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## Reimagined: An Analysis and Retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's Works

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REIMAGINED:

AN ANALYSIS AND RETELLING OF HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON'S WORKS

PRESTON SMITH

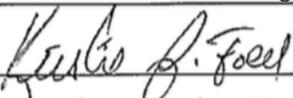
HONORS PROJECT

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## Abstract

Where do modern retellings of classic fairytales stick to their source texts and where do they differ? Inspired by ABC's fairytale drama *Once Upon a Time*, my reimagining project was born. I originally became obsessed with Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen character both through this television series and through the character's titular story, and after that, grew to love many of his tales from the nineteenth century. It has been two hundred years since Andersen was writing, and thus society has changed in ways potentially unimaginable in Andersen's time. I have taken three of his stories— "The Snow Queen," "The Little Mermaid," and "Thumbelina"—and analyzed them through feminist and queer theory. With this knowledge, I have written my own modern, updated versions of these three stories utilizing feminist and queer lenses to increase the intersectionality in each story. The end goal is to increase intersectionality in fairy tales because they, as worlds meant to represent our own in uncanny manners, do not traditionally accomplish this.

## Feminist & Queer Theory Research Notes

- Feminist Theory
  - Feminist theory is more about politics than a set of theories
    - Theory as historically male and macho, which feminist theory aims to counteract to create balance
  - Feminist theory is something new entirely, not tied down to prewritten male theories—new discourse that cannot always be related to predefined theories written by men
  - Feminist theory rooted is in opposition and debate because of historical male theories.
    - Sigmund Freud is an excellent example here. Feminist theory works to get away from his theories, such as perception of women's sexual development.
  - There is no grand narrative, but rather smaller ones that create a larger feminist theory.
  - First-Wave Feminism:
    - Women's Rights & Women's Suffrage are two major moments in this wave.
    - Material disadvantages as compared to men's?
    - Gender identity is more widely-discussed as socially constructed. With this, discourse on how gender can be challenged.
    - Distinction between sex and gender is key in this wave as well.
  - Second-Wave Feminism:

- This wave shifts politics to reproduction.
    - “Five main foci”: biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious, and social and economic conditions
  - Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* published during this wave.
  - Omnipresence of patriarchy is realized, leading to discourse of how this can be challenged.
  - Arbitrariness of sexual difference discussed by Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan
- Marxist feminism:
  - Occurred during the second wave in the 1960s and 70s.
    - Most prominent in Britain.
  - Applied Marxism’s breakdown of class to women’s “material and economic oppression.”
  - In this, there is discourse of domestic labor and its contribution to the “sexual division of labour.” (133).
- Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Theories
  - Gay theory:
    - Born in the 1960s like feminism outside of academia.
      - A movement of establishing identity and raising awareness in the public eye.
    - Reclaiming of texts that had been previously hidden from critical consideration through gay and bisexual research
    - Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault as main influences on gay theory.

- The latter writes that homosexuality inherently contains “...a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself” (245).
  - Gay theory connects culture, history, and text in its examinations and critiques.
    - Examples of things reclaimed through gay criticism: “‘effeminacy’, ‘drag’, and ‘camp’” (246).
  - In the end of the section, this text notes: “Such a shift beyond binary oppositions marks the transition from gay to queer theory” (248).
- Lesbian theory:
  - Rose against the male-dominated gay movement, which had proven to be sexist.
  - Much more so than gay theory, lesbian theory and criticism really works to examine the patriarchy and how it affects all women, even more so lesbians.
  - Gayle Rubin presents the idea of compulsive heterosexuality during this movement in 1975.
    - In 1990, Judith Butler coins the term heterosexual matrix to describe the grid of identities and sexualities people can fit into and explore
  - This movement also focuses considerably on gender and sexual oppression:
    - Focus on the identification of women

- The movement moves away from a single lesbian identity and rather shows that lesbians do exist and will continue to exist as unique individuals with no prescriptive, stereotypical model.
  - In 1979, Elaine Marks notes that women should simply begin writing what they want for women and forget the opinions of males.
  - Moreover, there is generally always intertextuality embedded within lesbian texts
- Queer theory:
  - “Queer” reclaimed in 1980s by a new generation of political activists
    - The term was used by gay and lesbian critics in the preceding decades to their own audiences, but this was a full resurgence and reclamation of the identifier.
    - Concurrent rise of men’s studies, which aims to critique the lifestyles and sexualities of men.
  - In the 90s, queer theory becomes a “radical rethinking of the relationship between subjectivity, sexuality, and representation” (254).
  - Queer studies “queries” orthodoxies and provokes these uncertainties.
    - Queer theory questions all constructed sexualities, including homosexuality, which is a large reason why it’s different from gay theory.
    - In this way, queer theory questions all societal structures and identifiers. However, it also recognizes that they are often

intertwined. For example, the text notes that one cannot refute the fact that lesbians are also oppressed because they are women.

- Queer theory demands that we gain a better understanding of desire itself so that we can better understand the constructions of sexuality we live with and then move past them.

Feminist and Queer Theories as applied to Hans Christian Andersen’s Texts:

	“The Snow Queen”	“The Little Mermaid”	“Thumbelina”
Are Andersen’s works intersectional?	Somewhat. He handles his female characters pretty well in this story.	Being a mermaid offers potential diversity, but overall, no.	The idea of fairy/flower people lends itself to intersectionality, but again, no.
Do his characters have a prominent voice?	Gerda and the Snow Queen both do in this story	The mermaid must sacrifice her voice to travel on land	Only the male characters
How does magic/fantasy affect female & nonbinary characters?	Magic in this story gives the Snow Queen a power we do not see in any male characters	Magic in this story hinders the mermaid, as it takes her voice, even if willingly	Fantasy offers Thumbelina the possibility of breaking free, but instead, Andersen makes her a damsel in distress
Do predetermined gender roles constrict characters?	Not as much in this story. Gerda, the Snow Queen, and the Robber Girl are all allowed adventure and power.	Yes. The mermaid is left to chase a man	Yes. Thumbelina is expected to be passive and submit to the male characters

Chart created for presentation at BGSU’s annual Undergraduate Symposium for Research and Scholarship

Three Retellings of Hans Christian Andersen's Tales:

Breaking Glass

By Preston Smith

*A Modern Retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen"*

**First Fractal: Once Upon an Autumn**

The time of year had come for summer to retreat and for autumn to ascend. That year's summer had been one for the record books—with blistering heat waves and a lack of rain to quench both the earth and the people—but, as if overnight, signs of autumn's arrival had appeared. Temperatures drastically dropped, and quaint, chilly breezes began sweeping through the nation. Though the trees hadn't yet commenced their changing of colors ceremony, they were visibly preparing themselves for their impending transformation and stasis.

In New York City, where individuals were dressed in tank tops and shorts the day before to stay as cool as possible, everyone sported knit sweaters and vibrant scarves to stave off the new breezes. In Manhattan, where cafés had received plentiful business from their outdoor patio seating, all restaurants were shutting down their patio services, not to open again until the following spring.

In the Bronx, an elementary school trip to the zoo, scheduled a month earlier when the heat was still overwhelming, saw more success than anticipated. Monkeys swung happily from tree to tree; penguins and polar bears increased their activity levels, practically smiling at visitors; tigers roared gleefully toward the sun.

In Queens, an editor of a local newspaper scoffed at summertime headlines. The industry hadn't prepared for a sudden change in weather, instead pushing summer-themed fashion, food,

and fun articles as long as the weather permitted them. Now, one editor laughed at their happenstance words and set to work writing and editing his own more appropriate articles.

### **Second Fractal: The Black Sheep of the City**

Where New York felt the change suddenly and powerfully, two teenagers found themselves impacted by autumn's entrance in a different way. Geraldine and Kale wandered the streets of Dayton, Ohio, frolicking in the cool air. They were on the precipice of their eighteenth birthday—the two shared a birthday and believed themselves to be twins after having known each other for as long as they could remember—and though they hadn't lived in a stable home since they were twelve, the teenagers never felt alone.

Geraldine and Kale were supposed to be in their senior year of high school. As life living on the streets of a mid-sized city caught up with them, they had stopped going to school occasionally, and then altogether. The bullies at school ruined any chance of Geraldine ever appreciating education, and Kale simply found himself uninterested and only wanting to explore the streets with Geraldine. "Why learn when we can explore?" he always said.

The city of Dayton was cut in half by a cerulean river, and it was underneath the main bridge to this river that the two usually sought shelter. The water was always crisp and refreshing, even during that year's burning summer, and townspeople often stopped to give them food by the bridge. While they always returned to the bridge for shelter, one of the duo's favorite places to explore was the city's train district.

The train district lay close to the outskirts of the city, but Geraldine and Kale never minded the walk there. The area was a hub for numerous trains, with tracks snaking and weaving and covering the whole area. Warehouses, both empty and full, stood at the end of the tracks.

The teenagers sometimes snuck inside to play or hide in them, but they never stayed long as they always remained wary of being caught and arrested.

That day, as the season's change crept up on the nation, Kale imagined a different playground, one that soared rather than trekked on land. He was nearing adulthood, and his wings were anxious to fly to unknown gales. He only wished Geraldine would join him.

"No, that can get perilous so quickly," Geraldine said. "We are not going anywhere near the airport." On the opposite side of the city from the train district lay the regional airport. Walking to the airport would take the same amount of time as going to the train district would, so Kale saw no problem in adventuring to the other side of the city that day.

Geraldine remained firm in her stance. As fall's breeze swept into Dayton as it had in New York, it played with her brunette hair, twirling it in the air before laying it gently along her back. Kale's short, slightly curly blond hair bobbed in the breeze, but he paid it no mind. Instead, he turned his attention to convincing Geraldine to go with him to the airport.

"Please," he begged, "we've never been to that side of the city. We're almost eighteen years old and you're still talking to me as if you're my mother. But we don't have a mother--"

"That's enough." Geraldine looked down on Kale. Though they were the same age, she had always been taller than him. Kale always believed she got her false sense of authority from her height, but Geraldine knew she had to protect him because she couldn't lose him.

After some pouting and the shedding of a few crocodile tears, Geraldine gave in to Kale, but only if he promised to not put either of them in danger. He hesitantly agreed, and they traipsed toward the airport, taking their time and relishing the cool weather. The summer's record heat had been hard on everyone, but living in the streets meant they had had no real escape other than the occasional dip into the river. Now, they were free to truly breathe.

Where the train district was usually quiet due to the city's decreasing use of trains for transportation of goods, the area immediately surrounding the airport was abuzz with booming engines and roaring gusts of wind. A few larger passenger planes readied themselves on pitch black runways, with smaller cargo planes sitting adjacent to them. As the sun winked through the partly cloudy sky, Kale snuck closer to the airport, with Geraldine following behind him.

“Be careful, Kale.”

“We'll be fine.”

Nausea bloomed in Geraldine's stomach as they neared. It metastasized outward, blossoming in her lungs and numbing her limbs. She examined all of the people hustling in and out of the building, picking them apart before picking herself apart. Kale spoke in front of her, but his voice simply formed a knot of words she could not make out.

Geraldine's blurry eyes could barely make out his figure, but she knew Kale was running for a cargo plane that was nearing take-off. She stumbled forward, calling out for him, but her words echoed absently. Nausea, as if fractals of ice, sliced her insides. Geraldine collapsed outside the airport, and as the cargo plane whirred to life, Kale hurtled himself inside just before the door shut.

He looked outside only to see Geraldine's body on the cold ground. He had been so sure she was following him, so sure that they would escape to somewhere far away to start anew. Instead, he alone flew to a location unknown.

### **Third Fractal: A Present Day's Journey**

When Geraldine came to, she found herself swarmed by people inside a building. They whispered to each other, and one muttered a little louder than the others. “She's awake,” that

individual had said. But how long had she been asleep? And where was she? The last thing she remembered was galivanting with Kale in celebration of autumn.

“You must be confused,” the same woman said. “You’re inside Dayton’s airport. A flight attendant found you unconscious and brought you in here for safety. We’ve all been worried about you.” The woman, who appeared to be about sixty years old, with kind, gray curls, turned her head to emphasize each of the individuals that was watching over her.

Geraldine had been alone with Kale for six years, and though she never felt alone with him, the feeling of being cared for was new and unfamiliar—a territory she was scared to traverse. She looked down to see herself reclined in a velvet blue chair, and she pulled herself upright, hunching over, elbows hitting her knees. She combed her fingers through her hair.

A second woman, this one considerably younger, stepped forward. “Thank goodness you’re awake. My name is Whitley, and I’m the chief in-house paramedic here.”

Geraldine met her eyes, but her words slurred. She wanted more information about what had happened to her, but all that fell out of her mouth was a simple *thanks*. Then her head turned over the idea that some of the passengers could have missed flights out of concern for someone they didn’t know, and now the woman was willing to aid her further. The paramedic seemingly had everything under control, so why would they stay?

“I’m okay,” she managed. Her words croaked out of her throat, dry and raspy. The older woman offered to walk her to the airport’s exit, but the paramedic insisted that Geraldine be examined. The older woman wished her well before rejoining the others that had watched over her that day, fully surrendering Geraldine to Whitley.

Whitley led Geraldine through the hospital, talking to her as if giving a new employee a tour of the premises. They weaved through dashing individuals and families, and Geraldine saw

an opportunity to escape. When Whitley turned around next, she saw only clusters of people heading to board their flights.

Outside, Geraldine breathed heavily, taking long drags of the fall air. She paced toward downtown in the same clothes she had worn for as long as she could remember, praying that Whitley wouldn't follow her or call for reinforcements. Her blue jeans, which may as well have been called white jeans due to fading, and tattered jacket flapped in the breeze as she picked up her stride into a full sprint back toward the city. The image of Kale running toward the cargo plane slowly materialized in her head, and the more it developed in her brain the faster she ran. If she could make it to the bridge, she knew he'd be there waiting for her.

He wasn't. Instead, what awaited her was impending nightfall. How long had she been out? She remembered departing with Kale toward the airport around noon, and now the sun was more than halfway set. Knowing she couldn't settle for the night and wistfully sleep with Kale gone, Geraldine sulked into the city.

She walked toward the train district but found herself detouring through a small shopping district on the way. Window displays full of elegant dresses and elaborate tablets normally caught her eye when she walked through this area, but tonight the only thing that caught her eye was a television screen in a window across the street. She ignored oncoming traffic and hurtled herself through the street, throwing up her arms to block blinding headlights from both directions. Once across, with traffic resumed, a stream of tears swam down her plump face.

The television screen in the shop window ran a "Breaking News" headline while repeatedly flashing clips of a crashed cargo plane. The vessel was mostly in one piece, with the only major damages, at least from the screen, appearing to be the wings, which looked clipped.

The footage zoomed out to show food and miscellaneous items from the plane splattered around it, dotting the fresh blanket of snow that had been draped on the ground during the storm.

Through the glass of the shop window Geraldine could barely make out the speech of the news anchor. “The plane was found in the middle of Michigan, near the lower peninsula. Our sources say the plane crashed due to a sudden snowstorm that wasn’t on the radar, its wings icing over. No bodies have been uncovered.”

“No bodies...” Geraldine knew it was Kale’s plane and ran. Guilt, as if an animate entity, hugged her until she was completely constricted.

