

De la Salle College *One School, One Book* Annual Writing Competition

2021 WINNERS

6th year and Overall winner Darragh White

A HEROIC MONOLOGUE

The sun rises, but not for me. I can see it looming over the terraces, creeping its blinding head around, burdening me with another day. I feel Buster's tail wagging as I my conscience reconvenes with the theatre production of my dreams, Trying to decipher a true meaning to my mother eating the moon with a knife and fork. We Roll out of bed into our slippers whilst maintaining our nightwear. I always wear my tweed newsboy cap as you said I looked 'Gentleman like'. The staircase creek acts as my sole companion on this journey through our countryside manor. I've always detested that grand table, It's 6 victorian accomplices to this cruel joke act as jester's parading around the kitchen, Taunting my cold cornflakes and Blistering cup of tea. I was never a huge fan of vintage decor, It made me feel old and decrepit but you were adamant on it, Saying that some of these plates were so old that they made me look young. Y'know, Sometimes, When I feel on the verge of joining you and my parents in a tailed cloudy oasis, I feel you watching, Whispering in my ear, 'Just one more day, One more day for the grandchildren to have someone to visit during the summer holidays'. I've taught about it alot. Ending it all, But I can never bring myself to facing you. I feel as though if I took that leap of faith, You'd burden me with an eternity of Guilt, And I don't think Jesus sells 'i'm sorry for killing myself' flowers in the Kiosque of heaven. So, For now, Just one more day.

I do have odd moments of joy in my days of spite. The exuberance Buster emanates once his eyes catch a hold of the walking lead brings a wry grin to my wearing face. He doesn't recognize the wretchedness of my mind or my nihilistic imbalance of emotion, All he sees is an opportunity to roam, Untamed by the confines of your wilting garden. I still try to maintain your green thumbled legacy but i can't seem to nurture the tulips, It's almost as if they've noticed the change in management and have gone on strike against the brash and buffoon like owner. The Radishes however? Forget about it, They've flourished under my tutelage and I can see a soup brewing in their near distant future. Everyday at the beginning of Buster and I's morning maurade I slowly courtesy through the garden, Spectating the

plants and crops, Investigating for any noticeable development. It's like raising a mute child who only asks for sunlight, oxygen and regular attention. I wonder if Michelangelo experienced the same pride whilst passing David. I become embroiled in bliss as I open the front door for Buster to gallop through the garden trying to sniff out any foreign traces of urine, This is almost always swiftly followed by my hips sudden realisation that it has been partially replaced by a chunk of metal. After the surgery you said I had the legs of the terminator and the upper body of Sarah Connor. That comment always seemed to penetrate my tough skin as it implied that I had somehow developed boobs. You always knew I was insecure about the size of my retired pectorals and used it to your full advantage. I don't bother to change out of my pinstripes of silk gravitace as I highly doubt people are seeking fashion advice from an aged misanthrope. The Cobblestoned wall seems to deteriorate by the day, Slowly creeping closer and closer to the soil. The wooden gate still holds strong, maintaining it's solid shape and recognising it's valued role in the garden.

Our kingdom of solitude is hidden to the untrained urban eye, Buried deep between the weeds and fairy forts. Only bothered by one gravel road which forbids most modern machinery's journey due to its tenuous size. But your Fiat 500 treated this gravel like a freshly produced Dublin road. That Fiat 500 acted as my sigal for feast for a plethora of years. I could hear it's gentle hum sifting through the gravel and it's wheels torque as a beacon for freshly produced products from the local market. Buster's keen ear also peeked at the gentle song of your nourishing automobile which was joined by an out roar of twinging barks that funnelled it's way to you. I haven't touched it since you left. I don't want to either.

I enjoy the walks we go on, They take up time, They allow me to see the world from a safe yet grimacing distance. I vary the route but I always end up at the beach. Every even day is through the woods and every odd day through the town. The town bothers me, It's the sympathetic looks I get from people, I know they mean well but it feels like a never ending reminder of you. It's not like I want to forget you but the sympathy must end. I can't, I can't stand the eyes tracing me through the shop. I can't talk to anyone in this town without them mentioning you in some shape or form. I remember one Sunday afternoon, I mosied into the old tavern to watch the match and the comfort of everyone's attention being on the screen soothed me, The noise acted like a blanket of social anonymity. I was able to finally fully submerge myself into the world of drunken stupors. It's nice to forget every once in a while. Don't take that the wrong way, I love you and all it's just, Perilous. Everyday, Waking up to see that side of the bed, Empty. I still haven't emptied your wardrobe. I don't want to see anyone walking around in your clothes, Mimicking your nonsensical style.

The beach, where sand meets water. The great blue abyss in conjunction with tiny demons cursing your footwear with a monsoon of clatterings. I have one love left on this earth, My bench. It's planks of wood leave an imprint but my god that feeling, I'd refer to it as a Vegan's

version of ecstasy. Sure it can be uncomfortable to the untrained tush but by god does it bode well with a book and cup of tea. It's a couple of yards from the ice cream shop where I can observe and scrutinize people's Gelato gumtions. I mean chocolate? c'mon now, It's too fattening on the stomach and it just resides in your mouth for a couple of hours until your taste buds require a lifeboat from the titanic known as Chocolate tiramisu. Mint is also an international war crime especially with chocolate. You know this but I stick with vanilla, Straight down the middle. No gimmicks, No hullabaloo, Just Vanilla Ice cream. I don't need to be sold on this sugary haven, Just hand over the goods and let this business transaction be over with. I've seen the inflation over the years, It's basically The wall street crash minimized to an ice cream shop. When we first came here the average price of a double scoop was 2 euro, Now? 3.50, I think the moment your casket was wheeled away they jacked up the prices out of common courtesy.

I can still picture your face the moment you realised there was an Ice cream parlour in our area, It was like you had found God at the bottom of that raspberry cone. You knew the raspberry choice bothered me but you went ahead and bought it anyway, I think you did that out of pure spite. I told you a vanilla cone but you saw the pink and were just dragged into the realm of ubiquitous delights. What did I do to deserve raspberry? I've tried tracing back what I did that day to deserve raspberry and I think it was the fact that I watched the latest episode of whatever show we were watching without you. I think you held that grudge for about two weeks.

1st year Winner Bernardo Hogemann

Lost without Courage.

A short story.

I am lost. No. I lost myself.

0 - Prologue.

The vast, desolate landscape shrieks in a form of whistle.

An almost mute, remote legacy of what it once was.

No train of thought, no will to break, no life to save.

An ocean of dark encompasses the sky as the night and it's lights flicker by, the waves sway and dissipate along the traffic of currents, fed by the stream of the river. I lay there.

The waves push me, the streams move me and I feel as if paralysed. The ocean engulfs me as if one of its own, not violent, not calm, no will.

As the water around me becomes darker, and darker, I look up at the lights in the sky, fading, fading rapidly along their constellations, apart from each other through millions of eons.

I ponder, I ponder at the question of if someday I'll reach those, those skylights high in the unknown of the sky, the vast landscape that it never was, the unexplored bastion of millions of queries, questions, that just float on by, that at this moment, cannot help but flicker, and show themselves in the sky.

The descent continues, continues through this atmosphere of chill, as my consciousness drifts and sways.

I close my eyes, I close my eyes to remember the times, the times which the waves grew still and the wind around me influenced the grey-ash clouds that amble on by.

No. Those times, too afar, and the present, too near at hand.

I have no courage, no courage to swim, swim and resurface to walk upon that path.

No courage to face what it once was, no courage to embrace what I once was.

I am lost. No. I lost myself.

1 - If.

It is cold.

You can feel it, it sparses throughout your body with an undesired shock. Your nose rose-red from the chill, breathing heavily as a result.

You feel as the thaw in your nose begins to freeze, aching with its burden.

You continue walking upon a path forsaken by ice, a path of agape mazes which sprawls into the depths of your mind. You, many queries at hand, question where this path will lead, even though you already know the destiny and faith which cannot be changed, the vignette of destiny which closes in , and cannot be stopped.

Silence. Silence in this sterile, desolate and arid plane which you walk upon.

If.

If you'd only withdraw from this path which you walk by, a sign of light might pass on by.

If only you'd stop, if only you'd stop at your tracks, terminate your resolve, set part from this melancholy and disconsolate tempest of snowfall and thaw.

The burst and squall of wind impales and strikes your very heart, your very compassion to walk, walk in this frigid, glacial inferno that combusts with squalls and tempests of gale.

If only you'd held. Held on to the only path you had.

2 - Leap.

Forget; We as people forget, we forget what it is to be just.

Jump; We as people, sometimes forget to jump.

Hate.

Hate we learn. Hate we never forget.

“We’ll be alright... We’re alright...”

You rise to consciousness. Your eyes begin to steadily open, as your sight is gradually retaken, the encompassing atmospheric ambience fades into your ears.

You come to the sense of touch, as you feel what appears to be a frigid, dense object, held by the palm of your hand.

You begin to sense the heat, of which is pulsating nearby, in almost waves, the heat seems to be gradually decreasing, as you feel the kindle blaze that is upon your body fade, fade slowly.

The roof looks as if rugged, and primordial, its olden, ancient stone, almost look as if casted and embedded with dense and rich materials.

The light from the kindle waves and sways as it reflects from the material and structure of the cavern. Stalactites, generated through years, centuries and millennia, still standing in this cavern of yore.

Stalagmites, which encompass the soiled, stained stone floor, almost as if the is given landscape, with mounts and hills of stalagmites, with rugged, defined and compelling form.

The pillars, formed from the combination of twain, looked as if a monolith, standing upon the ground.

You attempt to stand.

Every muscle, every joint, every bone twitches, and spasm as you begin to stand.

Any will, any thought of action negated by the conflict and voices which screech with vast, reverbing echoes as you begin to contract.

You fall. The ground responds and echoes with what seemed to be a blaring thump, as it reverbs throughout the cave, radiating with a wave, displacing the atmosphere, and the cave’s ecosystem as a whole.

Creatures, which hadn't made their appearance, emerged from the unknown of the unexplored shadows, they crawl, almost in a synchronized formation which expanded and developed as insects and indescribable organisms fled, and scrambled to their perspective of safety.

