The Beauty in Horror

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Submitted to the Department of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York
May 2022

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When I first started brainstorming this senior project, I thought it would have to be one set piece or genre of pieces. However, meeting with my advisor has shown me that this isn't the case. I chose a variety of stories to showcase my skill as a writer. The bulk of my senior project consists of a story called *Carousoul*, which I've been working on for three years. The format of this story resembles a choose your own adventure, as decisions that can impact the story are presented to the reader. The story follows an unnamed protagonist as they awake in a carnival that exists in limbo. As they struggle to get their memories back, our protagonist learns the purpose of the carnival and why they and the other workers are trapped there. Each time I've presented this story in class, I've always tried showing a different outcome in a given path. An example of this is a few pages in when the protagonist and three of the carnival workers, Zlight, and twins Zyxterr and Zaxterr, stand on top of a cliff as their curfew bell begins to ring. Zlight makes his way down a steep path to get to the carnival while the twins are too scared to follow. At this point the reader can choose to either help the twins, or leave them like Zlight. Not only does each decision yield a different outcome, it unlocks different choices for the same upcoming scenes. It also causes the other characters to act differently towards the protagonist.

It was in Fiction II, that I learned about flash fictions and was tasked with writing one. The flash fiction *Just The Wind* introduced the Colombian urban legend of El Silbòn, as he visited a child in the dead of night. According to urban legend, El Silbòn is a tall, thin man who wanders around whistling, and carrying a sack of bones. It's believed that he'll visit a new house

every night, and if no one notices, then someone in the house won't wake up and he'll add their bones to his collection. *Just The Wind* follows this belief but with El Silbòn portraying a softer side to the child who finds him. While it is common belief that El Silbòn was once a spoiled child who's punishment turned him into the creature, there are a few variations that show him a victim to an abusive household. With the child in the story being a victim of that themself, El Silbòn would find himself relating to the child and giving them what he believes to be a better life. This abused child is part of my contribution to this urban legend.

Although I may not write poetry as often, it's still something I enjoy writing and felt the need to also include in my senior project. I've only had a Poetic Techniques class at Purchase, but that alone has taught me so much about my poetry. Specifically all the different types of poems there are. I enjoyed writing villanelles the most, and my poems *Nocturnal* and *Diurnal*, which tell the story of a lost love from both people in the relationship, are of this format. Both poems use a lot of the same words to create a lack of believability that will cause the reader to question which speaker is at fault of the relationship ending. My poem *Familiar Bonds* tells the story of a child growing up as the odd one out in their family, and is written as a pantoum, a style of poetry that I practice writing a lot. My favorite poem in the project *As Nature Intended* follows the story of a wolf trying to befriend a rabbit. A story inspired by a good friend of mine who was afraid to get close to me for fear of hurting me somehow. Lastly my poem *Non-Fiction* is written in a way that's meant to mimic an individual's final words as they contemplate suicide. This collection of poetry captures the beauty that's present in things upon reaching their end. While these ends are scary for many people, they are also moments of acceptance.

I first started writing when I was in the fifth grade. Up until that point writing never interested me, and I only read when forced to by my mother. In grade five, she had picked a book

for me titled The Thief Lord by Cornelia Funke. I spent the first several weeks of the school year pretending to read it, and attempting to distract my teachers with the map of Venice that the first few pages held. After a while I caved, and while the first chapter certainly bored me, the book as a whole did not. Suddenly I became transported to this magical world of Venice, following the journey of a group of orphans living in an abandoned movie theater. I became so invested in their stories, it was as if I was a character in the book interacting with them. From that, I found myself creating new stories with this group. Adventures that would happen after I closed the book. I went from creating stories in their world as my own character, to creating my own stories with my own world and characters.

My early work was made up of short stories that lacked any plot, and fan fictions of whatever book series I was currently hooked on. I always presented my writing to my English teachers, who all supported my writing and taught me ways to improve it. Throughout middle school and high school, I would write any story or poem that came to my mind; often experimenting with different genres. Attending a film high school meant I got to learn screenwriting, and challenge myself with a new form of writing.While it was difficult, the film classes exposed me to so many different films I would have never watched. Writing scripts certainly proved challenging as many of the details that would go into a story had to be left out. Aspects such as a character's emotion and the layout of a setting had to be left to actors and the film crew. While the creativity of the work would, in a sense, be shared, having to remove certain details taught me the proper way to tell a story without info dumping. It was through this new format that I learned to leave certain details up to the imagination of the reader. A tactic that I find myself using a lot in my horror work. The human mind can be a terrifying place, and by being selective with my words, I can make the reader fill in the blanks and come up with an

image even more terrifying than anything I could have written down myself. While I still can't enjoy movies without analyzing shots, I became drawn to the pacing and stories that horror and thriller movies possesed.

It wasn't until my first semester at Purchase that I actually attempted to write horror. While I, at the time, thought the story to be a success, I found myself wanting a more fantastical element to my horror stories.

I may not read nearly as much as one might think a writer should, but I'm always drawing inspiration from the writing of various movies and video games. Video games like Supermassive Games' Until Dawn immediately stood out to me for its use of wendigos. Supernatural horror often reuses the same handful of creatures/spirits, and I became bored by this. I began watching various YouTube videos of animated horror short stories, and found this one YouTube channel Snarled.

The creator of this channel and the something scary podcast, Sapphire Sandalo, states that she is "on a mission to create more diversity and empathy within the paranormal and horror communities."

This mission is something that I too strive for in my writing. Through Sandalo's work, I became introduced to the many urban legends that each culture possessed. I knew I wanted to write about them, however I wasn't sure how to fit such little content in a short story. I knew I could take some liberties, but respecting the culture that the legends came from was always my top priority. There can be so many adaptations of one’s culture that are simply made to either mock or gain profit from. I want my work to instead educate, and make my readers do their own research.

I hope this senior project can show my growth as a writer, and the passion I put into every piece I've written. With this project and all future work, I hope to inspire the next generation of writers. By focusing mostly on the horror genre, I hope to contribute to the genre in new and meaningful ways. For starters by using fewer cliches and tropes that are meant to solely generate revenue.

Nocturnal

I want to ask if you remember
a night so long ago.
A night I was not a stranger.

When neither of us found our slumber.
The sandman in woe.
Each word spoken; Do you remember

that twinkle touch from a tongue's treasure,
buried deep within its burrow.
To explore, unwelcomed: its maker, a stranger.

So we met in the frosted weather.
Sinister strangers shivering in snow.
A demeanor-- I'll always remember.

With that night all lost of pleasure
and our roots fallow,
to still grow would be stranger.

The fruit it bore was brightly bitter.
So you sugarcoat in hopes to bestow,
something sweet enough to have me remember.
Of that night, you weren't a stranger.

Diurnal

You want to ask if I remember
a night I could not forget.
When things were thought to be better.

When the fruit was sweet and tender.
Tired eyes having no regret.
Lively lips spoken. I do remember

that touch. A fool's splendor
rusted when touched by roulette.
Always played: luck no better.

Warmth: a soft plucked feather
sways 'round a sickly silhouette.
A choice-- you made to remember.

Once a perfect proposal for forever
turns to a thankful threat.
We both knew better.

That shining spark of ember.
A mere dagger in a bouquet
that pricks you to remember.
That we are both, no better.

Non-Fiction

He writes a simple story. With no ending in mind. Words of soft blue ink. Inspired by the blind. He writes this very story with feelings he forgot. Memories forced to fade. And “sociopathic” thoughts. His simple story sees with eyes lacking haste. The words as they are spoken with sickly sweet taste. He ends his simple story. With one not so kind. Words of sharp red ink. With them--he is blind.

As Nature Intended

In the cold of the night, runs the rabbit.
A trail of red in a sea of white from the rabbit.
A wolf not far behind the rabbit.
"Want you to be mine, oh rabbit."
Meager modesty stops the rabbit.
The wolf's heaving chest beside the rabbit.
Softly laying in the snow, the wolf not wanting to hurt the rabbit.
A small streak from the eye of the rabbit.
The wolf stays close to warm the rabbit.

A tender smile soothes the rabbit.
The beast deep inside still craved the rabbit.
A splash of red in a sea of white from the rabbit.
The wolf tries to wake the rabbit.
A cold touch is all from the rabbit.
With kind fangs the wolf cradles the rabbit
into his home. Protecting the rabbit.
The wolf's cry in the night yearns for the rabbit.

Familiar Bonds

I did not attend
the family gatherings.
My grandfather, often the host,
shared drinks and laughter amongst the family.

Those family gatherings
were often followed with teasing me.
More shared laughter. And one too many drinks.
If only they knew

how the teasing often affected me.
Critical chances with family crumbling away.
If only they knew:
how unloved a man could feel, for loving a man.

And as chances with family
became crown jewels of a foolish king;
a man who felt so unloved, found love
in potions he'd happily drink.

The family jewels would be the payment
a now pauper would happily pay
for potions of love. Painful potions
to a child crumbling away.

The pauper found imperfect ways to pursue his payments.
Remaining family found ways to prevent;
the crumbling child, now an adult,
from having to hide the knives.

Family found ways to foretell betterness:
abstract apologies that only bear false forgiveness.
The knives: were hidden. The hider:
was I.

Another apology spoken. Broken
bottles of booze; promoting better quality ooze.
Was I to blame?
"No," spoke Tio Micheal.

Who's better quality ooze foamed at his mouth. And he lied-
in a closed casket. The morrow after grandpa wished it to be me.
"No," spoke God.
I ask, what God would do this?

A closed casket buried.
A familia promise of togetherness. I ask
what god wouldn't give the heart attack to grandpa instead?
Answered at another funeral. Because I forgot to hide the knives.

A promise of togetherness kept.
Kept at a funeral.
Where knives no longer needed to be hidden. Together. At a funeral
I did not attend.