She ran until she could run no longer. Mentally and physically drained, she found herself returning to her favorite place in the city: a crow mural. The mural existed roughly halfway between the shopping district and the train district. She had never disclosed this location to Kale, for even though they were close, she wanted a spot that was wholly her own. Oftentimes she found herself talking and venting to the crow. Sometimes, she received advice in return.

When she reached the mural, she pushed her back against the wall and slid down until she was sitting on the ground, rough red bricks scratching her back and tattered jacket. She tilted her head backward, peeking at the inverted crow.

“I don’t know what to do, crow... The news said no bodies had been found. That’s either a good thing or a terrible thing... They’ll either find him alive or dead, or he escaped and is fine. Either way, I feel useless. I should be there for him.” She wrapped her arms inward and began to rock in place. What had rendered her unconscious earlier that day? Knowing that she was unable to save Kale was a hard enough burden to carry without also realizing she couldn’t comprehend the dizzy spell that had inhibited her.

A single tear welled in Geraldine's left eye, and out of nowhere a crow's squawk pierced the silence of the night. A flurry of snow rushed into the street she was facing. Snowflakes danced in the darkness. They formed various shapes—a star, a heart, a human head—and then receded to their flurry like animals in a pack. As snow accumulated on Geraldine's head and face, a second squawk throttled her ears, and a crow landed in front of her. It blended into the night as if a messenger sent by the moon itself. It motioned its head at her, flapped its stark black wings incessantly, and pointed in the direction of the bridge.

“You're right, Crow.” She wiped away the tear she had been harboring. “I don't give up. I'm going to find Kale.”

#### **Fourth Fractal: Royal Pains**

Geraldine and the crow had journeyed farther than either of them had been before and still there remained distance between them and the lower peninsula in Michigan, where Geraldine was hopeful Kale would be awaiting their rescue. They had commenced their journey by stowing themselves aboard a cargo train. Dayton is known mostly as the birthplace of flight, but as Geraldine knew well, the train district was just as present. With the trains mostly used for cargo, it had been easy for her to hop aboard a train without the conductor noticing.

She had hugged the crow close to her chest as she hid among piles of sulfuric-smelling coal for two hours—or was it three? She could hardly keep count. Once stopped at a new train stop, they waited for the conductor to exit their sight before jumping off of the train and hurtling toward any sort of coverage. Geraldine saw a sign that the closest town, Holly, Michigan, was two miles away, and from there, she walked north until she reached the town and realized she had crossed the border into Michigan.

As Geraldine entered Holly's city limits, she saw signs promoting open admissions at a local community college and remembered her childhood dream of attending college. She always thought she would study meteorology, or maybe even physics. The sciences had fascinated her as a kid, but as she grew older, her academic interests had been suppressed. That day, as she saw students bustling across campuses with books and laptops in tow, her interests resurfaced, only worsening her grief.

The crow flew ahead of her and turned to stare her down. If he could talk, Geraldine thought, she knew he would be asking her what was wrong. But she didn't know what was wrong. There were the obvious matters—Kale's whereabouts and her lack of a stable, suitable life—but matters had always been rough. Whether she was in a foster home with Kale, grieving the deaths of their foster parents, or living on the streets with him, problems had always arisen.

The crow squawked louder than she had ever heard him, pulling her back to reality.

"Right," she said under her breath. "Let's go."

They walked around the outskirts of the city, where torches blazed in the distance. A fiery horizon greeted them as they neared the local Renaissance Fair, which they learned from signs at its entrance was in its final week of operation for the year. It was the end of September, which always marked the end of the Renaissance season, and the number of attendees was dwindling, especially with the plunge of daytime temperatures.

Hesitantly, Geraldine entered the fairgrounds. Her sensations were immediately overwhelmed, and something in the crow seemed to switch. If birds could grin, she thought, this was a bird grin. He flew ahead of her, and she chased in pursuit.

"Where are you going?" She panted as she ran. They passed a variety of food vendors who were proudly serving large pieces of meat and weird-looking desserts.

The crow soared straight ahead, but Geraldine weaved in and out of crowds, attempting to maintain eyesight of her bird friend. Some attendees dressed in Renaissance attire—from tunic-style tops to leather boots—while the majority attended in modern, everyday clothes. Geraldine didn't meet anyone's line of sight, but she knew she was catching puzzled looks. She hoped, even prayed under her breath, that the looks were for not being dressed like those in Renaissance garb, but the realist in her understood that they likely were because of her frantic eye movements and sweaty, confused face.

Suddenly, the crow halted on a post, and Geraldine met him. In front of them were large wooden steps leading up to an ornate, velvet purple tent. The crow bolted upward and into the flaps of the tent.

Geraldine barged into the tent after him. "I am so sorry!" she said.

"Please don't be," a gentle voice said. After her eyes adjusted from the sunshine to the dimly lit tent, Geraldine could see a man and woman sitting opposite from each other in elegant, gem-studded chairs. It was the man that had spoken to her, and she was shocked that his voice was burly yet so gentle. Outside of Kale, who would never be mean to her, every man she had met had been far from gentle. Foster dads were often snappy from stress, and men who passed her and Kale on the street were often far from pleasant. This man, however, was different.

"I'm Queen Rosalie and this is my King, Alistair," the woman added. "We like our fair to be accessible and open, so don't feel bad for coming in here." Geraldine awkwardly bowed, sweat forming on her forehead. "Don't worry about such formalities. This is all for fun."

"Right," she stammered. She finally spotted the crow, who had landed on the small mahogany table positioned between the two chairs. He was perched on it, swinging his head back and forth between Rosalie and Alistair.

Geraldine explained everything that had happened like a torrent of water, urgent, beginning with agreeing to travel to the airport with Kale. Rosalie and Alistair's facial expressions morphed throughout her story, but ultimately landed on empathy.

"I see," Alistair said. "I'm so sorry for your loss." He and Rosalie both appeared soft, friendly. They had luscious black hair and golden eyes.

"B-But that's the thing. We don't know if he's actually dead. There were no confirmed bodies on the news," Geraldine explained. She knew she probably sounded insane to them, like some sort of conspiracist.

Rosalie turned to face the King, and when their eyes met Geraldine knew they were hiding something.

Turning her attention back to Geraldine, Rosalie said, "We did see that plane. The one your Kale was on. It passed directly over this fair, and after it did, we saw a cold front and then a snowstorm pass over us. It was as if the snowstorm was following the plane, even though that's impossible."

"It was remarkable to see, though. All the clouds moving in tandem like they were in pursuit of something," Alistair added with a chuckle.

The crow squawked angrily at Alistair, and Rosalie sniped, "Knock it off," before standing up and cupping Geraldine's hands in her own. "How about we get you some food. You've got to be positively famished."

Rosalie and Alistair rounded up some meat and vegetables for Geraldine to replenish her energy. If she was going to find Kale, she had to be alive, and she wasn't sure she would be if she went any longer without eating. They packed additional food for her to take with her.

When the time for Geraldine to leave arrived, both king and queen of the fair hugged her tightly and wished her the best of luck on her journey. They had spent most of the sunlit portion of the day together, with Geraldine feeling pure kindness for the first time in a long while.

“Before you go,” Alistair said, “someone we know has journeyed north of here and may be of assistance to you. She can be a handful, but she may know more since she’s closer to the plane’s crash site than we are. She is also a bit of a spy. Her name is Ruby.” He pulled out a map and circled the area he thought to be her whereabouts. Geraldine met Alistair’s eyes with her own cross-eyed expression. “By spy, I simply mean that she is extremely curious. She has the eyes of a hawk.”

“Which is why it’s nice that she’s in our corner,” Rosalie added with a soft laugh.

Geraldine thanked them both, probably too much, and heeded their offer for help from Ruby. As she then headed toward the fair’s exit, her crow squawked incessantly. She turned around to see him still perched near Rosalie and Alistair and their royal, gem-studded thrones.

“Aren’t you coming, crow?”

She was met solely with squawks, but his message was clear. He had found his home at the Renaissance Fair. Though she had only known him a short time, Geraldine could say with much pride that the crow was one of the best friends she had ever had. He had been loyal, quirky, and helpful in her darkest moment. But he had found his home, and that is all she could ever want for him.

“Take care of him.” She met the royal couple’s eyes. They shared a large smile with each other, and Rosalie stepped forward.

“There’s a queen in you,” she said with a wink.

And with those foreboding words lingering in her mind, Geraldine set off further north to find a mysterious girl named Ruby who would hopefully bring her one step closer to Kale.

### **Fifth Fractal: Like Deer in Moonlight**

After leaving the Renaissance Fair, Geraldine headed north by foot. She trekked through towering fields of golden soon-to-be-plowed wheat, snaked around ponds and lakes while avoiding teeming wildlife, and finally entered a midnight forest. Because of her time at the fair that day, she had been forced to proceed mostly in the dark.

As she walked through the forest, with limber twigs snapping with each step she took, she thought that she might miss the sunlight even more than she missed Kale. Nighttime brought with it inherent coldness and dampness, both of which she wanted nothing to do with. She startled herself with each broken twig, which actually kept her mind off of the animal noises swirling around her. She missed the city, where maneuvering around animals was out of the question.

In the distance, a faint light hummed and glowed suddenly. Geraldine's hair had become matted to her face with sweat, but she brushed it away with excitement. Her pace quickened, and she found herself picking up a full sprint toward the light. As it grew closer, she realized it was a fire—and if there was a fire, there were likely people. She was supposed to be finding a girl named Ruby, but she wasn't necessarily sure she should search her out. Rosalie and Alistair had warned her about Ruby's habits.

Before she could finish her thought, she felt her brain turn upside down. When her brain and eyes refocused as well as they could refocus in a pitch-black forest, she found herself trapped in a net hanging from a tree.

“You’re not exactly the dinner I was hoping for,” a harsh voice said. A girl around the same age as Geraldine appeared from the direction of the glowing light. She retrieved a sharp knife from a holder on her side and slashed the rope that was upholding the net. Geraldine tumbled through the air and crashed on the muddy forest floor.

With her clothes more soiled than ever, the girl helped Geraldine up but kept her at a distance. Geraldine opened her mouth to ask questions, but the girl shot her a look that could only mean “don’t speak.” She led Geraldine closer to the light, and when they finally broke through the trees into a clearing, she could see the light was a roaring fire. The girl had set up camp in the clearing, and now she thrust Geraldine onto a soggy log in front of the fire.

Taking up a seat across from her, the girl asked, “So, who are ya?” She spoke with a slight Scottish accent, but Geraldine couldn’t tell whether the accent was real or if the mysterious girl was presenting some sort of façade.

“I’m Geraldine.” She sensed a new power in her words. Although she always fought for Kale and had always vowed to protect him, she always thought of herself as timid. *Maybe this journey is changing me in ways I didn’t know*, she thought.

With the fire now illuminating the girl’s face, Geraldine could see it was worn. Her hair was black with sharp red highlights snaking through it. Her hair length was choppy and uneven, but something about the girl made Geraldine believe she didn’t necessarily care about her appearance. “Can I know your name?”

“Ruby. Y’know, you’re lucky I didn’t kill ya back there.”

“K-Kill me? Why in the world would you do that?”

“You’re out of your element out here, kid.”

“Kid? We look the same age,” Geraldine spat. She took a deep breath and focused her energy on the task at hand. “I came here to find you.”

“Find me? And just what could ya want with me?”

Geraldine took another deep breath. “I’ve been journeying to find someone, and recently it led me to the Renaissance Fair. The king and queen there told me that you might be able to help me.”

“Nonsense. Prove your connection to Rosalie and Alistair.”

Geraldine slung around her body the tan sack she had been given by the royal couple. It contained enough food to last her roughly a week, and all she could think about was Ruby stealing it from her. She didn’t know how to build a fire or kill an animal, and this forest didn’t exactly house an abundance of fresh fruit. She would be utterly hopeless if anything happened to her food supply.

Ruby eyed the bag for several minutes, eyes squinted and her chin resting in one of her cupped hands, before saying, “It does have their sacred crest etched onto it…” Ruby was the first person Rosalie and Alistair met upon their move to the United States from Mexico. They had taken her in those years ago, and though she yearned for independence, Ruby cared deeply about them. She had begun her amateur attempts at spying as a method of helping them from anyone who might protest their presence in the country because she had felt the same pressures upon her move from Scotland, though, admittedly, hers weren’t nearly as bad because she was still Caucasian.

“Will you help me then? If my assumptions about you are correct, we’ve been through similar trials and know what it’s like to be on our own. Help me, and I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“What is that you need, *Gerda*?”

“That’s not my name,” Geraldine snapped. She breathed deeply and recollected her wits. “I’m looking for information about a plane that may have passed over you. Rosalie and Alistair said a snowstorm looked like it was following it, but that’s all the information they had. Do you know anything?”

“That plane... That storm...” Ruby’s body shivered. “After the plane flew overhead—maybe fifteen minutes later—the wind whipped so quickly it knocked me onto my behind. When I looked up into the sky, I saw the snowstorm hovering above me, but wouldn’t ya know it was more!”

“What was more?” Geraldine, who had been sitting opposite Ruby, repositioned herself next to her. She could tell Ruby’s nerves were raw.

“There was a woman! In the sky! It looked like a woman made of snowflakes. I blinked, and ya would’ve thought I was crazy. She continued moving north after the plane.” Ruby shivered again, and Geraldine removed her tattered jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

“Is that even possible?”

“Have you ever heard the tale of the snow queen?” Geraldine shook her head. “It’s more of... how do we say? A prophecy! It’s said that a queen of snow and ice will rise. I remember overhearing two old women to the north discussing it one day.”

The moments before Geraldine departed Dayton flashed through her head. Moving snowflakes... When she had slumped herself against the crow mural, the snowflakes had danced in shapes in the street. Her eyes widened, and she grabbed Ruby’s hands.

“These two women—where do they live?”

Ruby recoiled, grabbing her hands back. “North of here. Closer to the lower peninsula. But do not touch me.”

Geraldine yanked her knapsack and prepared to leave, ready to journey further north to find Kale and answers. Ruby protested, telling her she should sleep and journey at first light.

“There’s something ya should know,” Ruby added before they lay down. She had thought to keep her friends’ story a secret, but Geraldine had been nice to her. No one was ever truly nice to Ruby. “Rosalie and Alistair... part of the reason they came north was ‘at prophecy. A crow landed in front of them one day in the streets of Mexico with a piece of parchment, saying they had a part to play in the rise of a queen.”

“They know about this supposed Snow Queen?”

“Aye. Rosalie and Alistair—even the two kind women up north. I have a feeling a grand design is at play ‘ere.”

Geraldine wasn’t sure how to process this information, but she and Ruby lay down anyway. Exhaustion knocked on her mind, but the information she’d received kept her awake. Ruby was long gone, asleep before Geraldine lay down, and now Geraldine was left alone with her thoughts. Normally, that would have been fine, but tonight, she seized.

Much like that fateful day at the airport, Geraldine shook and convulsed until she was unconscious. When she came to, Ruby was standing over her, holding a silver, pointed dagger to her face.

“Whoa, what are you doing?” Geraldine panicked and recoiled backward, inching away from Geraldine. She peered around her only to discover it was still nighttime. Only this time beautiful colors were spraying across the skyline.

