
The Blue Guitar
Jr.
Featuring literature and art for youth
The 2026 edition

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The Blue Guitar Jr. Staff

Co-editor: Rebecca Dyer
Co-editor: Richard H. Dyer Jr.
Publisher: Elena Thornton
Artwork for front, back covers: Marjory Boyer

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"Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar."
— Excerpt from Wallace Stevens' 1937 poem "The Man With the Blue Guitar."

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Poems by Sheri Bentley

We Are Pickleballers

Game On!
Time to Compete on the Concrete
No Walls
Wiffle Balls
Tilting the Racquet
Ready to Whack It
Bounce Swoosh Smash Woosh
Dive Dash Zoom Crash
Grumbling Moaning Growling Groaning
Soaring Spinning Scoring Winning
Queen of the Court
King of the Swing
Victory!

A Flutter of Wings

Brilliant butterflies
Collectively fluttering
I whisper ooh-aah

Boing!

Long-legged grasshoppers
Springing into spring
Enthusiastic pogo sticks

Ready, Set, Leap!

Froghoppers leap
Winning the high jump
Insect world's athletes



Sheri Bentley loves Arizona sunshine and sharing the magic of reading with kids. For the past fourteen years, she's been a children's literacy coach. She also volunteered with the Assistance League's Hooked on Books program and serves on the Grand Canyon Reader Award picture book committee. When she's not working with young readers, she's dreaming up playful stories and writing poetry to make them smile! Visit her at www.sheribentleybooks.com.

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Your Order Is Delayed by 30 Minutes

By Ayansh Tripathi

(**Note:** At the time of the following, the only available language was Hyper-Latin-English, so a time traveler traveled in time to translate the following into English. Therefore, this story really is from the future, and time traveling exists.)

In the year 5000, restaurants began adding $C_6H_2(NO_2)_3CH_3$ (TNT, also known as trinitrotoluene) in small amounts to food. This made the food alive until it got cooked, which evaporated the chemical, leaving no traces. Dining was very efficient; food was clean, and the only people behind the counter either made sure the food wasn't dirty, added the chemical, or gave the food their orders and how to cook themselves. However, at one business, people got the message: *Your Order Is Delayed by 30 Minutes.* Here is what happened.

On that fateful day, the newest batch of pizzas came to life. They danced gracefully with each other, matching the dough-to-sauce-to-cheese-to-toppings ratios perfectly. They were about to go into the oven, and customers' phones displayed the message: About to go in the oven! But then, disaster struck. The oven wouldn't turn on! Then, the sad message: *Your Order Is Delayed by 30 Minutes* appeared on the customers' phones. Bob, one of the pizzas, said, "Let's try the instruction manual."

Alas, the instruction manual's text was worn out by time. The pizzas needed to keep trying if they wanted to feel saliva.

After a few more ideas from Bob that failed to work, which included Bob kickboxing the oven and Drew, a weird pizza who tried to order himself because he had a phone, the phones displayed extremely long times:

Your Order Is Delayed By 45 Minutes
Your Order Is Delayed By 60 Minutes
Your Order Is Delayed By 90 Minutes
Your Order Is Delayed By 120 Minutes

Jim, one of the more observant pizzas who was supposed to have Slice Sauce on the side, looked at the back of the oven and said, "There are nine holes, with two at the top, one slightly below those two, five in the middle, and one at the very bottom. The two holes at the top say SS and GS, the one below those two says BC, the five in the middle say HB, SMH, HBBQ, R, and M, and the one at the bottom says SI."

However, Bob said, "So?" which caused

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Ayansh Tripathi is a 6th-grade student. His hobbies are doing math, playing video games, and watching TV. Ayansh's favorite video game is Mario Kart 8 because it features a racing theme, and he likes racing games. When he grows up, he would like to study either biology or mathematics in college.

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all the pizzas to laugh except for Jim, who thought, *"I'm so stupid; how does that even matter? Bob is right; I'm trash; maybe being observant is more of a curse than a blessing."* After looking around for a few seconds at the other pizzas' faces full of laughter from the roast, he stomped to the back corner and stayed there, causing himself to have a decrease in flavor by 10%, a condition called *litvis nomores,* which, in the language Hyper-Latin-English, means "sad pizza."

Max, a nerdy pizza, looked into the instruction manual and realized Jim was beating himself up, so he decided to help.

Jim stayed in the corner, wondering, *"Will I ever be useful?"* when Max said, "I think your idea is great. Do you want some help?"

"Of course, Max."

"Then come with me."

Max led Jim to the storeroom. Jim asked, "Why are we here?" Max said, "The letters on the side stand for different sauces, with SS standing for Slice Sauce, GS standing for Garlic Sauce, and BC standing for Blue Cheese."

"I get it!" said Jim. "So, HB stands for Hot Buffalo, SMH stands for Sweet Mango Habañero, and the rest explain themselves. The height differences in the holes are most likely based on popular opinion."

"Also," Max said, "the oven gets happier when you pour the sauces in and is more likely to start."

"Oh!" said Jim, "It's like when people long ago had electric machines that made their four-wheeled transportation machines work in the cold."

"Exactly, so let's do it," said Max.

After some help from a staff member, Max and Jim poured the sauces into the oven, and with a *Whoosh!* The oven was on.

Before, the phones displayed: *Your Order Is Delayed by 150 Minutes.*

Now they said: *About to go into the oven!*

Bob said, "I'm sorry, Jim. As a punishment, I will be eaten last."

That person's phone still read: *Your Order Is Delayed by 30 Minutes*

Once all the pizzas had been eaten, the crisis was finally over, and everyone (except the pizzas, sadly) lived in peace.

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Misplaced

By Bellis Nieh

I run.

Same every day routine for the past ten years – grab it and go. I've been stealing everything from food to home appliances and taking off with them, leaving not a trace. Ten years on the streets, ten years stealing things, ten years without a family. But the day I lost my way is still a vivid memory.

I was five with a great family – two loving parents and a younger sister. We came to Rio De Janeiro on a vacation one summer break. I was following my parents into this clothing shop when someone grabbed me by the arm and yanked me back. Then they clamped a hand over my mouth so I couldn't yell for any help. It didn't matter anyway. My parents were already inside the building. I was in a dark, sketchy street, the people just as dodgy. No one helped. No one protested. No one said anything.

As a little kid, my first idea was just to run away. I remember planning on it. In retrospect, sometimes I wonder what I might have done differently. Maybe if I were older, I would have done something different. But not much reason to dwell on the past anymore.

