looked at their hands and realized how much older they were.

“Where have the years flown to?” asked Michael.

“Will you excuse us for a second? We must find something in the kitchen,” said Maggie.

Maggie yanked Michael into the kitchen.

“Michael, robots are flying around everywhere here. There seems to be a flying holographic phone for everyone,” Maggie said.

The couple looked down at the counter, where their picture was on two passports. They had flown worldwide—from Italy to Jamaica to London and everywhere in between. Both their jaws dropped through the tiled floor. Four refrigerator magnets on the fridge said Oregon.

“That must be where we are, Maggie. We’ve had a wonderful life together. That’s what we wanted, right?” asked Michael.

As soon as Michael had uttered those words, Maggie blinked, and they were back in the holding world. There were no doors now, only a demon named Mitchell. Unbeknownst to Maggie, he had slipped out of her past to find her.

“I’ll take you straight to hell, Maggie,” said Mitchell. You think you’re more powerful than me, do you?”

Maggie knew she must decide her identity. Was it back in NYC? Was it her past? Or was her future with Michael? She must follow her heart. She knew that time was running out. She heard a voice rise like a lion.

“Maggie, remember who you are. You don’t have to pick. Just be yourself, and it will all fall into place,” said the voice.

Maggie closed her eyes and fell into a dream. In the dream, she and Michael had found peace and were in heaven with the rest of her family. They were all holding hands. They were dressed in costumes as giant butterflies. They were singing in unison. The only two words she could capture were Memory and Moonlight. They sang to the Father, the Lord of Lords, King of Kings. A light so powerful shone like a thousand suns upon them. A breeze came from the voice of the Father, and he was speaking to his people. Maggie didn’t want to leave. This was her future. This was what she lived for, her whole world. It was all clear to Maggie now.

The dream shifted again, and she and Michael stood in a castle overlooking millions of people dressed in costumes. Michael was telling her who everyone was because she couldn’t see over the side wall of the castle.

“Meanie,” he said.

Maggie grinned and said, “Meanness.”

Maggie opened her eyes and found the demon was trying to pull her back into door number one again.

“Get off of me, you lech!” screamed Maggie.

“I’ve decided, Lord, I want my future to be with you, and I’ll let the rest of the chips fall where they may. I choose you, Meredith, and Michael,” shouted Maggie.

Maggie blinked, and she and Michael were back in her NYC apartment with Meredith. They were all sitting on the couch watching television.

“My baby, where have you been all my life?” asked Maggie.

“Are you ok, Mom?” said Meredith.

“Dad, she must be hitting the sauce hard again,” said Meredith.

Maggie shoved a finger over Michael’s lips. She kissed him with a deep, longing kiss. She leaned in close to whisper in his ear.

“Looks like we’ve got all we’ve ever wanted: meanness,” said Maggie.

“You’d be correct, meanie,” said Michael.

Outside, snow blew like a train whistle to “Memory and Moonlight.”

A voice whispered in the wind, “Well done, my child, well done.”

**Angela Rolph**

**The Pit of Perseverance**

**Written Story to My Comic Book**

**Page 1 Splash:** Showcase a large image where the couple and their little boy are the central focus, peering out from the window of the Pizza Pit. The orange sign of the Pizza Pit flickers brightly in the windy storm, and a young couple, both in blue jean shorts and matching Buzz Lightyear t-shirts, can be seen through the windows. They sit across from their son in a brown upholstered booth. Their little boy, in a green Toy Story t-shirt and orange shorts, holds up a massive slice of pizza. The gooey yellow cheese drips down his chin in thick globs as he tries to catch it in his wide-open mouth, a mixture of joy and anticipation on his face.

**1Caption:** Pizza Pit is in downtown Savannah, Georgia. It has been open since 1972 and is still in operation in 2024.

**Page 2**

**Panel 1**: A tall, skinny young man with black hair and an orange jumper with a pizza pit name tag counts money in the small, red-themed kitchen. He hovers his face over the cash register, casting a shadow over it. A short, stout young man with red hair, holding a roster, taps him on the back.

**1Donald:** Ronny, your job today is to **sweep** the kitchen. **Let me** do accounting.

**2Ronny**: **Are** you sure we can keep this place afloat? We are **all** working overtime.

**3Donald:** **Leave** the books to me, Ronny. I know you’re my best friend, but you’re also my best employee. **Work.**

**4Ronny:** William is out on delivery; I’ll help Kadejah wait tables. Becki told me she left for a coffee break with Rachel. Those two are slackers, Donald.

**1SFX:** **Bang!**

**Panel 2:** A short, thin girl with blonde hair, wearing hot pink high heels and an orange jumpsuit, crashes into the swinging door of the kitchen.

**5Becki:** Reporting for duty, your M**ajesty!** We’ve got everyone’s coffee. Where is my humble peasant, Rachel?

**Panel 3:** A young, skinny girl with curly brown hair, wearing an orange jumpsuit, backs into the door, holding a cupholder with four coffees in one hand and two more cups in the other.

**6Rachel:** I’m not your peasant, Becki; I’m your **bestie**. Now… start treating me like one.

**7Becki:** Peasants are **so touchy** **nowadays!** She sticks out her tongue at Rachel and twists her hands by her ears mockingly.

**2SFX: neeeeeeehhh!**

**Panel 4:** A tall, blonde, bearded man with graying hair enters the kitchen and empties a pizza delivery bag. He collapses into a nearby black office chair.

Page 3

**8Donald:** Becki, yanks Kadejah out from the floor. It’s time to have a friendly team meeting.

**Panel 5:** Kadejah, Becki, Donald, Ronnie, Rachel, and William are sitting around an office chair in the corner of the kitchen. Donald slaps his accounting book down on the table.

**3SFX:** **wham!**

**Panel 6:** The group exchanges worried looks and talks loudly.

**9William:** This is **more serious** than I thought. Are we in **trouble**?

**10Donald:** No one here is in trouble, but I want to get some things straight **right now**. Does anyone have any idea **how close** we are to losing this place?

**1Donald (thoughts):** They aren’t going to respond well to this.

**Panel 7: Becki**: **Oh my God, this is all my fault!** If only I’d worked **harder** and not been so lazy.

**11Rachel:** I feel the same.

**2Rachel (thoughts):** We don’t get paid enough for this.

**4SFX**: **Waaaaaaahhhhhhhh!**

**Panel 8:** Becki covers her eyes and cries; her mascara runs down her hands in black torrents as Rachel embraces her warmly.

**3Becki (thoughts):** I’m such a failure! I take too many coffee breaks.

**Panel:** A feisty red-headed young woman hollers.

**12Kadejah (bursts):** We’ve been working **hard**, and you two have wasted time**!** She yells with her head in her hands.

**5SFX**: **Uggggggggghhhhh!**

**Panel 9:** Kadejah is holding her head and screaming in frustration—Donald's hands are around six binders with paperwork inside.

**4Donald (thoughts):** They’ll **love** this. They might have to help me with several fundraisers.

**13Donald:** As I was **about to say,** the real reason behind our struggles is Pantastic Pizza. They are stealing all our customers.

**Page 4**

**14William:** What can we do to take them down? Let’s sabotage their pizza dough. I can think of a **million** ways we can sabotage their supply chain. He laughs menacingly.

**4William (thoughts):** They’ll **all** get what they **deserve!**

**6SFX: Mwaaaahhahahaha!**

**Panel 10**: Kadejah taps her foot nervously. Becki gulps as Ronnie listens intently. Donald gets up and answers the ring on the drive-thru window. He gets the customer’s pizza from the kitchen, runs their credit card, and hands them their receipt.

**15Donald:** You have the right idea, William, but we don’t have to resort to being **sneaky** to get even with them.

**16Kadejah:** I do best to get even; when do we **begin?**

**17Donald:** This must be a **group effort**, and since I consider you all co-owners of this establishment, I’ve devised a fundraising plan to keep our place. Who's **with me?**

**2Caption:** Kadejah and Becki are outside the Pizza Pit, taking out the trash by the side of the building.

**Panel 11:** Kadejah and Becki are sitting on the curb talking when Becki stands up, drops her trash bag, points, and shouts.

**7SFX:** **R-r-r-r-aaaaaaaaaaaatttttttt!**

**Panel 12:** Rachel immediately stands up and pulls out her phone to take a picture of one of them with her camera. Her camera flashes, and she pockets it back in her jeans pocket.

**18Rachel:** This is all the evidence we need, **Becki! Those no-good rotten finks are going down for good! Say goodbye to Pantastic Pizza!**

**19Becki:** They have rats, Rachel! Rats! I think I’m going to be **sick!**

**5Rachel:** **(thoughts):** Don’t **throw** up on me, **Becki!**

**3Captions:** She goes behind the humongous blue dumpster can and pukes up some green, chunky vomit.

**8SFX:** **Bleeeeeeeaaahhhhh!**

**Panel 13:** The girls ran back inside the Pizza Pit and walloped right through Donald’s office, which is located to the left of the kitchen. He dropped his cell phone onto his desk.