Your back, agonised with a current of pain, lies in the scrumptious floor of the cave once again.

You glare at the light-yellow light, still afire with decreasing amounts. You notice a figure. A shadow. A person.

It's back almost curved, its form almost cursed and it's presence places a burden in your conscience.

Question and queries influx your mind, but no answers to be given, only fright.

The creature, the person, begins to move and as it does you begin to shake, vibrate and quiver, as you try to move, run, sprint and never look back and away from this nightmare.

The creature, alarmed by your motions, begins to approach.

You stop.

You breathe.

You accept fate, for thy has no courage to face what is upon you, and just as what brought thy here, will end you.

You glare as the creature's face enters your sight.

You stare at the void, and the void stares back.

Tears flow from your eyes as you close them.

Your heart beating rapidly, almost as a motor.

You sense the dense object which the palm of your hand held.

You grasp, you screech and you shout. The blood, the pain and anguish flows through your arm as you begin to move it.

With collective strength, you swing, you swing with the force of all your body, all focused on the point of your arm.

You strike.

You stop, it looks.

Your hand is encompassed by blood. Your flesh is visible and bone exposed.

Your arm drops, and a great noise is created as a result. Your eyes feel heavy, and as the vignette of dark closes in, the last thing heard, was,

“We’ll be alright... We’re alright...”

3 - Wish

I drag it.

I drag it through the soil, the snow and spikes. I drag it through this highway of regrets and confusion.

It seems lost.

It walked upon a path unfinished, before collapsing and crashing into the white-powder substance which stays atop the land and continues to fall, almost endlessly and slowly to the ground.

I glared at it for an undetermined amount of time. It’s arm, purpled by the cold and its nose red-rose from the chill.

I knew I had to do something, something to save it. I didn’t know what, why, how or when, but I knew action should be taken.

But, at that very moment, I’d wished it’d died.

I found a home, a sanctuary upon this cursed, forsaken land, of simple minded creatures, chaos and blizzard, only to give shelter to a soon to be corpse.

It slept and stayed motionless, as if in a coma. I started a fire with some wood I'd foraged. It burned with passion, passion until it steadily, and slowly came to an end.

It awoke sometime after I lit the fire. It stared at its surroundings and the roof of the sanctuary for some time, before attempting to move, leading it to shudder, tremble and shake, as for it was stricken with chill and cold from the outside.

It tried to ambush me. It attempted to attack me with a rock it'd held while asleep, even though it was unaware of its injuries from the glacial temperature, he clawed the rock and swung.

It stopped, and fell to sleep once again.

4 - A Shadow and a Heroic Villain.

The end.

I, already awake, stared into the abyss that was the edge.

I looked back upon the path it'd trailed, and dragged me, which was almost linear and direct footprints left behind.

I pondered as to why I'd strayed so far from the path which was built for me, the path which people before me walked upon, the path built from sweat and tears that I'd decided to steer from, to demolish.

If I'd only stayed, If I'd only stayed at my ocean of thought, If I'd been a coward that I was before, if I'd let the waves influence me, push me and pilot me to the end, to the finish line, then maybe, maybe this hellish, inferno of mystery, of confusion would have ended.

I wish that I'd died, I wish that I'd just been left behind, I wish that the corpse found of me would decay, be buried away and never found or spoken of in such a way which made it heroic.

In these events, in this story of mine, I'd been nothing but a mere Villain, one of hate, one of desire, one who'd striven for a resolution, a happier ending.

I walked upon that path with nothing but anger, anger which was my fuel.

I'd attempted to kill my savior, to kill a shadow, a shadow which was a mark of the past, one which should've avasted, should've retracted, retracted from saving a villain, which was nothing but a selfish, hating, animated corpse, roaming this land.

I'd shed a tear, I'd cried upon its sight, as for it had no hope, no hope in its eyes.

And now, at the end of it all, at the end of the path and at the downfall of the hero, no, the villain, there's nothing to do, except leap.

I leaped, I leaped as everything around me came to a stop.

I'd looked behind me and saw a figure, a shadow, no, not a figure but a person gazing into my eyes.

It looked empty.

It glared at me as I went into the light without it.

I held out my hand, and for once, I had enough courage to reach out, to leap away from fate, and decide it myself after all.

I took its hand, and pulled it, as he, for the first time, smiled.

He'd found me. And I'd found courage. Courage to save the savior, and embrace the world around me.

But the time has come, and as the light around me faded away, the last words it spoke were,

"Thank you".

2nd year Winner Oscar Fitzgerald

Ben and Joseph Taylor were two brothers living in Chadswickton, a small town near London during WW2. Chadswickton was a quaint town. At its heart there was a bustling marketplace, full of colourful aromas and alluring fragrances. It was just becoming evening as they were driving home from London city after seeing their sick mother. Suddenly a fleet of German planes darted over them. Minutes later they heard thundering booms far off in the distance. "Oh my, what was that?" said Joseph. "I don't know but it can't be good!" said Ben. Minutes later they got home to a pile of rubble that used to be their town. There was an overwhelming stench of charred debris. "Oh my god!" Said Ben, "This can't be happening!" Joseph fell to his knees and wept. Their lamentation was interrupted by the sound of coughing in what used to be the house next door. They got up to see who produced this noise. When they turned the corner they saw a withered little girl. She was half crushed by the remnants of her house. Joseph could just about recognise the residue of her fragmented face. "This is Mary, our neighbor!" he wailed. "We must get her to the hospital." Ben declared. They scrambled to their car, which was now covered in a thick layer of ash from the intoxicating smoke and fumes. "The nearest hospital is in London, can we make it in time?" quizzed Ben. "I don't know how long she has left, but we have to try." They zoomed off hastily.

After what seemed like centuries on the road they halted. They noticed faint outlines of men with guns, blocking the road. A plane was parked right beside them and they were setting up blockades and barbed wire. "They could be Nazis," said Joseph. "We have to find a different way to London. They'll shoot us on sight!". "I'd say the hospital is about a mile away" deducted Ben. They slinked out of the car while delicately removing Mary. They wrapped her up in a thick fleece. It was now raining heavily. The road was bordered by pulpy bog and muddy slush. As they trudged into the swampy depths they realised it was as high as their waist. It took considerable effort to get through this sludge. They had reached an alcove under the road, covered by lofty waving grass and reeds. After they waded into shelter, they heard the heavy stomps of steel boots. They could hear deep voices, speaking a foreign language. They realised they were beneath the intimidating men. Ben decided to chance a peek. He could see that the soldiers had set up a tent. "I don't think they're going to leave any time soon," said Ben. "We don't have long. We have to risk sneaking past them" said Joseph with a trembling voice. They began to covertly slither past the soldiers, laboriously plodding through the greasy mire. They were trying to quash the wet squishing of their movements. When they were nearing the border of the swampy waste that led onto the main road, they turned and looked back. They noticed they had made quite some distance from the soldiers.

There was a forest nearby. "We should go towards those trees" whispered Ben. Just as they began walking again there was an ominous stillness in the air. They stopped. They heard murmuring from the soldiers. Suddenly a bullet whizzed past Ben's head. Once they realised they had been spotted, they bolted towards the woodland, being careful not to drop Mary.

The soldiers were not chasing them. Instead they stayed in their camp and kept on shooting. "Keep running, we're almost the-" Joseph's speech was swiftly ended by the unbearable pain of a bullet piercing his right shoulder. He dived unceremoniously onto the harsh, rough ground. His mind was racing "No, not like this! We were so close!" he thought. Ben sprinted over to Joseph. In his haste he tripped and dropped Mary. "Joseph, are you okay?" he said after getting up. Joseph could barely gather the energy to speak but he came out with a shaky grunt. He laid there for a few minutes fighting through the searing pain while Ben was re-wrapping Mary. "Get up, We can still make it," said Ben, trying to maintain a calm voice. "Here, let me try this." Ben said while fashioning a tourniquet out of some cloth he ripped from his shirt. Joseph mustered enough strength to stand. "Come on now we have to hurry. Those soldiers could be nearing us. Ben picked up Mary and started marching purposefully towards the city. Joseph hobbled dizzily not far behind, wincing with pain.

After they faltered through the dark and untouched forest they could see the blaring lights from the city in the distance. "Not too far now!" announced Ben, triumphantly. Joseph did not respond. He was growing pale and the hope in his eyes was fading. As they were nearing the city entrance, Joseph collapsed on the ground. Ben spun around, looking distressed. "Joseph? Come on! We're almost there. Just get up and you'll be fine." said Ben with a quivering voice. Joseph was weak now. He could barely move and his vision was dark and blurry. "Ben" he uttered with a shaky tone. "Save Mary". His eyes went dull and lifeless. His frail body was limp. "Joseph. Joseph, get up! Joseph!" Ben did not want to believe he had lost his brother. He could not comprehend the brutal agony he was feeling. After lying there mourning in silence, he vowed he would get Mary to safety and then he would give Joseph a proper burial.

He picked up Mary and wandered through the city streets. Slowly searching for the hospital. While meandering through the bright, flashy city, high class men in suits and elegant women in bedazzled dresses looked down at him judgmentally. His grubby clothes were covered in dry muck and earthy moss. When he reached the hospital and handed in Mary, he realised his brother hadn't died for nothing. He sacrificed his life for the young girl. Mary was finally safe. Ben would spread the word and share Joseph's memory. He would be remembered as a hero.

3rd year Winner Oisin Derwin

THE CONDEMNED BROTHER

Josiah and Maxwell did lay waste to the wooden toys their uncle Oswald had made for them many years ago. The Ink Spots played on the radio and their mother and father sat on the veranda sipping an ice cold beverage. Josiah was turning sixteen and he always had taken care of his younger brother Maxwell. "Pa, is it alright if me and Maxwell go to the treehouse?" asked Josiah. "Okay son, just make sure you are back before dinner, you hear?" Replied their father, Robert, in his southern accent. The boys lived in Alabama and the year was 1954 and they lived in bliss. The mother, Marie, was a caring soul, she gave to her sons all that she could, her time. Josiah and Maxwell rolled down the hill while the sun beat down on the back of their necks. They stood up at the foot of the hill, now stained green by the grass. The boys climbed up the ladder into the rickety old treehouse their uncle Oswald had made for them many years ago.