I don't remember much other than that, but sometimes I wake up, and I hear someone in my head repeating a phrase. "Never forgotten, just misplaced." It's just where I heard it that I can't seem to place my finger on.

Now, my only friends are Cece and Gus. We met last year in a cramped alleyway, all trying to hide from some food vendor. Until I met them, my best friend was a white mouse named Bob. Cece's the oldest of us, and Gus is the youngest, so we take care of each other. Life would be difficult alone.

Our hangout is this worn-down tree house on Rua Tonelero, behind an abandoned building. We basically live there, with stolen canned food and rotten fruits lying about on the floor – stolen everything.

I hurry up the rickety rope ladder. Cece's reading a comic she found in a garbage bin, while Gus is doing…I don't know what – some sort of acrobatic stretching thing that makes him look like he's in severe pain. The wooden trap door slams behind me.

"What'd you get?" Cece inquires.

"Nothing this time. I almost got caught."

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Bellis is twelve years old – a middle schooler who loves writing and music, especially poetry and creating original songs. She also enjoys other activities, too, including dance, taekwondo, playing instruments, and learning different languages. She has been included in several Blue Guitar Jr. publications, and other writing compilations, such as from the Young Writers contests.

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"I'm hungry," groans Gus. "And tired. Tired of always being hungry."

"We all are, but pouting won't do anything." Cece rolls her eyes. "Why do you have to run the errands, Evie? Gus and I have been cooped up in this trash house for three straight days. When can we get out?"

… Footsteps. Then voices: *"Ai! Para onde foi a ladra? Ela tentou roubar meu pão! Alguém pare de ficar aí parado e me ajude!"*

Then stomping noises, heading the opposite direction.

"Actually, I'll take that as a sign from the universe that maybe not for a while," she added.

"What did the guy just say?" I ask. The surprising thing, even to me, is that in my ten years in Rio, I've picked up only a few phrases and words in Portuguese. Both Gus and I rely on Cece to translate for us. She was born and raised here.

"Yelling about a thief that tried to steal his bread." She smiled sarcastically. "I'm betting it wasn't you. No, it was another girl who happened to be shoplifting bread at the same exact place and moment as you came dashing back here."

I plop down on our ripped, dirty beanbag and let out a long exhale. "Let's face it, people. We're broke. And we can't spend our entire lives like this. We need to find at least a little bit of cash, and soon." The room goes silent. I can tell the others are thinking.

Just then, a piece of paper flutters in through the window, settling down in front of me. It looks almost like an advertisement.

"What's this?" I wonder out loud.

"What?" asks Gus.

Cece snatches it before I can reach for it. "Let me see this…" Her eyes widen. "I don't know if one of you wished on a shooting star, but…" she pauses, as if debating whether what she's reading is true or not. "It's a cash prize."

I stare at her. "How much?" I ask slowly.

"One…million dollars," Gus buds in, now reading the ad. We exchange looks.

'Could this be it? Could this be our chance to live off of something other than scraps?'

"Guys," I break the silence. "This could be a life changer…" I trail off.

Cece starts, "Hey guys, hate to ruin your moment of excitement, but this is a competition. This is the cash prize for a scavenger hunt."

My face drops. We're not exactly in the best position to be running around town and out in the open.

She continues, "Some dead American billionaire man apparently left behind a buttload of money, leaving it to no one in his will. After this, his family assumed there was a reason, so they decided to start a scavenger hunt, basically letting anyone who's up to it take the money. I wonder why they didn't just keep it for themselves?" She reads the paper:

"For those true of heart,
And those in need.
Will succeed this mission,
Through a good deed.

Between the two pillars,
Between the two men,
Enter the passage,
And you shall see ten."

"What's that supposed to – ?"

"It's our first clue!" I interrupt Gus.

"Of course!" Cece exclaims. "Some cryptic riddle that we're supposed to solve. Like this even makes any

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sense."

I scrunch my nose, thinking. "It doesn't really."

Gus looks up. "I might have an idea. Let's ignore the first part, where it says that we need to complete a good deed, but doesn't define what that deed is. Then it goes into the next part, where we need to find two pillars, two men, then we enter a passage, then see ten of… something. I'm so smart." He knocks on his head with his fist.

"Wow, way to go, Mr. Obvious," Cece applauds. "You nearly said that literally word for word. Stuff we already knew."

"Actually," I add to the discussion. "I do think that he's on to something." Gus puffs his chest out and looks so proud of himself, about to say something, but I continue. "I think I know where the pillars might be… but I'm not so sure about the men. Plus, there are three different places the pillars could be, spread out around the city."

"What? Where?" Cece inquires.

"The food bank, town hall, and post office."

Gus's face shows that it suddenly dawns on him. "That's it. The town hall – for those in need, and where people do good deeds!"

"But think about it," Cece argues. "The food bank does better stuff, don't they?"

"So…we can rule out the post office?" I ask.

"It's the town hall," Cece repeats.

"You guys never listen to my ideas!" Gus exclaims.

"Guys," I pitch in. "There's one thing we're missing, though. I don't think we can go back out. We've already stolen too many things to not be recognized."

"She's right," Gus agrees, shoulders sagging.

"On the other hand," I add, seeing his disappointment, "it's our only chance at a promising future. Cece can finally go to law school like she always wanted to!" I reason.

Cece's face changes, softening. "I mean…that *has* always been my dream."

"Yes! And Gus, you've always wanted to be a musician, right?"

"True…" His face brightens. "Let's try. I have half confidence this'll work out, though. And we don't even know where to start. Especially because *some* people-" he glances at Cece, "don't appreciate my ideas."

"That's not…*entirely* true." I hesitate. "But I say the more obvious answer would be the food bank. The guy who made this hunt probably isn't Sherlock Holmes anyway."

And with that, Cece's already halfway down the ladder. Gus, reluctantly, too. So I follow them, jumping off the bottom.

After living in a place for ten years, you start to just know your way around the place. I've memorized the best underground tunnels to take and the most hidden alleyways to find my way around, without being seen.

I suggest to my friends we slip behind a large glass skyscraper, into a dark, smelly alleyway. Holding my breath, I shimmy through the narrow pathway.

The food bank isn't too far – only about a block away. As we exit the alley and walk into the light, the building comes into sight. Quickly and silently, we run around the back of the stone structure.

And I crash right into someone's back.

'Uh oh.' My face turns red, and I start sweating. I try turning around, but it's too late. This tall, black-haired security guard spins on his heel, turning to look me straight in the face, standing less than a foot away.