**20Becki:** We have evidence the **Pantastic Pizza** is harboring **rats!** We have **evidence!**

**6Rachel (thoughts):** Get a load of these apples…**or Rats!**

**9SFX:Raaaaaatsssssssss!**

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**Panel 14:** She whips out her phone and scrolls to the picture of the rat from Pantastic Pizza’s kitchen.

**4Caption:** The next day is beautiful as morning light shines through Pizza Pit’s dirty windows. Donald slumps over in his office. Birds are twittering outside his office window. He fell asleep on his computer, reviewing his finances. The bank calls him.

**11SFX:** **Riiiiiiiiinnnnnnnngggggg!**

**Panel 15:** Donald answers the phone.

**V.O.** (Bank employee speaks brokenly): We’re sending someone over so you can sign the deed to your land.

**21Donald:** Please give me one last **shot!** I can make it **work!**

**12SFX: Cliiiiicccck!**

**7Donald (thoughts):** We’re **all screwed**! The bank will put this place for sale as **soon** as they can.

**23Donald:** This may take them down, but we still struggle financially. So, even with the competition, our financial woes will continue to grow. This changes nothing; I’m sorry, girls.

**Panel 16:** Donald goes back to working in his office. The girls hang their heads and return to the kitchen to put on their aprons to continue making pizzas. Becki slides a pizza paddle under a pizza to take it out. She drops the whole thing on the floor, shocked.

**13SFX:** **Splaaaaaaaaaat!**

**8Becki (thoughts):** I must be getting tired.

**24Rachel:** What a waste of delicious pizza. I can’t believe we can do anything to save this place. Even if we try to raise money, we won’t have enough time.

**25Becki: Donald says it wasn’t meant to be and that we should all** start looking for other jobs.

**26Rachel:** Becki, let’s go take out some more stinking trash.

**Panel 17:** Becki and walk outside with their full black, leaking trash bag. Becki drops it on the sidewalk, and slime oozes into the sidewalk cracks. A red Mercedes Benz pulls up slowly from the entrance of the small parking lot.

**14SFX:** **Plop!**

**27Rachel:** Don’t look now, but the wealthiest lady in town is pulling up to have pizza here.

**28Becki:** I **don’t think** she has **pizza** on her mind, **Rachel!**

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**Panel 18:** The car door is flung open, and a white-haired woman emerges. She is dressed to the nines in a yellow silk dress. She walks to the door, yanks the for-sale sign out of the green grass, and smiles. The woman thrusts up her checkbook, and the sun is setting behind her back as she casts a long black shadow.

**29Francis:** My name is Francis Merci. You’re standing in the middle of historic land. A tunnel underneath Pizza Pit leads to a treasure long lost to the Incans. My team uses advanced radar to scan through objects. Name your price**,** and you’ll be **filthy stinking rich!**

**30Kadejah:** Yes, ma’am, we’ll do anything we want.

**31Donald:** Hush Kadejah! We can’t sell this land or building. This is a home away from home, and we’re family. Everyone cries out in unison.

**15SFX:** **Yeeeeaaaaaah!**

**Panel 20:** Francis thrashes her hands in protest.

**32Francis:** Alright, you’ve left me with **no choice.** If you agree to sell this land, I’ll keep you on and give you half of the profits. You’ll be **making history!**

**9Francis (thoughts):** They are fools if they don’t take this offer.

**Panel 21: William has a scowl across his face.**

**10William (thoughts):** This old broad isn’t budging.

**Panel 22:** Kadejah tugs on her long, thick hair.

**11Kadejah (thoughts):** I’d take the money and run.

**12 Ronnie (thoughts):** What other choice do we have?

**Panel 23:** Becki has a quizzical brow as she is lost in her train of thought.

**13Becki (thoughts):** Think of all the purses and shoes I can get with my share.

**Panel 24: Rachel looks amused and is smiling.**

**14Rachel (thoughts):** I think Becki will explode from excitement.

**Panel 25:** Donald has a determined expression on his face.

**15Donald (thoughts):** By accepting her offer, I would be doing an honor to my grandaddy and Daddy before me.

**16Donald (thoughts):** You have yourself a deal, Francis! The gang cries out in excitement.

**16SFX:** **Hoooorrraaaaaah!**

**Panel 26:** Francis writes the check and hands it to Donald. She strolls back to her Mercedes Benz, slams the door shut, and drives away. Tiny rocks near their feet begin to tremble.

**17SFX:** **aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!**

**Panel 27:** Fantastic Pizza’s evening crowd runs screaming out of its yellow doors, and well-fed rats race out from around their feet. The gang fist pumps the air. Victory is a dish best served burning hot.

**FISHY FELINE**

**A RUNER PLATFORM GAME STORY**

**BY: ANGELA LOREN ROLPH**

**FADE IN:
EXT. A JUNKYARD PLATFORM - DAY**

**The sun rises on a broken-down car in a junkyard. A bulldog named Buster guards the chain, linking to the next level. His mid-sized bulldog offspring stand in the initial path to Buster.**

**Frankie and Buster go way back. Buster has beefed with Frankie for years because Buster wants to be the all-powerful supernatural bulldog and rule the world. Frankie doesn’t want the world to become evil and corrupt.**

**Buster will stop at nothing to rid the world of insignificant beings like Frankie. Frankie will do everything he can to ensure the world is safe from evil, including Buster.**

**FRANKIE**

**HE IS A HANDSOME YELLOW TABBY CAT AROUND FIVE YEARS OLD. HE WAS ABANDONED FROM A GOOD HOME AND HAS BEEN FIGHTING CRIME EVER SINCE. HE HAS HELPED OTHER CATS TRY TO TAKE BUSTER DOWN FOR YEARS, BUT THEY’VE ALWAYS FAILED.**

**Because of an accident, Frankie has a supernatural ability to shape-shift into any animal he wants. He thinks this will put him above the other animals he’ll face in Fishy Feline.**

**BUSTER**

**BUSTER IS AN UGLY, GRAY, HUMONGOUS BULLDOG WITH A RED COLLAR WHO IS AROUND SEVEN YEARS OLD. HE HAS BEEN TEAMING UP WITH OTHER DOGS TO MAKE THE WORLD CRIMINALISTIC. HE WILL S**

**STOP AT NOTHING TO DESTROY EVERYTHING IN HIS PATH.**

**He was also abandoned from his home when he was a puppy and left to starve to death on the streets. He didn’t take his abandonment as well as Frankie did.**

**FRANKIE
Give it up, Buster. I’m coming for**

**you. Your time is up. I’ll not let the world come harm’s way because of you.**

**BUSTER
I’m more vicious than you’ll ever**

**be. What makes you unique, Frankie? You’re nothing more than a pawn in this game of life. I’ll soon destroy you!**

**EXT. JUNKYARD - NIGHT**

**The moon hangs low as the saliva of the bulldogs drips slowly from their mouths. Frankie must make a game plan for getting through this junkyard.**

**Will he shape-shift into an elephant? Will he turn into a bear?**

**BUSTER
I can hear your heart racing,**

**Frankie. It would be best if you were fearful of me. I am menacing. I could rip you to shreds.**

**FRANKIE
I have a secret weapon, Buster. I’m**

**not afraid to unleash it on you. You won’t stand a chance against my fury. Hell hath no fury like a cat scorned.**

**BUSTER
You’re no cat. It will be like a**

**game of cat and mouse play tonight. I’ll be the monster this time.**

**Frankie scratches his claws on a tree and transforms into an elephant. He lets out a powerful elephant noise that shakes the rocks on the ground in the junkyard.**

**BUSTER (CONT’D)
I’ve never feared anything a day in my life! Bring it on. I’m not afraid to snap you like a twig**

**pussy cat!**

**FRANKIE
Let’s duke it out, Buster. We’re**

**about to see who’s top dog. Are you scared to let a cat defeat you?**

**GO TO FISHY FELINE LEVEL 1**

**Dance or Die!**

**A Romance Fantasy Choice Text Game**

**By: Angela Loren Rolph**

**Bertha was a seven-and-a-half-foot grizzly bear with supernatural abilities and wore a yellow-black polka-dotted tutu. She woke up from hibernation and stretched to reach her clamoring alarm. 'Oh my! Today is Saturday? The sixteenth of June? I'm late for the first day at the dance recital in Manhattan!' Bertha held her temples in utter concentration.**