“It’s only been a couple hours, but I woke to this...” She pointed the dagger toward the sky. “Oh, sorry,” she continued, turning her attention to the dagger. “I was trying to make sure ya were breathin’.”

Aurora borealis was holding the entire sky captive. Vibrant teals and purples waved through the air, tangoing like the snowflakes both Geraldine and Ruby had witnessed. Geraldine got to her feet and gawked.

“We’re so far south... How can we possibly be seeing aurora boreal-” A booming noise cut her off. She and Ruby turned slowly to find a large reindeer staring back at them. Its whinny was deep and powerful. It stepped forward, nudging Geraldine’s stomach with its nose.

“How is there a REINDEER?!”

“He probably followed the aurora borealis here,” Ruby said. “He seems to like ya. Take him north with ya.”

And she did. Together, she and her new friend, along with her new reindeer companion, traveled until they finally saw forest’s exit. They voyaged underneath the stunning lights until the sun cracked the horizon, and a new day to find Kale was born.

### **Sixth Fractal: Walking on the Cold Side**

Once the forest broke and marvelous green pastures lay ahead, with the aurora borealis dissipated into sparkles of light and energy, Ruby knew it was time for her departure. She had traveled with Geraldine and her reindeer through the remainder of the night, and becoming acquainted with Geraldine had awoken inside her something she had long forgotten.

“It’s time for me to head back to the fair,” she announced. “I spent so long running, and then I ran again after being taken in by the Rosalie and Alistair. It’s time I thank them and allow myself to be cared for by them.”

“It’s been an absolute pleasure traveling with you.” In a surprise twist to Geraldine, the two hugged. “Say hi to the crow for me.”

Ruby stared at her, completely puzzled, and disappeared back into the woods.

Left alone with her reindeer, Geraldine continued onward. For the first time on her quest she was walking over luscious, thriving fields of soft grass. She took turns walking alongside her reindeer companion and riding on him. They continued this back-and-forth pattern for three days until they reached a small coastal farm town in the lower peninsula.

“Now how am I supposed to find these two nice women?” The town only had a few roads, and she found herself and her companion standing in the middle of one of them. The town couldn’t be any more different from downtown Dayton, with the city’s smart cars morphing into tractors in this town, but something about it felt like home.

A gust of wind swept past her, rustling her dark hair. She turned around to see snow swirling in the street, creating a sheet of shifting flakes. At once, the snow cleared as if given an exeunt cue in a stage play, and an elderly woman was left facing Geraldine.

“Come with me, darling.” The woman motioned for her and began walking in the opposite direction. Geraldine and the reindeer obeyed and found themselves swerving in and out of alleys and streets until they reached a pristine ranch house. “Come inside. Everything will soon become clear.”

Geraldine and her reindeer exchanged a nervous but slightly excited glance and followed the woman, who unlocked a gate on the side of the house for the reindeer to rest while they

talked. Inside, another woman awaited them. Geraldine immediately thought them to be twins. They looked to be about the same age, and they shared the exact same curly dark gray hair. They were also both short in stature, and they carried with them kind smiles.

The two women sat next to each other at a wooden dining room table. It was clothed with a stark white embroidered tablecloth. They poured themselves cups of fresh tea and invited Geraldine to join them.

As she sat down opposite them, the woman who had led her to the house said, "I'm Mary. Sitting next to me is Margaret."

"It's so nice to meet you both. I'm Geraldine. But how did you know I was coming? And what were all those snowflakes doing back there?"

"We just... had a hunch someone was here to speak with us. As for the snowflakes..." Mary said.

"We were hoping maybe you knew more about that," Margaret said.

"I know nothing." Geraldine filled in the two kind women on her entire journey, and the reason she had left to begin with. She left no detail untold, and the two women emphatically nodded and smiled through each turn of her story.

"I originally moved to this town because of a hunch that felt very similar to our hunch today," Margaret said between sips of tea. "I'm originally from Detroit, but something pulled me here. Mary and I became friends rather quickly because of these shared hunches."

"And I think we speak for each other when we say our hunches are stronger today than ever before," added Mary.

Mary rose from her seat and shuffled through stacks of books on a nearby bookshelf. She retrieved a single pale blue book with wisps of white churning on its cover. Retaking her seat, she combed through it until she found the page she was looking for.

“This,” Mary said, “is why we believe we’re here.” She pointed her sprightly finger at a figure on the left page of the book. A silhouette of a woman was powerfully posed, with snowflakes twirling at her feet. The right page described the woman and her abilities.

“That, my dear, is the Snow Queen,” Margaret said with a wink. “We saw the plane your Kale was on, and we saw it have mechanical issues in the sky. We saw sparks fly, and we saw flames spurt out of it.”

“I know the snowstorm caused it to go down. But why this book? Did the Snow Queen crash the plane?” Geraldine, who was growing impatient, began to beg for answers, but she couldn’t believe they were discussing a mythological figure as if it were real.

“Quite the contrary, my dear. The plane was already going down when the snow reached it,” Margaret said.

“We believe the snow *helped* the plane and your Kale. When it was going down just north of here, we could see the snow rush to it and circle around it, dousing the flames and softening its blow on the earth,” Mary said. She moved her arms as she spoke, creating an animated retelling of the events she and Margaret had witnessed.

“I have to find him.” Urgency returned to Geraldine’s voice. “If the plane landed better than I thought it did, I have to go!”

“Patience, dear. We brought out this book to discuss with you the origins of the Snow Queen,” Mary said.

“She’s someone powerful. She has lost much, including her family, and has experienced much rejection. But she’s overcome it and risen to a throne of her own creation. She is not one to be doubted,” Margaret said.

“That’s great.” Sweat coated Geraldine’s hands. She stood abruptly and walked toward the door. “You two have been so hospitable and helpful, and for that I am grateful. But even if the Snow Queen is powerful, I have to find Kale.” She opened the door and saw her reindeer looking back at her through the wooden gate he was locked behind. She turned back around to face the women. “Can you watch the reindeer for me?”

With that, she sprinted as far as she could. She had never been to Michigan before, and now she would go back for the reindeer and she and Kale and the reindeer would head home once he was safely rescued.

Back in the house, Mary shut the door Geraldine had left wide open. Margaret fed the reindeer, and the two women sat down to read and drink another cup of piping hot tea.

“Do you think she knows?” Margaret asked, though she knew neither she nor Mary could answer that question.

### **Seventh Fractal: Breaking Glass**

When she reached the plane’s wreckage, she slipped through official-looking people until she got to the aircraft itself. It had been several days since the plane’s mechanical damage and consequent plummet to the earth, but it was only that day that clean-up workers had arrived to clear the wreckage and restore the area.

Her hand touched the plane for the first time, when it should have touched it in Dayton, and she wept. Gathering her wits, she maneuvered around the plane's broken parts until she reached a misshapen door. Looking inside, the cabin was empty.

"Ma'am, you really shouldn't be here," one worker said.

"What are you looking for?" another asked.

"It's a *who*," she said.

"Didn't you hear? No bodies have been found."

*He still hasn't been found?*

The plane had landed in a field on a fresh bed of snow between a town and a snow-coated forest. She sprinted toward that forest. Kale hadn't been in town, so he had to have wandered into the forest. She knew he was close.

And he was. Inside the forest, his body lay in a clearing. It became immediately clear that he had survived the plane's descent and had wandered on his own before dying. Now he lay visibly harmed: Checkered scratch marks as if from an angry cat marked his arms, and his face sported garish bruises. The crash had injured him, but the elements claimed Kale in totality. Underneath him, his blood stained patches of snow and fallen leaves in a crusty, muddy puddle.

"We're so sorry." A soft voice resonated from behind her. Geraldine's reindeer volleyed into the clearing and hurtled himself at her, rubbing his body against her. "He got out of the gate and followed you." Mary and Margaret stepped into the clearing.

Margaret and Mary saw Kale's body for the first time. "We are so sorry," Margaret said.

"I still don't even know if we were siblings." As the words escaped the crevice of her mouth, she bawled.

“You were siblings in your heart,” Margaret said, and they joined Geraldine, each of them slipping a hand through one of Geraldine’s. “You treated each other with care until the very end. Your abilities appear to have saved him from the initial plane crash.”

“Abilities?” Geraldine couldn’t meet either Mary or Margaret’s eyes. She stared only at the puddles of snow underneath her.

Margaret opened her mouth but hesitated. “Now’s not the time, my dear. Let’s go back to our house so you can rest. We’ll throw the kettle on and discuss this further when you’re rested.”

“We were only able to follow you today because you released a trail of snow as you ran, you know,” Mary said, and Margaret flashed an upset look at her.

“Ignore her, dear. You saved Kale the best you could. It isn’t your fault he passed in nature. Let’s go home.”

“This is all too much right now.” Geraldine released her hands from the two women’s grips and ascended. She clenched her fists, and snowflakes trooped into the clearing and circled around them, encapsulating them in a cocoon of snow. A glowing blue light swirled around them, and they disappeared. Geraldine, through her transportation spell, deposited Mary and Margaret in their home and took herself and her reindeer somewhere far away.

For twenty-four hours she mourned, and for twenty-four hours the entire world saw incessant snowfall. Lakes froze in tsunamis of ice, forests became encased in icy prisons, cities shut down entirely.

The next day, Geraldine buried her best friend. She did not have money for a fancy headstone, so she instead lined the dirt covering Kale with frostbitten flowers.

She stood and conjured a hurricane of ice and snow. “If only Kale could see me now,” she said, and she disappeared.

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One year later, the Renaissance Fair opened for another season. Rosalie and Alistair surveyed the festivities—the food, the games, the costumes. Everything was as it had always been, but the new addition of the crow and the return of Ruby swelled their hearts.

One night, as the two lay in bed, Rosalie was scrolling through her cell phone when a breaking news headline appeared, claiming that a roaring snowstorm had hit northern Europe. She showed Alistair, and the two lamented Geraldine's whereabouts. Though their time together had been short, they could never deny the impact she had had on them.

Rosalie laid her head on Alistair's chest and, smiling while nodding at her phone's screen, said, "She's finally found herself."

## In Which I Grow Sea Legs

By Preston Smith

*A modern retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid"*

Asking a lake witch to grant you human legs is challenging enough one time, but twice? Forget about it. I was nervous to say the least.

Five years ago, I completed a valiant quest for love. I had emerged from Lake Erie for the first time in my twenty years of aquatic life, and I had returned with a wife. The lake witch, Gideon, had bestowed upon me two legs to traverse terra, but stipulations riddled them: I would only receive my tail back if I were successful in my venture and if I returned within two months' time. I only learned after my trip his true motive: Gideon sought revenge on the rest of Lake Erie's mermaids, for it was intense bullying for his peculiar abilities that forced him into his cave years ago.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Sea Wizard!" I had said upon meeting Gideon that day, but he corrected me, noting that his identity was unquestionable. He informed me that he prefers the title of sea witch, and I apologized. Though I had known of his existence, it was my first time meeting him in person, and nerves jabbed at me.

"Make that one month's time," he had said. I hadn't meant any offense, but I understood the consequences of my words.

When I arrived at Lake Erie exactly one month after first meeting Gideon with my new wife, Waverly, he contested our deal, declaring that I could not have my tail back and must suffer on land until my inevitable death, which he further noted would arrive sooner rather than later considering I wasn't supposed to be on dry land to begin with.

“Our deal was for you to find a husband, Marina.”

“My identity is unquestionable,” I said. Waverly and I worked to overthrow Gideon’s contract, which we accomplished once we got our hands on it after sneaking into his underwater lair. It hadn’t been easy, but our saving grace was that I could still breathe underwater. I had taken on land with me a small satchel of magical sand that, if used, would force someone to do whatever I wanted. Naturally, as a witch, Gideon was shielded from such trickery, but his guards were not. At night, while Gideon was asleep on his bed of kaleidoscopic coral, I dosed his guards and stole our agreement. Contracts can’t exactly be fair if one party is forbidden from examining it, right?

“The fine print doesn’t say *husband*,” Waverly observed after I brought the contract to her. “It clearly says *partner*.”

The next day, we made our move. Gideon had had no choice but to give me my tail back, and in the process, we had him transform Waverly into a mermaid to live with me in the lake. He owed us for the prolonged hassle. The anamorphic spell I’d stolen while stealing our contract was good leverage, too. The transfiguration process Gideon enacted on us had physically damaged both of us, for it’s not exactly fun to have the lower half of your body morphed into something entirely different, even if done magically. We didn’t care, though, because it meant we would be together.

Four years after my first adventure, we lost my mother. She was the fastest swimmer of us all, enjoying thoroughly any time she could drift freely through the lake. She made her rounds every day, saying hello to every mermaid. Because of this, she knew every mermaid in the lake, and because of this, every mermaid attended her funeral. I still wish I hadn’t been the one to find her that day.

“What happened?” Waverly had called as she found me hovering over my mother’s body. Blood swirled in the water around us as it inked out of her mouth.

I cried out and, with Waverly’s help, brought her body to our father. Thick, black sludge painted her mouth like lipstick, and our father declared her cause of death to be too much ingestion of toxic waste from her daily laps around the lake’s surface.

In the months after her funeral, my sisters and I contemplated ways to save the rest of us from dying. One sister offered trying to relocate somewhere using Gideon’s magic; another offered going to war with humans for the hurt they caused us. Neither my father nor I agreed to these propositions. Late one night, I offered my own solution to him alone. Waverly and I would save everyone.

Now, one year after my mother’s death, I approached Gideon’s lair for a second adventure. Memories of my first trip flashed through my head as I contemplated this new venture. Waverly and her father, Dominic, had been enjoying a picnic on the sandy lakeside when a rapturous stormfront appeared over the lake. As they rushed to pack up their supplies under parading thunder and lightning, the tide surged, yanking both of them into the hungry water. The lake could not be sated.

I had saved Waverly, but her father was lost to the storm. She explained to me that he was the only family she had left, and that night I went to Gideon for legs. Something about Waverly sparked innate curiosity in me. I told Gideon I was going to discover love for the first time, but truthfully, I was prepared to suffer if it meant helping Waverly in any way I could in her time of need.

And so I ascended. For a month, we became acquainted with one another, and in the end, I poured my truth out to her like a torrent of water. I couldn’t stop myself. Having no other

family, we married on the twenty-ninth day of my time on land, and on the thirtieth, I returned to Gideon with Waverly by my side.

Now, I maneuvered through his lair, evading fish traps and spiked coral spears that jutted from the walls of his long cave. Waverly awaited my resurgence outside, but I knew I was the last entity Gideon wanted to see after we trumped him five years ago. I didn't know if I would survive this trip to see him.

Gideon must have been in a good mood, because he didn't immediately smite me when he saw me turn into his central chamber. He turned his focus from a rack of technicolored vials of what I assumed to be potions to me, and I drifted in further. My blonde hair gently wafted in the water, which, if you asked me, is one of my favorite aspects of being a mermaid. We live below the human world, and there is something ethereal about letting water consume and encase you, becoming one.

"Marina." He had long, stygian hair accompanied by a long, thick beard. He stroked his beard, eyeing me up and down. "I didn't imagine you'd ever risk coming here again after what you pulled before. Contracts are binding for a reason, you know."