Cece and Gus are hiding just around the corner of the wall, so I'm left there standing alone. *'I'm doomed!'* I keep thinking. *'I'm doomed, I'm doomed, I'm doomed!'* It continues to echo in my head and I spiral into a

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collection of worries. *'I'll get arrested. This man will take one look at me and decide something's off. I look suspicious. He'll definitely arrest me. I don't want to be arrested!'*

"Hey!" the man shouts. I can now see his badge,

'João Souza

Diretor de Segurança'

I've seen the uniform before. And I've seen the badge before. Police.

I can tell this is going to be bad.

"Who are you?" His voice booms. He speaks with a thick accent. "This location is for employees and volunteers only. You are unauthorized to be here. You look like a minor."

I'm assuming he can tell I definitely don't look like I'm from around here.

My mind is racing. "Uh-actually…I'm a volunteer!"

I can tell he doesn't fully believe me by the look on his face. He looks me up and down, as if making up his mind. "You look awfully…and you smell awfully…"

"Well, that's because I've been *so* busy working here today."

"I don't think I've seen you here before –"

"I mean, I *do* work behind the scenes, so nobody really ever notices me…" I attempt to guilt-trip.

It seems to work, and I think he finally buys it. "Oh…I'm sorry about that. Nobody ever noticed me as a child, either." He's silent for a moment.

"Uh–" This is awkward. I laugh nervously. "Well, I better get back to work, heh. Still got a *super* busy schedule, so…"

"Oh, yes, of course – keep up the good work," he flashes me a smile. The man returns to work, whistling, as he heads toward the front of the building. He – thankfully – goes the opposite path Cece and Gus are hiding in.

"The coast is clear!" I whisper. Cece peeks out, then they come out of hiding.

"Okay, so what're we looking for?" Gus asks.

Cece scans the building. "Remember the two pillars and the two men from the riddle."

We stand there for a few moments, when I snap my fingers. "Got it! – It's obvious! See these marble stands?" I gesture towards two structures holding up the corners of the building. "These are the pillars!"

"And look-" I point to a stone carving on the wall of two men facing each other, a bowl of food on a table between them.

"Yesss! You're officially a genius," Gus appraises.

Cece crosses her arms. "Yeah, yeah, Evie's a mastermind, now what?"

Gus shrugs, then says, "I might have an idea. Let's find, like, a hidden lever or button or something like that."

"That's straight out of a movie and you know it," Cece says and laughs.

He tries anyway, taking a step closer to the wall. Leaning in on the carving, he presses his finger into the bowl of food.

Nothing happens.

But then I can audibly hear a low rumbling sound, and feel the floor shaking slightly. For a moment, I wonder if it's an earthquake.

The wall smoothly slides into the wall with a resounding click, as a piece of the wall glides open to reveal a long tunnel. "Should we go inside?"

"You tell me – you're the one who opened it," Cece says. "I vote for him to go in first, and if he doesn't come back out, then we head on back to the treehouse. All in favor, say *'ay'."*

Gus nearly lunges at her, "Hey – !"

"I'll go first," I offer, "since you guys *clearly* can't

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decide without nearly pounding each other to the floor."

They back off each other, but give one last shove before agreeing.

Slowly, I step into the dark tunnel, smelling dust, walking down the narrow path lit by – I count – only ten torches propped up on the walls. *Record scratching* "Wait, *ten?"*

"What?" Gus asks, trailing behind me, grabbing my arm. "What *'ten'* are you talking about? Did you solve the riddle?"

I think about it. "I mean, we kind of already solved the riddle – I just understood another part of it. There are ten torches lining the walls, like explained in the riddle. This was the ten it was talking about."

Cece makes a small motion of slapping her forehead. "Why didn't I figure that out?" she mumbles, shaking her head.

"It's fine," I add.

She doesn't respond, but instead starts down the path in front of me.

I start to wonder why she's been so moody lately. Not that she's normally rainbows and glitters and sparkles.

As we all decide to start down the tunnel together, something just seems familiar about the feel of it. Maybe it's the carvings on the walls?

They depict a unique pattern. It's difficult to describe. Like a swirl but in a very distinct shape.

After what feels around eight minutes later, we reach a dead end of the tunnel.

There on the wall is yet another carving. This time, there's a large crest engraved on it. I wonder if it's somehow connected to the billionaire who died?

The crest is divided into four empty quadrants, and features the same pattern in the center, as it does on the walls. The outer shape of it reminds me of the Harry Potter houses' symbols. I remember watching the movie with my family, years back. Sometimes random memories return to me, but mainly the little ones. Not really anything big.

"What now?" Gus asks.

"I don't know, ask Evie," Cece mumbles. "She seems to know everything."

"What's your problem?" I ask. "You've been so crabby lately, it's starting to get to me."

"Well, it just seems like you're always doing everything for us. So just lead the way." She gestures forward. "You know, I'm the oldest here, but you guys are acting like I'm just a grumpy teenager, and you're apparently the main character."

"What are you talking about?" Gus asks.

Cece just turns. "I'm out of here. You guys can finish this scavenger hunt on your own." She walks away, then starts to add, "And I still want a fair share of the cash prize! If you find it, anyways…"

Gus and I just stand there, watching her walk away, until she exits the tunnel entirely and turns the corner, out of view.

"Sooo, what now?" Gus asks again, gingerly.

"I guess we just do what she said. Continue on without her." I throw my hands up in the air. "A scavenger hunt shouldn't get her *this* worked up over something so little."

But I just try to focus on the task at hand, looking for the next step and thinking about why the patterns feel so familiar.

Feeling around, my hand catches a small crack. A small nook, a hole with something jammed in it. I finger at it, pinching the object, and tugging it out. The thing feels light and papery, and once I get it out, I realize it's simply a small roll of paper.

"Woah, what'd you find?" Gus stares at the piece of paper in my hand.

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"I think–" I say, unrolling it, "It's our next clue.

Now I see, you have reached
The second off the three clues you will need
To meet the end of this scavenger hunt,
And to grasp your prize. But
Be wary and please understand,
The large sum of money **changing hands.**
To hold such fortune is as opening a book
Into the possibilities you hold with the riches he forsook.

"Well, it seems to me, this clue just added a lot more words than the last one had," Gus comments.

"That's odd," I say, mainly to myself.

"What? What's odd?"

The clue hardly gives anything to go off of. I mean, we know now that we're nearing the end of the hunt, but what to do next is very unclear.

"Evie. Evie! What's odd?!" Gus is shouting now.

I realize I've been talking in my head, so I say, "This clue doesn't tell us anything about what to do next. I think each one gets progressively harder." I hand the paper to him.