**//Lisa, what time does the recital start? asked Bertha.//**

**Bertha's temples trembled erratically. 'If you don't get here in thirty minutes, your career will go down the tubes! She'll give your spot away to Martha, the pink porky pig! Hurry up and get here now!' thought Lisa. "Do you think I'll make it on time?" asked Lisa.**

**[[Faster than greased lightning]]**

**Bertha flung on her tutu and ran downstairs from her eclectic city apartment, where she'd been hibernating. She tried to dance to hail a taxi, but the driver just gave her a startled expression. She danced like an elephant trying to kill a mouse to a street corner where a man was selling hot dogs. He screamed and hid under the countertop, and hotdogs were flung like red-hot fireworks everywhere.**

**"Sir, I'm not here to kill you! I must hail a taxi, but I'm too menacing for the drivers to stop. Could you do it for me?" shouted Bertha.**

**"You're a bear, and you can talk! How is that possible?" yelled the stranger.**

**"I have supernatural gifts. You've never heard of the supernatural bears across this great country? They are the true heroes of America. Can you please give me a taxi? I'm in a hurry!" said Bertha.**

**"I'll do it if you perform for my daughter's five-year-old birthday party tonight. Do you think you can do that?" the stranger asked.**

**[[Steaming Hotdogs]]**

**"My daughter's name is Sugar Apple Smith. She'll be so excited," said the crook.**

 **Bertha threw back her head and cackled like a hyena. It made the stones near the hotdog cart rattle and roll. Bertha hailed a taxicab like she was a Bonafide New Yorker and patted him on the back. She motioned for him to enter the cab fits.**

**They sat in utter silence as the cab drove on. The radio belted out "Living La Vida Local." Tom was seated, dancing like Selena Quintanilla. He sang Ricky Martin's song like he was destined for greatness. They reached Tom's apartment in five minutes.**

**A little girl with blonde pigtails and a green jumper ran out to leap in his arms. "Sugar, this is Bertha. She's a ballet dancer. She's going to perform at your birthday party tonight," said the stranger. "**

**“Hi, Bertha. You're so big! You'll be perfect for my dance troupe act. Can you dance?" asked the little girl.**

**[["I can dance like it's nobody's business, child. You’re talking to a future famous ballerina who will be able to trump any stage she takes," said Bertha the Ballerina. ->Follow Your heart.]]**

**Bertha desperately grabbed a hundred-dollar bill from inside her tutu and shoved it in the man's dingy outstretched hand. He tapped his foot impatiently and pushed the cart forcefully in the opposite direction. "You just robbed me blind!" yelled Bertha.**

**"Honey, don't you know you're in the big, stinking, greasy apple?" said the crook.**

**She stomped her giant, monstrous foot like a dinosaur. She joined the street performers who were swaying to melodic jazz music. A cab saw her and stopped for her on a dime. She jumped inside and slammed the door, enraged with her life. She clamped her mouth as she remembered she didn't have any dinero. She informed the upset driver, who dumped her on the next corner like a green moldy bag of silliness in the trash.**

**"Can you please just take five miles up the road to my dance recital? I only have forty-five minutes, or will I jeopardize my career?" asked Bertha.**

**[[Gravy train ends]]**

**[[God grant me mercy.]]**

**Bertha stretched her neck around to see who else was watching her. She sang the beginning of My Heart Will Go On. Sugar isn't so sweet. She walked off in the opposite direction to check on her friends. Her friend Samantha waves eagerly to her. She turned to talk to Bertha. "You can't sing, but I bet you can dance. If you can come to my party tonight, I'll have my daddy take you wherever you want. Can you dance to Shake It Off?"**

**[[Shake it off!]]**

**[[Sing and Dance]]**

**Bertha jumped out of bed and brushed her unruly head of hair. She jumped in her polka-dotted tutu and made a beeline for the door. She dashed over to the street corner, and when she looked at the street, New York City was forsaken. There was nightmarish traffic from all sides. Instead, she saw a green labyrinth as far as the eye could see. She entered with trepidation.**

**Noise didn't exist in this maze. She could only sense her thoughts. Bertha used them as her only accurate guide. 'This is impossible! What is this funky place, and how do I get out of it? I only have an hour, or my goose is cooked! Where will this maze take me?' Bertha envisioned a gigantic grizzly bear driving her in a taxicab in New York City. This gave her hope to return to her city and be all she could be.**

**[[Fall to pieces]]**

**Bertha needs a sense of time and direction. She jumped out of her skin like she was on fire. Leaves rustled swiftly behind her. She jumped backward and stumbled in the warm dirt. That's when she heard a stampede coming for her. She wills herself forward into the depths of the labyrinth's snares.**

**//What's behind me, and how can I get out of here?// thought Bertha.**

**[[Follow Your heart.]]

Bertha jumped to her feet and roared with fury. Luna steps back and flaps her wings, ready for immediate takeoff. Luna turned to walk in the opposite direction and felt a gentle tugging on her wing. She turns around and sees Bertha towering over her, smiling like the cat who caught the canary.**

**''Bertha, are you thinking what I'm thinking? The only capability I have is to shoot fire," said Luna.**

**"Yes, girl, it's time to squash us a spider!' proclaimed Bertha.**

**"How are we going to go about this?" asked Luna.**

**[[Spider's demise]]**

**[[Let's have a dance-off, said Bertha.]]**

**Luna pulled her writer's notebook from her ruffled feathers. She took the pen from behind her ear and tested the end with her tongue like a proper writer. She looks like she's going to A-plan the strategic moves of a lifetime or B-blow this story right out of the water. As she jots out the plan she wants them to use, it looks like her pen and her have melted together. They have become one, and the lightbulb is ignited above her head.**

**"Bertha, I have the perfect plan. If we can get the spider to shoot its web in circles around itself, it will trap itself. Then, we can lull it to sleep. It will have to be the dance recital of a lifetime. It won't have a chance of escaping death's fury after this.**

**"Are you ready to get home finally and destroy this thing?" asked Luna.**

**[[Two fools are better than one.]]**

**"I forgot to tell you, Bertha, whenever you left your body in New York City, you might have been given a duplicate one here. You should merge back with it when you get back home. It's probably running amuck without you. Without a good conscience, there is no telling what trouble it's getting into. It's probably lost as a goose in the Big Apple," said Luna.**

**Bertha smacked her forehead in utter disbelief.**

**"How is this possible? So right now, we're spirits, you and me?" asked Bertha.**

**''The best kind of spirits. This whole realm is a spirit dimension. The spider doesn't even have a physical body, but the rules of physics still work here. The same as they do on Earth," said Luna.**

**[[Spider's demise]]**

**"How do we lure it to us?" asked Bertha.**

**"We stay in plain sight. Let's start by redecorating this whole maze and burning it. I'll take flight and start the flame fest," said Luna.**

**Luna took to the skies, and Bertha found a tree to stand by. Everything else went up in flames around her. After Luna came down, they watched as the maze burned like a beacon. It let a piercing scream as it died; its poison was no more. It took a little while to burn in a glorious flaming, red bonfire.**

 **Luna turned to Bertha.**

**"Positions! Get ready! On my word!" proclaimed Luna.**

**The two ran to opposite ends of where the maze used to stand, flailing their arms wildly. They screamed as loudly as two pairs of idiots chasing a tornado. A vast, seething black widow spider descended from the heavens on a shining, white thread.**

**Bertha pulled a little speaker out of her pocket and put it on a blast. It played; I love Rock and Roll. It was their savior or their death sentence. Bertha began the ultimate dance. The spider shot its web in a fury and missed Bertha by a milestone. She started dancing in a circle, jumping, landing, and rocking their ears and the Earth. Each time she landed, the spider caught her vibrations and got sleepier and sleepier.**

**Bertha jammed out so hard that the spider had a web all over itself and fell on its side. Its legs were trapped in the sticky web. Its body was limp and lifeless. Bertha signaled a roar to Luna. Luna burned the beast to ashes that blew away with the bitter wind. Their world was disintegrating around them as if they were in a video game, and they'd just beaten the level.**

**"Luna, can you meet me in Times Square at noon?" asked Bertha.**

**[[Loyal to the end]]**

 **Bertha quickly looked at her watch on her iPhone. She growled viciously, and the people nearby stopped and gawked stupidly at her.**

**"I've got to get to Manhattan, or my goose is cooked. I'll take a taxi from here," said Bertha.**

**"You better hurry. There's construction all the way there.**

**Do you think you'll make it?" asked Luna.**

**[[Dancing Fool]]**

**Bertha entered the middle of the street and slammed her front paws onto an incoming taxicab. It screeched to a burning halt. The grizzly bear taxicab driver lowered his window and screamed like a beast at her.**