"They're not when your language isn't specific enough."

He scornfully glowered at me, his hair elevating in the water like a cat's tail, hiking higher as he grew angrier. Cats are actually one of my favorite species I met while on land. Seahorses are my best friends in the water, but if I were able to go on land again, I would love to meet more cats.

"What are you here for? It must be important if you're here to see me."

"You're the only witch in Lake Erie, so I don't really have a choice." Each of the five Great Lakes has their own resident witch, and we are blessed with Gideon. "If you haven't

noticed—which you may not have, because you don’t appear to leave this cave—our lake is increasingly polluted. Fish are dying at an alarming rate, and the climate of our dominion is in shambles. I need to return to the surface and fix this.”

“It has to be you that goes?” I am the oldest of seven sisters: Aria, Serenity, Melody, Cora, Acacia, and Aliana. The youngest, Melody, had offered to go in my stead, explaining that I should stay and be happy with my wife. I would never let any of them go without prior experience on land.

“None of the other mermaids have been on land before. I volunteered, and I was hoping to bring Waverly along with me since I’ll be visiting her homeland,” I said. I wholeheartedly expected to be transfigured into a fish or evaporated into a pile of sand in that moment. Instead, I was met with surprising, even if reluctant, aid.

If I was being honest with myself, part of me was selfish. I loved my wife, my sisters, and the rest of my people, but I also volunteered for self-preservation. I couldn’t imagine dying at the hands of humans. I had a life to live.

“I suppose I can’t hold dominion over a lake whose creatures have all died.” Gideon levitated through the cave, floating freely while losing himself in his reflection. “I will help you with no stipulations,” he finally said, hovering down in front of me. “I don’t want to see our lake further devastated any more than you do.” He snapped his fingers together, which I had only ever seen done on land—how is that possible underwater? Five years ago, he had simply waved his hand in a whooshing manner. Now, he was more powerful than ever, and I could only feel that he wanted a second chance to reclaim the narrative surrounding his name in our lake with his instant cooperation.

A cloud of enchanted smoke materialized around my tail, circling around it, ripping apart my tail until only two legs remained. My swimming abilities were severely hindered with legs, so Gideon temporarily removed the coral spears and fish traps from the cave with another snap of his fingers. I swam to the cave's exit with the best of my ability only to find a drowning, human Waverly.

I was in no way the right mermaid—or human now—to be saving another living being. Not with legs that I barely knew how to use. I wrapped one of my hands around Waverly's waist and flailed my other arm and my legs. Waverly must have been transfigured in the same moment I had, and who knows how long it had taken me to swim through the long corridor connecting Gideon's chamber to the rest of the lake.

We eventually reached the surface, and I continued to flail until we reached the sandy lakeside on which Waverly and I had first met. She spit up a pint's worth of lake water and leaned up, unsure of what had just happened.

"All of a sudden, my tail wasn't a tail any longer and I had reverted to being a human. I inhaled too much water, and I was too far down to reach the surface with that much water in me," she explained. The sun gleamed on her dark skin and shiny hair, and I fell in love with her all over again.

"I'm so sorry, Waverly..." It should have been obvious that we would revert at the same time, but I hadn't thought about it. Despite the circumstances, I was excited to journey with Waverly again.

Gideon had failed at any attempt he had in mind for separating Waverly from me. Now on land, we would reclaim our lake, our home, and show Gideon that love prevails over any and every outside pressure. At least we hoped it would as we progressed inland.

Gideon hadn't been nice enough to clothe us upon our transfigurations. Underwater, we hadn't much need for modest wardrobes, which I quickly learned was unique to our kingdom during my first journey. I had had to borrow a spare outfit from Waverly when I rescued her and her father the first time, but today we searched for a person or a cabin—anything or anyone that might be able to provide clothes for us. We stumbled upon a single cabin in the forest not too far from our lake, but no one home. Perhaps the owner had simply went to gather wood, but their door was unlocked and we borrowed two outfits. Now clothed, we began our trek toward the closest city to this side of the lake: What the humans called Toledo, Ohio.

We trudged through a marshy swamp to reach the city. Mosquitos swarmed around us with every slippery step we took, and Waverly observed that it must have recently rained. We didn't experience weather or precipitation underwater, only ever noticing small fluctuations in the temperature of our waters, but rain had grown on me when I first walked on land. I danced in it, which I later learned from Waverly to be a cliché among humans, but I didn't care. I danced freely through it, as it was the only factor in my journey that reminded me of home. I had only wished it to envelop me as the lake did.

The forest was less forgiving. When we emerged, we were caked in mud, and my exposed arms were dotted with small red bumps—mosquito bites. In that moment, I wished I had been cursed with the pantsuit.

“We can set up base at my father's old photography studio,” Waverly said, pointing to the city ahead. The moon had ascended for the night as we walked, but the lights in Toledo shone brightly before us as we broke through the tree line.

“It won't be closed?”

“Shouldn’t be. After he passed, I worked with his employees to ensure it would stay open. His legacy deserved to be honored.”

I held her hand tightly, and we continued into the city. A local storefront for a metalwork business with one of those fancy electronic signs informed us that it was 9:45 p.m. Waverly led me through the streets, snaking through alleys and tunnels until we reached a building that looked to be recently renovated.

“Wow,” Waverly gasped as we drew nearer. She had left her inheritance money from her father with the business because she wouldn’t have any need for it as a mermaid. “They certainly put the money to good use.”

A large electronic sign reading “Dominic’s Photography” hung illuminated above the main entrance. Waverly peeked through a set of windows, where she could see one person working alone inside. She slowly opened the door and revealed herself and me to the employee.

“Sage, hi,” she said, closing the door behind us. “Long time.”

Sage adjusted his glasses. “When you said you were running off, I never thought I’d see you again,” he said. He had curly black hair that bobbed as he spoke. He appeared innocent and precious.

“I didn’t think I’d be back either,” she admitted. “And I’m not back for long.” Looking around at all of the new cameras and lights, she added, “I really like what you’ve done with the place. And I know my father would approve, too.”

“Th-thank you so much. I live by his standard every day.”

Waverly embraced him. In his ear, she whispered, “It’s really good to see you, Sage.”

I joined them, and Sage gave us a short tour of the renovated facility. Backdrops of every color imaginable hung loosely from every wall, ready to be employed at a moment’s notice.

Waverly observed that the facility's prop collection had more than tripled in size from the last time she saw it. Everything was coming together in Dominic's name.

"Say, Sage, is there still that bed in the back?"

"Of course. We would n-never remove anything that belonged to y-your father."

Turning to me, Waverly explained that her dad used to get so caught up in his work that he would occasionally sleep in the studio, so he put a bed in the back room. Turning her attention back to Sage, she said, "Marina and I are only here for a short time. Is it okay if we stay here for a few days?"

"It's your father's facility. You don't have to ask," Sage said.

"It's your facility now, Sage. I no longer have any possession over this place."

"Well, in that case, y-yes, of course, you can stay."

Sage went home for the night, and Waverly and I made ourselves comfortable in the studio's back room. We cocooned ourselves in afghan blankets to stave off the bitter cold of the studio, and at daybreak we groggily rose to set out on our mission. We dressed ourselves in our Gideon-sent outfits from the day prior and embarked further into the city.

As we walked through the city, breakfast in hand and shivering in the early morning frost, we could overhear city folks discussing Lake Erie. They talked about something called an "ice tsunami" that had hit the lake earlier that morning.

"I'm not surprised," one stout man said. "I heard there's some magical ice witch loitering around these parts."

If the lake truly was frozen, we had come onto land at precisely the right time. If we'd waited any longer, we wouldn't have been able to ascend, and I couldn't imagine how our lake would look after no attempt at fixing its ecosystem.

We buried their words in the sandpits of our hearts, for we had to remain focused on our goal. As she had the night before, Waverly continued to lead until we approached one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city. Signs around the glass building read *Harper Law and Reform*, and I didn't understand what we were doing there.

Waverly noticed my perplexed expression. "This building houses a law firm and political activist groups. It's the only place I could think of that may be able to help."

Underwater, we floated through our days peacefully. We had no concept of laws and politics, or lawyers and politicians. On the contrary, we rarely encountered issues among mermaids. My father presided over the lake as i

I would just trust Waverly.

She led me inside, and receptionists on both sides of the entrance hollered greetings in our direction. They pointed us in the direction of the local Environmental Activist Organization chapter office. Finally, we began to feel as though we were on the right path.

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Six months later, we finally made headway in our cause.

The more humans I met, the more confused I grew. Our existences—those of the humans and those of my mer-people—had always followed a parallel diameter. We were two halves of the same sphere of life, yet our axes never crossed.

Until five years ago, when I ascended against nature's very will. We often thought of humans as the mundane because of their fragile bodies, but were mermaids that different? As we met with the Environmental Activist Organization, the distinction grew less clear. The people with whom we met were polite, kind, and more worried about our home than most of the mermaids I had left behind to save.

They had immediately welcomed us with open arms—literally. Mermaids weren't big on hugging, but these environmentalists more than made up for it. Waverly and I did not tell them about being mermaids; rather, we concocted a story in which we lived in a cabin near the lake, and we've simply noticed the harmful changes occurring in and around it.

After the first month of working with the organization, I was asked to give a keynote presentation at a local environmentalist rally due to my passion for the subject. A large stage had been erected in the middle of the city, and thousands of people from around the Great Lakes region had traveled for the event.

For the first time in my life, I had sweated. Thousands of people sat ogling me. All I was sure of was my love for my home, for my wife, and for my people, and I needed to convey that to the audience.

"Th-thank you all for coming today," I began. "I live in—" I stopped myself. I could not blow my secret in this speech. "I live near the lake, and I see firsthand the conditions stressing it. I've seen countless fish die from polluted waters. I've seen the water, once cerulean blue, darken from sludge being dumped into it. I've seen plastic fill the lake, outnumbering the fish. We must tip the scales back into the favor of aquatic life. We cannot be the reason this lake is lost forever."

The crowd stirred, moved by my words. I continued.

"Lest we forget that aquatic life is not the only group of species reliant on this lake: Humans—we—need this lake to live. We need fresh water. We need the fish to flourish. We need the environment to sustain itself again. What happens if your local source of water is completely diminished?"

Sunlight reflected off of each face in the crowd. They had all begun to sweat, restless.

One of the event's coordinators brought to me on stage a steel container. He unlatched it and flipped it upside down. Dead fish piled on the stage, the smell of rotten meat and blood wafting through the crowd. Three people vomited from the sight alone, and more followed when the smell hit them.

I picked up one of the fish. It was a murky, green-tinged brown with a cylindrical body that tapered at its tail. Its mouth was a perfect circle, with boorish teeth extending around the entire diameter of its mouth.

“Do you see this? This is a sea lamprey. It bites into fish with its circular mouth and kills them with its innumerable teeth. This is one of the many invasive species killing the lake. These fish,” I said, pointing at the pile on the stage, “were all killed from this single sea lamprey before someone stopped it. It's in the name, folks. It belongs in the sea, not a lake.”

I threw the creature back onto the pile, and a second coordinator handed me a damp towel to clean my hands.

“I implore you: *act*. I alone cannot fix this. My wife alone cannot fix this. We alone cannot fix this. With all of your help, though, we can save the lake, and we can save northern Ohio from the desert it will become.” The audience cheered, and I melted into it. I didn't want to risk embarrass myself, but I continued. “Join my wife and I in this collaborative effort to save this area, and we can promise you that you will feel fulfilled. It will not be easy, but it will be rewarding. It will sustain life itself.”

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In the months following my speech, Waverly and I lobbied city and state politicians. The environmental organization had told us it was best to go straight to the source, and we listened, for we had no better ideas. We met with as many activists and politicians as we could.

One night after a long day of lobbying, in the middle of the third month of our trip, an apparition appeared to us in the back room of the photography studio. Ominous smoke swirled in a mirror hanging on the wall opposite our bed, and a familiar face appeared.

“Gideon?” I said, leaning upward. “What do you want?”

“The lake may not be frozen anymore, but you two need to hurry,” he said. “I’m sending you this message because matters have complicated in your absence. The lake’s ecosystem is in distress, and I fear it will collapse if you do not hurry. The number of sea lampreys has multiplied, and pollution has increased more than we expected. Coral and other plants are dying rapidly. We’ll lose all oxygen if you don’t hurry.”

“That’s horrible.” I paused. “How would you know if you don’t ever leave your cave?”

“Now is really not the time for your jokes,” Gideon snapped.

“I’m sorry... We’re trying our best. Thank you for updating us,” I said.

Gideon’s apparition dissipated into the glass of the mirror. Before we could drift off into turbulent slumber, Sage appeared in the room, his face pale.

“Sage, what’s wrong?” I hurtled out of the bed.

“Are y-you two, like... supernatural?” he managed. He stumbled, and I helped him to a sitting position on the floor. He turned his attention to Waverly. “W-When you said y-you were running away, d-did you mean into the w-wilderness? As something p-paranormal?”

“Not in a ghostly sense...”

I ran back to the bed and grabbed Waverly’s hands. “Sage...” I dropped any pretense I might have had. Every time Waverly discussed her friendship with Sage, she always mentioned how much she could trust him, how loyal he was to her. This would be the ultimate test of that loyalty. “I am a mermaid.”

Our time on land was taxing. Sage knowing our—my—secret, my very identity, unsettled me. We were a couple months into our stint, and I feared I was making matters worse for my species.

A week after I revealed myself to Sage, I slipped out of the photography studio in the middle of the night. I followed the winds through metropolis and forest alike until I reached Lake Erie.

I sprinted to the coast as it came into view and hurtled myself onto the water's rocky edge. I splashed my hands and face with the slightly salty water, and all of the pollution taking tolls on the lake immediately overwhelmed me. Black, slimy sludge lay in the water. More plants and animals than previously expected had perished.

In my periphery, I saw two silhouettes darting toward the forest line. They carried empty buckets, and I got to my feet—I will never be used to saying that—and ran to where they had been standing. I stepped in muck, and I knew: They had been dumping waste here.

I took after them, chasing their shadows until they escaped fully into the cover of the midnight trees. Into the forest's entrance, I screamed, "What kind of people go out of their way to kill nature? It's murderous what humans do out of ignorance."

I sulked back to my spot in the sand, crying. How could anyone purposely advance the death of nature? My people had no conception of murder; it was the first thing I learned from humans.

In front of me, the lake boiled. Volcanic bubbles burst as the lake parted and a figure rose from its depths. The figure levitated in the air in front me, inching closer to me.

"Gideon?!" I screeched. "You can fly?!"

“Magic can do anything.” He spoke as if it was simply common knowledge that he could float outside of water. “I’m doing what you told me to do. I left my cave to help.”

“How are you helping right now?”

“You haven’t given me a chance,” he rebutted. “Here.”

He snapped his fingers and a contraption materialized in front of me. I picked it up, its shape box-like with a smaller box-like feature extending from its top.

“I thought I might find you here,” came a voice from behind me. I jumped, startled, but then I realized just whose it was.

“Did you follow me?” I turned to see Waverly, and she joined me in the sand.

“I think the better question is why and how Gideon is floating outside of the lake,” she said. “Ooh, a camera!” Waverly took the contraption from me and fidgeted with it. A light flashed in the night, and a small square piece of paper ejected from the contraption’s bottom.