Josiah opened up the old trapdoor with his right hand, using his left hand to keep himself steady as he hung from the ladder as Maxwell stood at the roots of the big old oak tree. As he pushed the heavy trapdoor open, the welts on his hands from working all day began to sting. He finally made it into the old rickety treehouse and pulled Maxwell up. Maxwell was eight years old, well he claimed to be, he was actually seven, turning eight the next month. Josiah and Maxwell played in that old den of theirs. Then, as he caught his hand in a rusted old nail, Maxwell's hand began to bleed and he cried out in pain. Josiah rushed to his rescue and pulled a bandage from his arm from a few days ago and pulled it tight around Maxwell's hand. "You know what?" Said Josiah. "Huh?" grunted Maxwell. "I'm gon' make a promise right here, I'll stick with you forever and never leave you alone, if you don't tell dad you got hurt up here, you know how he can be." Maxwell nodded in response to Josiah's Request.

TWO DAYS LATER

Marie drove her crosley station wagon down to the farmers market when a hare leaped out onto the road and she swerved her car out of the way, then as a cadillac, pulled around the corner into the t-intersection, he smashed into marie's car, pushing her off of the road and down into a ditch, but before rolling down a hill. Marie was found dead later and the driver had rode off in a hush.

Maxwell and Josiah sat outside the room her body sat in as the funeral was being prepared, holding each other and sobbing.

Their father, Robert walked up to them with an old priest who owned the local children's home. Josiah looked up at the man and immediately knew the situation. "Pa, please you can't do this Ma wouldn't want it!" Shouted Josiah as Maxwell pulled him closer in fear as he shuddered at loud noises. "I AM NOT YOUR MOTHER!" shouted Robert at the boy. Robert then lifted his hand behind his head and backhanded Josiah in the face. "Well, can you handle one child?" asked the wicked old priest. "Yeah, I suppose." Replied Robert as he pointed at Josiah "I'll keep him" He continued as he knew Josiah was the only one who could work. The crooked old priest took Maxwell by the hand and slowly walked with him outside of the house. Maxwell took one last glance at Josiah and remembered the promise that was broken. So did Josiah. Josiah knew today was the last time he would see his brother if he didn't save Maxwell.

Josiah jumped up and pounded his body into the side of his father's, bursting through the door shortly after running after his brother. The priest had Maxwell in the passenger seat of the car as he walked around to get in the driver's seat. Josiah ran and pushed the old man onto the dirt road and leaped into the driver's seat, he twisted the key and the old car bursted and popped making noises all over and it started up. Josiah hit the gas as he floored the pedal. The car accelerated as he and his brother rushed away.

THREE HOURS LATER.

Josiah pulled in the car on the side of the road just outside of Texas as they had entered Louisiana. Maxwell rolled around in the golden fields as the sun began to set and storm clouds lingered on the horizon. Josiah searched the Chevrolet Bel-Air. He found a wad of american dollars, sporting the face of Benjamin Franklin. He found a toolset in the boot and unscrewed the number plate, as he figured police were after it now and he looked on a map in the car for the nearest pit-stop town. It was called Vinton. He called out to Maxwell "Hey, come on we gotta get here before dark if you wanna get some sleep tonight boy."

The car sputtered and pulled its shell onwards as it slowly ran out of fuel through the pitch-black night. Josia looked to the sky and the clouds he saw earlier had made their way above him. Then, the wind kicked in and the rain began to patter on the shell of the car making a metallic noise. Then, a rumble rustled the trees. And a light flashed before them as a thunderstorm blasted about. The loud noises began to agitate Maxwell. He began to kick and scream and began throwing a tantrum. The car came to a halt and broke down and Josiah became overwhelmed and shouted "SHUT UP BOY!" and Maxwell pushed open the door of the car and ran into the woods. Josiah jumped out of the car and quickly rushed after his brother.

Josiah found Maxwell, huddled up on the ground, in a ball crying in fear as the thunder rumbled, the lightning flashed, and the rain fell. Josiah ran and grabbed his brother and held

him, protecting him and shielding him from the storm. Once the weather calmed, Josiah gave his jacket to Maxwell and kept him sheltered as they walked back to the hunk of metal they called a car.

They slept under the shelter of the thin metal sheet on the seats of the car. Maxwell sat in the back three seats laying down as Josiah sat up. Maxwell began to shiver and shudder as the rain got to him. Josiah pulled his way to the backseat and held Maxwell, warming him up.

THE NEXT MORNING.

The beam of sunlight flashed through the leaves of the trees as the wind rustled them about. The beam found itself on the eyelids of Maxwell, and the light awoke him. It was about five o'clock in the morning. Maxwell sat up and saw his brother Josiah snoring away and pushed and tapped at his shoulder to awake him. "Whaaaat..." Groaned Josiah as he sat up next to his brother.

"I gotta go pay the water bill" said Josiah as he pulled himself out of the car and walked down the nearby hill to pee in the river. He felt the grass of the hill push its way in between his toes as he left his socks up to dry. He unzipped his fly and began to do his business. Maxwell crept down the hill towards the small river flow and put both of his hands on Josiah's back, pushing him into the water. Luckily, The boy's could swim. Maxwell bursted out in laughter as his brother flailed about in the water, trying to catch his breath. Once he did so, he began to splash Maxwell. Then Maxwell cannonballed in and they pounded their sore hands against the surface of the water, creating splashes at each other as they laughed for the first time since Marie's death. The boys circled in the water, splashing each other relentlessly.

Then once they left the freezing cold water, they put on their now warm and dry clothes after they were left in the sun. Maxwell began to groan in pain as the hunger he felt began to become unbearable. He signaled to Josiah that he was starving."I know, i'm hungry too, we begin walking to the nearest town soon, it's about a mile off." The boys loaded their pockets with the things from the car and began walking towards the town.

Hours passed and the four feet that fell sequentially began to ache and pain as the boys hungered for food. "Hey, Hey i think i see something, it's a sign! Vinton! It's only about an hour away! YES" Said Josiah in ecstatic joy as he neared his destination. Maxwell, after about ten minutes, couldn't go any further. Josiah lifted his brother upon his back and continued trodding on.

Over the hump of the hill he climbed, Josiah saw Vinton, a small town with about fifty buildings. The boys sat in the stylised red and blue americanised diner as they chomped down on the burger and fries they bought with a fraction of the money they found. The boys finished their meal and licked their plates clean. "You boys sure y'all are okay" asked the waitress "yeah we're fine" Replied Josiah "What's your name?" "Oswald." He responded. The boys quickly left the restaurant while she had her back turned, leaving her quite a tip.

Josiah entered the gas station and spoke to the cashier, who stood behind the counter. "I'd like to buy a jerry can with petrol please." "Sure, a't'll be 'bout one dollar twenty seven please." Josiah handed the man a note and took his change as he looked out at the cars being fixed. He saw one with a loose number plate. About twenty minutes later, the cashier looked out his window to see a car with no number plate laying in his garage.

Josiah and Maxwell found the nearest inn and paid for a night's stay. There was only a room with one bed so Josiah slept on the floor, which happened to be more comfortable than the car seats.

THE NEXT DAY

Josiah and Maxwell returned to the priest's car and filled it with petrol from the jerry can. He then applied the new number plate and they continued their journey, far away from the wretched men who plagued them.

The boys drove the car down the dirt road as the harsh sun of the south of america beamed down through the windows of the car and Josiah drove the car through the cities of trees and their sweat stuck them to the leather chairs.

"We're heading for the east coast. Uncle Os. lives there" Josiah informed Maxwell. They drove in the large welded sheet of metal towards Ohio.

Nine days had passed from town to town to Ohio in a car that maxed out shortly before one hundred and thirty miles an hour as they took a twelve-hundred and seventy mile journey.

The boys had arrived in Ohio and continued their journey to Middlefield in Ohio. Josiah had remembered the address of his uncle from the many interactions over letters he had with him when he was younger, and knew the address by heart. Josiah pulled up the car in the center of town. He meandered into the drug store, with a sign over the door, Cazlow's.

He walked through the double door and it clanked off of a bell hanging from the roof. Ringing it "Hey kid, get out." Shouted the manager. "I've got cash." Said Josiah, as Maxwell waited outside in the car. "Alright, where you from, I ain't seen you around here." Said the manager.

"I'm not exactly sure anymore." Replied Josiah as he looked at the products for sale including, Morphine, penicillin and Terramycin, among other things. Josiah spoke to the manager. "You know where 15838 Grove St is?" Yeah, just down the street. take two lefts and you'll be right on their doorstep." "Thanks. Replied Josiah as he walked out the door back to Maxwell.

Josiah followed the instructions given to him by the manager and saw a wooden framed white house with a red brick chimney attached to the left side of the house. Josiah parked the black bucket of bolts next to the pavement. He pushed open the thin sheet of metal and grabbed the roof of the car to pull himself out. Yet again, it was blisteringly sunny. He was sweating profusely and there were wet patches under his arms and on his back seeping through his rough egyptian cloth shirt. Maxwell erupted out of the other side of the car in his usual energetic manner.

The two brothers strolled up the gravel driveway of the house past the bushy ferns littered either side. They walked under the shelter of the doorway and hammered on the door. The door opened slightly and someone, indistinguishable spoke through the chain keeping the door shut. "What you want?" He blurted out, with a drunken twang to his words and a stench of alcohol wafting out to the boys and making their noses revolt. They pulled back slightly, to avoid the smell, and after a short wait, Josiah spoke again. "We're here to see Oswald Macintosh?" "He ain't here." Replied the intoxicated man. "Well, that would be a shock considering he lives here." Shouted Josiah. "Is that backtalk I hear boy?" Said the groggy old man, who couldn't be seen, as of how dark the inside of the house was. "And what if it is you laggard?" Replied Josiah. The man quickly rallied up and kicked the door open and aimed a double barrel shotgun down the bridge of Josiah's nose. "Os?" Said Maxwell, shuddering in fear. "Max, Josiah? What on earth are you two doing here, where's Marie? And Robert?" Grumbled the old man dropping his gun to the floor. "Ma is dead, Os, and Pa wanted to put Maxwell into a home for the special, I couldn't let him, so we thought we'd come to you." "What, Marie, is... dead? Oh Jesus." Whimpered the old man, who ran his fingers through his sweaty hair in disbelief. "I gotta ring Robert, how am I supposed to take care of you two?" Shouted Oswald, who rushed back into his gloomy abode to ring Robert. "No!" Shouted Josiah who rushed in after him. Josiah came first into a murky living room, with trashed furniture and the alcoholic smell thickened and the air was greasy. He continued into the kitchen which was in an even worse condition with Rats and rodents bumping about. He saw Oswald dialling Robert's phone number. "Wait, wait, I swear, I'll earn my keep, I can cook, clean, work, anything?" Oswald lowered the landline from his ear and stepped his head against the wall repeatedly. "You can work?" He asked. "Like an ant."