**[["You got some loose screws lady?->I'm driving!]]**

**Bertha entered the taxicab and slammed the door.**

**"Touch you, sweetheart! You one of them fancy broads, aren't you?" asked Paolo.**

**"I'm fancy-free and feeling fine!" said Bertha.**

**"You got the last part right, baby," said Paolo.**

**"Excuse me, sir! I won't be spoken to in this manner. You have no right! Drop me off at the next stop." said Bertha.**

**"Not until you agree to go out with me. We have a long way to go in this construction zone, so what will it be?" asked Paolo.**

**[["I want to go to 131 E Tenth Street in Manhattan to the New York Theatre Ballet.]]**

**"When we stop, I'll give you my phone number. You don't meet many of our kind in New York City," said Paolo.**

**Paolo let out a deep, guttural growl from his belly.**

 **"Oh, you mean the pig-headed sort?" asked Bertha. "Don't sell yourself short," said Paolo.**

**Bertha snorted just like an oinker, and Paolo slapped the front wheel in fits of laughter.**

 **"We're getting close now to Manhattan, honey. Why do you want to attend that fancy ballet school?" asked Paolo.**

**[[I'm a prima donna.]]**

**Bertha stuck her head out the window, covering her furry ears in frustration. The jackhammer echoed in her eardrums. She raised the window back up in a blind, frenzied fury.**

**"It'll be around this next block, precious. I'll meet you when I get out to give you my number," said Paolo."**

**[[I'll just trash it in the nearest bin, honestly, said Bertha.]]**

**The taxicab circled the next block, and Paolo put the cab in the park. He approached the passenger side and opened the door for her like a true gentleman. Except for the fact that he most definitely is far from a gentleman. Bertha stepped out onto the curb and saw Paolo in all his glory.**

**"Paolo, my, what big eyes you have," said Betha. "The better to see you with, my sweet," said Paolo.**

**Bertha stretched back down in the car, feeling light-headed. Paolo gave her a crumpled-up piece of paper with his name and number written in chicken scratch. His name was Paolo E. Procell, and the name was underlined. At the bottom, it said Hit me up on Facebook. Bertha looked up at the looming figure and grinned like a silly schoolgirl.**

**"Does this mean you'll be mine?" asked Paolo. He growled and helped her out of the cab.**

**[[Under consideration]]**

**[[Don't push it.]]**

**Bertha walked down the bolstering sidewalk until she finally arrived at her destination. The ballet school burst at the seams with dancers. She walked through the revolving door and up the elevator to floor twelve like she was walking to the pivotal moment of her life's story. The elevator ride was full of ballet dancers with pink ribbons and black long-sleeved outfits. They reached floor number eleven when the elevator came to a shuddering halt. The elevator was pitch black. Young girls were crying like babies, and Bertha roared like a beast with one powerful blast. Complete silence reigned over the tiny elevator shaft.**

**"How will we make it out of here," asked Cynthia.**

**[[By our bootstraps]]**

**Bertha slammed her paw around the tight-knit cable and dug her claws into it. Her arms and body were searing with pain. She spotted a number on the side of the wall, number twelve. She swung and jumped, clinging to the bottom of the door frame. She pulled her massive frame painfully to push herself up. She received an incoming message.**

**"Bertha, we can't last much longer. The air supply is low, and some girls have already passed out!" thought Lisa.**

**"I'm getting your help soon, Lisa. Don't worry," thought Bertha.**

**Bertha used her vibration to rattle the door loose from its hinges and busted out into the foyer; girls shrieked shrilly left and right. She ran to the dance hall door number thirteen and busted it down.**

 **''We have a problem. Your dance troupe is stuck on floor number ten, and if we don't get to them soon, they might all die. The air supply has been compromised," said Bertha.**

**Sylvia sprang into action like the gazelle she was.**

**Bertha vibrated the elevator doors on floor number ten off their hinges.**

**“I'm calling the ambulance. The dance recital is canceled for now. We'll reschedule it in a few days. You'll compete with Lisa, the porky pig, for the top spot in my troupe. Can you please help me safely get all the girls to the ambulance?" asked Sylvia.**

**[[Anything for the Troupe]]**

**Bertha sat at the edge of the sidewalk and became unaware of how many cars were about to run into her impossibly large feet hanging over the curb. She wept like a two-year-old as she tried to skip a small pebble into traffic. She looked up and saw signs for her dance studio nearby. She picked herself up off the dirty sidewalk. 'I'm so close to it now. I know I can walk from here. I wonder if I should take a cab instead. It might save me many headaches,' Bertha thought to herself.**

**[[Follow Your heart.]]**

**[[Lord, I depend on you.]]**

**[[Fall to pieces]]**

**Bertha begrudgingly stepped into the car and turned her head toward the window. The driver turned on the radio, and they were both deathly silent.**

**''Do you want to hear a joke, sweetie? Asked the driver."**

**[[Don't joke with me.]]**

**Bertha crouched slowly down and assisted Gwendolyn as best she could. Gwendolyn moaned and contorted her facial muscles as she helped her to her feet.**

**"I’ll be ok, Bertha. Attend to the others and save me for last. Marilyn looks like she's going to vomit, and Stacy looks like she's having a panic attack. Can you please save me for last?" asked Gwendolyn.**

**[[Reassure the troupe]]**

**[[The ambulance is here.]]**

**"I'll be fine, Bertha, the fabulous grizzly bear. You truly are a hero. You could have been a brave firefighter in another life. Can you please say something to the troupe to calm them down before the ambulance has to rally them up?" asked Gwendolyn.**

**[[Anything for the Troupe]]**

**Bertha gathered the troupe in a circle and prayed for peace over them. She asked them to practice their calming breathing and try to relax.**

**"Bertha, I'm glad you're here. Do you think we'll all be able to do the dance recital in a few days or so?" asked Lucy.**

**[[No serious injuries here.]]**

**Lucy smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. The ambulance stepped briskly off the elevator nearby. Paramedics swarmed different girls and put them on stretchers to take them to the ambulances.**

**"Do you need a stretcher, miss?" asked Jim, a paramedic.**

**[[I'll be fine.]]**

**A few days passed, and the girls were released from the hospital. All of them checked out to be healthy and whole. When Bertha got the news, she growled in delight.**

**//"Bertha, the recital is tomorrow. Are you sure you're ready?"// thought Sylvia.**

**[[Take this chance.]]**

**On Saturday evening, Bertha was at the recital hall strapping up her pink ballerina laces tightly. She stretched by the mirrors and bars and practiced some of her dance moves while listening to classical music by Beethoven. Sylvia walked in the door wearing her pink tutu. She raced over to Bertha and squeezed her as hard as she could.**

**''No matter what happens today, Bertha, I know you'll do wonderfully. Are you nervous?" asked Lisa.**

**[[Louisiana Heat]]**

**[["I'm more nervous now than ever. My whole career is riding on these upcoming moves and moments. I must crush this, literally," said Bertha the Ballerina.]]**

**"I suppose so," said Lisa. She chuckled to herself and slapped Bertha on the back.**

**"The competition is stiff, isn't it?" asked Lisa.**

**[[Competition is stiff.]]**

**[[My inner diva is fierce.]]**

**[[Troupe party]]**

**"I've fought hideous obstacles to get to this point. I'm not giving up now that I'm close to the finish line. I can smell the green grass waiting just on the other side," said Bertha.**

 **\Lisa gave her a hug that warmed up her insides and inspired her new confidence.**

**"The troupe will be here any minute, and so will Ms. Sylvia. Are you ready to rock this popsicle stand, Bertha, the ballerina?" asked Lisa.**

**[["More than you'll ever know," said Bertha.]]**

**Lisa nodded her head swiftly in agreement. She got a text from Sylvia that she and the girls were on their way up to the recital hall. "Bertha, I'm so glad I have you in my life. I can't think of what my world would have been like if I had never met you. Can you imagine how different our lives would have been?" asked Lisa. "**

**[[Not even different dimensions can keep us apart, Lisa. We're meant to be besties, you and I, said Bertha.]]**

**"Incomplete passage: The troupe filed in the room like the girls, all in line with the book Madeline. They all had different colored tutus; some held Starbucks to perk themselves for the recital.**

**"Bertha, I'm so excited. I know you're going to rock this recital. Do you think our competitors stand a chance?" asked Lucy.**

**[[''Not in this lifetime. Strap yourselves in and get ready, girls, for the ride of a lifetime," said Bertha.]]**

**The girls gathered in the back curtain of the stage where they would smoke out their competition. Classical Chopin music started as the lights grew dimmer. They filed out one by one, all in a line. They held their poses as intense classical music drifted through the audience's ears. Bertha was still backstage, waiting to go on last with Sylvia. ''Who do you think will do the best?" asked Sylvia.**