“We can use this to take pictures of the lake. This could really help people understand why we’re adamantly pleading for help,” Waverly said.

“See, she gets it.” Gideon waved his hands in the air as if to say *I told you so*. “I’m just wondering why you didn’t think of this sooner. You’re staying at a photography studio.”

“Thank you, Gideon. Seriously.” I meant it. He was coming around, even if only to save his home, but it was a step in the right direction. I didn’t even care about his sassy remarks. We really should have thought about using a camera before, though.

“Before you go,” he said, “there’s something you should know.” The gruffness of his voice dissolved into melancholy. “One of your sisters was attacked by a sea lamprey. It was the first time one of them made it to the bottom of the lake. None have descended that far again, but your sister... she didn’t make it.”

“Which one?” I had six younger sisters, and now I had taken too long saving them.

“The youngest,” he said.

I collapsed into the sand. In no universe could I comprehend that Melody was gone forever. Waverly lifted my head to support my body, but I didn't care. I was limp; my heart was devastated like the lake. My sisters and I did everything together from playfully chasing fish through the lake to sightseeing both underwater and on the lake's bank. We were inseparable.

“Your father didn't want you to know until you were home, but I thought you should know.”

“Thank you, Gideon. I'm going to take her back into the city,” Waverly said. “With any luck, we'll see you soon.”

He disappeared into the lake, leaving a small bloop rippling on the water's surface, and Waverly and I trekked back to downtown Toledo, where we promptly passed out into a turbulent slumber.

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With our secret out to Sage and Melody gone forever, we had to focus harder than ever despite it becoming increasingly difficult. We met with more people than before, and we finally received good news: Waverly and I would be granted the opportunity to write articles for local and national newspapers through the environmental organization's contacts. We would do so in Melody's honor.

Waverly aided my efforts. We didn't write underwater, but I knew how to showcase my passion in a grandeur style. Together, we penned a handful of articles that reached tens of thousands of people. We relayed to them the serious, devastating effects of invasive species on local animals and plants and the poisonous effects of pollution on wildlife and water sources. We

placed emphasis on the Great Lakes, but we made sure we noted that any water source could and will fall victim to these atrocities if humans are not checked.

Our headlines, which ranged from the blunt “Stop Killing Our Lakes” to the lighter “How You Can Act to Save the Great Lakes,” became the talk of Toledo, and the two of us were offered to appear on a national daytime talk show. I would take my speech in Toledo and perform it on a countrywide stage.

“So, you know how I’ve been explaining to you how human politics work?” Waverly finished another article, this one outlining products that humans can buy to minimize plastic consumption.

“Of course.”

“American politics are based on a doctrine called the Constitution, and it comes with an appendix called the Bill of Rights. What if we extend this notion to governing wildlife?”

“Waverly, that’s brilliant.” I pressed my lips against her forehead, and we threw ourselves into preparing our policies.

The next week, we were flown to New York City to film the television show. I had fervently protested flying, but Waverly somehow convinced me it would be okay. Mermaids had never been on land, nonetheless in the sky. I was breaking too many standards for my own liking.

Once in the city, we stopped by a local shop and purchased their infamous rainbow bagels, which we scarfed down in record timing while walking toward the television studio. Waverly had never been to what she called The Big Apple, so we both found ourselves in an entirely new situation.

We quickly learned that New Yorkers aren't the friendliest people. Eventually, someone pointed us in the right direction, and we stumbled into a studio ten times larger than Dominic's photography studio.

Once inside, masses of people surrounded us, hounding us with questions. *Who are you? What are you doing here? Who are you here to see? Who let you in?*

"We're literally here to be guests on the show," Waverly said. She pushed her way through the conglomeration of assistants and producers, pulling me with her.

"Leave them alone," came a demanding voice. A tall figure entered the back room of the studio we had entered into and pulled us aside, shooing away the mass of studio employees. "Hi, I'm Venus, the show's host."

"It's amazing to meet you," I said. "My name is Marina."

"And I'm Waverly. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Venus led us to the studio's stage, where fluffy scarlet armchairs sat circling around a wooden table, on top of which lay several pale-yellow mugs next to a pot of steaming black coffee. Lights berated the stage, and cameras panned at all angles. There was no privacy in here, I quickly gathered.

Thirty minutes later, the show began. Producers scolded us for being late, but it rolled off of us like sludge. We claimed our seats on the stage, and Venus joined us. She was tall with pink pixie cut hair, and I could only think that she resembled one of our kind.

"Good morning, America, and welcome to the Venus Morning Show." Venus enthusiastically beamed into a camera. "Today, we are excited to have married couple Marina and Waverly here for an exposé on environmental protection." Venus returned to her red chair. "Marina, Waverly, can you tell our audience where you've traveled from to be here?"

Though I was nervous, I allowed myself to relish in our present situation. “We just arrived from Toledo, Ohio.” I slid my fingers through Waverly’s. We could truly do anything together.

“And what have you come here to tell us about?” Venus asked. “I have a feeling it’s important.”

“It’s more than important,” Waverly said. “The issue we’re here to discuss is life threatening.

“Fish, insects, plants, and even humans can die,” I added, “if action is not taken. Let me explain.” I took a strong sip of coffee, one of the flavors I would most miss when I returned home. “The Great Lakes affect so many states, and Lake Erie borders our home in Toledo. However, it’s dying. Its ecosystem is imploding from human-caused pollution. There are ways we can slow this down and stop it altogether, though, but it will take a lot of time, money, and effort. Because of this, it will not be easy in any regard, but we need to take a stand.”

I took a long, deep breath. Waverly whispered affirmations to me, and I could feel Melody’s presence surrounding me. I continued, “One of my sisters lost her life because of this unsolved disaster in our waters. Her name was—is—Melody, and she, more than anyone else in this world, deserves retribution. She was young and kind, had an amazing, insightful head on her shoulders. She was the most supportive person I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. I refuse to let her die in vain.”

Waverly let her hand fall out of mine and stood. “We’ve brought with us photos of the lake as it currently exists. They’re horrifying, but they will show how far the lake has been let go.”

Venus stood and joined Waverly. She clicked a remote in her hand, and two electronic monitors lowered from the ceiling, facing the audience and the cameras for those watching from home. Photos flashed on the screens, and the live audience gasped. Groups of dead fish lay on the surface of the lake. The lake's water was nearly black in color. Plants lay wilted along the edge of the lake. Devastation had reached every corner of the ecosystem.

We had opted for photos on the morning show because production wouldn't allow for dead animals to be brought into the studio, so we could only hope that the pictures would be just as effective.

"We come with hope," I said, and I tried to believe my words. "We are beginning a movement. Together, my wife and I, along with others in Toledo, have drafted a document we're calling the Lake Erie Bill of Rights. With your support, we can bring this document to life and save our ecosystems."

The remainder of the show was like a blur to me. As mermaids, we kept our species a secret from humans as a form of conservation. We didn't want the attention of humans. But I lost myself in the splendor of attention and presentation. I soaked up every ounce of it until I blacked out from unfiltered euphoria.

The longer I stayed on land, the more my brain mutated, evolving from existing in a world that mermaids had never visited before. My identifying signifiers were merging and morphing, and I was becoming something entirely new. As a sophisticated species, we had watched humans evolve for millennia while we stayed mostly the same. Now, I was breaking the mold.

I needed to go home.

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Politicians finally began to feel our sting in the fifth month as Waverly and I continued to write articles and lobby their offices. They had no doubt seen our plea for help on the television as well. We learned a strong lesson of perseverance that would stay with us forever.

In the sixth month, legislation passed in Ohio's Congress. The news broke during a televised press conference from Ohio's Capitol building in Columbus, which Waverly told me was about two-and-a-half hours from Toledo by car. I hated cars.

The two of us leaped onto the bed in the back room of the photography studio, and Sage stumbled through the honey-colored curtain that separated the room from the rest of the studio and joined us. Waverly trusted him, so I did, too. With any hope, he would remain the only human that knew our secret.

Sage had bought us a television during our second month on land. "Figured you m-might want some entertainment while you work," he had said. If I weren't married to Waverly, I might see myself crushing on Sage. He was incredibly sweet and always looking out for others, and I loved that in a person.

Red and blue letters spelling out *BREAKING NEWS* flashed on the television three times before a news anchor materialized, the letters slowly dissolving to reveal his face. His visage was worn, as if he hadn't slept in days or as if he had been caught in the midst of a war. His tuxedo creased in the shoulders and arms, and his eyes looked strained and red.

"We have breaking news coming from the Ohio Capitol tonight. The eco-friendly reform initiative championed by wives Marina and Waverly, the Lake Erie Bill of Rights, has passed in Ohio's Congress, meaning the practices outlined throughout will go into effect soon. Lake Erie will benefit most from its passage, but the Great Lakes will all see rejuvenation for the first time in decades. Reporting from Columbus with the latest news, I am Rutherford Jones. Goodnight."

The clip ended, leading into a string of commercials for new fast food restaurant offerings and the latest cell phones. We cheered, jumping up and down on the bed, the afghan blankets falling to the floor.

“I can’t believe we actually did it!” I was never going to give up, but it still felt surreal.

“I can,” Waverly said. “Your fiery determination won in the end like I knew it would.”

“You t-two are amazing,” Sage said. “T-Truly inspirational. I’ll be right back.” He slipped through to the curtain to the shop and returned fifteen minutes later carrying three tall ice cream cones.

We indulged and celebrated, and then we fell asleep.

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I still couldn’t believe that the state would begin devoting more money to conservation efforts, specifically focusing on the Great Lakes, and would fight the emergence of invasive species.

“It will be a slow fix,” Waverly said, “as every government-led solution is, but the lake should be safe now.”

Government. Being on land for six months, I had been exposed to modern human politics. Ancient human politics had been much more fascinating, but that’s neither here nor there (seriously, what happened to chariots and Coliseum fighting?). In my kingdom, we technically had a king, but he was a benevolent ruler who taught and led us to be a humble society. We all helped each other, and I now wonder if that is something the humans should adopt.

I must admit I was hesitant to return home, though. As much as I wanted to, I wasn’t sure I trusted putting the lake’s safety solely in the hands of humans. I had to, though, and it felt good

to catch the lake's briny breeze hitting my face as we emerged from the marshy woods, we had to travel back through to reach the lake. We made a single stop to drop off the clothes we had borrowed upon our ascension to the land and waltzed to the lake's shore.

"Gideon," I called into the water. I felt immensely stupid screaming a single word onto the surface of a giant body of water, but thankfully, no one was around to witness it.

I opened my mouth to call his name again, but I snapped it shut when I saw sharp white mist curling on the surface of the lake. It engulfed us, and pain jabbed through us. Our human legs clamped shut, and scales dug out from our skin, forming a solid layer over the lower halves of our bodies. Our feet turned outward, and the scales overtook them, forming fins.

When the mist receded, we fell to the ground, splashing and wriggling until we made it into the lake. We swam below, closing our eyes to shield them from the layer of sludge near the lake's surface. We arrived home in our kingdom, and I sent a sincere thank you note to Gideon's lair. Despite him aiding us, I wouldn't risk seeing him in person in his cave just yet.

Soon after we returned, Waverly and I swam to the surface and saw government-contracted employees with a variety of mechanical doo-dads that would supposedly filter pollution from the lake. It was a start, and it was beautiful to witness.

Melody's funeral wasn't so beautiful. My father waited for my return for the ceremony. When Waverly and I arrived at the outskirts of the lake, a place dedicated solely to mermaid burials, the rest of our people had already gathered. My five remaining sisters and I performed a holy dance over the sand after Melody had been laid into a plot and covered. It was our belief that the deceased would be reincarnated into something beautiful if their living loved ones completed the dance. It was the least we could do.

One month after Melody's burial, I entered my coral hut to see flowers rapidly blossoming and aging. They grew instantly, covering every wall and surface in a kaleidoscope of entrancing colors. Melody would always be with me.

Between my two trips, I spent a total of seven months on land. I learned that humans are as varied of a species as we are, and some of them are quite lovely. I saved my lake for the time being, and I am able to live happily with my wife. I created a voice for myself, and that means more to a mermaid than anything else.

## Inching into Exodus

By Preston Smith

*A modern retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's "Thumbelina"*

Flowers blossomed with each step I took, but I was far from a messiah. Our race was born from passion and kindness before the existence of humans, but we have grown to tolerate them since their separate genesis. Our two species remain distinct and different like oil and water—is that the correct expression? Human idioms always confuse me—with the most noticeable difference lying in our genders.

We have none.

Humans didn't begin to truly comprehend the complexity of gender until the twenty-first century, but we have been living genderless since the dawn of time itself. I, for example, have features of both the feminine and masculine, as humans say. As does nearly every one of my people.

Love in our community extend to the earth and to one another—platonically, never romantically. In addition to being genderless, we are an asexual community, even if only from tradition. Despite this, I craved an emotion no one around was capable of generating.

My father, the Ruler of Flowers, presides over our realm. The sun sparks innate joy in them, so I waited until one perfectly sunny morning to approach them. Twilight had broken, and I had ascended to their chambers, where the ruler lay on his patio, basking in the rising sun's waves of sunflower yellow.

"Father," I said. The Ruler turned and stood, towering over me, long black hair flowing down. Their face is aged, which always makes me curious. If we had all been born alongside time, why did some of us appear older and younger than others? Where my father, Indigo, stands

muscular with flowing hair, I stand shorter, with no muscles and short, blond hair. No muscles may even be a stretch. I am known to over-indulge in our honey supply at times. Truthfully, families did not exist in the Flower Realm, but the concept arose on the first day. Indigo and I budded near each other, and they naturally gravitated toward me as if they possessed intrinsic parental merits.

“Yes?” Indigo spoke, and my nerves intensified.

“I was wondering if there were any way I could meet some humans.” My wings fluttered, reflecting my nerves. Around our year 1500, the size of my wings eclipsed that of my father’s. They took it as a sign of my maturation finishing, but I know deep down they must also worry about my ascension to Ruler of the Flowers upon their death.

“Why would you want to do something silly like that?” Materializing in a world where we were the only sentient creatures, our people were confused. Indigo arose as a steadfast leader with me alongside, and the Flower Realm was born. Its denizens accepted us if only as a form of comfort, and I hope to live up to my father’s lengthy legacy.

Though we were all born simultaneously, we do experience death at different moments. One of my best friends, Meadow, died in 872. We first met in 349. We galivanted through fields and soared through the heavens, but one day we fell from the sky. Their wings became wedged between two rocks upon our bumpy landing, and our attempt to free them ended with the wings ripping away.

A hole has gaped in my heart since that day. I never knew if Meadow would reciprocate my feelings, but I had fallen in love. I did know the chances were slim to none, but I would never find out with them meeting an early demise.

“If I am honest with you,” I said, “you have to promise not to mock me.”

“Theo, where is this going?”

“Promise.”

“Okay, I promise. Now, Theo, tell me what’s going on.”

“I want to find love.”

Indigo’s screams echoed across multiple pastures. Robins and blue jays skirted in all directions, terrified from Indigo’s booming bass voice. Their eyebrows arched higher than I’d ever seen them.

“Absolutely not. I’d have to hold a council meeting anyway, and the council will never agree.”