FOURTEEN YEARS LATER

Josiah ploughed the field as the sun rays bubbled his skin. The welts on his hands were only worse after such a long time. Sally, his workhorse pulled the plough with all her might. He then went and reseeded the entire field with barley and wheat. He reached the last spot to seed and placed it down into the crevice in the ground. He grabbed a handful of soil and dribbled it over the seed, then covering it with the soil. He looked to the sky and took his first break of the day. From the break of dawn till the break of dusk he worked. Josiah made his way to the farmhouse and spoke to Uncle Oswald. He spoke to the withered old man "I got the work all done." "Good. Now get outta here." "Thanks Unc." Josiah boarded the station wagon that he stole from the priest many years ago, turned the key and the car as old as time itself, managed to pull itself up that dastardly hill up to the farmhouse.

Josiah walked into the Farmhouse to Maxwell and saw there seemed to be a struggle a few hours before. He saw the struggle lead to the living room. He bashed the door open and saw Maxwell sitting there peacefully, next to Robert, his father "What the hell are you doing here?" Grumbled Josiah "I came to say, I'm sorry, son, every day since I sent you two away I have felt extreme guilt and pain. Maxwell and I decided it's best he lives with me." "What? After all these years you gon' just up and leave me? Fine. I see. I'm going" Josiah stormed out of the house and opened the door to his 1963 Corvette Sting Ray and got in. Maxwell rushed out after him with tears in his eyes and ran in front of the car, keeping it from driving off. Maxwell ran and hugged Josiah "Please don't leave us, you're all I have, you're all that's been protecting me from the world." Said Maxwell with extreme difficulty.

"I ain't the one protecting you from the world, i been the one keepin' you from it." Said Josiah as the tears welled up in his eyes and he hugged Maxwell tightly. Josiah then drove off into the sunset and played a smooth melody on the Radio. Sittin' on the dock of the bay by Otis Redding waived it's way out of the radio into Josiah's ears. He cruised down the sandy path and onto the tarmac road. The car drove to the west, and he took the sunglasses dangling from the rear view mirror and seated them on his nose. He looked to the sunset and the exhaust pumped out a great deal of smoke. The sky was a beautiful salmon pink as the sun that had been tormenting him all these years was setting. The convertible dropped its roof and his hair rippled in the wind.

THE END

TY Winner Jethro Ledesma

Outrun the Remorse

Hey, I'm Kreo. I'm a hero in my home city of Brownstone. Brownstone is a city of everyday normal people and I, the only hero in this city must take care of it. It is my duty and my sense of justice that I must take care of my own city every single day. I have to deal with local robbers and massive idiots who think robbing and killing is a lost resort for them. But recently, everything has gotten a bit boring. There hasn't been a villain or a big time boss for me to take care of. I was born with lucky genetics which lead to my powers. I was born with Myostatin also known as the MSTN gene or Hercules gene, a gene mutation that affects my muscles which causes me to be abnormally strong but in sacrifice, it affects my bones as a whole and puts pressure and stress on my bones. I am able to lift over 2000kg, close to the bodybuilder Paul Anderson. Despite me having a fairly mesomorphic body, my appearance can make people baffle at me. I also was blessed with another mutation which is the ACTN3 gene also known as the sports gene which makes me abnormally fast as well. Realistically speaking I'm not supposed to be alive or in a sense able to live with the abnormal genes and its effects on my appearance on my body but somehow I live with it. The ACTN3 gene makes my muscles flex faster than the average human so with that combined with my strength makes me a sort of machine.

Growing up with these genes, my parents supported me. With every decision I made growing up to become a hero or in a sense. Someone to help people, everyday people, those who lived in fear because of where they lived. So I had learned many techniques, fighting styles and learned to be a good person with a sense of justice and the law.

And here I am, in my home city of Brownstone. I was stationed here by the NHL. National hero league not to be confused with the National Hockey league, been telling the president to change the name but he won't. As an up and coming hero, it's my call and my passion to protect this city. I loved and grew up in it. The smell of smoke and freshly cooked food from local restaurants and vendors, the green parks filled with families and animals. The local attractions. And the duality of homes from, high-rise apartments to big family homes.

Everything is perfect, for now.

As I finish my very enthusiastic monologue, suddenly a bomb goes off in the distance. It came from the west street from 3rd, probably at the bank. I run off to get there as fast as possible. And there came before me. 3 men with firearms, assault rifles and of course, they're wearing masks. I develop a plan in my head to easily get rid of them. As they are in the bank, still holding everyone hostage. I can get access to the vents inside the bank as

thankfully, the NHL has connections and resources to every building or every person in the city. I go into the back of the bank, and crawl through the vents, trying to make the least of noises while I crawl around to the entrance of the bank where all of the 3 men are. The plan is to distract them with firecrackers or stones. I can try and incapacitate them one by one. I get to the entrance onto the lights where pipes are connected to the vents. Thankfully one of the guards has already steered away from both his friends and the hostages. I throw a stone into one of the rooms while I make my way down onto the ground. Both men are distracted with either negotiating with the police or watching the hostages. One of the men goes into the room as planned and I choke him out to the point of passing out. I hide his body nearby into the corner of the room. Now the hard part here is to separate the two men, while I think about it. One of them called out their friend's name. And judging by ear, is walking over to the room as of right now. So my best instinct is to hide behind something and incapacitate the criminal. Which works once more, it's either dumb luck or i'm just smart. I hide his body beside his friend. And I go out to the entrance where I meet with the leader. He gets off his phone as he gets frightened as he sees me. He aims his gun at me. "Who are you!" while he blindly shoots his gun with thankfully no hostages behind me. I dodge the bullets as I'm extremely nimble and flexible enough to dodge the high speed of the bullets. I go up behind him and immediately take him down. I look at the hostages and free them with my tactical knife from my gloves.

Another day at work it seems. I get home to my high rise apartment in the NHL headquarters where they host and base their heroes. For now, which is only me. So I have access to one of the most premium housing in the headquarters. I take off my suit and mask. And lie down in my king bed. Which is one of the most comfiest beds I've ever slept on. I look up at the ceiling of my bedroom. I have a painting of "David and Goliath" by french painter Guillaume Courtois. The painting holds significance to me as it's story inspires me of what it's like to be the little one in a fight against giant evil men or women. Because the truth is, I've always been treated poorly and weak to others because of how I look. Just because I'm a hero doesn't mean I'm treated the same by everybody.

(The story of Jai)

As I wander the halls of those who came before me, patients, doctors and nurses. I wonder, would they ever be really helpful or in a sense caring to my needs or to plague that fills my brain, my lungs and within the rest of my body?

You see, these voices, these thoughts. They run through my head like it's memorisation of numbers, words, faces, colours and everything around you. Because they've been with me all my life. You see, daddy never liked mommy. He would get angry and hit her and drink alcohol. And just one day, mommy would stop moving. And poof! She was just as gone as the alcohol that consumed my father just as the same way the light has been lost in an animal's eyes as they die. Because my father became an animal, a rabid being with only

anger, and the look of sadness yet, a will to only survive. And surely, it passed onto me. The only family he had left. He would torture my young body with glass and metal. And everybody has a breaking point, but I didn't. I broke the day my mother and father birthed me. The hate, the sadness, the anger and my will to survive always stuck with me, it lived with me, and then came the voices. My only friends. They helped me so much, they told me to play night night with father. And so I did. I grabbed a glass bottle, broke it. And tore him apart with it. The thing that killed my mother had also killed my father by my hand.

After they both died and police suspected no foul play and lack of evidence. They sent me off to the orphanage where I ended up living till I was 19. Till I enlisted in the military. Oh, the punishment, the smell of gunpowder and sweat and blood every single day. I loved it, and soon as I got into my first tour. I had lost all of my squad in a terrorist raid, All except me. When they found me, they told me that I was covered in blood, either my squad or the terrorists. They had found me in the backroom of our base where the terrorists had raided our base. Bodies were everywhere, mutilated and tore to pieces. All because of me.

They had proved me guilty of genocide and murder when they found out that i had kept and killed innocent civillians while stationed there. I didn't kill them, I had released them and my squad from this unsaintly unforgiving world and that my life goal now is to cleanse it. They threw me into Brownstone asylum where I was kept for 3 years until now. Where now, the walls are splattered with entrails of patients and the guards. Doctors are hiding of fear and I will come to get them soon enough. My friends will help me, they always did. They'll tell me what knife I'll use to gut the next person I'll see with. And soon, the world will soon cave in but only to me, a person with being and the vision of thousands souls will live and survive. And soon, many will follow me to this intention with purpose in their eyes.

(Kreo's heartbreak)

I woke up in a cold sweat, it's 4am. Sweat drips down my face and in shock onto why I woke up with such a reaction. I have this feeling of uncertainty in my chest, this, presentiment that something's going to happen. I get up from my bed, and stretch out my arms. I have a long day ahead of me. I do my usual routine of doing a 2 hour workout and then i eat breakfast and then take a shower. I go ahead to a briefing of what to do today. After that would be, my daily patrol around the town on my motorcycle.