**[[Let's not compete against each other.]]**

**Sylvia squeezed Bertha's hand as the troupe filed out from the other side of the stage. The curtain fell, and silence covered the audience. Sylvia danced out first to a classical modern number. She was light as a feather and graceful as a butterfly. She twirled with dignity and honor as her killer moves lit up the stage. She could dance circles around any ballerina. When she was done and took a leisurely bow, she looked toward Bertha.**

**\\"You'll kill this girl; I know you will. Don't get too deep in your head about it. Try not to think, and you'll be fine. Can you go out there and just hold your breath through this whole number," thought Lisa.\\**

**[[I was born for this moment, thought Bertha.]]**

**Bertha entered the stage with a rush vibrating in her head, and her ears were alive with the classical hip-hop music she would be shredding the stage to. Her fears had fallen by the wayside, and she was willing to do anything it took to make her dreams come true in these few moments of insanity.**

**'Can I do this? I must put any doubt I have to the side. This is my moment,' thought Bertha.**

**[[Lord give me strength.]]**

**Bertha danced like she was on fire. Her feet were light, and she had tremendous agility on the floor. The song switched tempos and blended into I Believe I Can Fly by R. Kelly. Bertha flew like she never had before. The audience was drawn to her like a moth to a flame. She was golden; the world had never seen anything like her. She had a unique quality that none of the other dancers did. She shone like a blinding beacon of light. The competition was nothing compared to her; they fell far in comparison. She landed on the stage with a leg split, and her hands were perched high in the air in glorious triumph.**

**[['The crowd is just staring at me, this isn't so good,' though Bertha.]]**

**The audience rose to their feet and cried out with grateful applause, filling Bertha's heart with overflowing gratitude. She fist-pumped the air as her troupe came down to the stage, hugged her furry neck, and shrieked loudly.**

**Ms. Sylvia came down to the stage and stood in front of Bertha.**

**"You've outdone everyone, my dear, even Pinky the Pig. She stormed off and said she'd never compete again.**

**“How do you feel, Bertha the Ballerina? You won't let this go to your head, will you? You're the reigning champion and have the brightest career ahead of you. Here comes out trophy now," said Sylvia.**

**[[Fitter than a fiddle.]]**

**[[For what lies ahead.]]**

**The girls and Bertha stood, too. The trophy was rolled down to them. It was a humongous golden trophy with five ballerinas perched atop the top tier. It shone like a brand-new penny in the gleaming lights of the stage.**

**"Bertha, I will sign you up for the best schools. You'll learn everything there is to know about this art. The world will never forget who you are, and you'll never forget this moment. Are you ready to start tomorrow for your next stages of training?" asked Ms. Sylvia.**

**[[Ready when you are.]]**

**The girls cheered and gave Bertha a humongous bear hug from every side. The audience cheered, and roses and flowers were thrown on the stage. Stuffed bears littered the stage. The competing dance troupe stormed out of the auditorium; their faces were contorted in fury.**

**''Bertha, this day will live on in infamy. I'll never forget this moment with you," said Lisa. What restaurant are we going to? Asked Lisa.**

**[[Finest New York City Restaurant]]**

**The troupe returned to the recital backstage hall and was still cheering Bertha on. "How does it feel to be a selfless hero? asked Lucy."**

**[[I'm not a hero.]]**

**Bertha rose before daybreak and prepared herself for the next stage of her life. She trained with Sylvia every day, and each day, she became so much better than the one before. After six months, Sylvia said she was ready to take on anything that came her way.**

**"Now, do you feel like a ballerina, Bertha? Asked Ms. Sylvia."**

**[[Infamous ballerinas make history, said Bertha.]**

**That night, they donned their best outfits and traveled to Tuscany Steakhouse. They ate lobster and dipped it in so much butter sauce. They dined on oysters off the half-shell and baked oysters. They broke apart crab legs and dined on the delicious insides. The steaks were tender, and the white wine flowed in every direction. Ms. Sylvia laughed viciously all night long.**

**Everyone got their fill and stretched back in their chairs with satisfaction.**

**''Tonight, we celebrate a true victory. If Bertha weren't late to get to us in the first place, none of this would have been a victory. I treasure these moments with you girls. I hope the next troupe is as good as your girls. I'm proud of every one of you and what you've accomplished. May your lives never be the same, but let them be better.**

**“Bertha, can you toast to this occasion?" asked Ms. Sylvia.**

**[[Let's make a toast, said Bertha.]]**

**[[Thank you, God! said Bertha.]]**

**End of Game. The joyous group chimed their glasses together in unison.**

**\\What do you think of this little life?" thought Lisa.\\**

 **\\It's better than I ever could have imagined, thought Bertha. \\**

**This is the version one ending to the story. Bertha danced wildly like no one was watching. This time, she wasn't trying to impress or thrill her audience. She was doing this purely for fun. She finished with loads of applause from her young audience.**

**A little girl ran up to her.**

**"Can you come to my next birthday, big bear lady?" asked the little girl.**

**[[Take me to the dang address.]]**

**[[Late]]**

**'My girls deserve the world and more.' thought Bertha. Bertha stormed the hall like a mighty electric storm, set to wreak havoc to get to her girls. 'I hope they're all alright. I don't know what I'd do if one of them were seriously injured.' thought Bertha. 'Am I strong enough to pry open the elevator?' thought Bertha.**

**[["More than you'll ever know," said Bertha.]]**

**A sinister black spider. Huge black spider.jpg. A sinister spider resembling Vanessa, the Spider.**

**Paolo knelt and planted a big bear kiss on her hair paw. She snatched it back so fast you'd have thought he scorched her hand with fire.**

**"Do you trust me, my sweet?" asked Paolo.**

**[[Follow Your heart.]]**

 **Bertha felt complete in this one thought, and it willed her forward. While she was encompassed in this one true thought, she felt safe at home. She felt a purpose within her soul. She felt a searing fire within her heart, which encapsulated her body, which was so complete that it shook her core. "Bertha, you use all your senses. I'll give you a psychic vision so you can embrace your future more clearly. What do you see now?" asked God.**

**[[Where's my slippers?]]**

**Bertha got onstage, in front of all those children, and danced to the son 60's song War. To say the kids were a little shocked was a colossal understatement. She even sang to it. Her voice echoed harshly through the party. A little boy dropped his ice cream cone up front and started screeching like a bat on fire. A little girl screamed at Bertha.**

**"What song are you singing? It's a little pitchy," said little Suzy.**

**[[War]]**

**[[Shake it off!]]**

**Bertha hopped off the stage and pointed to Sugar and her microphone. "What song do you want to do, Bertha?” The last one was a stinker. Are you sure you're capable of this," asked Sugar.**

**[[Britney song]]**

**Bertha got onstage, and the minute she was about to belt out You're Toxic at a little kid’s birthday party, she felt an intense surge rush through her vast body. She instantly collapsed with a monstrous crash onstage. Children gathered around her in swarms. A small girl prodded her with the waffle part of her pistachio-flavored ice cream cone. Bertha jumped up like someone had caught her britches on fire.**

**"We thought you were dead. Are you alright?" asked the small girl.**

**[["I'm late for a recital that's going to change my life. I must go!" said Bertha, the ballerina. ->Bertha became one with herself.]]**

**Bertha looked up and smiled at her heavenly father.**

**"You already have the victory, Bertha," said God. Will you accomplish your dreams now? You're overdue for them," said God.**

**[["Just tell me what path to take, Lord," said Bertha."]]**

**Bertha leaped into her body onstage just as she was about to make a foolish mistake again in front of the children. One that might scar her for life is poor Bertha. She only sometimes had common sense. 'I hope this works. Will I become myself now?' asked spirit Bertha.**

**[[The connection was immediate. Spirit world, Bertha became whole again and felt the weight of her physical body weighing her down like lead weights underwater. 'Am I back to normal now?' asked Bertha.**

**[[Follow Your heart.]]**

**//Bertha, set your path and decide, and I"’ll give you a way out. I'll never leave you or forsake you. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. Don't you dare ever give up on yourself? Do you think you can do this? asked God.//"**

**[[I see a taxicab now, said Bertha.]]**

**Bertha's body collapsed on the sidewalk. She awoke days later in the hospital. She looked at the calendar on her phone. All hope was lost. She had missed the recital, and her career was now in shambles. What was worse was that she now looked like a liar and failure for not being true to her word. She could never show her face to Lisa again. She would never forgive her. Bertha fell into a deep sleep. She awoke on the sidewalk. All that nightmare was only a dream, thank God.**

**"My mind won't ever leave me alone. What would I ever do without it?" asked Bertha.**

**"[[I'd be going around like a chicken with its head cut off. I need to stop talking to myself one day, and one day soon, said Bertha.]]"**

**"[[Follow your heart, it will lead you out, thought Bertha.]]"**

**Bertha's front bike tire went flatter than a crepe rolled underneath a watermelon. She fell off the bike and went sliding down the hill. Luckily, she wedged her claws in the dirt of the sidewalk crack she slid over.**