“Make them agree,” I said, and I couldn’t believe my own brashness. I knew that they had to be mostly concerned about my wellbeing rather than love itself, but their reaction startled me.

To my surprise, however, our ruler held the meeting—only I was forbidden from attending. “Emotional appeal has no place in the council,” Indigo had said. Yet, I found myself sitting impatiently outside of the council’s chambers, if they could even be called that. The room was rather small, and they sat around a circular, oaken table. Observing King Arthur and his court had been fascinating and all, but I always thought imitating his table was a little too much.

From outside, I could hear faint whispers of legends, myths, and fate. Suddenly, the chamber’s wooden door opened, and my father emerged. The council’s other members trailed innocently after them, and I lifted my head from my cupped hands.

“Well?”

“We will allow your endeavor. It is a gamble, but we require something of you in return.”

“Anything,” I said, and I truly meant it. The possibility of discovering something new for my species kept me awake at night.

“You must bring back with you a special sapling. It is crucial to the survival of our people.”

“A sapling? Where will I discover it? Why is it crucial to our survival?” The Flower Realm exists in pocket dimensions around the globe. We exist in a parallel plane to humans, though we have access to the rifts between realms, allowing us free travel between them. Lately, the light in our dimension had slightly dimmed, and we had all hoped it to be merely a result of the seasons changing. Father’s words told me something more dangerous was occurring.

“I do not know its whereabouts,” Indigo said, “but this sapling will restore the light to our world. The legends say one hero will unearth the answer in the human world—though I guess that makes them more prophetic than legendary.”

“I will do my best.” How had my journey for love morphed into one to save my people?

Indigo ushered me to the outskirts of our land where the dimensional rift vibrated and hummed after stopping to collect supplies for my trip. Naturally, I stuffed a sack with large vials of honey, but Indigo made sure I took plenty of water—something I probably would have forgotten otherwise.

On our way, Indigo explained more of the legend to me. Around the same time that they had been observing King Arthur, the council discovered a dusty book in a human library that detailed a realm falling into darkness. The cover depicted a figure that looked eerily similar to Ruler Indigo. I only ever saw the book in person one time when one of the council members accidentally left it sitting in their meeting room.

Indigo and the council could only assume that a higher power had written the book as a warning, or as a way to save ourselves if conditions in our realm worsened, which they currently were. “The book originating in the human world is a key reason why we’re letting you go,” Indigo said, and I nodded. I didn’t care why they were letting me go, only that I was going at all.

I had been through the rift a handful of times before, so I knew the pain awaiting me. We reached the rift, which was as alluring as ever. It was shaped like an almond, but it was stark white in color, pouring white light onto the grass around it.

“Good luck, my son.” Indigo hugged me. I stepped into the blinding rift and immediately felt the all too familiar agony of my cells being torn apart, only to be stitched back together on the other side. The pain was a searing reminder of my mission, of why I felt alone. Why had we been born alongside time before every other species? What was meant for us?

When the light receded, I whipped my head in every direction. I needed to figure out where I had been deposited. That’s the thing about dimensional rifts: They never take you to the same place twice. I was only guaranteed to be dropped in the American Midwest because my pocket dimension aligned with it. If I resided in the next dimension to the left, I might be deposited in Texas or Oklahoma, and I certainly did not want that. My only encounter in Texas had ended with me almost dying at the hands of self-proclaimed human supremacists after my wings had been exposed. Southern Americans? Not always the friendliest like some would have you believe.

Ohio was slightly better in that regard. Slightly.

The room around me was bathed in darkness, with the only source of light being a small lamp in a corner across the room. The rift remained open behind me, and I watched my feet to ensure I wouldn’t stumble back through it. At least the rift had the common courtesy to stay in

the same location where it deposited me. Since my first trip through the rift, I had wondered about its strange sense of sentience and knowledge, but who was I to judge the grand design? Even if it were the only aspect of my trip that went my way, I was happy to know I had a path home.

I felt my way through the room and realized I stood in a filthy office. I found a dust-coated sweater and a roll of tape and set to work. In fifteen minutes, I had my wings taped down to my back and I covered them with the sweater. I felt my way out of the room and up an ominous, littered stairway. I stepped outside the single door upstairs, and the sun showered brightly over me. I hadn't realized how much I missed our light, but this sun rejuvenated me.

It was immediately clear that the rift had transported me to a decently big city. Cars and taxis crowded the street in front of me, and buildings stretched toward the sky in all directions. Across the street, one building read "The Columbus Dispatch."

Columbus. Columbus... Where did I know that name from? *OH*. I was in central Ohio. Indigo had repeated to me stories of some flower people interacting with Ohioans. I seem to recall him mentioning they're a rather interesting group of humans.

I descended a couple of stairs onto the sidewalk and nearly walked directly into a human man. He was slightly taller than me, maybe around five feet and ten inches tall, and he smelled of oranges.

During our people's trips to the human world, we always hear rumors of flower people existing, only humans believe our species to be tiny—merely a few inches tall at best. This is one of the funnier rumors we hear about our kind. My body next to this man's proved that we are indeed a similar height to humans, though we, like them, vary in height.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he said, and his voice sounded familiar. It reminded me slightly of my own. He looked at me, and I tripped through his blue eyes. They were vivid and possessed a strange steadiness. He was confident.

“Please excuse me,” I managed. I pulled myself out of his eyes. “Could you help me? I appear to be lost.”

“Yeah, no problem. Where are ya headed?”

“I’m unsure. Where do you suggest going to find love?”

“That’s quite the question.” He laughed and rubbed his hands through his rose gold hair. Did humans always have delicious-looking hair? His looked like golden rays of sun hitting a strawberry field at sunset. “How about you come with me to a café nearby. I’m going to need more details. The name’s Willow, by the way.”

“I’m Theo. I’d be honored to dine with you.”

Willow led me through a few city blocks. We passed countless restaurants, corporate offices, book stores, and a lingerie shop. When we arrived at the café, Willow opened the door for me, and I claimed a table. He ordered orange zest tea, while I opted for honey-infused milk tea.

“So, about your question back there.” He blew steam from his teacup, letting it roll across the metal table. “Where you should go depends on what you’re interested in. Are you straight? Gay? Bisexual? What’s your label?”

“L-Label? I’m frankly unsure what that means. I have never been in love.”

Willow took another long sip of his tea. “Maybe you’re pansexual.”

“Pan-sexual?” Humans were precarious with their labels.

“Never mind,” Willow said. He laughed and went back up to the service counter to order a cheese and raspberry danish. “You have to try these. They’re famous for them here.”

I tore a small corner off of his pastry and transcended to a heavenly realm. The smooth cheese mixture contrasted elegantly with the slightly tart raspberry compote, and the flaky pastry added a delicate, buttery finish. If love ended up feeling as good as this pastry tasted, I couldn’t wait to get out into the world.

“I forgot to ask earlier,” Willow said, “but what are your preferred pronouns?”

I took a large bite of the pastry, attempting to stall. Hailing from a realm in which gendered pronouns did not exist made matters difficult.

“What are *your* preferred pronouns?”

“He and him,” Willow said in a quick, matter-of-fact tone.

“Me too,” I said, and I went with it. Truthfully, because I wasn’t as familiar with the construct of pronouns, it didn’t matter to me what Willow called me, especially because I was only in the human world for a limited time.

“Come out with me tonight,” Willow said suddenly, smiling up at me. “I know we just met, but I was already planning on going to my favorite bar. It’s more of a club, but it’s one of the best places in the city to meet a diverse group of people.”

“I would love that.” The last individual that was this nice to me was Meadow. I met her in a similar manner to how I met Willow. Neither of us had been paying attention as we soared through the Flower Realm’s sky, and we collided. With headaches in tow, we had snuck into the honey depository and imbibed until we could not move. From that first meeting, I knew Meadow and I were meant to meet. I felt the same here.

Willow had paid for our drinks and danish. I admitted to him that I didn't have money, and he was thankfully understanding. He no doubt wondered where I was from, but for the conservation of my own sanity, I chose to keep the Flower Realm a secret. We had witnessed human wars too many times for comfort. We could not afford for our realm to be involved in one.

"I want to get a new jacket for tonight. Is it okay if we stop at a shop down the street?" I nodded in agreement, knowing I didn't have money to buy anything for the night.

Willow led me a few blocks away from the café, where he perused through a boutique with me. He eyed the store's leather jackets, looking for something fresh to wear tonight. I was drawn to the lace shirts. They were sensual but flattering, though I questioned if I could pull it off given my chubby stomach.

"Those are sharp," Willow said. He carried with him two jackets, one black and one lilac.

Any concern for my realm dissolved inside me. I yanked two shirts off of the wall, one yellow and one teal, and slipped into them in a dressing room. They were sheer and showed skin in the front, but I refused to let the human world hinder my view of myself. I looked amazing. More importantly, the backs were solid, which meant I could hide my wings.

Then I remembered I didn't have human money.

When I walked out of the dressing room, Willow had moved to the checkout register at the front of the store. The boutique's owner scanned his two jackets, and Willow turned to see me placing the shirts I had taken back onto the wall.

"Theo, come on." Turning to the owner, he said, "Those shirts are going to be on my bill, too." Reluctantly, I picked the shirts back up and placed them on the counter.

"Thank you. For everything."

“I got my tax refund yesterday, so it’s fine. Plus, why wouldn’t I help a cute boy?” I didn’t know what a tax refund was, but it must be awesome if it gives humans money. The owner winked at us, and we departed from the boutique back into the bustling city.

A cute boy. Willow, the sun-kissed strawberry boy, called me a cute boy. I could not believe this. I wasn’t a boy per se, but he called me cute.

“Where do you live?” Willow asked. We aimlessly cut across a couple of streets.

“Not around here.” I couldn’t tell him about the Flower Realm, but I also was a horrible liar. So, instead, I sounded short and harsh. “I apologize. I didn’t intend to sound cruel.”

“You’re totally fine.” He laughed under his breath and flipped his hair. “You can come back to my place until we head out tonight if you’d like.”

“That would be perfect. Thank you.”

Willow’s apartment sat lofted above a sushi restaurant, leading him to pick up a California roll on our way upstairs. Inside, plants dotted the room—tall ones in the corners and smaller ones laid out on every surface. His wooden furniture added to the natural aesthetic, and long, open windows lining his living room allowed sunlight to permeate his apartment.

“I have a thing for succulents and trees,” Willow said.

“I love it.” I fingered the succulents as he showed me around, and their colors enhanced. The smell of moss, which I knew to really be the smell of strong chlorophyll, filled the apartment. “I have never encountered anyone with as big of a green thumb as you.” I learned that expression during the early 2000s, when Indigo and I visited the house of Martha Stewart. She showed us some of her favorite vegetable dishes, my favorite eggplant risotto among them, and then her sprawling garden, which stretched until the sunset that night.

“You’re really unique.” I could hear the sincerity in his voice. “I’m glad we met today, even if by accident.”

“It has brought me joy,” I said.

For the next few hours, Willow told me about his life. He had been born in South Korea, moved to Dayton when he was young for most of his childhood and adolescence, and moved again to Columbus a few years before. He discussed his favorite pop songs, notably all hailing from Britney Spears and Ariana Grande with the occasional Nicki Minaj feature.

“You’re really easy to talk to, you know,” he said.

“I’ve never been told that.” I felt horrible about not reciprocating and telling him about my life, but there was nothing I could tell him without risking the safety and prosperity of my people.

“I think it’s about time we get ready for a great time!”

Willow and I changed into our new clothes. He let me borrow a pair of dark faded jeans to match the yellow shirt he had bought me earlier. He blasted a Britney Spears song about toxicity on repeat as we got ready, and with jubilant moods intact, we left for the bar.

Willow led the way as he had the rest of the day. I knew nothing about the city, but he was an amazing guide. We walked ten city blocks, and I learned that this city does not sleep. Signs lined the streets, noting that many stores and restaurants are open twenty-four hours every day. We turned a final corner in the darkness to see neon pink and orange lights beaming out of a building.

“That’s the club,” Willow said. He grabbed my hand and picked up his stride, pulling me closer to the building. His hand in mine warmed my body more than the sun ever did, and flowers bloomed inside me, rooting in my stomach and towering into my lungs and throat.

Willow granted me no time to contemplate the forestry of my body. He ran inside, me behind him, and we disappeared into a foggy cacophony of colors, lights, and raving music. Around us, people danced in dashing variety. Women, men, and non-binary individuals in every combinations swayed to the beat originating from the DJ at the far end of the club. Willow had given me a complete breakdown of human genders and orientations, but I couldn't say I fully understood.

Instead of trying to understand, I took in the mesmerizing dancefloor, where everyone smiled with genuine glee, where humans with all different hair colors bounced to the music.

"It's beautiful in here." My words caught in the mulch of my gut.

"It's the most accepting place on the planet." Still grasping my hand, Willow pulled me into the center of the floor. Where the ceiling above us was reflective glass, the floor under us was solid stygian tile. Those around us moved in ways I could have never imagined, contorting and bopping to both the music and each other.

Most everyone around us carried some sort of drink, in flutes, glasses, and bottles. Willow showed me to the bar, where the club-goers ordered their drinks. I must admit they didn't smell appetizing.

"Well, who are you?" said an unfamiliar voice. At once, I felt myself pulled from Willow's grip. I turned to see a woman bearing over me. She was boorish, her eyes beady. I grew immediately hesitant, frantically looking around to see where Willow was. "You'd make a good spouse."

"I apologize. You must excuse me. I must find my friend." I ducked under people dancing around us, which intensified when the DJ raised his hands and the club physically bounced to a more intense music beat. What had she meant? Spouse?

I wove through dancers, but I could not see Willow. Calling his name would not work either with the music this loud. I parried through a few more crowds of dancers. While searching for Willow, I evaded running into any other clubgoers. The nerves in my body remained spiked from my interaction from the woman. Had she wanted me as a spouse for herself? For a child?

One man stepped in front of me, sloshing drinks in his hands. "Please forgive me," I said, and I dipped away. I could feel the eyes of the woman from before on my back. They were warm, scalding my back and wings if I were taking a hot bath, which would, in any other circumstance, be my favorite part of the day.

"*Willow*," I called out, but the club roared over me. For the first time, the lights changed colors. They flickered from pink and orange to pale blue and green, back and forth until nausea crept alongside the ivy in my throat, climbing to a peak. I bit back the urge to vomit.

The back of my shirt fluttered, and I knew with certainty that it was not a human touching me. My wings grew restless as my anxiety worsened. Meanwhile, due to the mesh front of my shirt, I could feel human skin and sweat as I brushed past people. Flower people didn't sweat, so I am sure you can understand my surprise when I first smelled a salty liquid on a human in the year 451 when I entered the human world for the first time.

"You really must consider my offer," the woman said, and she appeared before me. I must have been lost in thought because she seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

"I do not want trouble."

"I don't either," she said, and she wove her hands through mine. She pushed her face closer to mine and whispered, "I scout this club every night, and I've never seen anyone as genuinely captivating as you. Let's get out of here."

Part of me wanted to accept the compliment, but the uncertainty of her intentions scared me.