"Well, there's nothing else here, is there?" He looks around the carving to see if I had missed anything. When he finds nothing, Gus says, "Okay then. I guess we just have to dissect this clue now. Let's break it down-"

"Are we doing this again?" I hear Cece groan.

I turn around and roll my eyes. "So now you want to join us?"

But then I realize no one's there. Gus and I are the only ones in the tunnel. She's getting to my head.

"Who are you talking to?" Gus seems extremely confused.

"Nobody," I reply quickly.

"Okay, so as I was saying, let's look at this more clearly. In the last line, where it says 'he forsook,' they're most likely talking about that billionaire guy. Also, did you notice how 'changing hands' is bolded? And why did they use the specific wording of the last three lines?" Gus points at the small words on the paper, but I zone out and don't read them.

I remember one Christmas, my grandparents came to visit us in Michigan, the U.S.

They happened to live in Brazil, actually. I think that's part of the reason we came to visit Rio.

I loved to read so much, for Christmas, my grandparents bought me a whole book series. It was called Misplaced. I'm pretty sure, now, that that's where I read or heard the phrase, "Never forgotten, just misplaced." My grandpa really loved those books, especially that quote.

My grandma and grandpa both were very…quirky. They always dressed overly nicely, I thought – seemed sophisticated, but they were kind.

"-and so maybe that's why we should visit somewhere with books. I'd say a bookstore. But also libraries have used books," Gus finishes.

I don't bother to ask him to repeat himself, so I let him choose. "So where should we go?"

"You're asking *me?* Finally! Someone who actually values my opinions!"

"So where should we go?" I ask again.

"I don't know, I'm very indecisive," he shrugs.

I laugh. "Okay then, I'll choose. Let's head to the library. Bookstores are full of new books. If we're being specific here, it's probably a place with lots more used books."

"Good idea! I'm so smart."

When we arrive at the library, I stare at the looming

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building, and it dawns on me.

"What exactly are we looking for?" I ask Gus.

"Books, I guess."

"But there's probably tens of thousands of books in this single building. It would be impossible to search every single one of them." Then another thought comes to mind. "Plus, if this is a scavenger hunt, we're probably not the only ones on it. I don't know if everyone is given the same clues or different clues, but we definitely don't have any time to waste here."

As if on cue, I hear distant shouting. "Hey guys, I think it's over here! The next clue!" It's not at all a familiar voice, but something tells me we should follow them.

"Gus, follow me," I say.

"Where?"

"Just trust."

I follow the voices around the building to the entrance of the library. They belong to three adults, running through the doors.

We have to speed up to keep pace with them, making sure not to get lost.

Chasing the grown-ups, Gus and I tail them to a small, quiet reading corner in the library. Overhead, a sign on the nearest bookshelf reads *'Fantasy'*.

I yank Gus down with me to hide behind a bookshelf. If these people really are on the same hunt as us, they probably wouldn't be too happy to see a bunch of kids shadowing them.

"Evie," Gus whispers.

I turn to look at him, but instead find that the voice came from none other than Cece. Crouched down right behind him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask skeptically. Gus and I stare at her.

She sighs. "I've been following you guys."

"Really? *I* thought you didn't want to join us," I whisper aggressively. "And *I* thought *I* was always the main character, which must mean I'm right, right?

"Look, now is not the time to talk about this, we have something to deal with right now," she says urgently.

"Don't try to change the subject," I retort. "Why did you come back?"

"Seriously, Evie–" Her gaze then slowly shifted from me to above my head. And I could tell she was not lying.

"Please tell me no one's behind me," I manage to squeak out.

"Hi. What are you doing down there?" I turn around to see a young woman – one of the scavenger hunters – looking down on me. I get the impression she's trying to come off as friendly, but at the same time, already doesn't like me either.

"Checking out some books," I lie, sifting and flipping through random books around me.

"Uh-huh," she says slowly. The woman looks at me curiously. "And you're interested in reading Game of Thrones?" She nods to the book in my hand and I turn it around.

To be honest, I definitely am not.

"Let's just go," Gus mutters to me. "We'll figure out the clue on our own."

"So you're on the scavenger hunt too?" the woman asks.

"What scavenger hunt?" Cece lies.

"Who are they?" One of the woman's friends has come over now, looking from me to Cece to Gus. "Have they been following us?"

"Not the entire time," Gus blurts at the man.

Out the side of my eye, I can feel Cece's stink eye at Gus. I start to panic, but then start to think. There's really nothing for these people to accuse us for. It's not

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like cheating at a random scavenger hunt is illegal. So, yeah, it's a scavenger hunt for a whole lot of money, but what difference does that make? We're not in trouble.

But that all depends on someone's personality.

The woman's demeanor immediately shifts. "Oh. Well, you know, we can get you little children disqualified for cheating. I mean, once *we* win the cash prize." She speaks in the way I would talk to a dog. Or a small baby. A very annoying and annoyed tone.

"Not if we find the cash prize first," Cece protests. "If we get to it first, we can't possibly be following you when we're ahead."

"Shouldn't be too ha-"

The man stopped mid-sentence.

I don't understand why he pauses so suddenly – until my feet fall out from under me, and I'm falling. It reminds me of Alice falling down the rabbit hole. There's another memory I have of watching that show when I was little. What's even curiouser and curiouser, is that everyone else seems to have disappeared from beside me. All that's left is me and a plummeting hole, with bright orange walls. The color gives me nausea, as my stomach flips and I watch the circle of light above me shrink.

I puff when my back thuds to the floor. But it's not out of pain. There's a great neon green mat which caught my fall, and it starts to swallow me.

Before I'm fully engulfed, I manage to swim my way out of the giant-sized pillow.

"How peculiar," I say out loud to no one in particular. Standing up, I start to notice the three tiny doors laid out flat on the floor in front of me.

The wooden one on the left has beautiful carvings on it, similar to the ones I found in the tunnel. In the middle, there's a bright blue door bearing a ring handle, and feels velvety to the touch. The last door on the right is a simple solid door, with a tiny peephole, but no doorknob.

After a while of sitting there on the floor, and gaping at the doors, I decide to take the left one. Something tells me the whole hunt has been leading us down a path of the patterns.

Pulling hard on the door, it finally budges open, flinging off the hinges, onto the mat. I take one quick glance behind me, just enough to see the wooden swirls disappear into the depths of the cushion. Then I peer down through the door frame, revealing a spiral staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs, I arrive in a glass room. Or more of a glass maze. My head spins looking at the labyrinth. But I step forward and set down the path.