Just the Wind

There was always noise amidst the emptiness of my slumber. Never a visual to aid me, only the crack of a whip. I felt the stings on my back, as if the bed I lay on was made of rubber bands that snapped with every turn. Every night I dreamt this, and every night it ended the same way. A mumble that I always recognized to be from my father.

I soon woke up and checked the time to discover that it was three in the morning. The whip's crack was gone, but the night was not silent. Instead, I could hear a clattering sound from downstairs. It echoed, the sound of many hollow objects bumping into one another. But just under this noise, hidden almost perfectly, the tune of a whistle coming from far away.

I peeked my head out the door and looked to my left. At the end of the hallway stood the door to my father's bedroom. Beside the door was a small table that held a photo of my mother, with a memorial candle lit beside it. I then looked to my right to where the hallway opened up into the living room. It was there, I heard the noise. I moved towards it, stopping right at the edge of the hallway. I glanced around the corner, gasping at what I saw. Sitting on the couch was a tall, slender man. His body had a soft glow like some spirit, yet he was not transparent. Instead his skin was pale, and appeared stitched together. He sat hunched back, whistling, a straw hat covering his face. By his feet there was a burlap sack, with whatever was inside making the noise.

The whistling stopped and he quickly looked up. I moved behind the corner, praying the man didn't spot me. My body trembled and I held my breath. The man began to whistle and my body froze at the first note. My body slowly turned without command from my head. It was as if my consciousness became detached from my body. My feet stepped from around the corner, and

my eyes lined up with his. At least, where a person's eyes would be. His were two sockets that had the same glow of his body. He whistled and gestured with his hand for me to come closer. My body obeyed him.

The closer I was to him, the higher the note of his whistle became. The sound shook my head with pins clogging my earlobes. I stretched my vocal cords, hoping to summon a scream. My bottom jaw felt sewed to my top with metallic wiring. Once I was within reach, the man extended his arm and held my chin. I stared at the stitches around his joints before he moved my head up to make eye contact with him. Breathing was the only movement I could manage as he moved his hand from my chin to my shoulder. Upon doing so, my eyes closed and the corners of my mouth cringed. The man suddenly went silent and removed his hand.

I immediately fell to my knees, my head slouched over as if I were bowing to him. From this angle, and with the aid of the light he glowed, I could see into the sack that belonged to him. In it, were various kinds of bones. I gulped, and feared that my own would soon be in that sack. I felt his hand lift the back of my shirt by the collar. If the man had eyes, he'd see the monochromatic red painting that my father painted with his belt. When I felt his hand retract, I took a deep breath and looked up. The man's eye sockets no longer glowed, but instead had large white spheres that almost fit the sockets perfectly. He gave no emotion, or showed any other change in appearance. He reached over and placed his hand on my face. His fingers pressed slightly on my eyelids. I took a final look at him through the gaps in his fingers before he closed my eyes.

When my eyes next opened, it was morning. I jumped out of bed and dashed towards the living room. There was no sign of the mysterious man. For a moment, I thought about asking my

father. However upon seeing him in a good mood, I decided I was safer remaining silent for the day.

That following night was stranger than the last, because I slept without a single dream. I woke up to the sun shining through my curtains, and the sounds of morning birds chirping. Having slept through the whole night, I was now convinced that the mysterious man from the night before was just a dream. Confident in this, I decided it was time to share this with my father, and so I walked over to his bedroom. The memorial candle was still lit as I knocked on his bedroom door. There was no answer, so I knocked again. After waiting several seconds I turned the doorknob and realized that the room was unlocked. I slowly opened the door and stepped inside.

"Father?" I called. "Are you awake?"

Hearing no answer, I walked towards his bed where I saw no bump to indicate there was anyone underneath the covers. The bedside table held my father's wallet and keys. I saw what looked like a finger poking out from under the covers. I lifted them quickly and fell back in fear. On the bed was the body of my father: a pile of flesh, with no bones.

Carousoul

Silence never was good company. So much so that it becomes avoided. A bathtub overflowing; droplets echoing across a porcelain floor. The scent of lavender gives company to this noise as the candles it came from illuminate the room. The water in the tub rises briefly, causing a few waves of it to flow over the side. The water soon relaxes, and the droplets play a slower melody. The steady ripples slowly become opaque.

It's then, the water flattens. The edges of the tub widen and become the shoreline of a lake. In this lake, someone floats. Their wavy black hair straightens from the warm water. Above, a nightingale perches on their chest, and begins to sing. Their eyebrows furrow, and with a gasp, they awake, scaring the nightingale away.

Having arrived at the shore, they look around, panting slightly. The sand beneath them is a bright red that easily falls through their fingertips. The sky mimics this color, darkening towards the west and becoming lighter towards the east. The pink hues on the east eventually reach a patch of sheer white; circular, where the sun should be. At its very center, the nightingale perches on the tip of a branch. It's there, at the pinnacle of a tree, that the nightingale sings to the person.

They take a few steps forward, their eyes following the curves of the tree's exposed skin. A dark gray, the tree stood tall as the first to a forest. Not a single leaf to be seen on either the trees or the ground around them. At the base of this tree stands a boy peeking out from behind the trunk. With only his right side visible, the boy fixates so deeply on the person that they turn around to see if there's anything behind them the boy could be staring at instead. When they turn back around, the boy is gone.

“Hello?” They take a step towards the tree then pause. The nightingale begins the next segment of its song. “Little boy?” They continue to inch their way closer to the tree. Its bark is covered in a rich soot, with a scent strong enough to cause them to cough. The trunk contains various scars from slashes that seem to hold no meaning. Cuts from neither love, nor anger that healed long ago. They reach forward to run their hand along the scars, their hand dripping onto the tree’s exposed roots. When they’re only a moment away from connecting with the tree, does the little boy run out from behind it, making a beeline into the forest.

“Hey!” They chase after him. As they run deeper into the forest, the trees begin to blur together. Their breathing becomes heavy, forcing them to rest against a random tree. The soot stains their clothing as they wait for their vision to straighten. A few feet ahead, the boy is peeking from behind another tree, this time only making his left side visible. His mouth arching in a smile, the boy giggles before running deeper into the forest.

“...wait.” They cough once more before giving in to the chase. They fight the flames in their lungs and run faster, their vision softening as they begin to lose sight of the boy. They continue to run straight, closing their eyes for several seconds to rest them.

They soon hit a low bearing branch, falling flat on their back from the impact. They grumble and rub their head, fluttering their eyes open. Once their vision clears, the first thing their eyes put into focus is the tip of a sword. They immediately jump back, the wielder of the sword stepping forward to keep the blade at a fair distance from the person’s chest.

“Be still,” the man with the sword speaks assertively. The person follows the flat silver edge of the blade, to the man who stood before them. Appearing to be in his late twenties, the man;s hair is cut into a pointed mohawk. He wore tight leather clothing that appeared almost metallic, like the armor of a knight. Around the circumference of his neck, a thick neon yellow

streak glows in the dark atmosphere. Behind him two figures approach, both resembling the boy who led the person here. Each twin possesses a massive scar across the half of the body they each hid from the person. The scars glow a neon yellow that matches that of the man. Seeing the same glow from the bottom of their peripheral vision, the person looks down at their arms. It was there, vertically across both arms, that they saw the glow of the yellow mark.

The person clenches and unclenches his hands before looking up at the knight. “What is this place?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” The twins tilt their heads in opposite directions as they speak in unison. “You’re in Liiiimbooooo!” The two of them begin to limbo under any low branches that were nearby, giggling as they trip over their own feet.

“Zyx! Zax! Knock it off!” The knight keeps his eye contact with the person, not checking if the twins had listened. “Get up.”

Being only a sword-length away, the person slowly stands up. They put their hands up immediately after. The person’s eyes dart between the knight to the twins, who pull the skin beneath their eyes down to make a silly face at the person. They respond to this with a weak smile, finding the damaged, wilted part of their face creepy. The knight changes posture to a more relaxed stance, before twirling the sword like a batton and sheathing it.

“You got a name?” The knight asks. Several seconds go by, and the person can only respond with a look of confusion. “Well, that checks out. Although we will need a name for you. Until the Empress can properly induct you.”

“Em...press?” The person whispers.

Before the knight can speak, Zyx tugs his jacket. “Let’s call him Curly.” Zyx points to the person’s hair that has become curlier since it’s dried.

The knight looks down at Zyx, then back up at the person. “Curly it is. Now then, follow us.” The knight turns around and begins walking away.

“No,” Curly speaks. “Not ‘till you tell me where we are. Or who you are for that matter?”

The knight stops and grabs the hilt of his sword as if getting ready to unsheath it. However, he instead speaks. “You may call me Zlight. As for where we are, the twins already told you. Now follow us.”

Curly’s eyes widen as they look down at the markings on their arm.“If that is true, and I’m…” They clench their hands into fist as their arms begin to tremble.

“Crying is for funerals.” Zlight continues to walk away.

“I don’t need to follow you!” Curly takes a loud step forward. “That sword of yours can’t actually harm anyone here. I won’t let you threaten me.”

Zlight stops once again, and emits a loud sigh. “Then don’t, I don’t actually care y’know.” Zlight walks over to the left where a lone pink carnation rests on the ground. He kneels down and gently pats it. “You wouldn’t be the first.” Zlight stands up and continues walking away.

With a trembling body, Curly stands their ground. A second later they jump up, realizing the twins are in front of them. They stare at Curly with puppy eyes before each tugging one of Curly’s arms forward. Curly shakes their grip loose then starts to follow Zlight.

Never once does Zlight stop to see if Curly is following him. On either side of them, the twins are running with their wingspan out. The nightingale’s song became softer until eventually it could no longer be heard. As Curly follows, they look around for any other signs of life. The red sky did little to cast any actual light, and the height of the trees would cover most of it. Curly looks at the top of every tree they pass for any signs of leaves. The treetops are all barren, despite

each tree being perfectly rooted to the ground. On their right, Curly spots another pink carnation beside a tree.