**"Is this really how I'm going to end up? Am I going to be on the news for breaking every bone in my body in one day?" asked Bertha.**

**"[[Bears always bounce back, said Bertha.]]"**

**"[[Lord, I'm over the hump, said Bertha.]]"**

**Her paw slipped out of the crack, and she fell so far she felt like she was in the spirit world again. 'What kind of hill is this? Who makes hills of death in New York City?' thought Bertha. "**

**[[This doesn't amount to a hill of beans, said Bertha.]]"**

**Bertha mustered all the strength in her mighty body and climbed the impossible climb. This was her last showdown before she whipped Martha the Pink Porky pig's butt. Bertha, the ballerina, reached the top just before she gave out at the precipice of the sidewalk from H-E-double hockey sticks. "That pinky, what's her name? She couldn't even do this if she tried. I wonder what she'd think of me now. Does this sidewalk have an ending?" asked Bertha.**

**[[Ballet studio up ahead]]**

**A herd of giggling girls came around the hall corner. They were all dressed in their pink tutus.**

**"Bertha, we thought we'd never see you again. We thought you'd given up on your dream of being a ballerina. How on Earth did you make it here so fast? The recital will be starting soon. Are you alright? asked Monica."**

**[[I need Water.]]**

**[[Where's my slippers?]]**

**Suzy raced to the girl's kitchenette and returned quicker than Jack Flash with some water. She shoved the timing full glass into Bertha, the melting ballerina's desperate, sweaty hand.**

**"You need to take it easy for a little while, Bertha. Let's take you to our dance studio so you can lie on the big chair that reclines. Have you been around the Earth to get here? You look like you've been to hell and back," said Suzy Foyer.**

**[[If only you really knew.]]**

**Luna called Paolo on her cell phone and asked him to fetch her ballerina slippers from his taxi and bring them, or else she couldn't perform.**

**''What will you do for me? asked Paolo."**

**[[Forever girl]]**

**She fell horrifically to the bottom of the sidewalk and crushed every bone in her body. There was no coming back from this now. Her whole world had imploded. She felt her body giving up on its energy.**

**'Lord, if it's your will, please take me swiftly and soundly to see my momma before me and my grandmother before her,' thought Luna.**

**Luna's bright light left this world with all the grace it took to enter it. She was still a free spirit but would be a beautiful ballerina in heaven now. She'd dance for Jesus in front of his throne for eternity.**

**"[[Lord, I've done all that you have asked of me? Am I still your child," asked Luna.]]**

**Third alternate ending to Dance or Die!**

**Paolo was there in less than ten minutes. He shoved open the double doors so hard, you'd have thought he ran all the way there to be her knight in shining armor.**

**"I've got the slippers right here. Do you want me to put them on your feet, too?" asked Paolo.**

**[[Unnecessary]**

**]Paolo walked to her like a hairy version of Clark Gable in "Gone with the Wind."**

**He got to her in almost one entire stride. His timing was impeccable. He was so cholent it was unreal. He gently reached out for her hand and motioned for her to stretch out her hand. He gently placed the slippers in her hand so you'd have thought he was handling a newborn.**

**"[[Does this please you baby? Are we going steady now?" asked Paolo.**

**[[No Funny Business!]]**

**Paolo looked like he would turn into a pile of mush on the white floor. He attempted to gain all his composure, but it was too late. He was on some other planet in the heavens. He had drifted to cloud nine.**

**"You make me the happiest man on the Earth. I love you so much. Do you love me?" asked Paolo.**

**[[Don't push it.]]**

**Paolo knelt to give her a big, slobbery bear kiss. She leaned into him like her very life depended on this moment. ''Was that as good for you as it was for me?" asked Paolo.**

**[[Mr. Italiano]]**

**Paolo stayed to watch Bertha crush her recital. He was in the front of the audience, cheering like the little cheerleader he was. Bertha stepped off the stage after she received first place. She leaned over Paolo in the audience and planted the biggest wet one the world had ever seen onto his awaiting lips.**

**"My dear, you never cease to amaze me. Do you want to go steady with me," asked Paolo.**

**[[Go Steady?]]**

**This is the fourth alternate ending.**

**She went into the lengthy story of making it there on time. Not one of the girls believed her, but they all nodded in agreement to play along.**

**''[[So, you think you were just a spirit?" asked Suzy.]]**

**Bertha had a telepathic vision that ended all her worries. She saw that she already was the ballerina she needed to be.**

**[[Bertha felt relief]]**

**[[Infamous ballerina make history.]]**

**Bertha slid down the rest of the sidewalk, going downhill like she was in the Blizzard Beach water park at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. To add gravy to her mashed potatoes, a downpour poured down and drenched the slippery slope completely. What was once her biggest obstacle now became a great asset to her successful venture.**

**"I knew there had to be some good from this last homestretch. I'm so close now to the studio. I think I’m only a few minutes away from success. What time does the recital start?" asked Bertha.**

**[[Sliding to victory]]**

**Bertha slid down to the bottom of the sidewalk and took off running like her yellow-polka-dotted tutu was zapping the life out of her body. ''I can make it. I'm so close to those double doors. I can feel it," said Bertha.**

**She ran into a little old lady and tumbled with her on the sidewalk. She made the sincerest apologies after she made sure she was alright. She kept on running like the Forest Gump she was.**

**"Is this my destination," asked Bertha.**

**[[Home at last.]]**

**Bertha, the worn-out ballerina, ran through the doors like she was in the race of her life. To her surprise, Paolo was inside, waiting for her with the most enormous bouquet of yellow roses she'd ever seen.**

**"I knew you'd make it, my love. Did you ever doubt yourself? I never did for a second," said Paolo.**

**[[I doubted myself.]]**

**"Will you go steady with me, Bertha the brave ballerina?" asked Paolo.**

 **[[I guess I can make an. Exception for Mr. Italiano.]]**

**Alternate End of Story.**

Mixed Media Poetry

By: Angela Loren Rolph

Mutilated Cries

They stole him into the unforgiving night.

He savagely cried for freedom, but it fell upon deaf ears.

One girl was desperate to save him and was driven mad by his fetal cries.

Her exasperation drove her to hunt for him relentlessly.

He was a stranger to all, but to her, he was a forgotten soul, a voice that had been silenced.

A draft of cold loneliness echoed through the Earth they once stood upon.

The dirt beneath her had once known his footsteps, but it had no voice.

The trees he had once gazed upon had shed every color.

She anticipated the day would come when she would have to count each footstep.

The girl walked coldly down the path they once walked on, where the trees met the sky.

She lay upon the green grass in the fields and shut her eyes from the cruel world.

The sands of time sifted on without her.

The red birds twittered in the endless baby blue sky.

Darkness engulfed the Earth like a vicious tidal wave.

Spring kissed the warm Earth, and the flowers bloomed in the spot where she had become one with its soil.

She had once tasted the sweet nectar of the honeysuckles that grew like wildfire around her.

Her calming lavender scent was wrapped up into the wind’s everchanging grasp.

Her familiar impression had disappeared upon the blooming hillside.

Two voices whispered upon the breeze that stirred the Earth.

Infinity Times Infinity

Guide her to the dancefloor.

Spin her in circles until you're blue in the face.

Keep going until you both collapse in exhaustion.

Hold her frail hand as she crosses the street.

Reassure her that she’ll never lose you.

Caress her hair when she’s sleepy as you whisper sweet nothings in her ear.

Take her to see the Opera for the first time.

Take her temperature when she is sick.

Hold her hair back when she is unwell.

Kiss her softly on the head as you tell her good night.

Pull her closer to your chest when she’s having a nightmare.

Celebrate her small victories with her.

Sing for her.

Seek comfort in her.

Value every aspect of who she is.

Never tear her down.

Let your soul become one with hers.

Listen to her guidance.

Let her protect you.

Teach her to have patience.

Let her know that not everyone’s her friend.

Tell her not to wear all her hopes on her sleeves.

Be an outstanding father to her children.

Hold them tightly.

Mend their wounds.

Teach them right from wrong.

Open the door to show them God’s love.

Let the light shine in from your example.

Watch them grow and move away.

Dry her tears as she mourns them.

Hold her hand through it all.

Slow dance with her in the kitchen, listening to My Girl.

Hold her close to your chest.

Whisper, I love you for infinity times infinity in her ear.

Never let her go.

**Unknown Man**

He can kill with a look.

He can give life with a smile.

He can torture you with kindness, and all the while, he can casually see you as nothing more than you are.

He can cut out your heart, and he knows it’s true.

He can stand by and watch your wound get infected.

When the wound heals, it's not a big deal.