Trial and error brings me to many dead ends, backtracking, and oddly-reflecting pieces of glass.

When I'm near to giving up, I come across one last dead end. But this piece of glass is opaque unlike the others. And in the center of the glass is engraved the same pattern that has led us through the entire scavenger hunt.

I run to the wall and push. Nothing happens. I push again. Again, nothing.

Then I hear excited clapping behind me.

I turn around to see a familiar-looking woman. Her skin is ever so slightly wrinkled, but her hair is white. It's so odd. Like I've met her but we're still strangers.

She smiles. Then her face scrunches up, as if she's thinking deeply.

"You're…" she starts.

"You're…" I pause. "I'm sorry. I *do not* know who you are. And, pardon me, but have we won the cash prize? And where is everyone else? Did they reach the end?"

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"Everleigh! What a delight! Oh, you're Everleigh!" she exclaims. The woman points at me and bounces up and down, higher than I would expect of someone her age. "I'm your grammy!" She now points to herself ecstatically. "They were right!"

It comes back to me. Never forgotten, just misplaced. Gram and Poppy. Mom and Dad and Sissy. The family crest. And I now realize, there was a reason my grandparents always dressed so fancy.

"What do you mean, 'They were right'?" I ask.

"Do you remember us?" she says, as I nod, smiling widely. "Your parents set up this scavenger hunt in hopes of finding you. I thought it was quite a far stretch, but nope."

I can't help but laugh, then a thought comes to mind. "Wait, who died?" I ask urgently. "I thought that's where the money came from?"

"Oh, no one," she says simply. "Your Poppy came up with that. I said, 'Why don't we just send out missing flyer posters?' But of course not. Had to be extravagant and costly. Well, at least the money's not wasted." She smiles at me and stops bouncing.

There's one more question that nags at me though. "Why didn't you come looking earlier?"

"Oh, we have," she replies, nodding and crying now. "We have been for years. I don't know how your parents could have possibly lost you anyways!" she seems to add as an afterthought.

"Not lost, simply misplaced." I shift my gaze to behind Gram, and see Poppy appearing from somewhere, smiling even more widely than her. Behind him are Gus and Cece.

"Evie!" Cece jogs to my side.

"So are we good?" I ask.

"Yeah, I guess." She winks and fist bumps me.

"Wow you guys, fastest breakup and makeup I have ever seen." Gus walks over to us.

"Have you seen any other breakup?" Cece asks.

Gus doesn't reply, and I giggle.

I look around. What an anticlimactic and climactic ending all in one. "Okay, I have tons more questions."

"On the way back to the private stay," Poppy replies.

When I glance at my friends, Gram adds, "You two, also."

There's a moment where the conversation pauses, like we're all taking in the moment.

"Okay, so let's go," Gus says impatiently. "I need some private suite time."

My grandparents chuckle.

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The Cost of a Wish

By Ria Balusani

Ariadne stared at her phone longingly, blue light covering her face as she stared at the one thing she wanted most— well, one of the things she wanted most. At fifteen, Ariadne's world was surprisingly small. Her life mainly consisted of three things: wishing for friends, wishing for money (well, who wouldn't), and wishing for her dream guitar (a Taylor 214ce-K DLX, of course). But alas, no matter how many dandelions she blew, stars she wished on, or nights spent waiting for 11:11 to come, her wishes never appeared to happen Three weeks into her endless scrolling, there it was. She saw a seller giving away their guitar for only $200. Of course, two hundred dollars is a lot for a high schooler, but Ariadne was determined. The next hour consisted of Ariadne going through every place she could for her money. She went through every piggy bank, under the couch cushions, and even her mom's purse (something she still is not very proud of). But finally, after all the effort, she came to the amount of $203.16.

After accounting for all the money she found, she opened up her laptop and opened the marketplace app, praying no one else had taken the deal yet. After finding it, she was giddy with joy as she clicked the message seller button.

Ariadne: Hi, is the guitar still available?

Seller: Yes! Are you interested?

Ariadne: Yeah, how much are you doing for it?

Seller: $200

Ariadne: Okay, I'll send it in a bit!

After texting the seller about the deal, she closed her laptop shut and breathed a sigh of relief. She was about to get a celebratory snack when, all of a sudden, a jingle played from her phone: the seller! Rushing to her computer, she checked what the seller had said. After finalizing the deal with the seller. She checked the clock and realized it was 11:11, and she realized it was time to go to bed. First though she was gonna make a wish, she always made a wish then. As she was about to shut her laptop again, the same ding sound played.

Seller: Do you enjoy music too?

Ariadne: Yes!

Seller: I don't have any friends that are in to my style of music

Ariadne: Well I love that style of music

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Ria Balusani is in 7th grade, and she loves to bake, read, and make crafts. Ria Balusani is a cadet in the Civil Air Patrol program for youth. Her favorite book series is The Hunger Games. She is currently learning Python by doing Harvard's CS50 Python course.

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too!

Both of them stayed up late talking to each other until Ariadne checked the lock and realized it was already 3am. Deciding to log off the conversation, she went to bed all giddy because of her new friend.

Over the next few weeks, Artemis (the seller) became the center of Ariadne's world. What started as a simple transaction quickly turned into a close bond between the two. Ariadne shared everything with Artemis. Ariadne still didn't have the guitar but she trusted that Artemas would bring it.

Ariadne: Are you available today for the guitar?

Artemis: Sorry I can't make it today!

Ariadne: Ok no worries!

Conversations like these happen almost every day. Ariadne started to get suspicious, but she trusted her new friend. From gossip at school, annoying group chats, and secrets Ariadne told Artemis. With their bond growing closer and closer, Ariadne thought that everything in life was finally working out. One day, Ariadne needed to buy something at the store, and when she was going to pay, her card declined. Confused because her parents had just given her allowance only two days ago, she checked her bank app on her phone. $2.03 left. Worried, her mind went through all sorts of possible scenarios: Did I accidentally spend it? Did my parents not give me the money? Am I in the wrong account? Did I get hacked? Leaving the store in a daze, she went home and decided to look into this. She was about to call the bank when she thought I should probably tell Artemis about this. Texting Artemis, she told her what had happened

Ariadne: You will never believe what just happened

All my money was just stolen

Artemis: Oh no! What are you going to do?

Ariadne: I don't know how to fix it

I'm thinking about going to the police

Artemis: You shouldn't do that

This happened to me once and they only made it worse

Ariadne: Then what should I do??

Artemis: Change your password and give me the info so i can make sure its secure

Ariadne: Are you sure?