The twins suddenly stop their game and run ahead of the others. Curly feels the vibrations of a tune, different from the nightingale's. Curly presses their hands against their ears and groans.

"What is that?!" Curly calls out for Zlight who keeps walking. "Hey! Answer me!"

The music becomes stronger, feeling as if it was being fired directly into Curly's ears. Despite having them covered as tightly as possible, the tune bounces around the walls of Curly's skull. They shut their eyes and fall to their knees, beads of sweat slowly sliding down their temples. Curly's eyes shot open, and they uncovered their ears. The music suddenly stops, and Curly stands up and continues to follow the group.

The twins stand together at the center of a cliff, shivering. Curly and Zlight peek over the edge. There's a steep slope that leads down the cliff. At the base of the slope, there are two metal towers that held up a sign that read "Cheers!"

"Let's go." Zlight takes a step down the slope.

"Zlight…" Zyx whines.

Zlight stops and looks back at the twins.

"Can Zaxterr and I go the long way? We don't like cliffs."

The sound of a bell tolling breaks through the quiet air.

"You two won't make it inside by the thirteenth stroke." Zlight watches them for an additional bell stroke before turning to go back down the hill. He steps down without any sort of concern for falling. "He'll only slow you down Zyxterr, let him suffer alone."

Curly stands at the edge of the cliff, glancing back and forth between Zlight and the twins. As Zlight makes his way down the cliff, the twins stand in place. Their knees buckling as the fourth and fifth bell strokes echo across everyone's bodies.

[If you choose to leave the twins and walk down the cliff, flip to page 37]

[If you choose to help the twins down the cliff keep reading]

Curly walks over to them and kneels down.

"Hey. It'll be alright." Curly reaches out for them but they flinch and step back. "I don't know what'll happen after thirteen strokes, but you both want to be safe inside before it, right?"

Zaxterr clings onto his brother's shirt, wiping tears onto it. Zyxterr looks into Curly's eyes, the pupil on his scarred left side drooping downwards. He gulps and then nods as the eighth stroke echoes.

"Just stay calm, I'll carry you both down." Curly picks up Zaxterr, cradling him in both their arms. They stand, Zyxterr grabbing the bottom of Curly's shirt. By the tenth stroke they were moving, At the eleventh stroke, they caught up with Zlight at the entrance. The twelfth stroke echoes and the group were in the carnival, standing at a cellar door. As the thirteenth stroke fades away, they were inside and underground.

Curly is quickly shown where they will be staying after having dropped the twins off. Down the hall from their room, the only door that stood on the end as opposed to the others that all stood somewhere along the sides of the hallway. Curly turns to say goodnight Zlight, but stops as he walks away.

Curly's room was just that: a room. There was a mirror built into the wall by the entrance. The walkway turns from white tiles, to a carpet that matches its color. A set of bunk beds lay across the mirror, and to the left was another door that leads to a small bathroom.

Curly takes a few steps to the beds then stops as there's a loud thud on the ground above their room. They quickly look up and listen for any other sounds. Curly feels the warmth from their arms glowing. They take another step, collapsing from a sudden sting in their legs. Their inner thighs burned as if they were gently kissed by the tip of a blowtorch. Curly lifts the left leg of their shorts up, their fingers trembling from the pain. Underneath their pants, they see the familiar yellow glow. This marking was much smaller, going horizontally across their inner thigh. They look towards the mirror across from them. Foggy, Curly moves around to see if they could make out their reflection amongst the smudges. In the mirror, Curly sees their younger self, watching their parents from the living room.

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They both stood in the foyer, Curly's mother fully dressed with a suitcase. They run up to her, holding a stuffed bunny.

"Mommy!" Curly hugs their mom's waist tight, she never looks down. "Please, don't--"

Curly's mother hit their cheek with her elbow, knocking them off her. Curly's dad immediately kneeled down to where they hit the floor.

"You took my life away." Curly's mom looks down. Her eyes scowling at them. "I wish I never had you." Curly's mom left, leaving Curly who was reaching out for her.

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The burning on Curly thighs turns cold. They grunt and pull themselves onto the bottom bunk, scanning around the small area. They let out a hoarse sigh before resting on the bed, letting sleep overtake them.

Morning came fairly quick, at least what felt like morning. There are no windows to let in any natural light, and so Curly's body wakes up naturally.

"What should I draw today?"

Curly wipes the sand from their eyes and looks across the room into the mirror. There was a young man, about Curly's age standing in front of them. He has short gray hair that was combed up into a wave. The man stands shirtless with several neon yellow dots scattered randomly around his stomach.

"Maybe a...goldfish?" He begins to connect the dots with a black sharpie, using the mirror to assist him. "And a ooh--" His eyes glance down, making contact with Curly's reflection. He laughs then proceeds to finish his game of connect-the-dots.

"Good morning." Curly sits upright on the edge of the bed.

"There is no morning." He fans himself to dry the ink. "Only the thirteenth hour."

"Thirteenth...what is this place?"

"Ohhh you're so cute. I remember when I first arrived, don't worry you'll soon answer that question yourself." He puts on a plain white tee, then a blood red vest around it. Turning towards Curly, he bows and offers his hand to shake. "The name's Tzolka, it's a pleasure to no longer be the newbie."

Curly shakes his hand then opens their mouth to introduce themself. Curly's mind goes blank at that moment.

“Ahh, I wouldn’t break your back over it. The Empress will assign you a name and role.”

“The...who?”

“Our leader.” Tzolka walks towards the door.

“Leader?” Curls stands up and hurries towards the door. “Where are we?”

“You already asked.”

Curly follows Tzolka above ground. The sky has neither lightened or darkened a hue. The world is the same as when they left it, only at this moment, dozens of people are walking around. Curly’s eyes widen, their lips unfreezing from their permanent pout into an open mouth smile that hooks from one ear to the next.

“Excuse me!” They run to the nearest person and reach for their shoulder. Curly’s hand goes through their body and they continue to walk unbothered. Curly looks down at their hand, then at the people around them. Their smile falls as more people walk through them. Curly feels a hand pat their shoulder and they look up with the eagerness of a puppy.

“Down boy, it’s just me.” Tzolka chuckles and pulls Curly from where they stand. “It’s an acquired life I assure you. You’ll be able to interact with the souls who wander through here once you’re assigned a job.”

“A job? Doing what? Tell me what this place is?” Curly attempts to push Tzolka away, then flinches as he grips their shoulder tight.

Curly’s feet glide across the ground like feathers in the wind, soon they would shake Tzolka’s grip loose and walk on their own. Tzolka pushes past people who Curly just walks through, leading them to a tent. There’s a long table that separates the two from the other souls. Behind Tzolka and Curly are balloons of various colors and an assortment of darts.

“Come one, come all! Step right up ladies and gentlemen!” Tzolka jumps on top of the table and cups his hands together to project his voice. Glancing to the side, Curly makes eye contact with Zaxterr and gives him a soft wave. “That’s right! This be a game so miraculously easy, I bet my soul that even this six year old I could do it!”

“I’m eight.”

“Not when working with me Zax.” Tzolka winks and clicks his teeth towards him. “Watch, and take notes.” Tzolka jumps off the table and hands Zaxterr a dart. He takes aim, curving the dart in his throw to hit two balloons that were close together. The crowd cheers as Tzolka hands Zaxterr a plush popcorn bucket with a dog’s head sticking out of it. The front of the bucket has “pupcorn” stitched on it. “And he wins a prize having only used a single dart! Imagine what you could all do with three. Line up everyone! A game so easy, we’ll be paying you to take these prizes home!”

While Tzolka continues to entertain and draw a larger crowd, Curly sneaks away through the back of the tent. Curly walks farther into the depths of the carnival, paying no attention to where they were going. The scent of warm, melted sugar lingers in the air. They spin in place until they could decipher its location. They pause and face a white cart with baby red filigree around the trim. Curly walks towards the empty cart, the sweet scent becoming stronger as they draw closer.

“Hello! Hello! Hello!” Tzolka jumps out from behind the cart, causing Curly to jump back. He’s wearing a white sailor hat with a baby red trim to match the cart. “You look as if you’re on a cotton candy deficiency.”

“What the hell dude! Wait, how did you--”

Tzolka shoves a cone of cherry red cotton candy into Curly’s face.

“Now now, the less you query, the more fun you’ll have!” Tzolka salutes them then ducks behind the cart. Curly leans over to look, all that stayed behind was the sailor hat.

“Come one! Come all! Shoot the ball in the hoop, win a prize!” Tzolka reappears a few feet behind Curly at a different carnival game stand. “So simple a six year old could do it!”

Curly rolls their eyes and turns away as Tzolka hands the ball to Zyxterr. At the very center of the carnival, there’s a carousel covered in a weird black soot. The carousel is also missing the horses needed to ride the attraction. Nearby there’s a pitch black tent with small white highlights that represent stars in the night sky. Curly peeks inside where they see a woman who looks to be about twenty-one in age. Her hair is dyed a bright violet, with her head being shaved on the left side, and combed over the top of her head. She holds an old lady’s hand, tracing the woman’s palm with her index finger. She slips something small and round into the old woman’s palm and closes her hand. The woman smiles and a ring of fire forms around her. The old woman’s body becomes more transparent before floating away into the red sky. As the palm reader watches the woman’s soul float, Curly makes out a large neon yellow dot right under her chin.

“I wouldn’t let Zaurora catch you staring.” Tzolka pats Curly’s back, startling them.

“I wish you’d stop surprising me.”

“I’m just warning you, don’t fall face first for her. Zaurora is like spaghetti. Sure it looks straight now, but get it wet--”

“Don’t! Finish that...please.”

“Alright, I’m sorry.” Tzolka puts his hands up then relaxes as Curly calms down. “My work for the day is done. Come with me, you should see this.”