He’s always late for the meeting of good versus evil.

He’ll banish your heart and watch you leave.

He can take care of his tracks because there’s no turning back.

He’ll lie and cheat, but he can’t take the heat when it comes to defeat.

So, he’ll cower and cringe when you’re doing your best.

He’ll stop you from bleeding, but you’ll do the rest.

He’ll show you a world you’ve never imagined.

He can laugh at your innocence, tell you you’re hopeless, and leave you to be.

He can stop time with memory and spoil your fun.

He can seek to destroy you, but you know better than that.

The most he can do is break your heart in two.

He’s always empty thinking of you.

He’s always a survivor to me.

He

He’s inviting

He’s Home.

He’s similar.

He’s the same.

He’s laughing.

He’s the best medicine.

He’s Star Wars with too much food from the concession.

He’s any 1970s classic romantic song.

He’s coconut cream pie, non-baked.

He’s a text at five a.m.

He’s the phrase, “I’m melting!”

He’s Garfield’s bet puns.

He’s the first kiss, like no others existed.

He’s Pepe La Pew, my darling.

He’s as loyal as the rising sun and setting moon.

He reminds me of myself.

He never grew up.

He reminds me of a T-bird from Grease.

He believes in me when I refuse to believe in myself.

He can feel my stress.

He soothes my weary soul.

He takes no credit for his good deeds.

He loves God, Jesus, and Mary.

He can be his own worst critic.

He doesn’t take a bull from anyone.

He practices patience and respect.

He usually minds his manners.

He is a Southerner through and through.

He dreams of me.

He makes me liable for my actions.

He grants me grace.

He prays for me.

He is a better version of me.

He needs help with a capital T.

He will always love me, he said, even after death.

He will always be my forever love.

**The View**

Keep the letter in your breastplate pocket.

Look for its voice within its sweet song.

The ink on the paper has leaked blue from your tears.

She's lost in the labyrinth of your mind.

You distance yourself from what could be sweet.

You tell yourself you must protect yourself.

You would move Heaven and Earth to have her again.

The cold rain is flowing down in torrents.

You can no longer feel the sun’s warm rays.

The Earth has swept her from you.

Distance divides you from her embrace.

Time stands accountable.

It doesn’t wait for you, and it doesn’t wait for her.

Towering obstacles are thrown your way.

You climb heights that would intimidate most men.

Your love cries out to her across time and space.

It echoes in the night and puts a stopper into its chilling madness.

 Light has returned, and the horizon is bright on the hilltops.

Move forward from here.

**Blood Brothers**

Once, while walking, I stopped to see two people talking.

They talked about their lives.

They talked about politics, beatniks, and bossy wives.

As the sun kept on glistening, I kept on listening.

Now, every day, I stopped to hear them talk.

They never, no, never, walked.

They sit on a bench every day and talk.

I don’t understand it.

They’re such good friend, but how will their relationship turn out in the end?

They chat, exchange ideas, and eat lunch, pizzas, and tortillas.

They’re two regular brainiacs, one named Bill and one named Max.

They stop eating, outstretch their legs, whistle, and hum while they drink some rum.

Then they fumble all the way home.

How do I know this?

I watched them alone.

Each went their separate ways, trying to say goodbye in a foggy haze.

The path to home was a complex maze.

As I peered through the dark and mysterious haze, I thought of the two friends.

I thought of how they said they’d always be there for one another, and when things get rough, they’d never run home crying to their mothers.

Instead, they’d work it out like faithful and loyal blood brothers.

**The Blueberries’ Warm Aroma**

The warm blueberry pie sat on the window seal.

The baker had left to take her morning pill.

The anticipation of the pie's taste filled Jimmy's senses as the summer wind carried its aroma into his nostrils while he napped in the barn.

His day was about to get as hectic as a tangled ball of yarn.

He searched the castle grounds, but the smell was not found.

Jimmy swiftly mounted his steed and raced through every weed.

The wind whipped past him in a thrilling rush.

He was thrown off his horse and into the thrush.

Jimmy limped toward the castle gate.

The guard told him he would be late if he were the taste tester.

The boy was guided to the baker’s kitchen.

His nostrils were jumping and twitching.

The baker snuck up behind him just before he reached the sill.

She whacked him with hell’s fury and an iron will.

**Rudy**

Someone told Loren every day through actions that he loved her.

He waited for her to come home in the same spot on her porch.

His love never faded, even after his body was gone.

No more affection, no more silent energies.

No more dishing out extra food.

No more scratches under the chin.

No more rubs against the leg.

No more pats on the head.

Now, there is an emptiness that echoes from her porch.

There is a stillness that radiates all around.

There are no catcalls.

There is silence that threatens like a black hole.

It is found around every corner, through every open door.

It echoes in the fields and under the porch.

It is all-encompassing and deafening.

**Peaches and Plums**

Bring a clear plastic bag with the peaches, plums, and nectarines.

Sit beside me and listen to the crystal blue waves crash into each other.

Stretch upon your towel and bake in the summer’s sizzling heat.

Squish your toes in the warm, grainy sand.

Wade into the chaotic waters.

Close your eyes.

Take off your ballcap and dip your head back under the surface.

Don’t breathe, not even for an instant.

Let your world fall away from you.

Think of me in the emptiness amid the quiet façade between life and death.

**I’ll be there with Bells On**

The bells no longer sound like home.

The tree doesn’t glisten with wondrous colors.

There are no echoes in the halls.

The feast is no longer set out.

The matriarch of the family is no longer here.

There is no Black Friday shopping.

The presents were opened years ago.

The star on the tree no longer shines.

It’s a Wonderful Life no longer plays on the television.

Popcorn is no longer strung on strings as garland.

The lights on the house don’t twinkle in the night.

The family is spread far and wide.

The one you love is close by, yet out of reach.

Those memories are the ones that teach.

**Heartbeat**

She knew the girl before she even knew herself.

She nurtured her into being.

Her melodic, quiet songs filled the girl’s ears.

The love she had shone through her fingertips.

This love filled her with such gentleness.

She taught and scolded when it was necessary.

She cried with her girl and wiped away her ever-flowing tears.

One hug from her would change her girl’s whole world.

It sustained the girl through rough and troubled times.

Her voice rings through the girl’s ears and heart.

She raised the girl right.

His teachings raced through the girl’s mind.

The woman showed the girl how to take care of herself.

She showed her how to be all she can be.

She was the young girl’s heartbeat.

**The Meaning of Tomorrow**

**An Historical Romance**

**By: Angela Loren Rolph**

 Lunesca Albright was twenty-seven years old in the year of our Lord in 1875. She lived on a frontier in Wyoming with her family. She was tall and beautiful, with bright blue eyes. Her hair was golden like the fields she sowed. She was betrothed to marry a young man named Reiner Rutherford in town. Reiner was tall and muscular. He had a slim build. He had dark black hair with dark brown eyes. She lived with her father, Cornelius Albright, and her mother, Petunia Albright. Her father was tall, lean, and muscular. He was handsome and was honest by nature. He worked in town as a blacksmith. Her mother was beautiful, and all the men lusted for her in town. She was tall and had golden hair.

Lunesca’s father, Cornelius, entrusted his wife and daughter with managing their home and fields. They paid the hired hands for the farming with Cornelius’ help. They resided in a spacious wooden house, a recent purchase by Cornelius; unbeknownst to the newcomers, a chilling secret lurked near their home- a graveyard with a sinister reputation. The town's folk whispered of an ancient horror where every two hundred years, the undead would rise from their graves, thirsting for blood. Legend says you may get a second chance at life if you die. The old wives’ tale had the townspeople on edge, planning to seal their houses tight on the night of Hollow’s Eve, fearing the return of the undead.

 Lunesca returned home from visiting Reiner’s family in town the afternoon of Hollow’s Eve. She pushed open the front door so hard she crashed onto the wooden floorboard.

 “Mother, Father? I must speak with you!” shouted Lunesca.

Lunesca’s father raced down the steps of their parlor.

 “What is it, child? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

 “No sir, where’s momma?” said Lunesca.

 “She stayed late in the fields today to tie up some loose ends with the workers,” said Cornelius.

 “It is pertinent that I tell you this: Let’s sit in the kitchen, Father,” said Lunesca.

 They walked quickly to the quaint kitchen and sat at the homemade wooden table with its hand-sewn tablecloth.

 “I think if we tell this to momma, she will be too frightened,” said Lunesca.

 “Out with it, my child!” shouted Cornelius.

 “Reiner told me the townspeople are locking up their houses tonight because every two hundred years, the dead rise again on Hollow’s Eve in this area. He said the tales have been passed on for generations. I think it’s a good idea if we do the same father,” said Lunesca.

 Cornelius stared at her blankly. He pushed back his chair and leaned slowly back in it.