Is that safe?

Artemis: Of course! You can trust me.

Trusting her friend, she did what Artemis told her. She changed her password, gave it to Artemis, and didn't call the police. She debated whether she should tell her parents or not. She knew it would be bad not to tell them, but she also knew that her parents would lose their trust in her if they learned what happened. After talking about it with Artemis, she decided not to tell them. After finishing up her work and getting ready for bed, she felt relaxed knowing that her friend would help her.

The next morning Ariadne decided that she wanted to treat herself to a snack at her favorite cafe before school. Remembering what happened yesterday, she decided she would ask her parents for some money. After getting ready, she went downstairs to ask, only to be greeted with her parents' panicked faces. Worried and curious, she asked what happened. *"Our savings, they're gone."*

"What?" Ariadne said, praying that it wasn't what she just heard. Her parents repeated it again, and her horror became true. Going to school, she was baffled about what happened. First her, then her parents? That couldn't possibly be a coincidence. She decided to text Artemis about it, knowing that she helped her yesterday.

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Ariadne: It happened to my parents too!
Artemis: What??
Ariadne: Their accounts were drained too!!
Artemis: OMG, that same thing happened to me too
First me, then my parents!
Ariadne: REALLY?!
Artemis: YEAH
When that happened, we just downloaded this thing that fixed it
It looks sketchy, but trust me, it works
Ariadne: Ok I'll try it!

Ariadne downloaded the thing on her phone and decided to add it to her parents' accounts when she got home. After coming home, she decided to go onto her parents' laptop and download it.

Sitting cross-legged on her parents' office floor, her dad's heavy silver laptop balanced on her knees. Artemis had sent the link, promising that it would return all the stolen information and money. Copying the link into her parents' browser, she started to hesitate at the Enter key.

Artemis: Did you install it yet??
Quick before more things happen!

With Artemis's text, Ariadne finally pressed the Enter key. She was about to breathe a sigh of relief, but then suddenly the screen turned blank, with jagged pixels covering the top half; the bottom half read: *This file could possibly harm your computer! Are you sure you want to run it?*

Her hand started to tremble.

Ariadne said out loud, *"First me, then my parents!"* Her mind suddenly flashed back to three weeks ago. *Why did a stranger start selling a guitar for almost nothing, then never actually ask for details?* Ariadne started to think about it all together. *Why had Artemis always tried to dodge meetups? Why did she never actually show her the guitar in a call? Why did she never ask for the details?*

And she started to try to remember what she had changed her password to, until suddenly it came back.

Ariadne2011!

The exact same password as her parents' bank account, her bank account, wifi password, and their home portal

Cold, sickening dread poured straight down Ariadne's spine, heavier than ice water. She opened her phone to check for the original listing. After scrolling for a bit she finally found it with the original picture. With trembling hands, she took a screenshot and put it into a reverse image search.

After three agonizing seconds of waiting, the results popped up. The exact image was from a random musician in Nashville dated two years ago.

Artemis didn't have the guitar. Artemis didn't care about Ariadne's favorite music. Artemis didn't feel a special bond between them. Artemis just lured Ariadne into the trap, and she took the bait whole.

Artemis: Ariadne, did you do it?
Don't mess this up. Hurry!

Ariadne noticed this sudden change in tone, the absence of warmth in it. It was almost like she had just woken up from a hypnotizing spell. Tears started to sting her eyes. *Was I really this desperate? Was I about to give everything to Artemis? Is her name even Artemis? Is it even a she?* Wiping her tears with her hoodie sleeve, she knew she had to tell her parents what happened. She was filled with embarrassment and worried about what her parents would say about all of this. Grabbing her dad's laptop, she took in a breath of false determination; she headed downstairs to tell them.

Her parents were both at the kitchen counter, with hushed whispers and papers scattering the gloss finish;

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they didn't even notice Ariadne entering.

"Mom, Dad?" Ariadne said, breaking the icy, thin silence.

Her parents, noticing how she was on the verge of tears, tried to be reassuring. *"Hey don't worry,"* her dad said softly. *"Everything's okay. We're just sorting out some things with the bank-"*

"It's not okay, though," Ariadne said, interrupting her dad. Dropping her phone and her dad's laptop onto the table, she said, *"You didn't get hacked by a stranger. It was all because of me."*

Everything spilled out in an uneven rush: the cheap guitar, the texting, the $200, giving her password, and the software that she was about to download onto her parents' computer. As everything came out, she mentally prepared herself for the anger and the screaming, but instead a deafening silence filled the room. Her mom suddenly pulled Ariadne into a tight, fierce hug, immediately cutting off Ariadne's uneven apologies. *"Don't worry it's not your fault,"* her mom said. *"Thank God you didn't click download."*

Her dad was already reaching for his phone to start fixing everything. *"Don't worry we'll sort this out soon. We'll call the bank, cybercrime unit, and police."* Ariadne was already feeling the weight start to leave her shoulders. She had a feeling that everything would turn out to be okay.

It took three grueling months to fix everything. With a messy mix of police visits, questioning, visits to the fraud department, and endless monitoring, everything started to slowly get better. They never got back the $200 Ariadne gave, but they were able to track where "Artemis" was and restore most of the drained savings.

Everything didn't hit Ariadne immediately like a train going at full speed. Instead, it slowly became clearer. Even though she knew everything now, she still missed her friend sometimes.

Things in her life did change, though. She now had two-factor authentication, had strict monitoring on her phone, and she stopped trusting anyone as easily. The last one would take time to fix, though, unlike the other ones. Slowly, everything started going back into their place.

On Ariadne's sixteenth birthday, she didn't blow on a dandelion or make a wish at 11:11, instead, she walked to the music shop downtown. As she stood in front of the building, she saw a small, old, acoustic guitar in the front, waiting behind the glass. Ariadne spent the last six months doing countless babysitting jobs, mowing lawns, and working at the ice cream shop near her school.

As she walked into the store she saw something. She saw the guitar she had spent countless wishes on, sitting on display in the front of the store, begging to be bought. She paid in cash, $250, and walked out with that small acoustic guitar. Case in hand, she walked through the town and thought about everything. As she walked, the bittersweet reality all came rushing back to her. She couldn't trust anything the same now, but the music she played on her porch was undeniably real.

"No wolf is as dangerous as the one dressed in a coat you wove yourself."