“Will it tell me what this place is? Or how I’m supposed to fit in all of this?”

“Yep!”

Curly takes one last look at Zaurora before following Tzolka to the far east of the carnival. It’s there that they see this massive roller coaster in the carnival. It’s one long crane with a claw at the end where the seats are. The claw had four sets of seats, each with four chairs on all four sides.

“Welcome! To the Stinger!” Tzolka does a spin. “Please dispose of all food and drinks before boarding.”

Curly takes a final bite out of the cotton candy, the sugar quickly evaporating in their mouth. They then toss it into a nearby trash can and follow Tzolka up the metal ramp to the platform that held the ride.

“Get in, I’ll operate.” Tzolka runs around to where the control panel is, Curly follows only a few steps behind.

“You know, I would rather not.”

“Don’t be a baby, even the twins rode it. If you’re so scared, I’ll loan you a stuffed bear from one of the carnival games.”

Curly turns around and begins to walk down the ramp.

“Okay fine!” Tzolka leans against the railing. He rolls his eyes then bites the corner of his mouth. “Ride the Stinger, and I’ll take you to where you’ll find the answer to all your questions.”

Curly nods then climbs back up the ramp. Tzolka gives his signature grin and does a full skip around the ride before strapping Curly in.

“Please keep all limbs within the seat at all times,” Tzolka says.

Curly feels a strong shake down their spine as the same music from within the forest plays. They shut their eyes tight and attempt to cover their ears. The girth of the harness that

went over Curly's head made reaching both their ears at once impossible. They scream as the ride rocks back and forth, gradually getting higher with each swing. The sets of seats begin to spin horizontally clockwise. The music becomes louder as the ride flips upside down. Curly opens their eyes, and for a moment, they could see the entire carnival. Before Curly could take any mental notes, the ride does a full rotation. It's then that the very seats Curly sits on start to spin vertically counter-clockwise. The music is abruptly overpowered by the echoing of a bell. The music dies and the ride starts to slow down.

"Tzolka? Get me off this." Through the movement of the ride, Curly looks to Tzolka who's standing on the grass in front of the ride. His face matches the white of the sky circle.

"It won't stop in time." The bell echoes its seventh stroke. "I'm sorry...I can't be caught out here."

Tzolka runs away, in the direction of the underground chambers. The ride comes to a full stop at the tenth stroke. Curly grunts and pushes against their harnesses in vain as the bell tolls. They spot a figure walking near the cotton candy cart from earlier.

"Hey! Help me! Get me out of this!" Unable to tell if the figure is a soul or fellow worker, Curly calls out to them. The bell's thirteenth stroke echoes. Silence falls on the carnival quicker than the darkness. Curly focuses their attention on the figure, hoping they'd be seen. The figure's head turns in Curly's direction, and they smile. The figure then screams as what appears to be a thick black vine wraps around their waist and pulls them into the darkness. Curly's smile fades and they freeze up. They pant, scanning their surroundings for any sort of noise. For a moment, Curly fears the music has deafen them. Their eyes adjusted to the lack of light, and Curly could see the black vines inch closer and closer towards them. They close their eyes,

praying this was only a dream. When Curly next opens them, they are in the hallway of the chambers, Zlight shutting the door behind him.

“Zlight.” Curly stands up to hug him. “Thank--”

“Save your praise!” He shoves them back onto the floor. “You might be new here, but that doesn’t permit you to act out of line!”

“I’m sorry.” Curly begins to crawl backwards, away from him. “Tzolka promised me answers.”

“Tzolka put you up to this?” Zlight’s posture softens and he looks down the hall to the room Curly shares with Tzolka. Zlight steps forward and pulls Curly onto their feet. He then shoves them into a nearby room and shuts the door.

This room appears to be the same as the one Curly was in before. It has the exact same layout and furniture, just rearranged differently. Instead of bunk beds, there are two separate single beds on either side of the room with a mirror directly between them. Zaurora sits on the floor, leaning against the wall beside the glass, shuffling a deck of cards in her hands.

“Zaurora! What’s going on here? Zlight just shoved me in here and left.”

“Shhh.” She puts a finger to her lips, looking at Curly through the reflection. “Sit with me.” She points to a spot across from her.

Curly walks over and sits on the spot she chose. They watch her hands carefully rearrange the cards.

“Tell me…” Without stopping her shuffle, she turns to me. “Do you believe in fate? That we are all destined for something.”

“What? Why does that matter?” Curly snaps. “I’ve been dragged through so much and haven’t been told a single thing about this place.”

Zaroura's eyes narrow and she flips her hair. Her eyes stare icicles into Curly, making their spine shiver.

"I mean...I do believe in it. However, I do feel that there are multiple fates. Each being dependent on the choices of an individual."

Zaroura relaxes her eyes before staring into the mirror once again, seeming pleased by Curly's answer.

Curly waits a few moments before speaking. "Earlier I saw you with that old lady, what happened there?"

"I gave her what she needed to pass."

"To pass? As in, death?"

"You mean to tell me no one here is doing their job?" Zaurora changes her attention to me once again. "Have you not even been told what this place is?"

Curly shakes their head. "The twins said something about Limbo, but this is a carnival in the middle of some dead forest."

"And show me where it says Limbo isn't a carnival in the middle of a dead forest." Her shuffling becomes faster. "The twins may be tricksters, but they do not lie."

Curly stays quiet, staring into her hazel eyes that seem to drown Curly's in our staring contest. "What is this place? The carnival."

"Judgment." Zaurora rifles the deck. "Place your hand on this mirror."

Curly is hesitant at first, remembering their vision from the last time they looked into one of these mirrors. They are unsure of whether to trust Zaroura, however, she has given them more answers than anyone else here. Curly places their palm on the mirror, a dark cloud swirls around

their palm until the entire mirror is foggy with it. Their pupils dilate wide, becoming locked with their reflection.

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The other side of the mirror shows a bathroom with a figure standing by the door. There's the sound of a lock before the figure turns around and Curly recognizes it to be them. They watch as their past self walks over to the bathtub and slides his hand along the surface of the water inside it.

Curly then steps into the tub, fully clothed. They lay there for what feels like hours. Curly reaches over to the nearby stand and picks something up. They can't quite see it because of the angle this memory is being viewed in, but Curly does see the light flash off of it. The sound of pain leaves Curly's lips.

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Curly's arms burn as the glow from their yellow markings fade.

"Upon death," Zaurora speaks, snapping Curly out of their trance. "Most souls are believed to follow a light that guides them to the proper place. However, many find themselves lost in darkness. It is the purpose of this carnival to aid lost souls to their proper place, and punish those who lead with corruption."

"But why are we here?" Curly asks

"To work, for this job is our punishment." Zaurora stops shuffling then places the deck between them. "Cut the deck, and reveal the card on the bottom of the half you hold."

Curly does as they're told, revealing the bottom card. There's a drawing of a man in a green tunic entitled The Fool.

"And so fate weaves its web." Zaurora looks to the mirror once more.

Curly sets the half of the deck down then notices the top card has a red smudge on it. They pick it up and lick their thumb with the intention to clean it for Zaurora. Curly's arm freezes as Zaurora grips it tightly. Using her free hand, she takes the card away from them, then puts the deck into its sleeve. Curly stares back at Zaurora, a look of fear on their face.

"Let go of me!" Tzolka screams from the hallway.

Curly and Zaurora stand up and quickly exit the room. In the hallway, they see the door to the outside has been left open.

"Not again." Zaurora runs up the steps and outside, the twins stepping out of their room.

"Go back to sleep you two." Curly attempts to push them back into their room. They both run around Curly and outside. "Don't!" Curly chases after them.

When they step outside, the strength of the wind nearly knocks Curly off their feet. They squint as the wind pairing with the lack of any light made Curly's vision strenuous.

"Help!" The twins let out a cry. Curly turns towards the sound and finds them huddling on the ground, a black vine looming above them. The wind shoves Curly against a table that they then use for balance. Using their hands to observe the table, they realize that it's the front of the dart game from earlier. Curly grabs two darts in each hand and runs to the twins. Before the vine could grab either of them, Curls stabs the dart into it. The darts go through the vine but appear to only stun it. The darts slowly fall off the vine, separating it like a zipper that was opening on one side then closing the same seam on the other. They hit the ground, holding strands of whatever material the vines are made out of. Curly quickly looks around for any interior to take shelter in.

"Over here!" Curly helps the twins up then pulls them into the carnival's Funhouse. The inside is pitch black. Curly scans the walls for any sign of a light switch. Finding none, they use the wall as a guide as they move forward. The twins whimper as they hold onto Curly's shirt.

“It’ll be okay, I’m here.” Ahead Curly could see a piece of fabric being illuminated by a flashing light. They pick it up and see that it’s Tzolka’s shirt. “Stay close to me.” Curly follows the flashing light to an open doorway.

Walking through, the three of them are now in an open room with a few candles for light. The walls and ceiling are lined with mirrors that reflect the light coming from the center of the wall across from the doorway. There, a single mirror flashes while Tzolka is kneeled in front of it.

“Tzolka.” Curly runs over to him. His eyes formed tears in the corners, and were glued to the mirror.

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The mirror shows Tzolka on his knees, but was not a reflection. Instead he was kneeling down in what appears to be a living room. He holds a knife in his shaking hands. Across from Tzolka there’s a man who smirks at him as he holds a gun to the head of a young boy with a gag in his mouth.

“Well?” The man removes the safety off the gun that was pointed to the boy’s head. “I’m waiting.”

Tzolka gulps then puts the tip of the blade to his stomach and gently presses in, drawing a little blood.

“Now now, that won’t save your brother.” The man presses the gun to the boy’s temple.

Tzolka’s knuckles turn white from his grip on the knife. He then lifts his hands up and swings them down, stabbing himself. Tzolka screams from the pain, coughing up a little blood.