After many hours of patrolling and doing the usual stopping robbers and your usual freak incidents, it reaches nightfall. I stop by a dunkin donuts to grab my usual donut and coffee. Then suddenly, a few buildings farther than the dunkin donuts. An explosion erupts. My ears ring from the shockwave and the massive sound of how big it was. I ran out dropping everything I had in my hands and looked out the store. It was a high rise apartment building that was hit. I run towards the building and I run towards it. The fire around the apartments

that were hit formed a sort of a symbol. The symbol of anarchy. I help those around the apartments and get them out of the falling debris and out of harm's way. And I quickly finished that, I ran inside of the apartment building. Also helping those inside. After some help from the civilians that were unaffected. I run up the stairs and try my best to get them out as fast as I can. As I feel the heat of the fires increase as I go up higher and higher the steps. As I go up the steps towards the 13th floor. A megaphone can be heard, and I hear a voice.

"Um, hello is this working?" as the voice is heard toying around with the megaphone.

"Ah!, hello, hello Kreo. The city's finest hero, I know you're in the building so you might as well face me at the 13th floor where we can talk, differences in our morality."

I reach the 13th floor, a floor that is in construction fortunately. It's only half finished and yet the foundations are still up. I follow the voice saying "Kreo! Kreo! My dear boy come over here!", it sounds as if he's mocking me. I reach the figure and the origin of the voice. The figure faces the sky, standing over what he has caused over his chaos. The figure laughs. "Kreo! You came!" the figure looks at the sky while speaking, he sports a black suit, fitted to its body. With white gloves and white shoes. The figure faces me. "And so, when two, his men meet. only one can survive life and one has to survive the light fading from his eyes. Well, well, Kreo, Brownstone's finest hero!" The figure walks around holding a knife with a hole in the handle. The figure twirls it around with his fingers.

"What can I say? I'm a big fan!" as the figure walks around speaking tonally sarcastically.

He faces me, and walks towards me.

"Jai, nice to meet you" he lifts his hand to form a handshake.
I slap his hand.

"Why?, all this chaos, this choice?"

Jai looks at me as he stands in front of me.

"To show the world that,"

"I exist"

He swiftly tries to stab me in my gut with his knife. But I quickly dodge it and I disarm him from his knife which slides far from him, and push him back and kick him to the ground with a roundhouse to the face. He falls on the ground onto his back. And he stares at me.

“That didn’t work did it?” I say to him

“Nope but my plan did” He says back with a smile, his eyes look as proud of what he has created.

Suddenly, the other highrise buildings around me begin to explode with flames and the force of each explosion pushes me back. I look over the edge of the building. All around me are restaurants, houses, cars, buses, trains and businesses erupt into red orange balls of heat. I walk towards Jai, who’s still on the ground laughing and clapping. I grab him by the collar of his suit.

“WHAT DID YOU DO!” I shout in anger.

“I did what I believed in” as he laughs in my face.

I punch him in the face, knocking him out.

In my earpiece, I ask for a report from headquarters for the damage right now caused by the explosions.

Thousands of people died within seconds, with hundreds injured. I look around below me in the wake of the destruction caused. I sit down at the edge of the building. Calling in for a helicopter to pick up Jai’s unconscious body to be taken into custody. The buildings I once passed by everyday are now reduced to rubble and nothingness. I get up and jump off the building. Thank god they implemented a parachute into my suit. I get down to the ground and help others who are injured. I look around the smoke and dust, paralysed from the multiple bodies of children dead on the ground. Men and women mourning the loss of their friends, and family. I can’t take it, i can't take this feeling of death around me. In my earpiece, I call in for help from headquarters. But i stand still, i can’t process anything that just happened. It doesn't feel right.

It’s all my fault. I didn’t stop it. I failed, everyone.

I wake up cold, and sweaty. I look at my alarm clock. It’s 4am again like last time, but this time, I don’t have the feeling of uncertainty. It’s fear. I feel disconnected from the world. the nightmares in my head while I slept and while walking round the day. It haunts me, the failure, the guilt. I wasn’t brave enough to run around and help everyone around me. I just stood there that day. I didn’t do anything to help anyone, it’s all my fault. I stand on my back facing the wall in my bedroom. I look around, it’s my old bedroom from childhood. After all, after what happened I suggested to headquarters that I should just take a break for the sake

of my mental health and away from the news stations. Luckily only a city away a hero named Mr. Danger will take care of the city while I'm gone. My room is still the way it was, back then I always wanted to be a hero. Even from a young age I always wanted to be a hero, the thought of helping and saving people while getting the girl seemed cool but now? That dream was only a fiction formed in my mind. The reality of it now hits me harder than when I first was nervous when I didn't have time to save a few civilians during the first few months of being a hero. The pain of the realisation just hits me hard. I really messed up, hard. I go back into my covers to go to sleep again and this time, I'll try to dream of better things.

(Jai's imprisonment)

THEY CAN'T KEEP ME IN HERE FOREVER, THESE WALLS ARE NOTHING BUT PAPER TO ME. but then, I forget I have followers on their way to come rescue me. But, Kreo? That little ol' chap is fun to have around. I like having him around, he's like my little plaything, messing around with his head. Like a stray puppy with nowhere to go, he's a lost soul. Thinking being a hero can really help and save people. But he can't save everybody can he? It's only his second year being a hero, and yet. He hesitates to save people. That's why I like having him around. I like someone incapable of stopping me because he doesn't realise that he needs me. There's no one else like me to be his yang to his yin. After all, he's not safe. His family is not safe as long as I'm around and I will make his life a living hell and then he'll realise he needs me.

Then suddenly the prison walls explode, as Jai's laughs as he has another plan in place to get Kreo's attention.

Oh well, my little followers are here now, I should get up. Don't want to ruin my attire.

(Kreo's search for meaning)

I feel warm, way too warm. I open my eyes to my poster filled bedroom walls. The yellow bright suns seams through my curtains. I stand myself in bed and crack my back. I get up from bed to go to the bathroom to go brush my teeth and freshen myself up before going to breakfast. After freshening myself up, I go into my living room where I find my dad.

"Kreo! My boy! How was your sleep?" My dad looks happy to see me especially after having a long train ride here and immediately falling asleep in my bedroom as soon as I get there. He gets up to hug me. It's warm. I missed my mom and dad.

I look behind to see my mom walking in.

“KREO?” my mom looks surprised but nonetheless, they both hug me from both the front and behind.

“Ok ok guys, that's enough” I peel my parents away from my body but I hug them back with a smile.

“I made you breakfast in the dining room hon”

“Thanks mom” as I kiss my mom on the cheek.

‘Also I slept pretty bad last night dad, but I'll tell you about it later” I go into the dining room and have my breakfast.

After some time talking to my parents, I go outside to go help my neighbours.

Where my parents live is in a really small town. The houses are miles apart and are inhabited by only old elderly people with my mother and fatehr being one of the few young ones left. I used to take care of my neighbours every single day when I was young and living here.

I help the Millers with their broken down tractor and help with heavy lifting. The millers were like a second family to me when mom and dad used to work far away from the house. They used to take care of me and I used to help them out with everything like cooking to gardening. They were like second parents to me. Their kids left when they finally got older and they moved to the city. They loved having me around, they always said like I was their youngest son.

This is what I loved feeling, this feeling of feeling joyous, good about helping people. But I freeze once I'm stuck between hundreds of people. I want to be the best I can, and I want to be brave. But yet, I feel. sad.

The whole day went by like a breeze. The sky was blue, no clouds and everything was warm and beautiful. The fields are what they used to be, green and littered with farm animals of every kind. I helped almost everybody in the community and I came home, to a nice meal with my parents. They supported everything I've done. They're my best friends.

The radio plays in the background with soft jazz. As we ate our dinner, suddenly the news came on.

“Breaking news, the criminal known as Jai has captured half of Brownstone tower with the help of his cult followers. This criminal was formally institutionalized and held in prison by

the superhero known as Kreo. Kreo is unknown to be found and the hero Mr. Danger was temporarily put in his place. Unfortunately Mr. Danger was defeated by the criminal and has been killed as shown by public footage of Jai dropping the hero by the feet on top of Brownstone tower, falling to his death.”

I drop my utensils. My parents are in shock as also shown in their facial expressions. They look at me and my mom holds my arm. I look down at the ground as I listen to the news.

“Kreo, you have to do something. I know last time didn’t go so well, but son. We raised you to be the best you can be, and you have to make up for everything we’ve given you by being the hero you were meant to be. Kreo, baby, everyone makes mistakes, we mess up all the time, and I know it hurts. But, we can’t all save everyone, just like we couldn’t with your brother.”

My mother says in a distressed tone.

“Julian would’ve want you to save everyone even if it meant your life, because, to save others you sometimes need to sacrifice yourself for the better”

It’s the first time mom has mentioned Julian. My older brother who died when I was 9. He died saving people from a collapsing building in Brownstone city. He didn’t have powers, he was ordinary. And yet he saved people.

“Where is Kreo? As the criminal asks for where he is. Will Kreo come back in time?, we’ll update you as the criminal updates his demands every minute, this has been Brownstone news channel 9” As the news fades away into the soft jazz it was playing once more.

I get up from my chair and I immediately call headquarters from my phone.

“Kreo speaking, get me Mr. Anders to send in a helicopter asap to Brownstone city, coordinates to pick me up will be sent in a minute”

I pack my things into my backpack when I enter my bedroom. I look behind me, my parents are standing in the doorway of my room.

“I’m sorry I have to leave so suddenly. This will be for the better, I promise.” I tell my parents.

They stand there as my father speaks.

“Son, Julian would’ve been proud of you, you know that? We’re both proud of who you’ve become, and if we don’t see you again. We’ll die knowing we raised the best sons in the world”

After I hear the helicopter in the distance. I go up to my parents. And they hug me once more.

“I love you guys” I squeeze them tight, they’re all I have and I hope I make it out of this fight safely.

I ran out to the helicopter in front of our driveway. I get into the helicopter quickly and I wave goodbye to my parents who are standing out in the driveway.

This is my destiny, my choice and my life. I will do the very best I can, I know I made mistakes. I know I can’t save everyone. Julian would’ve known that. It’s best that I know that too. I know what I’m dealing with.

I am who I am. I will save everybody this time and I will stop Kreo for good.

I get to headquarters in an hour. I get out the helicopter immediately asking for director Samson. Director Samson was the person who helped me when I first got into the NHL, he made me feel comfortable and I trust that man with my life.