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The Diary of Marella Quinn

By Jasintha Saravanan

07/16

Dear Diary,

Why's the first day of school so important? Why isn't it as important as any other day? I guess it is probably because it is the first time you meet your teachers, and the first time you see your classmates after a long time. But shouldn't it be as important as any other day? Your grades count from the first day of school to the last. So do the impressions you make. Today was sooo easy though. We had a bunch of the syllabus given to us. The teachers all seem nice enough. There are some new people I haven't had in my classes yet this year either. I'm so excited it's freaking me out, haha. I need to learn everybody's name soon, though.

07/19

Dear Diary,

I just finished logging into all my school classes, and I just got my first notification. Marella Quinn received a 100% on 1.1 HRW in AP Calculus AB. I forgot how nice it felt to get good grades. Academically validated. I'm pretty hungry, though. I think I'm going to make chocolate cake tomorrow. With extra chocolate. Maybe I'll even give some to Macie. Only after I finish studying, though. I don't have any major tests coming up soon, but what if one of the teachers gives us a pop quiz? I'd be screwed. Sigh.

07/27

Dear Diary,

We had our first major quiz in math today. It was so light. It was only seven questions, but I did well. Everybody else got Cs, though. I'm going to help out my friends with the content after school tomorrow. I'm pretty excited; we're going to a new cafe. Idk how I'll manage my time, though. I have a research rough draft to submit, and some other homework. But I'll figure it out. I need to keep my streaks and not get any missing assignments yet.

07/29

Dear Diary,

I actually locked in so hard today; it was great. I literally was able to study for 5 hours, but I'm really, really happy because I have a test coming up for Environmental Science, and this is definitely going to be so helpful. I'm so excited cuz we're going back to the cafe that I went to

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Jasintha is a high school student in Arizona. She enjoys reading and card games. She loves to express herself through writing and fashion.

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yesterday. It was literally so beautiful, and the food was so good. I'm going with my sister this time, though. I'll probably get something chocolatey this time, though.

08/03

Dear Diary,

I'm so tired. It's 2.09 am, and I've been studying, and this is so hard. I have to finish revising all the concepts for AB today because I'm taking my test early. This is so tiring. All I've done this week is study for this test. I couldn't even go to Macie's back-to-school night. I'm also kind of hungry, but it's okay. I'll just buy some coffee at school. I'm probably hungry because I haven't eaten anything, but I don't have time to eat anything. I feel kind of bad because Brin asked to

hang out after school today because she needs help finding a dress for her orchestra recital, but I don't have time to go out shopping. I'm going to bed now. At least I'll get 4 hours of sleep tonight.

08/04

Dear Diary,

I'm so mad. I didn't even get a good grade on that calc test. I'm so screwed. I studied so hard for that too.

08/07

Dear Diary,

All I've done today is wake up, review my flashcards for psych before school, and study until 2. That's all I've been doing these past couple of days, and I don't even see my work paying off. I feel bad I haven't been able to hang out with Macie for a while. It would have been fine, but I've also been kind of crabby to her lately. Whatever, she'll get over it.

08/13

Dear Diary,

I've stared at the same psychology paragraph for twenty minutes, and I couldn't process a single word it said. I've been studying so hard, but it feels like it hasn't been paying off. I've even stopped hanging out with friends and going to lunch just so I could go into tutoring, but I'm so tired. When I got home, even opening up my planner irritated me. I'm dreading going to school tomorrow. All my grades are falling off.

08/18

Dear Diary,

I feel bad for Macie. She keeps asking to hang out, and I keep lying about some non-existent family plans just so I can study instead, but I don't even know if it is worth it anymore. It's not like my grades are doing well anyways.

08/22

Dear Diary,

Bro, I could barely get out of bed this morning. Even brushing my teeth felt exhausting. All I needed to do was study today, but noooooo, Dad had to make me go run errands. It's like ever since I've been able to drive, I'm the person he goes to to get groceries. Why can't he go himself? Whatever. I went anyway, and I was almost done with everything on his list, but I saw a pink cake-decorating kit. There was a cake in the image, and oh my gosh, it looked so good. I bought a kit because it seemed fairly cheap. I haven't baked anything recently. I will bake the cake soon.

09/05

Dear Diary,

I made the cake today. It was so fun lol. I lowk

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thought it would be easy, so I wasn't really paying attention to measurements or anything. I ended up putting it in the oven for too long, and it kinda came out burnt. I made such a bad mess, but it was so relaxing. I didn't think about grades at all. But I don't feel guilty about that either. I need to try baking a cake again. I want it to come out good this time tho lol.

09/12

Dear Diary,

I faked a stomachache this morning so I could stay home from school and try making the cake again. I know it's bad to skip, but I just needed one day to breathe. I actually measured everything out this time, and focused on the process. When I took it out of the oven, it looked semi-decent. Lol, I was so genuinely happy. It was the first time in weeks I didn't think about calculus or my GPA. I even texted Macie and apologized for ghosting her. She said she understood, but she also admitted that being ignored for weeks had hurt. I wanted to defend myself, but she was right. We're planning to hang out this weekend though. For the first time all semester, I actually went to sleep at a normal hour, and woke up feeling good. I kept thinking that one bad grade meant I was becoming a bad student. Somehow, "bad student" had started to mean "bad person." Looking at it now, that sounds ridiculous, but it didn't feel ridiculous at 1:00 in the morning.

09/19

Dear Diary,

My third attempt at the baking kit today was perf. It actually looked just like the picture on the box! I brought a few slices to school and shared them with Macie and Brin at lunch, and we had the best time laughing. I feel good. My mood has improved, and I feel like my brain can actually process information again; my Psychology and Math grades are already climbing back up. Mom said I seemed like myself again. We even talked through dinner without arguing once. It felt good.

09/28

Dear Diary,

I still have a ton on my plate, but it actually feels manageable now. Last night, instead of staying up until 2 AM staring at flashcards, I spent an hour baking a batch of cookies for my psych study group. We met up at the library after school today, ate half the cookies, and actually quizzed each other effectively. When I got home, I checked my grades portal. I got a 94% on the psych quiz. Ayyyyy. Turns out, sleeping eight hours does help your brain work better.

10/05

Dear Diary,

Midterms are officially coming up, and I was low-key thinking about canceling all my weekend plans and locking myself in a room. I almost did too. But I actually spent Saturday morning baking raspberry tarts with my mom (which she was shocked about, but in a good way). We actually talked while waiting for the crust to set, no school talk involved. Then, Sunday afternoon, I studied calculus with Macie at the local cafe. There wasn't as much time to study for Environmental Science, but I tried my best to balance it all. I think I'm getting it too. My math teacher even handed back our test today and said I set the curve in our class. I'm proud of myself.