“Good. Now repeat, until you can draw a fish with the holes.”

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With every stab, a different dot on Tzolka's body glows. Curly gives the area a quick scan before facing the mirror. They wrap Tzolka's shirt around their hand then punches the mirror, breaking it. The twins then run up and hug Tzolka tightly.

"Aiden…" He speaks. "I'll protect you."

"What's going on?!" Zlight runs inside. Zaurora follows, cupping her left cheek. Curly reaches over to check on her but she swats their hand away.

"Get off him!" Zlight starts pulling the twins off Tzolka. "He needs to be punished!"

"The Empress." Zaurora gasps, and everyone but Tzolka stands still and acknowledges her. The Empress appears to be the same age as Zaurora, if not a year or two older. Her physique is scrawny, and the parts of her body that can be seen lack any yellow markings.

"What are you all doing here past curfew?" She then notices the state that Tzolka is in. "What happened to Tzolka? Answered that first."

"Zlight showed Tzolka his death." Zaurora answers immediately, flinching at the scoff Zlight gave afterwards.

"We went over this Zlight."

"I'm aware. But he touched The Stinger. My ride. My rules. No one had to follow me."

The Empress focuses her attention on Zaurora who looks away, still covering her cheek. A vine grabs Zaurora's wrist and pulls her hand away to reveal a bruise. The Empress looks to Zlight for answers.

"Like I said, I did what I had to do. I enforce the rules of this place as the Knight."

"No. Not like this. I can't forgive this behavior Zlight, not again."

“You think I’m scared of some scrawny girl who couldn’t even hold up a crown?” Zlight scoffs and puts his hands behind his head. “Why should I follow you? I’m older. You don’t even have a marking.”

The Empress tucks her chin into her chest. “Forgive me,” She mutters. Her body limps up like that of a puppet. Her black hair suddenly springing to life and wrapping around Zlight’s arms and legs. The hair pulls him towards the Empress until he’s only a few inches away from her. She then looks up, her eyes turning full white. Her mouth opens, widening so far the top half of her face bent back. There is a neon yellow glow coming from down her throat. The yellow streak around Zlight’s neck floats off his skin and down the Empress’s throat. Zlight’s face turns pale as this happens. The Empress’s face returns to normal and her hair drops Zlight onto his knees. Roots grow around Zlight, wrapping around his body. The roots pull him into the ground, leaving only a pink carnation where he once was.

“We’re all actors here.” The Empress spoke to the flower before looking up at everyone else. “Zaurora, you’ll take over the duties of retrieving any new recruits. Zyx, Zax, escort Tzolka back home, care for him, and operate his games until he’s recovered.” She walks over to Curly, and they back up into a mirror.

“For our newcomer, you’ll entertain the guests as a jester that walks the grounds, making people laugh. You’ll be known from here forth as Zhul.” The Empress reaches over and Curly closes their eyes. They feel her fingers running through their hair. When she stops, Curly looks at themselves in a nearby mirror. There are bells and various trinkets in Curly’s hair that make noises as they move.

“And remember Zhul.” She grabs their arm and runs her fingers against the yellow streak on it. “Have fun.”

[If you chose to leave the twins at the hilltop keep reading]

Curly turns away from the twins and begins descending down the cliff. At the seventh stroke, they allow themself one final look, witnessing Zyxterr prying his brother's fingers off of him.

"I'm sorry," Zxterr backs away from Zaxterr and starts walking down the cliff.

"Zyx… Zyx please... don't go." Zaxterr crawls after him, screaming as he sees over the cliff edge. He immediately backs away. "Help me...please. Anyone." His words are drowned out by the tenth stroke. By the eleventh stroke, Zyxterr catches up to Curly and Zlight who are waiting at the entrance to the carnival. Near the left tower, there's a cellar door which Zlight opens. At the twelfth stroke, Curly takes one final look at Zaxterr on top of the cliff, before heading underground. After the thirteenth stroke, silence becomes Zaxterr's only company.

From underground, Curly was shown where they'd be staying. The cellar doors only lead to a single hallway with numerous doors on either side. There was one door that stood out, for it was at the end of the hallway instead of the sides. It was this room that Curly was told to enter. The room is plain, as it lacks any color or decor. By the entrance, there's a mirror built into the wall. The white tiles by the entrance become a white carpet the further into the room Curly walks. A set of bunk beds lay across from the mirror. To the right of these beds is a doorway that leads to a small bathroom.

Curly takes a few steps to the beds then stops as there's a loud thud on the ground above their room. They quickly look up and listen for any other sounds in vain. They could feel the warmth of their arms glowing. Curly takes another step before collapsing from a sudden sting in their legs. Their inner thighs burn as if they were gently kissed by the tip of a blowtorch. Curly lifts the leg of their shorts up, their fingers trembling from the pain. They bring their breathing to a slight pant as they see the familiar neon yellow streak. These streaks are much smaller, going

horizontally across both of their inner thighs. They look towards the mirror across from them. Foggy, Curly moves around to see if they could make out their reflection amongst the smudges. In the mirror, Curly sees their younger self, watching their parents from the living room.

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They both stood in the foyer, Curly's mother fully dressed with a suitcase. They run up to her, holding a stuffed bunny.

"Mommy!" Curly hugs their mom's waist tight, she never looks down. "Please, don't--"

Curly's mother hit their cheek with her elbow, knocking them off her. Curly's dad immediately kneeled down to where they hit the floor.

"You took my life away." Curly's mom looks down. Her eyes scowling at them. "I wish I never had you." Curly's mom left, leaving Curly who was reaching out for her.

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The burning on Curly thighs turns cold. They grunt and pull themselves onto the bottom bunk, scanning around the small area. They let out a hoarse sigh before resting on the bed, letting sleep overtake them.

"What should I draw today?"

Curly wipes the sand from their eyes and looks across the room into the mirror. In its reflection stands a young man who appears to be in early twenties. He has short gray hair that was combed up into a wave. Shirtless, the front of his body is covered with random neon yellow dots.

“Maybe a...goldfish?” He begins to connect the dots with a black sharpie, using the mirror to assist him. “And a ooh--” His eyes glance down, making contact with Curly’s reflection. He laughs then proceeds to finish his game of connect-the-dots.

“Who are you?” Curly sits upright on the edge of the bed. “What exactly is this place?”

“Ohhh you’re so cute. I remember when I first arrived, don’t worry you’ll soon answer that question yourself.” He puts on a plain gray tee, then a blood red vest around it. Turning towards Curly, he bows and offers his hand to shake. “The name’s Tzolka, it’s a pleasure to no longer be the newbie.”

“The others have named me Curly.” Curly pushes Tzolka’s hand away. “And I know this is limbo, and that we’re dead. I mean, what’s the deal with this carnival?”

“Ah, Curly is quite a funny name. Though, I wouldn’t break your back over it. You’ll be given a proper name once the Empress assigns your role.”

“The...who?”

“Our leader.” Tzolka walks towards the door.

“Leader?” Curly stands up and hurries towards the door. “What is this place?”

“Ah! You already asked my curly friend.” Tzolka walks up the steps to the cellar door. “And actions answer better than words.” Tzolka opens the cellar door and leads Curly above ground.

The sky had neither lightened or darkened a hue. The world seems to be the same as it was left. However, once Curly turns to enter the carnival, they see dozens of gray figures walking around. Each figure shows no distinguishing detail, and all seem to be carrying bundles of tickets that vary in size per person.

“I wouldn’t try touching any of them.” Tzolka places his hand on Curly’s shoulder. “You won’t be able to interact with any of them until you’re assigned a job.”

“A job?” Curly pushes Tzolka’s hand off their shoulder. “Doing what?”

“You see my dear, curly friend, everyone you see around you are souls that have wandered to our carnival. And as proud members of the Cheers establishment, it is our duty to aid them into the afterlife.”Tzolka leads Curly further into the carnival, his walk having a certain grace to it as if he’s skating on the ground. “Upon arriving, each spirit is given a certain number of tickets that they’ll use to access our wide variety of games and other attractions.”

Curly opens their mouth to speak but is quickly silenced by Tzolka.

“Now I know what you’re thinking. No one knows what high power is behind the tickets, or what may happen if a soul doesn’t move on. After all, the poor ones with limited tickets may not get to. What I can say is that through our generosity, we can aid these spirits in reclaiming their memories, and finding peace. Now doesn’t that sound rewarding?”

“No,” Curly says. “We’re supposed to spend eternity slaving away to no benefit. Where’s our peace?”

“Oh my dear, dear, curly friend. You just don’t understand.” Tzolka sits on top of the bench in a carnival game tent. “The less you question, the more fun you’ll have!” Tzolka falls backwards into the tent and it immediately lights up.

The tent seems to grow as it comes to life with bright white lights. The bench has a tapestry thrown across it as a makeshift cloth. There are several boxes on the bench containing blue and red darts. At the back of the tent is a wall with multicolored balloons.

"Come one, come all! Step right up, everybody!" Tzolka jumps on top of the table and cups his hands together to project his voice, as a crowd forms around him. "That's right! This be a game so miraculously easy, I bet my soul that even this seven year old I could do it!"

Tzolka tosses a dart to an open space, as if expecting someone to be standing there. The dart quickly falls to the ground, and with it, Tzolka's expression.

"What…" Tzolka scans the nearby area. He then looks to Curly and jumps off the bench. "Where are Zyxterr and Zaxterr? One of them is supposed to be here right now."

"I'm not their caretaker," Curly shrugs. "I thought less questions meant more fun."

"This is serious. One of the twins has to be here." The crowd starts to disperse. Tzolka focuses his attention back towards them. "People please, no need for that. The game has just begun! And what man would I be if I could not prove the sanctity of my own word?" Tzolka grabs a nearby dart and takes aim before throwing it. The dart pierces through two balloons at once. Tzolka receives a small applause before bowing to the smaller crowd and hopping back over the bench. "With just one dart, I took down two balloons! Just imagine what you might do with three."