“Samson what’s the report now?” I ask as soon as I entered the same room as him

“Kreo, he’s asking for you, you got 30 mins to get there as soon as possible”

“Got you sir, do you have my motorcycle ready downstairs?”

“As always, kid, listen. This is life or death, I’m proud of you kid. Of who you’ve become”

Those words gave me a boost of courage.

“Thank you sir” I replied.

I get downstairs to the HQ garage where my motorcycle is waiting.

I get on and drive there as soon as I can, dodging all the destroyed cars and civilians. On the way there, I ask for backup from my earpieces to request for other heroes from nearby cities to help the civilians on the ground while I deal with Jai. It may be only me in this city

but I can't save everybody. It may be my duty and job for this city, but hey sometimes I need help.

As I reached Brownstone tower in time. Stopping my motorcycle inches away from the entrance.

I close my eyes for a moment to think about my judgement and life. All those years working my ass off, learning and mastering certain form of martial arts, working and conditioning my body to withstand torture to my physicality. The failures, the mistakes, the deaths, the broken people that came out of the dust from destroyed buildings having just lost family or friends. The weight is all on my shoulders and all it's gonna take to hold myself down and accountable for what I did is to find the courage and hope and the catharsis for all of this in myself, and in the people closest to me.

I open my eyes. I look around me, around the building and area. It's as empty as a room of judging eyes. The silence is there but you feel the weight as if you're suddenly placed as the centre of the world as you're watched by everybody. They watch as every mistake you make can affect the world slowly.

I start to jog up the stairs, to get to the top of Brownstone tower. Jai is patiently waiting for me and for his next tricks against me on the top.

As I make my way up top, I can feel the pressure on me as I hear helicopters representing news channels going to record the entire possible fight between me and Jai, but all I want is to end this without bloodshed or any more casualties. As I reach the top floor's exit. I breathe in deeply knowing I must do everything right for the next moment.

I open the door, and there he is. Waiting for me near the edge of the roof. Facing his back to me as he fondles with his knife in his right hand, throwing it up in the air and catching it as accurately as he can so he won't cut his fingers or hand.

"Well well well, look who finally came!" As he speaks in a sort of sarcastic voice but yet it sounds humorous.

I walk a few steps just to face his back.

"You know it took me like a hour to get here right?" I respond back just to crack a little joke before things tenses up.

It's not a movie, it's not a comic, this is the harsh reality. Even if I crack a joke with all of the tension between us. You know that this will be the end of something. It could be the end of

my life or his, or the end of Brownstone city itself. Or the end of something even more sinister blooming up in the air behind everything amongst us.

He looks back with an ear to ear smile as he's ready to fight.

"Well then, Kreo. let's have a talk shall we?" He finally faces himself towards me with his front side.

He holds one more knife in his left hand just patiently itching to taste my blood.

"This is not gonna end well, is it?" I say, as I watch both his hands cautiously.

"Maybe for you, maybe not for me" He responds.

"Well, talk's over." As I ready my fists.

"As ready as you are" I say to him.

He laughs as he faces the air letting all his emotion out with humour.

"You're a funny guy Kreo" He says while laughing.

He charges at me full speed while I counteract as well.

This fight will determine who will really live their lives out either as villain or a hero.

5th year Winner Calum Pettigew

What Comes After...

The sound was getting closer. The scraping of its claws against the rotting floorboards was becoming overbearing on the ears. Just beyond the door was the predator that had been hunting them for so long. Even still they waited for it to get closer, it wasn't the first time they've been another's prey and it wouldn't be the last. The smell of blood became all too strong, the greedy fucker had already eaten and yet it was still out hunting. It wasn't unnatural behaviour for these now twisted monstrosities but still it was an unnerving thought that no matter how much they ate they could never be satisfied. The prey knew this all too well. It was just outside the door now, part of its shadow could be seen under the door, now it all came down to a single moment. The prey planted itself against the wall, raised its spear and steadied its senses. For a while that's all it was, a predator and its prey separated by nothing more than a flimsy door, until the predator decided to strike. The predator smashed head first against the door letting out an unearthly growl from its mouth which split from ear to ear to reveal a medley of deformed fangs and rotting gums. Its yellow eyes with their split pupils frantically darted across the room attempting to gauge its surroundings. Before it could however the prey rushed its side planting the crude spear caked in filth and feces in between its ribs, just where they'd been aiming, the predator let out a devilish howl at the feeling of pain and before it could prepare itself for another attack attempted to knock the prey away with its large bony arm. This however was what the prey had expected and so before the predator could hit them they circled the predator grappling onto its neck from behind. The predator thrashed about the room attempting to free itself of its troublesome prey, knocking off its hood and revealing a riot mask. Even with the damage being dealt still the prey persisted, tightening the grip of their arm around the predator's long grey neck. The predator now dropping to its knees attempted one final attack by clawing at the prey's face, though all this served to do was make a slight scratch along the left side of the mask. Finally a crack was heard and the predator dropped to the floor. The prey rolled off the monster's corpse trying to keep itself conscious, it could feel damage dealt to its lower back beneath its shawl and makeshift armour from the beast's thrashing. Most likely that part of its armour had also been ruined. Never could catch a break in this hell, unless you killed every other sinner around you that is. They had to get out of there quickly, couldn't stay otherwise a new threat would come. It was now only after getting up to leave did the victor get to take a good look over its fallen foe. As expected it was a Fiend, a four legged, two armed creature with grey skin, patched fur and a bony frame. Despite its weak look it was deceptively strong with its skin being as thick as leather, usually making it difficult to pass a blade through unless you were well trained in fighting such beasts. The Wanderer prepared itself to leave, collecting the spear from the corpse,

the supplies it had left against the wall before the fight and then stepped back out to the ruins that had become all too familiar.

As the Wanderer traversed the ruined cityscape they made note of all details they could pick up on, the sounds of monsters in the distance and the direction they came from, tracks that could note what type of monsters prowled the area and most importantly of all the signs that a person other than the wanderer patrolled this area and that they were close. Close enough to know the fight that had just taken place and the damage the wanderer had taken. This was bad, the Wanderer knew that there were only two types of people who wouldn't help in a situation like that, either a coward or an opportunist. One was no issue, the other, now that would be a problem. The Wanderer quickly made their way through the ruins making an attempt to throw off their pursuer by going through back alleys and collapsed streets difficult to wade through, though this would prove fruitless as the observer was able to keep pace with them. The closer they got to their intended goal the closer could they sense the tracker, "so obviously not a coward," they thought. Finally they reached a dead end and finally did the other person reveal themselves. It was a boy, a young one, obviously not old enough to remember this scene from before it was the ruins it is now, though before the wanderer could get a better look, IT had already arrived, just behind the boy clung in between the walls on either side of the path was a huge eight legged beast, each leg ending in a fierce claw, its body covered in a thick exoskeleton, its red eyes that reflected everything it saw numerous times, its fangs dripping with drool and on its back a number of broken off spears, knives and other blades poking out, all that remained of fools who attempted to fight this thing known simply as Arachne. It had blocked off the street's entrance trapping the two and now it was heading for its first prey, the boy. It had taken a while before he noticed, obviously he was not as used to these parts as the wanderer otherwise instead of staring in disbelief of this monster he would've headed towards the wall for over there was a chute that lead deep into the building behind them, too small for Arachne to fit through. so while the wanderer once again made their escape the boy was busy looking up at his eventual demise, the Wanderer took another glance at the boy out of sympathy for what was about to happen and it was then that they noticed it, just below the right shoulder along his arm was a mark of a bird in front of a circular sun painted in red. "Shit." Quickly the Wanderer threw their supplies down the chute and with determined focus ran towards the boy. He had made an attempt to run but by then it was too late, Arachne with its terrifying limb knocked the boy into the wall and was now preparing to feast on him. Just before it could sink its fangs in, a sharp pain was felt in its side directly in its joint below its thick natural armour, a bloody spear had been pierced through it. Arachne stumbled back in pain from this spear only to find its prey gone, it looked around to see not only the boy but the Wanderer assisting the child towards the other end of the trap. The wanderer knew they would regret this later but still it wasn't something they could just ignore so putting the voice of their instincts to the side they dragged the boy towards the chute. They knew by now that Arachne had recovered and was

most likely only a few steps behind them but they couldn't worry about this now instead they continued towards their only escape. They frantically opened the chute helping the boy, who still hadn't fully recovered from being knocked to his feet, get in and just before getting in themselves they dared test fate to take one look back at the legendary beast and before them stood what could only be described as a demon, its eyes seemed to reflect the very fear they felt straight back at them, its mouth produced a frightening hiss, not one meant to intimidate like the fiends growls earlier, no, this was meant as a warning to the wanderer that this wasn't finished. And so just before travelling down the chute an unspoken bond in the form of the wanderers planted spear had been made between the two survivors of this dystopian world that if they were to ever meet again no mere boy could distract their next confrontation. And so the wanderer escaped into the dark dreading the next time they must face this predator who was one of the ones to stand at the Apex of this broken world.

The two stared in silence at each other as they waited by the smallest fire they could muster without drawing too much attention. They had decided it best to wait in the building the chute lead to until night before moving. While waiting the wanderer examined the boy even further. They knew from earlier that he was on the younger side but it seemed he was barely into his teens from a closer look. He wore an outfit that was reminiscent of old tribal hunters they had seen pictures of from before the collapse, he had markings drawn along his arms similar to tattoos that were around before, his hair was a light brown and eyes an green, he must be related to some clan that had moved outside the ruins into the mountains and provided for themselves. The Wanderer knew of such clans as they had encountered their type before, usually the clans would stay out of ruins and even when they did venture into them they kept to themselves, rarely approaching another they did not recognise. They feared that everyone besides them were uncivilized savages, though that was something everyone thought about others in this age. It was because of this that the Wanderers curiosity was piqued, why had this boy been following them, if he had meant harm he could have easily taken the Wanderer by surprise the moment they reached the chutes bottom. And what was more interesting was what they were doing here in the first place. As far as they knew it wasn't like clans to just abandon children in ruins. "Th-thanks for the help." Said the boy, finally breaking the silence. This had surprised the Wanderer, it felt weird to hear another person's voice after so long, for a moment they just stared in a loss until finally coming back to their senses replying, "Sure, no problem," in a voice that they hadn't used in such a long time that it now sounded alien to them. They then asked, "So there were some things that have been bothering me but first I have to ask," Pointing to the boy's upper left arm, "That mark, Are you aware what it means?" The boy looked back and forth between his mark and the wanderer inquisitively, " My clan mark? Everyone in my family has one, we get it as a sign of respect to our heritage. What do you mean, do I know what it means?"