Suddenly, someone said, “Come with me,” grasped my arm, and pulled me in a different direction, freeing me from the woman’s grasp. I had never been yanked around so much in my many years of life! Now in a secluded corner of the club, I looked up to see a scrawny man staring up at me. He couldn’t be taller than five feet, and he had the most bizarre facial hair. He almost appeared as though he had whiskers.

“I saw that woman lurking and thought you might like an escape.” He pointed to the idle woman in the crowd, and she dissolved into the dancers as quickly as she’d appeared before me.

“Thank you.” I ruffled my shirt in an attempt to smooth it out.

“The name’s Mousse, like the dessert. I’ve been told I’m a sweet one like that.” He extended his hand, and I reluctantly shook it. “We’re sorry you had to deal with that back there. Her name is Tonya, and we see her here nearly every night. It’s weird if you ask me.”

“She hadn’t even introduced herself before touching me! I was horrified!”

“What do you say we go back to my place?” Was Mousse disregarding everything I said about being terrified? “We could have a great time.”

“I’m quite sure we could, but I must be going.”

“You really should think twice,” Mousse said. “I saved you from Tonya. You could always say an extra special thank you for my effort.”

“Thank you,” I said, “very much.” Mousse burst burst into haughty laughter.

“I meant you could have sex with me. It’s the least you could do.” Mousse pulled a small gadget out of his pocket and clicked a button on it. A blade flipped out of the small sheath.

“I really must be going.”

I turned my back, and Mousse loudly gasped behind me. I began walking toward the middle of the dance floor, and I sensed the man following me. He was grasping his knife tighter than before, and I didn't intend to die in this club.

From the opposite direction, I observed Tonya spotting me. With the woman and man approaching me from opposite directions, I quickened my pace. I refused to be captured by any human other than Willow.

Where was Willow, though? I wondered if he had found someone to go home with. That is something humans do at clubs, right?

I didn't expect the music to shake the room again so soon. As everyone broke into wild jumps and dances, I tripped over someone's foot and fell onto the stygian tile. The floor welcomed me with an icy embrace, and spilled drinks soaked through my mesh shirt, making my chest and stomach sticky. The music in the club stopped, and at first, I thought it was my hearing suffering from hitting my head. Instead, I look up to see my wings displayed for everyone in the club to see.

The lifeforce inside me imploded; my ecosystem collapsed. Flowers withered, and roots shriveled. I had just exposed my people to the human world. I hadn't even found the sapling that Indigo required to save our people. On the contrary, I had *forgotten* about finding the sapling.

"Get out of here, freak!" one person close to me screamed.

"There's no room for weirdos like you here!" another said. The two people harassing me gripped knives of their own. Why did everyone in this realm carry weapons? I didn't stay to find out.

"My goodness, Theo!" a third said, except I recognized that voice. Willow hovered over me with two people by his side. They helped me to my feet, and we rushed out of the club. At the

last second, I looked back to see that Mousse and Tonya had both vanished somewhere. They surely would take no responsibility for my fall.

Back at Willow's apartment, he helped clean me up. He wiped my chest and stomach with a damp rag to get rid of sticky residue. We had unanimously decided I shouldn't use his shower with my long wingspan. I changed back into the sweater I had found on my entrance to the human world, and Willow prepared cups of tea for the four of us.

"Why does everyone carry knives?" I asked.

"Humans are small-minded." I wanted to ask for a more specific answer, but I knew that was the best I was going to get. "So, wings, huh?" Willow said more so noting than asking.

"I had them taped to my back, but when I fell, the tape must have lost its grip. I apologize for keeping this secret." I sipped my cup of tea, and even though I was outed to Willow and his friends, I felt immensely comfortable with him.

"My goodness, no. You're more than welcome here. We're not exactly the most popular people." He pointed to his friends. "I'm really sorry I lost you in there. You got pulled away, and then I ran into Spencer and Butler here. We tried to find you, but we were too late."

"We're happy you're safe," Spencer said. Her skin looked tan and silky like Willow's, and her smile exuded the warmth that usually came with warmed cardamom and nutmeg.

"We're also glad to meet you," Butler said. She was fair with long hair that faded from pale pink down to dark gray. I was beginning to think kindness equated to beauty, because Willow, Spencer, and Butler were the three most attractive humans I had seen since arriving in their world.

"You sure know how to pick 'em," Spencer said as if I wasn't sitting in the room with them. "He's so cute and nice."

“I’m not really a ‘he’,” I said. I hated confrontation more than anything else in the universe, Flower Realm included, but I felt it important to be honest now that my major secret was known to them.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t know you identified as nonbinary. I shouldn’t have assumed,” she said.

“You need not apologize. I told Willow upon my entrance into your world that I use your pronouns, but I must now be honest.” Willow glanced at me at the mention of his name, and he and his friends all shuffled in their seats. “I am not nonbinary, because I am not human.”

Neither Butler nor Spencer caught my gaze. Rather, Willow looked deeply into my eyes. I didn’t expect any of them to immediately understand my reality, but telling them was what was important.

“I hail from a place called the Flower Realm, and its denizens are neither male nor female per human standards. We sometimes utilize your ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns, but we do not strictly subscribe to them, either.”

When no one said anything, I continued explaining about our occasional passage onto their soil, about how we picked up their pronouns—most importantly how anyone that wants to use them in our realm gets the right to choose the ones with which they best identify.

“Thank you for telling us about your home and your people,” Butler said. “It can’t be easy talking about that with people you don’t know, nonetheless humans.” She laughed on the word “humans,” because why shouldn’t she? It must be strange to suddenly discover you’re not the only humanoid species on Earth.

“You’re very brave,” Spencer added, and in that moment, Willow pulled himself out his stare into my eyes.

“Thank you for your sharing that with us, Theo, and I am sorry if I ever made you feel like you needed to use our pronouns. Meeting you has opened my eyes to so much.”

“You never pressured me with anything. The three of you have all been incredibly sweet to me. Thank you.”

I pardoned myself and set off to find somewhere to root myself for a while. Willow and his friends spoke and waved at me to stop, but I escaped into the hallway of the apartment building and examined each beige door until I noticed one with a funny-looking sign next to it. I went through the door to find a staircase, which I climbed. I opened the door at the top, and cool, nighttime air brushed against my face. I

Displayed on the roof was a variety of plants swaying with the quaint breeze, no doubt courtesy of Willow. I perched in one of the chairs and allowed my wings to flow freely in the wind. After having them taped down all day, exercising them felt euphoric.

I closed my eyes, allowing the breeze to transport me home to the Flower Realm. I could almost see Indigo tanning on the terrace in the dimmed light between rounds of talking with our people. I could almost see Indigo calming them, informing them that I was in the human world to save them. Almost.

I hadn't found the sapling. In fact, I had no idea where to begin looking for it.

In front of me, the city was alive. It was now one a.m.—another precarious identifier created by humans—but nightlife flourished. A shop across the street served countless bowls of steaming noodles and meat. Skyscrapers lit sections of the city in all directions. I could still faintly hear club music in the distance. In that moment, Columbus reminded me of a miniature New York City, where I had escaped to a few times to observe human celebrities. There was something so fascinating about them to me.

Behind me, the roof door opened. I turned to see Willow approaching me.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi.”

“You’re not scared of people seeing your wings up here?”

“No.” Truthfully, I hadn’t considered anyone seeing them. “It’s just dark enough to conceal them.” Was it, though?

Willow claimed the chair next to me, cross-legged. “Spencer and Butler left for the night. It’s just you and me.”

“I like just you.” I gave him no time to respond. “There is something I would like to show you. Take my hand.”

I extended my arm, and he accepted. I stood and jumped slightly, levitating only a few inches from the ground. He looked quizzically at me, and I knew that no matter what happened, I would always remember the beautifully searing look of his blue eyes. He realized what I was about to do and gripped harder onto my sweater.

I thrust upward, and we soared into the clear night sky. The stars shone gloriously as if they were performing in a Broadway musical. I had taken a detour to Broadway during the trip in which we visited Martha Stewart’s home. At the time, my biggest wish was that I could have seen the musical with Meadow. Tonight, however, may be even more beautiful than that day.

The wind bobbed Willow’s strawberry hair ever so gently. I turned slowly in a circle, granting us both a panoramic view of Columbus. It hit me that I had not taken note of the building from which I entered this world. I looked as I turned, but in the darkness of night, no building stood out.

Nimbly, I lowered us until we both touched down on the roof. I lost myself in the city, which I had never been able to say before, and Willow grabbed me. Suddenly, Willow's face was against mine, his lips pressed on mine. Our hairs intermingled, and we became one. My wings rustled and flapped.

It was unclear to me whether it was only in my head, but my body appeared to glow. Energy surged through my veins faster than blood ever had, and the roots in my gut revived. The flowers of my body blossomed once more, this time healthy and vivacious, and honey coated my lungs, sticky yet pure.

Willow pulled away from me, smiling wider than any human I had ever seen, and a burst of botanical energy pulsed out of my body. All of the plants on the terrace deepened in color and grew. I had never felt more one with nature, even when living in the Flower Realm.

Willow stepped away, pacing around the roof. He looked back at me with every few steps he took, and my newfound smile never wavered.

"I wanted to kiss you in the sky, but that was worth the wait," he said.

A kiss. I had waited thousands of years for a simple connection of body parts, and electricity hummed in my body now that it happened. My body appeared the same on the outside, but I could feel the difference on the inside. I could feel internal dread and want for connection subside. In its place grew unapologetic love and acceptance.

In the streets below us, I heard people mutter, "Is that a person?" and "Look up there!" Had my hearing always been this keen? I wouldn't fall victim to human antagonization twice in the same night.

"Let's go inside," I said.

Willow grabbed my hand and led me back to his apartment. Once inside, he motioned to a room that snaked off from his living room. “That’s my bedroom. We should get some sleep. It’s late.”

In a matter of seconds, Willow had thrown off his clothes and replaced them only with a pair of black, mesh shorts. He handed me a similar pair of shorts and a plain white T-shirt to change into.

After changing in his bathroom, I opened the door to see him lying in his bed. He patted the open space next to him and called for me to join him. What did humans expect at night? I was scared to find out.

I jumped in beside him, and my wings retracted, lying across my back.

“Can I kiss you?”

I nodded. He leaned over me, kissed me, and lay back in his spot.

“May I be honest with you?”

“Of course, you can,” Willow said.

“I like you, but I find myself scared,” I said. I couldn’t look at him. Instead, I lay on my back and stared at his plain off-white ceiling.

“I really like you, too, Theo. What’s got you scared?”

“I entered your world to find love and romance because it doesn’t exist in my world.”

Haltingly, I explained in chunks the story of my people: Our lack of love and sex, our lack of sexual body parts, my lack of fulfillment.

“I do not desire that, but I desire love.” I tried to look in my periphery to see his facial expression, but a bubble of water blocked my vision. Was I crying for the first time in my existence?

“Theo, if someone would have told me that I would have the day I’ve had today, I would never believe them.” He leaned up, looking into my eyes. “I feel like I’ve always needed to meet you. Please know that your feelings and values are valid.”

I ugly cried. Friends and I had snuck into the human world a number of times to see sappy films, and I never understood the concept of ugly crying. Now I did. It was born from extreme emotion, and I had simply never experienced such a powerful feeling before.

Willow scooted closer to me in the bed, and I nuzzled my head on his chest. Within a few minutes, he fell into a contented slumber, and I followed not long after.

I groggily awoke to faint music playing outside the bedroom. Willow was no longer in the bed, so I followed the sound to find him. He stood, still shirtless, over the stove in his kitchen preparing something that looked intensely delicious.

“Well, good morning, cutie.” He flipped one final disk and slid it onto a plate. “I made blueberry pancakes!”

He placed a plate in front of me at his bar, where he joined me and we both ate too quickly for our own good.

“So, the news was interesting this morning,” he said. I hadn’t taken him for someone who keeps up with the daily news, but that attention to detail and to the environment around him made him that much cuter. “After a segment on two women saving one of our Great Lakes, they showed a pair of undercover police officers arresting Tonya and Mousse after we left the club last night. Someone reported them for harassment.”

“What does it mean to be arrested?”

“Sometimes in this country it doesn’t mean much. But it’s supposed to mean that they’re taken to a jail—a detention facility—where they serve a sentence for a crime.” I nodded as if I

understood, but I didn't. No one in my realm had committed a crime or done anything outside of our sense of ordinary. Well, until me.

My people.

“Can you help me with something?”

“Anything. What's up?”

“I must find the building with the dimensional rift.”

I received precisely the look I thought I would. I explained the dimensional rift to Willow and added that it was in the basement of the building I emerged from yesterday. The one outside of which we ran into each other. It had only been one day, but it felt like a lifetime of constant pinpricks on my brain. I missed my people, and I needed to regroup with them, even if for my own sanity.

We changed clothes and set out into the city. If Willow was thinking the same thing as I was, he had to be sad that our time together was potentially coming to an end. How could I give up love after being so sure I had just discovered it? Unfortunately, I knew the answer.

I had to return to Indigo and tell him that I knew nothing about a sapling that would save the flower people. Indigo hadn't exactly been helpful in the endeavor either, but that didn't change the fact that I was overwhelmed. I had rushed into this adventure as a figure of tangible naivety, and I didn't know how to solve any of my problems. I needed Indigo.

With relative ease, Willow backtracked our journey from yesterday, leading me back to the dilapidated building across the street from the newspaper offices. Though we'd only known each other for a single day, I trusted Willow. I let him follow me inside and down into the basement, where the rift glowed, ethereal.

I explained that the Flower Realm existed on the other side of the rift. I always wanted to call it a portal, but was it? It definitely looked and felt more like some celestial being slashed a hole through the fabric of spacetime to create the opening.

“It’s oddly beautiful,” Willow said. He stepped closer, and I joined him. I took off the black sweater and set it back where I had found it yesterday. I would feel bad if someone came back for it and I had taken it to an entirely different dimension.

For the first time in my life, I took charge. I slipped my hands into Willow’s, pulling his gaze from the rift to me, and passionately pressed my lips into his. The forestry inside me evolved, and I became a unified biome of the flower, the human, and the loved.

“I was about to say I’m sorry that your time here was so hectic, but that was magical.”

“I do not want to depart from you,” I said. “In my thousands of years of life, I have never once said goodbye. I do not want to start.”

“Don’t.”

Before I knew what he was doing, Willow latched onto me and walked into the rift. In a few seconds, we reappeared on the other end. In the Flower Realm. Together. With a human.

“Theo!” a voice called, and I looked to see Indigo flying toward me. “I’ve visited the rift once an hour since you left, but I didn’t think you’d actually be back so soon. You succeeded.

And then I saw it. The light in our realm had been restored to its former volume. Warmth had returned. My people would survive.

But I didn’t do anything.

“Is that the sapling?” Indigo asked, nodding toward Willow, who himself had been examining the pastures sprawling in all directions.

“You know fully well that that’s a human,” I said.

“Yes, but if he is not the sapling, why did you bring him here?”

“His name is Willow, and he is the human with whom I fell in love.”

Willow’s eyes glistened as he looked at me. I gave him permission to go talk with some of the other flower people while Indigo and I continued to talk.

“I believe that I am the sapling,” I said. I had felt my body bloom for the second time in my life, the second time since the birth of time. Now, I was sure this feeling was the light returning to our world. Indigo didn’t look convinced.