Curly rolls their eyes before walking a few feet deeper into the carnival. The scent of warm, melted sugar lingers in the air. They spin in place until they can decipher its location. Curly pauses and faces a white cart with baby red filigree around the trim. From way behind the cart, they could see one of the smaller hills that surround the carnival. At the very top, Curly spots a figure that appears to be moving along the hill's edge. They start walking towards the cliff but stop. Through their peripheral vision, Curly notices Zlight standing at the entrance to the carnival. He doesn't notice them watching as he faces away and walks out of the carnival. Curly

looks back at the figure on the cliff who remains still. For a moment, they wonder if this person is staring back at them.

[If you choose to follow Zlight out of the carnival flip to page 51]

[if you choose to investigate the figure on top of the cliff keep reading]

Unafraid, Curly walks towards the cliff and closer to the figure on top of it.

As Curly approaches the base of the cliff, they lose sight of the figure. They quietly climb up the slope. As Curly reaches the top, they see Zyxterr's backside as he's kneeling in front of something.

"Hey Zyxterr." Curly walks closer towards him. "Tzolka's looking for you and--"

"How'd you know it was me?"

Curly stops moving and goes silent.

"You obviously can't see my scar from where you're standing. And yet, you knew it was me and not Zaxterr. How could you know that unless…" Zyxterr turns his head to look at Curly. The scar on the left side of his face is shown while his clean side stays hidden. His left eye droops, rolling into his skull. Curly can see strands of his optic nerve sway in the soft breeze. His pupil was gone, and yet Curly felt as if Zyxterr could still see him "Unless you know where my brother is."

Curly's body freezes several feet away from Zyxterr. Even their eyes could no longer move, as if their nerves became attached to that of Zyxterr's. Curly watches as he stands up, never once changing the position of any body part above his waist. Zyxterr starts to walk backwards, his smaller stature inching its way closer to Curly.

"Ah Zyx! There you are," Tzolka speaks.

Curly unfreezes, a gust of air leaving their lungs. Zyxterr blinks, his eye returning to normal the moment the lid opens. He turns his full body and gives a weak smile to Tzolka.

“Polka-dot.” Zyxterr sniffles and gives Tzolka a hug. “Zax and I were playing up here. And...and..now I can’t find him.”

“Hey hey, it’ll be alright. He’s probably around the carnival.” Tzolka ruffles Zyxterr’s hair and boops his nose. “We’ll get you some cotton candy, and then we’ll find him together. Go wait for me by the dart game, I’ll be right there.”

Zyxterr nods, wiping his nose with his sleeve before leaving. Tzolka then draws his attention towards Curly, his eyebrows furrowing.

“You might be new here, and it might be my job to show you the ropes, but I will not tolerate anything happening to them.” Tzolka says the last few words through his teeth. “If you so much as look at them weird, I’ll make Zlight look angelic.”

Tzolka begins walking down the cliff, leaving Curly alone. They take a moment to control their breathing. Before Curly walks down the hill, they look behind them to see what Zyxterr was kneeling by. In an open spot where even grass can’t seem to grow, another pink carnation sways with the breeze.

After descending the cliff and re-entering the carnival, Curly decides to continue exploring. As they do, Curly spots Tzolka and Zyxterr by the cart from earlier. Tzolka hands Zyxterr a cone of cherry red cotton candy, before giving Curly a side-eye that says to keep walking.

At the very center of the carnival, is a carousel. The top of this attraction starts off as a cylinder, then quickly curls and spirals into a tip where a light blue flag waves hello. The top also has various clown faces, all with the same makeup: a bright red nose and yellow diamond eyes.

Curly walks the circumference of it, and realizes that what they thought were various clowns, is actually the same clown re-painted across the top. The ride is vacant of any horses, the middle of it being completely barren. Pitch black, they approach slowly for fear that an invisible wall connects the top with the bottom. Curly's foot taps the bottom platform, and their hand enters the atmosphere of the ride. They kneel down and rub a finger across the floor. The black coating covering it feels like spray paint that chips away when Curly scratches it.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

Curly jumps onto both feet. Standing only steps away from them, Zyxterr nibbles his cotton candy. His attention towards the carousel.

"It belongs to the Empress, and she gets mad if someone touches it." Zyxterr turns his attention towards Curly. They gasp as doing so reveals his left eye is gone, leaving only an empty socket that leads to more darkness. "You don't want her mad."

Curly's breathing becomes short as they try to think of the right words to say. "I...I thought you were with Tzolka." They take a step back.

"Do you remember that belief that twins can connect to one another telepathically? People always find it to be nonsense." Zyxterr takes a step forward. "But those people aren't twins."

Each step Curly takes back, Zyxterr matches with one of his own.

"Zax and I, we could always see life through each other's eyes. Imagine that? Seeing the world through not one, but two sets of eyes." Zyxterr's grip on the paper cone tightens enough to snap the lower half off. "But now… all I see through Zax's eyes are shades of gray."

Curly feels their back hit a pole that's holding up a side to a tent. "Leave...me...alone!" Curly's shout stops Zyxterr's progression, and puts a pout on his face.

“You don’t want to be friends? Well, okay. Just remember that I…” Zyxterr puts emphasis on the last word as he tugs on the skin under the socket, stretching it. He then covers it with his hand, and moves it away just as quickly. When he does this, his missing eye is back in place. “...can still see you.”

Curly dashes into the tent, never looking to see if Zyxterr is behind them. Once they feel safe, Curly slows their pace and walks deeper into the tent. The tent is a mix of midnight blues and purples, with small white highlights that seem to represent stars. Curly reaches an opening where the tents don’t connect. They look up and see there are a total five tents that form a star. In the clearing Curly sees a young woman who appears to be in her early twenties. She’s sitting on one side of a tree stump. Her head is dyed a bright violet, shaved on the left side, and combed over the top of her head. She holds the hand of an old lady sitting across from her. She traces the woman’s palm with her index finger, before slipping something small and round into the old woman’s hand, closing it.. The woman smiles and a ring of fire forms around her. The old woman’s body becomes more transparent before floating away into the red sky. As the palm reader watches the woman’s soul float, Curly could make out a large neon yellow dot right under her chin.

Curly approaches cautiously while she stretches in place. Soon the two make eye contact, and she greets them with an eyebrow raised.

“You shouldn’t be here.” She takes a deck of cards out of her red vest and begins to shuffle them.

“Then tell me how to leave, and I’ll go,” Curly responds

“No, I mean you shouldn’t be here in my tent. I have work to do.” She sighs and arches her head to look past me. “Where’s Tzolka?”

“Avoiding me, that’s all you need to know.” Curly walks in front of her. “And all I need to know is why I’m here. Am I supposed to just wander aimlessly?”

“Informing you is not my job.” She stands up.

“Well I’m making it your job.”

The two of them spend the next few moments staring into each other’s eyes. Curly can see their reflection in her pupils, and is sure she sees her own in Curly’s. Their arms tremble the more they stare into her eyes, but Curly quickly crosses their arms to steady them. She then pulls back and sits down on one side of the tree stump. She gestures for Curly to sit across from her, and they obey.

“Should I even bother asking your name?”

“Zaurora. Now tell me…” Without breaking eye contact, she shuffles the same deck of cards from before. “Do you believe in fate? That we are all destined for something.”

Curly stays silent, responding with only a blink.

“I can’t help if you don’t play along.”

“I don’t see my answer as something that’ll affect the outcome of this.” Curly shivers, rubbing their arms. The once soft breeze becomes stronger, wrapping around Curly’s body like a hug that lacks any warmth. “Not like I have the memory to give you a proper answer anyway.”

Zaurora’s stare relaxes, and she sets the deck on the stump.

“Earlier I saw you with that old lady, what happened there?” Curly asks.

“I gave her what she needed to pass.”

That last word forms a thorn that pricks Curly’s lower spine. It tingles up their spinal cord, and they think back to when they first arrived here. To what the twins referred to this place as. “Limbo,” Curly whispers. “But this can’t be it. It’s a carnival in the middle of a dead forest.”

“And show me where it says Limbo isn’t a carnival in the middle of a dead forest.” Zaurora nudges the deck closer to Curly. “Cut the deck.”

Curly does as they’re told, nudging the half they cut back to her. “Why am I here?”

“For judgment.” Zaurora grabs the half and turns the cards upside-down. She bends them, and one by one the cards start to flng into the air. “Upon death most souls are believed to follow a light that guides them to the proper place. However, some find themselves lost in darkness. It is the purpose of this carnival to aid lost souls to their proper place, and punish those who lead with corruption. As the workers of this carnival, we aid in the process. For this job, it is our punishment.”

Curly watches as the cards float their way down, scattering around the tree stump. A lone card rests face up on the stump. There is a drawing of a man in a green tunic entitled The Fool.

“And so fate weaves its web.” Zaurora stands up.

Curly stands up, but before they can speak, a loud demonic screech erupts across the carnival. It sounds as organic as it is mechanical. As if a small animal got sucked into a vacuum cleaner.

“Impossible.” Zaurora quickly runs out of her tent. Curly quickly follows, nearly running into her as she stops only a few feet from the tent’s entrance. The carousel from earlier had begun to move.

Zaurora quickly runs over to it. Curly following close behind. When they arrive there, Tzolka and Zyxterr are standing in front of it. As the carousel turns, the spray paint gradually chips off. The ride spins faster, churning the pieces of dried paint into crumbs, and then a black dust that makes the air foggy. The fog made breathing difficult, forcing Curly to use their shirt as a filter. When the fog clears, everyone but Zyxterr is where they were standing.

“Zyx!” Tzolka runs up to the carousel that is now moving at an incredibly fast pace. Through the blur of its movements, the group can see Zyxterr on his knees, riding the carousel. “How do we get him off?”