“Hmmm... Its nothing, forget I said anything,” And with that the two went back to silence for a while until the boy started again with, “I’m... sorry you had to lose your spear for my sake, I shouldn’t have been so careless in the face of an enemy,” He looked pained by this, to which the Wanderer responded, “No need, it was just an old spear I happened to come across. Losing a weapon isn’t much of a loss anyway, could probably make a better one with some old scrap from one of these old buildings.”

“No! A warrior losing their weapon isn’t such a miniscule inconvenience, it’s the loss of one’s memories of challenges overcome and enemies slain! And to be the cause of such a loss is a shame I cannot so easily wash away!” The boy said with such vigor and earnestness that the Wanderer couldn’t help but snicker at this show of character. The boy, clearly embarrassed by his outburst, began to look down at his feet in an attempt to hide his face. “Sorry, sorry, I had forgotten just how seriously you clanfolk took everything, so hearing you wax so passionately about that shit covered spear, I just couldn’t help but laugh.” They said trying to reign themselves in. Whether it was Wanderer’s laughter or a realisation of how ridiculous he had just seemed the boy smiled too even allowing a few laughs to break from his smile. After that the two began to speak more openly with each other and with this another part of Wanderer’s curiosity regarding who the boy was was being answered. The boy’s name was Alan and just as they thought he was from a mountain clan north of the area known as the Hawks Children, he said all he knew was that they were named this after their ancestors. The clan was one known by the others of the area as a group of strong hunters capable of taking on the toughest of beasts. This led to some of the younger clan members becoming overconfident, so to back up this ego those very same clan members decided to take to the ruins after hearing rumors of beasts tougher than anything found in the mountains lurking these once thriving areas. Alan had joined this group as one of its youngest and together with seven others they set off towards the ruins. “Though when we arrived we quickly realised how out of our depth we were. We were slowly picked off until there were just four of us. I became separated from the rest during a fight with a pack of those... mongrels you called them? The four legged ones, furless, with a head like a tiger and bloodshot eyes. Anyway, since I became separated I’ve been trying to find my way back towards my clan home but I’ve been struggling to find any way out that hasn’t been blocked by rubble. I was in the midst of searching for a way out when I caught wind of your fight with that fiend, and so I decided I might be better off following you and well you know the rest. Thinking back now I maybe shouldn’t have been so distant from you but at the time I had no idea what type of person you could be so out of fear I kept away, stalking you from a distance.” The Wanderer sat a while thinking about this new information specifically about the information regarding this clan. Finally they said, “Look there’s more I wish to know about your clan and hopefully I can hear more about this from the leader of your clan. If I help you find your way back, could you get me a meeting with them.” At this suggestion Alan shot up, “Of course! It’d be no issue, if you’re able to help me I’m sure they’ll be willing to hear you out. So with their plan now made and preparations in place, Alan had started to prepare some canned

beans he had kept within his supply bag. "You wouldn't possibly be willing to take off that mask and eat with me would you?" He asked, tilting the can in offering towards the Wanderer, "Heh, No thanks, I'll be fine even with an empty stomach. You should focus on yourself and make sure you're well fed for the journey soon. We'll be leaving at last light. Arachne wouldn't waste its entire day hunting for us, I'm sure it has a nest to get back to." And so as he ate Wanderer could tell something was nagging at the boy, so being unable to stand his sunken silence they said, "You know if you have something to ask you may as well spit it out, we'll most likely be travelling for the next day or two so it'll be good to speak your mind instead of lingering on something that's bothering you."

"Oh, in that case do you mind if I first ask your name and why you're wearing that mask. Matter of fact, why do you seem to be actively hiding any spot where skin may show." What he said was true, Wanderer had taken great precautions to hide their appearance and skin tone, it was only natural to be curious as to why. "Firstly you can just call me Wanderer. And well you see there was a time where I did not dress this way, actually I used to wear nothing at all," Alan looked up, shocked to hear this, "During this time, whenever I ran into another person they would run, if I was lucky, if not they would try and kill me simply because of how I look. Some of them ended up causing serious damage to my body. Eventually I became sick of having to deal with this trouble and so I decided it would be easier for me to just cover up what they did not want to see. Strangely it seems more people are comfortable with a person who conceals their entire selves rather than one who appears to have nothing to hide." Upon ending their explanation they looked up to see what appeared to be pity and remorse on Alan's face. "Please, there's no need to pity me. it's not as if it's anything new and believe me in saying that what others think of my appearance is one of the last things I need to care about."

"Yes, I guess you're right... We should still have some hours before night falls right? If that's the case I'm going to try to catch some sleep. Wake me when you want to rest as well and I'll take over watch okay?" Wanderer nodded in response and so without a word the boy went to sleep while his new companion took up patrol over the ruins surrounding them, keeping careful watch for Arachne who they knew was out there, waiting to strike the one who harmed them.

"Alan keep watching our back. They might try to surprise us." Lee ordered keeping a pair of mongrels at bay with his half broken spear, while others appeared behind them. "Kara, make sure they can't get near Todd, I don't want to lose another of us this soon." Alan looked over to the two, Todd leaning against Kara's shoulder, his left leg had been torn at the calf by the beast that had claimed Leas' life just two days earlier. Alan knew they wouldn't be able to make it back to the mountain range as long as they had to take care of Todd and were being pursued by these beasts. Eventually the mongrels would get the drop on them, they were tired, hungry and because of their injuries, slow. The only way for them to survive was to

either leave Todd or find some way to distance themselves from these beasts. It was then that an idea struck Alan. "Lee, you and Kara get ready to get yourselves and Todd out of here, while you do that I'll do my best to draw away a majority of their pack."

"What, how?"

"These things are smarter than the beasts we've hunted in the mountains, if they see me running away as if in fear they'll assume I'm easier prey than you and Kara who are prepared for an attack by them."

"Alan, no, I can't let you do that, there's got to be a safer way to get us all out of here."

"Todd's already on his last legs and you and Kara are close to exhaustion. I'm smaller, faster and more well rested than all of you, this is the best chance we have and the only one capable of performing the task of distraction and surviving is me."

"Even still, I won't risk it, you'll exhaust yourself. What would I tell the Matriarch if I was to just let you die. I won't let you just run out there and get yourself killed."

"Well sorry Lee but I'm not asking permission." And with that Alan ran past the mongrels who just as he had said started to chase after him, ignoring his friends. He ran and ran until his legs fell numb but still the mongrels chased him further and further into the ruins. Unfortunately it was just as Lee said eventually he fell from exhaustion with the pack surrounding him from all sides, he held up his axe in a last act of defiance. This was it, he was done for. Or so he thought, just as the pack closed in a subtle beeping noise could be heard and from the rubble a burst of gunshots rang through the air mowing down three of the packs number and scaring another eight into running off. Only one of the mongrels remained; it saw where the shots had come from, an old pre-collapse android model whose bottom half was crushed by debris and left arm bitten off. A light flashed on and off on its chest in synchronization with the beeping it produced. On its remaining arm was a worn out shield insignia with faded text and in its hand it held a rifle, in this current era they were weapons of unparalleled destructive power whose only flaw was the lack of ammo left for them. And it was this flaw that would allow the mongrel to rush the android as it desperately pressed on the trigger as if hoping for some miracle, but it never came. The mongrel bit down on the android's head, ripping it off to reveal a stretch of wiring and circuits and then throwing the head to the side. It was only as the mongrel had been mutilating what was left of the android that had scattered its pack did it remember the existence of its prey. Just as it remembered it felt a sharp blade press down on its neck and then dropped to the ground with its head rolling away just as the androids had. Alan put away his weapon and with the last of his strength stumbled underneath some debris to keep himself hidden and warm while he slept, he knew that he would need to regain his strength soon to meet back up with the others. As he drifted off all he could hear was the constant beeping still coming from the android's remains as it rang through the surrounding ruins, 'Beep', 'Heep', 'He-'... "He...", "Hey! You all right. You looked ill?" Questioned the masked figure hovering over the sleeping boy. "Hmmm... Yeah sorry did you want to catch some rest before setting off?" "No, actually the suns just about to set so we should start making a move if we want to make the most of the cover of darkness." Alan quickly got up at this news with a concerned

look on his face as he stood in front of the Wanderer. "Why the hell wouldn't you wake me up so you could sleep yourself!?"

"I'll be fine, you've had a long past few days after all, it's only right you get as much rest as possible," Wanderer replied nonchalantly packing up their gear and putting out the small fire they had made. "That's no excuse, what if you collapse along the way from exhaustion. From the looks of it you haven't eaten either so will you even have enough energy to make this trip?" Alan argued to the Wanderer who could only let out a sigh. "Look, I know full well my own limits and what I can survive with. Plus I'm a lot more used to this region than you are so traversing it is like second nature for me." This answer clearly didn't satisfy Alan who could only scowl at the Wanderer's answer until finally giving in halfway with, "Fine, I'll let it go for now but when we next stop to rest I won't stand for you pulling this kind of stunt again. You may be more used to this way of life but that doesn't mean you can keep it up forever, no person can run forever on empty." To this Wanderer only nodded as acceptance of the terms and so in alert silence the pair began their journey under the moon towards the path set out by Wanderer to get them out of the ruins and towards the mountains.