 “Lunesca, I told your mother to hide the Elderberry wine. I do believe you’ve been hitting the sauce,” said Cornelius.

 “I’m serious, Father; it will all happen tonight during the full moon,” said Lunesca.

 “No sooner than pigs fly, my dear,” said Cornelius.

 He kissed her gently on the head. Then, he walked outside to join her mother in the fields. An owl’s hoot was all that could be heard when darkness engulfed the house on all sides, bringing death in its wake. Lunesca lay awake in her bed with demons dancing in her head. They warned her of their impending doom and that she’d be powerless to stop the slaughter. She tossed and turned in the darkness that threatened her. Sweat poured from the palms of her hands as the old grandfather clock struck midnight in their drawing room. The sound struck her soul as each chime dinged, dinged, dinged!

 Lunesca tried to relax, laying her head back on her soft pillow to fall asleep. Just as she dozed off, she heard a thud from the front door. Creaaaaak, Creaaaaak, Creaaaaaak. She ran to her bedroom door to barricade it. The noise faded. Lunesca ran to hide under her covers like they were her savior now. She shook like a leaf caught up in a storm. Someone knocked on her door.

 “Lunesca, it’s me, Reiner. I have come for your safety. I can see you haven’t bordered up your home yet,” said Reiner.

 Lunesca flung her covers back and shoved the dresser away from the door.

 She pulled him inside and then shoved him hard in his chest.

 “You frightened me, Reiner! You could have been anyone!” said Lunesca.

 “Living or dead?” asked Reiner.

 “That’s not funny!” shouted Lunesca.

 Reiner tilted his head back and laughed like a hyena.

 “You always amuse me, my darling,” said Reiner.

 “Quiet Reiner, I think I hear someone outside,” said Lunesca.

 A commotion was happening around the home. It sounded like people were throwing themselves against the house. Glass cracked open and fell on the parlor floor. Lunesca threw her arms around Reiner and closed her eyes.

 ‘This is how I’m going to die; my family will die too! What will become of us?’ thought Lunesca.

 ‘I’d give my life to protect this family,’ thought Reiner.

 Lunesca sobbed like a small child.

 “Lunesca, I’m going to need you to be brave. We’ve got to get to the guns in the cabinet in the kitchen before the undead destroy us all. If we kill one of them, we must burn their bodies. Do you understand? We can’t lose our cool, not for a minute. We must survive this and get your family out alive,” said Reiner.

 “What happens if we can’t?” asked Lunesca.

 “Then we become the zombies, and pale skin doesn’t look good on you, my darling,” said Reiner.

 Lunesca smiled and laughed, a nice break from the horror welled in her eyes.

 She slowly walked to her bedroom door and carefully turned the knob.

Reiner grabbed her by her hips and yelled, “Boo!”

“Not funny, Reiner!” said Lunesca.

Outside, there was silence. The walls bled with the intensity of the house’s anxiety.

“Let’s move now they’re in the house!” said Reiner.

They ran out of the room and went to wake up Mom and Dad; they were missing from their beds. They flew down the stairs, and Reiner broke a railing off to use it as a weapon. All was quiet until they got to the kitchen. Ten undead stood in the kitchen, feasting on freshly mangled flesh. Scarlett blood was pouring from their corpses and seeped onto the wooden planks of the kitchen floor. The smell was rank and putrid, like rotting corpses. Lunesca grabbed Reiner by the arm.

“Let’s run for it; nothing left for us here!” screamed Lunesca.

“I’ll die defending you and your home!” said Reiner.

The zombies were inching their way toward them.

“I have nothing left here. The house doesn’t matter. Let’s get out while we still can!” said Lunesca

A pale, oozing zombie walked toward Reiner and tried to take a swipe at his face. Reiner shoved Lunesca onto the wooden planks that knew unspeakable horror. She sat on the floor and watched as everything she knew was taken from her. Reiner tried to stab the zombie with the sharp wooden plank in the eye, but the zombie was far more robust. It grabbed Reiner, and the wooden plank fell to the floor with a plunk! Lunesca screamed as Reiner’s corpse fell to the floor beside her.

His head was severed and rolled like a cantaloupe into the parlor. The zombies came to devour the rest of his body. Lunesca couldn’t move. Fear overcame her, and her limbs were like dead weights. Her body became icy cold and numb, and time became frozen with the sum of all her fears paralyzing her on the spot. She couldn’t force a scream out of her powerless body. Her world had ended.

‘My parents are gone; my Reiner is no more! I wish they had gotten me, too.’ thought Lunesca.

Lunesca watched as the zombies finished their meal. She was next. She crawled backward on the creaky planks as they came for her next. She slipped her foot out, tripped the one in front, and raced to her room. Lunesca ran inside and locked the door. She covered herself up on the bed and cried for hours until she fell asleep.

The next day, Lunesca woke up and noticed that her room looked the same as before the attack. The dresser wasn’t even moved. She walked to her parent’s room and slowly turned the knob. Her mother was sitting on the side of the bed, brushing her long, beautiful golden hair.

“Mother! How can this be? I thought you were dead! I saw the zombies eating your flesh last night in the kitchen,” screamed Lunesca.

“What’s the matter, child? Are you well, my darling? There is no such thing as zombies. You should know that is a fairy tale,” said Petunia.

Lunesca ran to wrap her arms around her in a warm embrace.

“Where’s father?” asked Lunesca

“He’s outside chopping wood. You look paler than a sheet, my darling. Reiner’s outside with him. Go and see.” said Petunia.

Lunesca raced down the staircase and out of the kitchen’s back door and saw them talking by the woodshed. She kissed her beloved as hard as possible and returned to the kitchen.

‘It’s going to happen again tonight. I’ll have a second chance to end this before I lose them for good. No one believes me, so I’ll have to do it myself. I have a plan,’ thought Lunesca.

Night came as cruelly as the previous one. Lunesca was waiting for the zombies outside. She was dragging half of a cow on a wheelbarrow. The cow was already rotting, and the smell infiltrated the zombies’ noses as they walked toward her. Twenty zombies were getting closer. She lured them into the barn, but when she tried to find the kerosene, she couldn’t find it to start a fire. She stumbled in the dark like a drunkard as they inched toward her.

Lunesca knelt and searched every inch of the area. The zombies moaned like they were starving for flesh. She fell backward on the hay. Lunesca crawled back to the wall, and her hand groped the hay until it rested on the kerosene. The match was in her pocket. She doused the zombies with kerosene and lit a match. Lunesca ran for the side door of the barn. She narrowly escaped the searing flames. Lunesca watched outside as the barn burned beautifully to a crisp.

‘Ashes to ashes, we all fall,’ thought Lunesca.

The graveyard was still once more.

**The Lion and the Lamb:**

**A Preschool Book**

**By Angela Loren Rolph**

The lion roams in the Savannah desert. (1) His friends in Africa sent him away because he was selfish. The Lion heard Father Goose was down on his luck. He came up with a plan to help him. The goose came because the Lion had promised him riches. The lion became angry when he caught a goose eating all his berries. He told Goose he would forgive him if he sent him his daughter. The lamb agreed and told the lion she would help him be happy again. So, he let her see her family on one condition. The Lion agrees if the lamb returns in one month.

The lamb came back because she wanted to keep her promise. The lamb sets up tests by using the enchantress/rose's magic. If the lion passes the tests, he will win her heart. If he fails, he will live alone. The first test is to picture someone he loves. The lion failed. The second test is to remember being loved. The lion failed. The third test was to picture himself as a happy lion who failed horribly. The lion looked sad. I love you she said. How can you love me?

 It’s easy, you should try it. He finally realized the lamb’s beauty. The lion hugged the lamb, and his heart grew. The lion and lamb transform into handsome men and women. The woman said beauty is only skin-deep. He kissed the wise woman. The man thanked her for showing him the truth. She told me the truth is inside you. You had to discover the beauty within you to set it free.

About the Author:

Angela Loren Rolph

Angela Rolph is a novelist and poet. She writes romance, sci-fi, comedy, suspense, crime fiction, horror, game writing, mystery, fantasy, poetry, and comic stories. Angela is about to graduate from Full Sail University with a degree in Creative Writing for Entertainment and is a member of The Creative Writing Club at Full Sail. She is excited to venture out and obtain a job with her writing capabilities. She has three years of experience in writing through Full Sail University. Angela loves art and drawing cartoons and is a VFW Auxiliary member. Angela enjoys life’s simple pleasures, won’t waste moments, and cherishes every minute of its beauty. Angela feels creativity is the cherry on top of her banana split called life. Most of all, she relishes rhyming intricate lines in her poetry. Her email is angelarolph@gmail.com, and her portfolio website is <https://aintthispeachy.wixsite.com/angelarolph>

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