“I don’t know. It belongs to the Empress.” Zaurora is now standing next to Tzolka. “I’ve never even seen her operate it.”

“Well I’m getting on it.”

Tzolka lunges his body at the moving contraction, his body freezing in the air right in front of it. Zaurora screams, as Curly looks closer at Tzolka’s body. Around his waist, a thick black vine grips him tight enough to hold him in mid-air.

“Let him ride it.” A voice speaks from the direction that the vine appears to be coming from. Curly stares at the dark space as a figure comes out from the shadows. Slender, she has long wavy black hair that reaches her lower back. Several strands of her hair seem disconnected, as if they have a life of their own.

“The Empress,” Zaurora gasps. “Have pity, Zyx doesn’t know--”

“Shhhh.” The Empress puts a finger to her lips, a strand of her hair shoots forward and wraps itself around Zaurora’s face, covering her mouth. “Just watch.”

Curly turns their attention from the Empress to the carousel. The top of it releases a bright white light. Other colors begin to fill the interior of this light, and form shapes. These shapes take the form of various images that display an old building in the middle of a field.

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In the field around the building, children of all ages frolic. By the house, a nun is kneeled in front of two children.
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“The land at the cliffside is unstable. It can give way at any moment,” she speaks. “It’s very important you both stay away. Next time you're caught, it’ll be bedtime with no supper. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes mother Tracy.” The line is spoken by both children at once.

The nun stands up then walks away, revealing the two children she was scolding. If the scars were to be lifted off the twins, Curly is almost certain that’s how they would look.

The image fades away, and a new one replaces it. This one now shows a cliff with only grass growing from the ground around it.

“Come on Chris!” One of the twins runs to the cliffside and spreads his arms to feel the wind. The other twin joining him. The two of them spend the next few moments throwing pebbles over the edge and hearing the different sounds they make when hitting the ground.

“We should get going Steve, they’ll start looking for us soon.”

“Just one more throw.” Steve winds up his arm before launching the pebble. At that moment, the cliff breaks underneath the twins. Their screams echo as they fall, followed by a loud thud, then silence as each twin lays lifeless on their sides, facing one another.

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The ride slows to a complete stop. Only then does the Empress free both Tzolka and Zaurora. They both look in horror at the sky where the light had once been. Zyxterr sits on both knees on the ride, weeping. With the spray paint gone, the body of the carousel is revealed to be made of multiple mirrors. The Empress steps onto the ride and walks over to Zyxterr, taking a knee in front of him when she does.

“Please… let me join him… “ Zyxterr sobs, and looks up at the Empress “Let me be with Zax.”
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“Oh Zyxterr.” The Empress cups Zyxterr’s cheek in her hand. “You don’t deserve that.” She then stands up and walks off the ride.

“You killed Zaxterr?” Tzolka causes the Empress to stop and face him.

“The less you question, the more fun you’ll have.” The Empress smiles before turning her attention to Zaurora. “Thank you for always picking up the slack.”

Zaurora nods in response, her attention still focusing on the sky. Zaurora cups her hands over her mouth and flinches, as if she reheard the noise the twins made when they hit the ground.

“And for our newcomer.” The Empress turns her attention towards Curly. “You’ll entertain the guests as a jester that walks the grounds making people laugh. You’ll be known from here forth as Zhul the Fool.” The Empress reaches over and Curly closes their eyes. They feel her fingers running through their hair. When she stops, Curly peeks over her shoulder to look at themself in the carousel mirror. There are bells and various trinkets in their hair that make noise as Curly moves.

“And remember Zhul.” She grabs Curly’s arm and runs her fingers against the yellow streak on it. “Have fun.”

[If you chose to follow Zlight out of the carnival keep reading]

Curly focuses their attention back to the carnival entrance, turning their body to face it. Sneaking past Tzolka's tent, Curly exits the carnival and follows Zlight.

Silence grows stronger the farther Curly walks away from the carnival. They exchange glances between the ground and Zlight, careful to not step on any branches while keeping a safe distance from him. Curly continues this pattern as Zlight steps down a small incline, leaving Curly's sights. They rush over, stopping at the tree that resides right before the incline. At the bottom of it, Zlight could be seen moving ahead. Through the low branches, Curly could see that Zlight is heading towards the lake. They shift their hand on the trunk of the tree, but freezes as they feel something squishy. Looking towards it, the trunk appears to be the same as the others Curly encountered. However, this one possesses a unique marking from the rest. The marking seems to be a thick curve, like a thin pair of lips smiling. On either side, there are small open triangles that seem to bracket the curve. Curly moves closer to the marking, when the curve suddenly opens, revealing a human eye. The white pupil moves quickly as if to scan the area as Curly jumps back. They lose their footing and roll down the small incline.

Groaning, Curly slowly stands up and dusts their clothes off. They look ahead and see that Zlight is no longer nearby. What they do see is a tree shaking, accompanied by a whacking noise. Approaching the noise, Curly finds Zlight to be causing it as he repeatedly slashes his sword across the tree.

"It wasn't my fault." Zlight whispers before giving the tree another slash. "It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault!" He screams before hitting the tree so hard a branch falls off.

Curly steps forward, a twig snapping beneath their feet. They dart behind a nearby tree as Zlight looks up. A few moments of silence pass, before Zlight breaks it with a heavy sigh.

“Am I supposed to act as if it’s just an animal?” He calls out. “No one would be here except you, and I, Curly.”

Curly walks out from behind the tree with their hands up.

“Put your hands down, I’m not mad.” Zlight swats the air to gesture downward. “Why aren’t you back at the carnival?”

“I wasn’t really feeling the whole idea of whatever show the others are putting on.” Curly puts their hands behind their head. “What about you?”

“Same reason.” Zlight walks over to the lakeshore. He kneels down at the spot right where the small waves stop and retreat. Curly approaches and watches as Zlight gently pets a pink carnation with the side of his finger.

Curly looks around, recognizing this spot from where they first woke up. “That… wasn;t there before.”

“So you do pay attention.” Zlight stands up and walks forward until he’s shin deep in the lake. “Every so often, a new one appears. I’ve spent God knows how long exploring this place. I’ve mapped out every one of those fuckin’ flowers to see if there’s any pattern, but nothing.”

“But there must be something. Some secret exit.” Curly moves closer until their shoes touch the lake. “What if we go north of the carnival? Straight through the forest.”

Zlight tilts his head back and starts to laugh. “Anything you can name, was done. If you walk deep enough in the forest, you’ll find a fog. Enter it, and you’ll find yourself right back at the carnival’s entrance.” Zlight shakes his head. “No, the only place left to explore is this lake.”

Curly watches Zlight step deeper before beginning to follow him.

“Oh no,” Zlight stops. “You’re not coming with me. I don’t need the literal dead weight.”

“Well, it’s not like you can do anything to stop me. And I don’t think drowning is a fear I should have.” Curly dives under the water and begins to swim down. A moment later, they feel Zlight grab their arm. He gestures for the two of them to stay close before continuing to swim. The lack of any real sunlight gave the appearance that the lake would be pitch black. However, that was only the surface level, as under the water appears more foggy. Curly and Zlight could see in front of them, but their vision is limited to just a couple of feet. It’s as if the two had dived under the water while wearing shades.

Zlight pauses for a moment, causing Curly to do the same and look back towards him. In an instant, Zlight is knocked back, a trail of bubbles indicating the speed of whatever knocked him back. Curly looks around in every direction until they spot a shadow in the water. The shadow grows darker before appearing right in front of them. Curly quickly dives down to dodge it. Another shadow hits them from below, causing them to release a muffled yelp. Curly spins, and his hit by another shadow before they can compose themself. The shadow moves Curly until their back hits the wall of the lake. Curly hears a muffled crack coming from the wall their back hit, then feels metallic disks hit their upper body. Curly opens their eyes and sees the shadow clearly. In front of them is a horse with algae growing from several cracks along its snout and body. Curly pushes against its thrashing body, their fingers digging into the horse’s cold yet firm exterior. It neither felt to be completely organic or mechanical. Curly pushes at the horse’s neck, holding its head still for a moment. Holding its head sideways, they see the horse’s eye open and resemble the same one before. From closeup, Curly could see the white pupil surrounded by red veins that seem to crack through the iris.

Curly snaps out of this daze when Zlight grabs their arm. He points to the buckles on the horse’s harness in front of Curly. Zlight then presses his hands on the muddy wall of the cave

before pushing the horse with his legs; back enough that Curly could use their arms freely to start unbuckling the harness. Zlight's hands wipe a patch of mud off the wall revealing it to be a mirror. Curly looks at Zlight who looks in fear at his own reflection. The patch starts to glow, along with the yellow marking around his neck. In a few seconds, the patch shows flashes of different moments; each appearing as some sort of photograph. From what Curly can see, the still images show Zlight driving with a woman in the passenger's seat. In the back seats is a young boy. The next image shows Zlight at a funeral. The woman is there in a wheelchair, but the boy isn't. The next image shows the woman hunched over the bathtub, blood dripping from her arms. The next image shows Zlight hanging from a noose off a tree branch.

The flashing and glowing both end, and Zlight immediately swims towards the surface, leaving Curly behind. They look at the horse who is still thrashing but slowly sliding off, and undo the last few buckles on its harness. The horse slips out of its harness and sinks to the bottom as they swim up.

When Curly reaches the surface, they make a beeline for the shore where Zlight is just arriving. As they arrive at the shore, Zlight is already several feet deep into the forest.

"Hey!" Curly rushes out of the water and chases after Zlight.

The two jump over roots and duck under several branches as they deviate from the usual path. Curly is able to gain some ground as Zlight nearly trips, stopping himself from trampling a pink carnation. When Zlight does stop, he falls to his knees in front of the carnival's entrance. Curly stands hunched over behind him, panting slightly.