“I am not so sure.” He scowled down at me, but his look wasn’t angry. Rather, his face was scrunched, lost in thought.

“Why are you not sure?” I knew I sounded harsh, but I had never been so sure of anything in my life.

“The prophecy described more than what we told you before you left. I now believe you finding love and consequently bridging our world to the human’s was the growth our realm needed to stabilize itself. If you hadn’t found love, the dimension might have eventually collapsed,” Indigo explained. “But this means that the bridge is the kindled flame shared between you and Willow. It’s more than simply you or Willow.”

So, in the end, I guess I was simply half of an anchor that chained our world to the humans’.

“I may not be showing it well, but I am happy for you, Theo.”

“Thank you, Indigo.”

We hugged, and we both flew into the air. We shared a special aerial dance that we only broke out for special occasions, and this was just the day to celebrate.

When we landed, Willow ran to me. “You’re remarkable”

“What did I do?”

“You’re you.” Willow kissed my cheek.

“So...” I knew for a fact that neither of us wanted to have this conversation. “What do we do now?”

“I overheard Indigo say that we are a bridge between realms. Maybe that’s what we do,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“We split our time. Sometimes you can stay with me in Columbus, and sometimes I can stay here with you.”

Quite frankly, I no longer cared if any of my people objected to having a human in our realm. We saved their lives, after all, even if we didn’t know we had. I agreed to Willow’s proposition, and for the next year we alternated our living situation on a monthly basis.

I eventually explained to Willow my history with Meadow, and he accompanied me to my realm’s cemetery. We placed bubbly blue and orange flowers on Meadow’s grave—their favorite colors. Willow introduced himself, and I assured Meadow’s headstone that the world’s memory of them would live on through us.

We grew increasingly accustomed to each other’s world, and after the first year, Willow offered me another proposition—this one innately human.

I agreed to his question quicker than I had ever agreed to anything in my centuries-long life, vigorously nodding my head when words wouldn’t form. For the entire year we had spent together, I wondered if Willow had felt the sapling bloom inside himself as I had. He had never shown any sign of it, but I now see that the love we have cultivated is real and truly reciprocal.

For the first time, I understood that humans weren't the only species that could evolve, and for the first time, our realms would be connected through human law.

## Project Reflection

Going into this project, I knew I wanted to work with the tales of Hans Christian Andersen, but I also carried within me a bulb of self-doubt, of which I was unsure how to overcome. Technically, I study literature, but I have always wanted to be a writer as well. During my time at BGSU, I never had the opportunity to take creative writing courses, but I knew that this project would allow a certain degree of creativity to seep through the literature base. There was also my love for the fairytale drama *Once Upon a Time* that acts largely as a motivator for me. Thankfully, my primary advisor, Abigail Cloud, was more than welcoming to the idea of tackling a creative project. The rest of the academic year would see me fighting back sporadic waves of self-doubt but pushing through because I knew I would not forgive myself if I succumbed to it.

Because of my lack of creative writing background—mostly drawing from my own prior writing experiences and my time with *Mid-American Review* and *Prairie Margins*—I often struggled while crafting my three revisionist tales. In all three of my stories, there is a sense of adventure, of questing, but the idea of journeying made me stumble the most in my “The Little Mermaid” retelling, titled “In Which I Grow Sea Legs.” In this story, my protagonist, Marina, ventures from her lake onto land to save it from ecological devastation, and that is simply not something that can be captured in a snapshot of time. Rather, I struggled to find a medium between a longer questing story and one in which there is solution without extending the piece into the length of a novella. To partially solve this problem, I implemented a six month time jump and filled in pieces of that missing time throughout, including the steps that Marina and her wife, Waverly, take to hopefully rescue their lake before its ecosystem completely collapses. Still, I feel as though there is more potential to be mined from this story, alongside the other two.

My other two stories did not come without their own battles. Where two of the stories remain mostly in a central location, my “Snow Queen” retelling, titled “Breaking Glass,” is a continuous journey north for my protagonist, Geraldine. This idea of movement is something I struggled with at first, in part because I didn’t want to become repetitive in my descriptions of her efforts to save her friend. I also wanted to do the character herself justice because the point in the story is one of empowerment, and that is something that is not always easy to depict but which, at the same time, is extremely important. On the other side of my struggles was my third story: “Inching into Exodus,” a retelling of “Thumbelina.” This retelling centers on gender and sexuality, so I knew I was walking a fine line between being inclusive and representative and being harmful to underrepresented communities. In the story, my characters are gender nonbinary and asexual, two things that are very real, underrepresented, and sensitive. Executing this is something I discussed with Abby in depth, and we worked together to ensure that the story would be genuine and a show of love rather than a story of disrespect or antagonization. In the story, my protagonist, Theo, travels from the Fairy Realm to the human world, and Abby suggested in the end that we not use human pronouns in the story until Theo enters our world, which ended up being one of my favorite aspects of the story.

This last struggle, while heavily present in the writing of my third tale, was something that I knew was going to be a struggle in all three of my retellings because increasing intersectionality and representation was my main purpose in crafting them. Thankfully, Abigail Cloud helped me through this. We worked to establish a world through these three stories that represents the world in which we live, where everyone is diverse and beautiful. Ultimately, I chose to make references to the other two stories in each one, connecting the three in a continuity to show that all of the characters in the three stories create a singular world where diversity sits at

the forefront of both their respective narratives and a canonical timeline. Though the timeline, if read out of order, does not affect one's reading much, I thought it would be fun to connect them in the following sequence: "Breaking Glass" first, "In Which I Grow Sea Legs," second, and "Inching into Exodus" third, though there is some overlap with the latter two tales. In so doing, and as Abigail Cloud expertly stated, I worked to and wanted to create a world that at its essence directly reflects the world we live in and see. Interestingly enough, the stories were originally named "A Tale of Frost and Chaos," "A Tale of Sea and Longing," and "A Tale of Fae and Lust," respectively, but we chose to rename them to help maintain originality in the project.

In addition to these story-specific issues, general issues that were present in all stories arose throughout the year. I had issues with dialogue that I had to hone, whether I was writing chunks of dialogue that are too large or whose length doesn't make sense in the scene's context or whether I was inconsistent with a character's tone and speech (Theo being the primary example for the latter). I also had issues simply with narrative at points. For example, in the original draft of "Breaking Glass," there was dialogue at the end that read as preachy and hitting the reader over the head with the point I was trying to get across. I wasn't letting the scenes stand for themselves or trusting readers to get my points. I had to truly take a step back and see this before I could fix it, similarly to how I had to balance the voice in all three texts. Finally, I think I struggled because I watch a lot of television series and films. I write some reviews online for a website to which I contribute and administrate, and I find myself using all of this film and series consumption in my writing, somehow unconsciously translating that sort of storytelling onto the page. This is also something I have had to consciously correct during rounds of revision.

Overall, this project was one in which I had a phenomenal experience, partially because it was my first real experience writing and getting feedback from someone rather than just writing

for fun as I had before. Before this project, on a personal level, I struggled to accept help from others, but throughout these two semesters, I opened myself up to help from professors Abigail Cloud and Kristie Foell. They centered me and my thoughts, ultimately allowing me to complete the project through their aid, and for that I am immensely grateful. Moving forward, I want to continue this project by expanding to other tales from Hans Christian Andersen's treasury of tales and culminate a growing anthology of my own tales inspired by his. These three stories were not easy to write, and the stories I write in the future if I do continue this project will not be either; regardless, I am proud of the project I have ultimately been able to complete, and I am excited to see how it potentially continues in the months and years to come.

Through all of this, my love for fairy tales, the mystical, and the fantastical has only grown, and I have become a better person than I was before. I cannot thank Abigail Cloud and Kristie Foell enough for their help, and I must say a special thank you to the Honors College itself for sponsoring this project of self-discovery. It has truly become one of my most-cherished experiences in my four years at Bowling Green State University.

## Annotated Bibliography

Andersen, Hans C. Translated by Erik C. Haugaard. *A Treasury of Hans Christian Andersen*, New York, Nelson Doubleday, Inc., 1974, pp. 1-524.

My main source for this project, this anthology contains seventy-two stories written by Hans Christian Andersen that have been translated from Danish by Erik Christian Haugaard. For my creative renditions, I will be focusing on “Inchelina” (29), “The Little Mermaid” (58), and “The Snow Queen” (185). I will, however, be reading the other stories within the anthology for further context of the time and for Andersen’s overall style and capacity for intersectionality. It is with this anthology that I will employ feminist and queer lenses for analysis and for the creation of my retellings.

"Andersen's Inspirations for Thumbelina." *Writing in Margins*, 18 Sept. 2017, [writinginmargins.weebly.com/home/andersens-inspirations-for-thumbelina](http://writinginmargins.weebly.com/home/andersens-inspirations-for-thumbelina). Accessed 24 Sept. 2018.

This article discusses the conceptualization of Andersen’s Thumbelina as a character. In my anthology, this character is referred to as Inchelina, though both names apply to this character. In this article, the writer suggests that famous singer Jenny Lind, who most recently appeared as a character in the 2017 movie musical *The Greatest Showman*, was the inspiration for a host of Andersen’s works. These stories include “The Nightingale” and “The Ugly Duckling.” Andersen is said to have been romantically interested in Jenny Lind, and though it is more a stretch than the other two stories, the article states that some believe Andersen’s Snow Queen is modeled after Lind and her rejection of him. The writer’s other point is that Thumbelina is modeled after a friend and pen-pal of

Andersen's: Hanne Henriette Wulff. The writer also notes that Wulff's letters to Andersen are a large reason we know anything about his life today.

Bcasper. *Hans Christian Andersen: A Dialogue*, 9 May 2008,

storytellermisunderstood.blogspot.com. Accessed 24 Sept. 2018.

On this Storyteller Misunderstood website, the writer, who goes by Bcasper, writes analyses of Hans Christian Andersen's works in relation to themselves, to media, and to Andersen himself. Bcasper has a number of essays on the website, where they draw a large variety of sources to help make their theses clear and developed. Though I will examine most of the essays on the site, the one most relational to my research sees Bcasper applying a feminist lens to analyze Andersen's works. Titled "Hans Christian Andersen and the Feminist Perspective," Bcasper examines sexuality in "The Little Mermaid" and "The Snow Queen." They argue that innate innocence in Gerda is the only factor that allows her to save Kai in "The Snow Queen," while also arguing that femininity and agency must be suppressed in "The Little Mermaid." Overall, the general argument is that these works offer Andersen's idea of the ideal woman.

Editors, Biography.com. "Hans Christian Andersen." *Biography.com*, A&E Television

Networks, 2 Apr. 2014, [www.biography.com/people/hans-christian-andersen-9184146](http://www.biography.com/people/hans-christian-andersen-9184146).

Accessed 24 Sept. 2018.

Biography.com predominantly provides the background information regarding Hans Christian Andersen's life. Living from 1805-1875, as the website notes, Andersen is most known for "The Little Mermaid" and "The Ugly Duckling," though the latter will be less

focused on throughout my research. The website gives an overview of his life and career, including events that have happened after his death. “The Little Mermaid” was made into a popular animated film, and his story “The Snow Queen” influenced the story and production of Disney’s *Frozen*. The website further elaborates on his personal life, stating that he was romantically interested in both men and women, which could potentially influence my research and analysis of some of his works.

Horowitz, Adam and Edward Kitsis, creators. *Once Upon a Time*. ABC Studios, 2018.

Horowitz and Kitsis’ *Once Upon a Time* ran on television for seven seasons, debuting in the fall of 2011 and concluding in the spring of 2018. The series interwove characters from all forms of media alongside original characters to create a large cache of characters. The main characters of Hans Christian Andersen adapted to the series are the Snow Queen and the Little Mermaid. The former was named Ingrid, who cast the Spell of Shattered Sight, which used a broken mirror to force people to only see the worst in other people. Ingrid was also adapted to be the aunt of Anna and Elsa from Disney’s *Frozen*. The Little Mermaid, on the other hand, was named Ariel and kept most of her characteristics from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* film. Finally, Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling” is referenced throughout the series as the protagonist, Emma Swan, often alludes to the story’s titular character.

Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, pp. 91-110.

Klage's sixth chapter is simply titled "Feminism," and in it she explains and explores feminism in the world of literature and literary theory. She notes Lacanian theoretical models of gender and its allowances while explaining gender's relationship to signifiers. She then employs Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's poststructuralist views of feminism to further explore the "relationship between language and bodies" (106). Klages' information regarding women in the theoretical models of poststructuralism and deconstruction helps inform Hans Christian Andersen's writing and how he portrays female characters. Would these characters be handled differently if written by a female? This is one of the questions that I will hopefully answer while utilizing this text.

Selden, Raman, et al. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 4th ed., Hertfordshire, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997, pp. 121-166. Print.

Even more so than Klage's text, Selden, et al.'s text really provides the theoretical backbone of this project, in part because it is longer and goes more in depth into feminist and queer theories and their applications to our world and its history. This application is crucial to the goal of the object as I work to craft tales that ultimately increase intersectionality in fairy tales. What makes this text so interesting is its breakdown of the steps taken to lead to feminist and queer criticism. There is discussion of the waves of feminism and the leaders, writers, and critics operating within them. Moreover, there is breakdown between gay criticism and writing, lesbian criticism and writing, and finally queer writing and criticism—again including prominent writers and theorists operating within these periods—with all three of these periods being crucial to the characters and settings of my retellings. These break down further. For example, there is specific

discussion of Marxist feminism or how sex relates to feminism, all of which is important in attempting to understand these branches of literary theory and then applying them in a critical analysis of Hans Christian Andersen's tales.

Warner, Marina. *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale*. 1 ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 4-132. Print.

Warner's analysis of the fairy tale both helps us define what a fairy tale is while also providing background information not only on Hans Christian Andersen, but also on other minds from around the world and from varying time periods. She notes that Andersen is the most well-known fairy tale writer from the Victorian period, and she also comments on his large ego, which often caused problems for him. Furthermore, Warner adds that he often modeled his stories and characters after his family members and their lives. When specifically discussing "The Little Mermaid," Warner describes it as "maudlin" and "morbid" (109), which is one of the reasons I am so interested in it and interested in offering a retelling of it. Finally, Warner very briefly discusses Charles Dickens and the Brothers Grimm in reference to Andersen, which further solidifies this relationship between the three and acts as an anchor for the time period in question.

Yenika-Agbaw, Vivian S. "Reading Disability in Children's Literature: Hans Christian Andersen's Tales." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2011, pp. 91-107. *EBSCOhost*, [ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2012025006&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.bgsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2012025006&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

This article proves critical in my understanding of how Hans Christian Andersen views characters, and more specifically those with disabilities. In his writings, Yenika-Agbaw concludes, Andersen allows disabilities to define his characters rather than representing characters with disabilities in a more tasteful manner. She draws on four stories (“The Little Mermaid,” “Thumbelina,” “The Brave Tin Soldier,” and “The Ugly Duckling”) for her analysis and examination. Her analysis of “The Little Mermaid” and “Thumbelina” will further prove crucial for my retellings of these stories. Yenika-Agbaw supports her article with a definition of what it means to be disabled and with American laws of rights that persons with disabilities inherently possess, which helps her conclusion and will help with my retellings.