For the next few days the two made their journey north out of the ruins. Along the way Wanderer had made themselves a makeshift spear from an old rebar to replace the one they lost. They had already encountered a number of beasts they had to either avoid or fight off, ranging from small wandering packs of mongrels to a large car sized, bear like creature with its front legs twice the length of its hind ones. When facing these beasts Wanderer mostly stayed back, encouraging Alan to face the beasts himself with Wanderer only assisting when the situation seemed desperate. After the fights Wanderer would drill Alan on what went wrong and how to better improve his skills for the next encounter, "You're at a disadvantage from the beginning if you continue to only fight with that axe." Wanderer advised yanking their spear from the corpse of a stag, a deer-like creature with bulky legs and incredibly tough antlers that would grant a painful death if you were to face it head on. "Most of these beasts will be tougher and stronger than you, so keeping a distance from them and taking them by surprise is your best bet. If you'd like I'm sure we could find some scrap to make you a spear as well."

"Sure, if you think it'll help." Alan replied while gutting the dead stag for its meat. He seemed uneasy at the idea. Wanderer, noticing this said, "You know if it bothers you I'm sure we could find some other way for you to catch your enemy off guard, the spear was just a suggestion."

"What- Oh no, It's not as if I'm averse to the idea, It's just that It got me thinking about that beast, Arachne, you said it might still be tracking us because of the spear you planted in it and... well... It wouldn't possibly try to follow us out of the ruins would it?"

"If you're worried about your family there's no need, beasts like Arachne, while being smarter than most others, are very territorial and rarely like being away from their nests." Alan let out a sigh of relief to this response. The journey so far hadn't presented many challenges, Even the beasts they ran into didn't serve as much of a threat. But as they came

close enough to the edge of the ruins, to the point they could see close to the mountain's base, the terrain had become increasingly more difficult to traverse. The surrounding collapsed buildings had fallen in the form of a wall separating the once populated city and the natural land to its north. Though Wanderer demonstrated his knowledge of the area well, being able to easily find his way through the wreckage. Eventually the pair had made it, they were just at the edge of the city, Alan could make out the way he and his group had taken when coming through the mountains. They still had a ways to go but if they kept at the pace they were going now they could possibly be at Alans camp the next day. "Yeah, there's a small ledge around the left side of that mountain there. Keep following that and we'll reach the valley where my clan is camped, It's next to an old ranger station that we use for lookout, if they see us coming I'm sure they'll all rush to see us. Who knows, I might even be praised by the matriarch for coming back with such a capable hunter." Wanderer looked to Alan, who was leading them now that he was in an area he recognised, concerned by what the boy had implied when he said that. "Alan, you realise I won't be staying, right? I just wish to speak to your matriarch then I'll be leaving to continue on my own." Alans previous demeanor seemed to drop as he realised this, a frown appearing on his face."Yeah, I know, but you can at least stay a while can't you, there's so many of my clan I'd like you to meet. And it'd be a shame for us to part ways so soon after all we've done together in just these past few days." Wanderer could only sigh before saying, "Sure but realise this. I don't plan on joining your clan, all I need is some answers. Once I have them I'll have my own journey to complete. Anyway, if we're going to be travelling through the mountains it'd be best to start the trek in the morning, we should find a place to make camp. I'll take the first watch so you can get some rest."

"Fine. But remember, don't take watch for the entire night, wake me when you get tired. Also be sure to eat something, I know you don't want to show your face but still you shouldn't starve yourself because of it." And so the two would make camp in a building that had collapsed on its side allowing them to hide away from any beasts by climbing up one of the doorways above them to a tilted office space.

The sound was getting closer. A few hours had passed since Alan had slept and Wanderer during this time made preparations. While earlier they attempted to comfort Alan by saying Arachne wouldn't follow because of its territorial nature, they knew at that time it was a lie. Arachne had never stopped chasing them, the most Wanderer could do was slow it down by taking smaller passages and hope it would give up when they had arrived near the city's edge. But even still the beast persisted, Wanderer knew by now that it had no intentions of letting them go, it would hunt them until either the duo or it was dead. Wanderer normally would be fine with such chances to fight Arachne head on but there was one variable that made this difficult, Alan, they knew that if they died here it wouldn't be long after until Arachne killed him also. This was something they couldn't allow, and so with the knowledge of Arachnes close pursuit, their gear and weapons ready and the ability to plan for it they

prepared the area for the fight... The sound was getting closer. Inside the abandoned parking lot Wanderer sat atop an old, rusted car and stared at the only entrance down from the surface, waiting, with spear in hand, for their foe. They knew it was there, waiting just outside, possibly judging the area for traps. Wanderer got down from the car and in order to cause a commotion broke its remaining windows, doing the same to whatever other cars were nearby. Doing so caused whatever ones with still enough power in them to ring out in alarm. As they heard Arachne getting closer in response to the alarms they quickly dropped to the ground and got underneath one of the cars. From the limited vision they had they could tell Arachne had entered, its spiked armoured legs slowly prowled the car park clearly searching for any sign of their hidden adversary. As it approached the spot where Wanderer had hidden they readied themselves to rush out and surprise Arachne, It was so close they could hear its hiss even through the sound of the alarms going off, just as it was within range, just before Wanderer could step out and begin this final bout, Arachnes legs one by one lifted off the ground and disappeared. Each time one of the legs disappeared a sound was made from above and what looked like concrete would fall in small amounts onto the floor. Arachne had taken to crawling on the ceiling. Just as this thought entered Wanderers head the car they had hid under had been knocked to the side by a powerful force and looking up Wanderer saw the Demonic face once again in its side it could see what was left of the spear they had stabbed it with. As soon as they processed what had happened they rolled to the side just barely missing an attack from one of Arachnes claws. The spear in its side was clearly still causing it pain as it let out a small yelp while extending its reach to the ground, Its strength had not been impacted though for now there was a hole in the spot Wanderers chest had just been. Getting to their feet, Wanderer ran towards the other side of the car park vaulting over a fence to reach the guards room. It was here that they had left their remaining supplies, but it was not their first priority. Using the power from some old car batteries that hadn't degraded they flipped the switch in the guard room to turn on the lights instantly blinding Arachne who had been dangling just under one. This surprise caused it to fall on its back shaking off some of the broken pieces of blades that had been embedded into its exoskeleton. With Arachnes front exposed Wanderer rushed out in an attempt to land a blow. Using the roof of a car as a jump pad Wanderer launched themselves towards Arachne spear raised ready to bring it down on Arachnes throat. Just as they were falling Arachne attempted to strike Wanderer mid-air though due to still being partially blinded they missed a killing blow only being able to knock Wanderer off target. This caused Wanderer to, instead of ending the fight with a strike to the neck, plant their spear into Arachnes chest. While still definitely causing damage to vital organs, it wasn't enough to put them down. Finally having adjusted to the light Arachne began to recover its bearings, using its claw it stabbed into Wanderers side launching them towards the car wreckage it had made earlier, knocking off pieces of their armour as they crashed. Wanderer tried to move before Arachne could charge at them but the damage they had sustained was too much. In order to survive they grabbed a car door that had broken off when it was wrecked and held it out towards them just in time to shield themselves from

Arachnes fangs that had been aimed right for their head. As they struggled in a contest of endurance with Arachne they desperately looked around them trying to find something, anything that might be able to help them. Arachnes fangs were piercing the door, one just inches away from Wanderers eye, in the struggle Arachne had once again stabbed Wanderer in the side with its claw this was it, there was nothing they could do, Alan would die and they couldn't do anything to stop it. As soon as Wanderers strength was about to give in though something had attached itself to Arachnes back striking at the holes in its armoured back which had been revealed from the fall it had suffered. This caused Arachne to step back so as to launch the attacker off. Alan fell to the ground but quickly recovered, drawing away Arachnes attention for long enough for the now maskless Wanderer to come up behind and grab with their metallic hand what was left of the spear they had planted in Arachnes side days earlier. Arachne, shocked by this sudden pain, turned only to look into the cold, robotic and bright blue eyes of the Wanderer who silently stabbed the overgrown pest in its own eye. The prey tried to pull away but using their other arm, Wanderer grappled its neck with newfound strength and began, with deadly efficiency, repeatedly stabbing into their preys face. The prey attempted to fight back but the most it did was cut into Wanderers leg to reveal circuits and wires running through their body. Eventually the prey stopped, its limbs falling limp and its face battered and mutilated, Wanderer dropped the corpse only to then fall onto their own knees. Alan quickly rushed to their side, "Wanderer! What the hell were you thinking, dammit, we have to get you fixed."

"You're not surprised?" Wanderer asked casually.

"Surprised? That you're an android? I'm shocked beyond belief but that's not what matters. We have to fix you up otherwise getting through the mountain's going to be near impossible." Alan lifted Wanderer by the arm and began lifting them both out of the battlefield. "Stop, don't waste your strength, just leave me here." Wanderer said through the speaker in their face. "I won't just abandon you. I don't think I'd make it far without you anyway."

"Alan, listen to me, there's no point, we're too far away from anywhere in the ruins that will have the parts to fix this unit before it stops working. There's a supply bag in that security room over there, grab it and use the supplies to get yourself back home. Just before you do, lay me down by some rubble." Following the instructions Alan placed Wanderer by the entrance to the car park before running back in to grab the supplies, while he did that Wanderer began taking off the rest of the clothes he had used to cover himself with, revealing even more of his robotic frame similar in the simple shape of a human but entirely void of the details that were deemed unnecessary for their design. Just as they pulled off what was left of their shawl Alan had returned, "Okay I got the bag and the spear you put into its chest what shou-" He stopped the moment he saw Wanderers body, more specifically what was on their body. Just below their right shoulder in black was the mark of a bird in front of a sun and just under it the letters XI. The same mark that Alans clan had been using since their inception. "Why... Why do you have that mark."

“I wish I could tell you but honestly I don’t know, It’s why I wanted to speak to your matriarch, in hopes of finding out. Alan I want you to promise me you’ll remember what happened today. That no matter how much time will pass you’ll remember this android you met. Please promise me.” Alan took a while to think it over before finally saying “Of course and I’ll learn what that mark is and why you have it. I won’t let my memories of you fade, I’ll take your teachings to heart so a part of you can live on” Once again Wanderer found he couldn’t help but laugh at the words of this kid before finally saying, “More of me will live on than you think kid, now get going. Before more beasts arrive and so you don’t end up like this unit.” And so Alan went on towards the mountains, being the last thing Wanderer would see before finally once again those words that had become all too familiar appeared before them.

Shutdown Imminent

Redirecting Main Files For System Transfer . . .

The End