"What the hell was that?" Curly stands straight. "You just left me! I could have been crushed."

"It wasn't my fault," Zlight whispers.

“What?” Curly steps closer to Zlight who continues to whisper.

“Maria… don’t go. I can’t do this alone.”

“Zlight?” Curly reaches towards him.

“Not now...not that Dwight is--” Zlight gasps as Curly’s hand touches his shoulder. A second later he sweeps his leg across the ground, knocking Curly to their back. Zlight steps on their chest and raises their sword up ready to strike. Curly looks up at Zlight who has tears streaming down his cheeks. He shakes before dropping his sword and stepping off Curly’s chest. He leans against the nearby tower and slides down it, a carnation nearby. Curly looks between Zlight and his sword, contemplating for a moment if he should go for it.

“Those images,” Curly begins. “Back at the lake. What were they?”

“The events that lead to me being here.” Zlight wipes a tear with the collar of his jacket.

“What happened to you?”

“There was a crash, I was driving.” Zlight shook his head. “I didn’t crash! They crashed into me. Those people put Maria in a wheelchair. They took him away... my son.” Zlight starts to choke on his words.

“But what happened, it wasn’t your fault then.”

“It was too late!” Zlight slams his fist against his thigh. “Maria had the right idea. She should be here. She...she is here.” Zlight gently pets the nearby carnation with the side of his finger.

The familiar toll of the bell sounds off, haunting the once quiet atmosphere. Zlight stands up and begins walking towards the cellar door. Right as Curly is about to join him, they feel a drop of water hit their cheek and look up. At the bottom of the sign that holds the carnival’s

name, is the eye from before, staring right at them. Curly becomes paralyzed as the eye blinks and disappears.

“Curly!” Zlight gestures for them to hurry up. They run towards him. Once there, the two head underground as the bell takes its toll.

Once through the cellar door, Curly and Zlight enter the hallway that leads to everyone’s bedrooms. There the two see Tzolka pacing up and down the hallway. In the middle there’s a woman with hazel skin who appears to be in her early twenties, shuffling a deck of tarot cards. Her head is shaved on one side, her purple hair combed over the other, and ending in a wave. When Tzolka sees Zlight and Curly, he stops pacing and walks towards them.

“Where have you been?” Tzolka asks.

“I was showing Curly around the carnival. You know, basically doing your job. We scored a few tickets with the dunk tanks.” Zlight walks past Tzolka and stops in front of the young woman. She stops shuffling her cards as he speaks quiet enough that only she can hear. “The horses are in the lake.”

“I couldn’t do my job because the twins weren’t around,” Tzolka snaps back. “You were with them last, where are they?”

“I’m right here.” Zyxterr appears behind Curly, causing them to jump into the wall. He’s looking down at the floor, water dripping from his face.

“Zyxterr!” Tzolka runs over and kneels down beside him. “You’re soaking wet. Where’s Zaxterr?”

Curly watches as Tzolka removes his shirt and starts to dry Zyxterr with it. They jump when they feel a hand on their shoulder. They calm down when they see it’s the young woman from before. From up close, they notice she has a neon yellow dot at the bottom of her chin, and

a much bigger one at the top of her head, peeking out from under her hair. Curly looks past her for a moment for Zlight, but he's already entered his room.

"You must be Curly. I am called Zaurora. Given the extenuating circumstances..." She gestures to Tzolka and Zyxterr. "You'll be sharing a room with me for the time being. This way." Zaurora leads Curly to a nearby door on the right and opens it.

"They were in the lake," Zyxterr speaks. Curly freezes and looks at him. Zyxterr lifts his head up, revealing an empty left eye socket. A pitch black spot that stands out on his neon yellow half, water dripping out of it. Zyxterr blinks twice, his eye appearing in the socket. "I saw them."

Zaurora quickly pushes Curly into her room, locking the door behind her. Curly does a quick scan of her room, and sees it's identical to the one they were in before. For a moment. Curly questions if it is the same room from before.

"Have a seat wherever you like, sleep whenever you'd like." Zaurora walks towards the mirror and sits on her hip beside it. Curly sits on the edge of the bottom bunk and watches as she reaches into her jacket and takes out a neat stack of white tickets. Zaurora takes two tickets from the stack and places them on the mirror. The mirror glows and begins to show images of Zaurora with another young woman who appears to be the same age. Unlike before with Zlight, these aren't still images and appear more like a film. Zaurora and this other lady are sitting by a tree stump, laughing and holding hands. They seem to be pointing at clouds above them, sharing a kiss in the shade. The image fades as the glow dimmers. The two tickets crumble to dust and the mirror returns to normal. Zaurora smiles and places a tarot card with a red smudge over her heart.

"What was that?" Curly's question breaks Zaurora out of her trance.

"Did Tzolka not tell you of the tickets? It was his one job."

“He mentioned the tickets, but never said they would be used for anything like this.” Curly walks over to the mirror before sitting beside it, across from Zaurora. “Let alone by us.”

Zaurora takes two tickets and slides them across the floor to Curly. “Use them, you’ll thank me after. Just be careful to not touch the mirror directly.”

Curly thinks back to the lake, and remembers what happened when Zlight touched the mirrors that lined the lake like one-way glass. For a moment, they consider not heeding Zaurora’s warning and touching the mirror directly. However, they place the tickets on the mirror instead. Curly feels the warmth of his yellow marks as they glow along with the mirror. Images of a younger Curly in their preteens start to show. The images show Curly sitting in front of a vanity. Behind them, their mother is brushing the knots out of their shorter hair. Curly’s mom brushes hair off their shoulder before giving their nose a boop. The image fades and the tickets crumble.

“What? No no that can’t be it. Mom!” Curly touches the mirror. A flash appears that shows Curly’s mom pushing them to the ground. She looks at them in disgust before walking away. Curly trembles as the image fades. Had it not been for their reflection, Curly might have never realized they were crying.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.” Zaurora pauses to examine Curly. “It is our duty to help the spirits who come to us. Our reward are these images.”

“It’s not the same.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s not the same!” Curly stands up and starts to walk around the room. “What’s the point of seeing these? To convince us that this job...this place is worth being trapped to?”

“We work, so that we can remember these moments.”

“Bullshit!” Curly slams his fist onto the wall. “Seeing these doesn’t help us remember. It just reminds us of the one thing we can never forget. That we’re here, and they’re there.”

Zaurora stands up slowly, watching Curly closely. She remains silent and starts to shuffle her deck of tarot cards.

Curly looks down at their fist as they open and close it. They then look towards Zaurora who avoids making eye contact. “Don’t you think so too?” Curly asks her. “Wouldn’t you rather find a way back to your partner than sit hit and watch memories on loop?”

“Of course I want that! There’s nothing I want more than to be with her again. But even if I could return back there...” Zaurora shakes her head. “She wouldn’t be there waiting.”

Curly watches as Zaurora steps closer to the mirror, before placing her hand on it. Images of Zaurora alone at a funeral start to flash. She moves closer to the open casket. It’s her partner who’s lying in it. The next flash shows Zaurora kneeling beside the casket. She holds her partner’s dead hand in one of her hands, and a gun in the other. She aims the gun under her chin before pulling the trigger. The images fade, and Zaurora removes her hand from the mirror.

“I...I’m sorry. I didn’t...” Curly attempts to speak, but their words get trapped behind the knot in their throat.

“It is not my job to help you understand. Nor is it to protect you.” Zaurora walks over to the bunk beds. “But know this. The answers you seek are shared.” Zaurora climbs into the top bunk and doesn’t say another word.

Curly follows her lead and climbs into the bottom bunk. They drift into sleep moments later.

As soon as Curly wakes up, they scan the room. Climbing out of bed, they check the top bunk and see that Zaurora is gone. Curly walks over to the mirror and stares at their reflection.

Their curly black hair has a lump on one side that they quickly flatten with their hands. Curly reaches a hand to the mirror but stops before touching it. They take a deep breath and pull their hand back before walking away from the mirror, and out of the room.

"Oh good, you're awake." Zlight is leaning against the wall of the corridor. The cellar door is wide open. "Follow me." He starts to walk up the steps to leave.

"So are you my newest caretaker?" Curly follows Zlight up the steps and out of the underground.

"I wouldn't call myself that, but seeing as you're not too favored by anyone else, I'd say yes." Zlight closes the cellar doors behind them. "I have to admit, it's nice not being the most hated for once."

Curly rolls their eyes before looking around at the carnival grounds. Their eyes widen at the barren fields and carnival attractions. "Where are all the souls?" Curly looks to Zlight for an answer but he's already started walking north. "Did you hear me? Where are we even going?"

"Here I was thinking you trusted me after our bonding yesterday," Zlight sighs. "The carnival isn't visited by souls when there are more important things that must be done first."

"What important things?" Curly looks at a carousel they walk past. The inside seems to be covered in black spray paint, and is missing the horses to ride. Curly freezes, and Zlight's speech becomes muffled to them. They remember their trip to the lake, back to the horses that were both mechanical and alive. They snap from their trance when Zlight places his hand on Curly's shoulder.

"Don't ask questions if you're not going to listen." Zlight pulls Curly along, continuing their walk north. "As I was saying. We still don't know what happened to Zaxterr, and there is also the matter of assigning you your role to the carnival."

“My role?” The two of them arrive at a wide building at the northmost point of the carnival. The building is a dark navy blue, with a muted yellow filigree along the rooftop, and bubble letters that match this color spelling the word “Funhouse.” It looks as if it was uncared for for years. Just a child of the carnival left to starve where no one would find it. The entrance appears to be made of these two long black curtains that hang from spikes at the top of the doorframe, that point downward. If the funhouse was alive, this would be its mouth. At the steps the others are sitting, clearly waiting for us. “And who decides my role? All of you?”

Zlight shakes his head as the others stand up. “The Empress.”