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A Gilded Map

By Akshaj Neil Atluri

“‘Billionaire Richard Westfield and a missing city,’ huh?” Geoffrey doubted. He went back to vigorously scribbling on his new maps, creating the coastlines and seven hills of his beautiful hometown, San Francisco. From the Painted Ladies down the street to his favorite hill, Lombard Hill, Geoffrey had no reason not to call it home. He lived a quaint, little life in his, so to speak, humble abode. For a house in the Lower Haight, one would expect Mr. Geoffrey Davis to be an extrovert, a lively figure with a quaint side to himself. That couldn’t be more wrong. Most of his contact with the outside world was selling his beautiful, work-of-art-quality maps to a select few and checking his mail every day. A random Monday started no differently. It was a chilly one, at that, with near 40-degree weather. Geoffrey donned his favorite coat and beanie and started at twilight toward the gates of his front yard.

His wrought iron mailbox glistened in the dim sunlight as he opened the mailbox to find a new envelope. The ornate seal, beautiful envelope, and golden trims gave it a rich feel. Geoffrey carefully escorted the envelope back to his study in a relaxed manner. It contained only a poem, with no indication of a sender or return. Geoffrey almost thought it was a joke from the day the poem was titled: Monday, February 6, 1595. It was clearly not 1595. Nevertheless, Geoffrey’s curiosity got the best of him, and he read.

Leave the city of seven hills, the city of expansive bays,

Head across the country, for your presence is called east

Find the eastern town of the two sisters, the sisters guarding the lakes

The eleven vertical lakes need a third sister at least

Some of your creations, big or small,

Might just come in handy, after all.

Davis’s 20 years of experience led him to the poem’s answer. His childhood home of Syracuse, New York. Having spent almost every summer at his grandparents’ lake cabin along Seneca Lake was always his favorite. He was skeptical of the letter at first, as almost no one knew him, let alone his personal life. Just as it always does, however, his curiosity got the best of him. Geoffrey set off the next day

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Akshaj Neil Atluri is a high school freshman who likes chess, travel, and biology. His other interests include playing video games and sleeping. He aspires to study either cardiology or business in his higher education.

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toward the lakes of his childhood.

Geoffrey would never really like a place if it didn't have an interesting story behind it. With that, Syracuse couldn't have been a better spot. The industrial salt market and the Erie Canal made the city all the more interesting for him. Driving up to the lake house, his grandparents left him was a flow of emotions. Nostalgia washed over him like a tsunami; bittersweetness like an arrow. Arriving at the house, kept in pristine condition, was a relief. It had been almost a year since his last expedition to the cabin.

Walking to the den, Geoffrey felt the cold New York sun as he moved toward the windows of the great room. The office had a sprawling desk, perfect for his and his granddad's area of expertise. Geoffrey laid out all of his maps of his hometown region and searched for a reason, discerning whether he wasted his time or not.

Geoffrey had made around ten prototype maps of the area that weren't actually on the special paper he uses. One of the prototypes had a third city on it. Geoffrey was just a child and didn't know much about the area himself. Knight's Cross was on the junction of two interstates, near the south end of a few lakes. Geoffrey recognized it and called it out. He scurried through his trench coat pockets looking for the clue and read it again. "The eleven vertical lakes need a third sister at least. Some of your creations, big or small, might just come in handy, after all." Geoffrey immediately began drafting up a new map on new paper, this time with Knight's Cross in its proper location according to his maps.

Thinking nothing of his little side quest, he drove back down the interstate to catch up with his uncle in Philadelphia. Around an hour into the uneventful drive, Geoffrey found a city that wasn't there the last time he took the drive. He pulled over into a pub and asked a person where he was. They said, "Well, you're in Knight's Cross, my friend! We, people, call our town 'The Third Guardian' of the lakes up North. You ever heard of 'em?"

Geoffrey promptly thanked the kind young man and set off searching the city for something, now knowing his little side quest was not just an ordinary venture.

The streets of Knight's Cross wound through rolling hills and steep cliffs of southern New York. Comparable to the landscapes of Switzerland and Lake Geneva, the scene seemed more fit for a small hamlet than the sprawling town it was. Geoffrey rushed through the backstreets and the cramped suburbs and stumbled upon an alleyway different from the rest. Partially abandoned and seemingly taken over by nature, the peaceful, little 5th Street was, literally, an urban legend for the town. The alleyway had the faintest scent of mildew, with graffiti peering out from under the controlling grasp of moss.

Salutations from Knight's Cross, I see you've made it this far

But your journey does not end, puzzle unsolved and reward afar

You now shall travel, travel beyond
To a land where time is inverted
And to a (somewhat) beau monde
Where taxicab drivers won't halt at all
Where beautiful coasts make landfall
Where mountains, reefs, and towers all make their mark
That is where you shall embark

John F. Kennedy International Airport served as the messenger of nostalgia for Geoffrey. His first job would regularly take him from San Francisco to New York, and his aunt and uncle lived on Long Island. The

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plane ride came all too quickly anyway, and Geoffrey spent most of that time in his thoughts. Drifting into thoughts of how this even started, Geoffrey sat reading a new novel for most of his flight, just like he did in the old days. His stop in LA was somewhat strenuous, requiring a journey from Terminal One to the International Terminal. He did make it with an hour to spare anyway. After boarding the plane, however, the next thing he knew was that they were already nine hours into their journey across the Pacific. Six hours and a novel later, the plane would soon land in his second destination: Sydney.

Jetlagged and grumpy as ever, Geoffrey just wanted to sleep. Again. Travel time took two days, and he couldn't stop complaining about how the route he flew was the most inefficient route possible for his long-deserved third European trip. In the midst of his internal fit, his taxi rattled to a stop in front of Geoffrey's hotel. He checked into his room and, immediately energized by his newfound enthusiasm from complaining, promptly unfurled his maps of the Greater Sydney Area. Just one could easily take up his whole bed. Geoffrey immediately started running through his diary, which he brought with him, and skimmed it for entries about the Great Barrier Reef, beautiful dunes, and his younger brother's odd obsession with kangaroos. And there it was. An entry from 55 years ago, sitting on the paper he had known his whole life. The entry was transcribed so many times that it was starting to become unreadable with all the alterations it had undergone. Geoffrey sought out a suitable location and found it. A plain, barely inhabited by only a few small neighborhoods south and southwest of the main city. An hour or two later, he was done. His new beautiful creation that probably didn't exist. It took Geoffrey a few minutes to flag down a taxi, and the one he did manage to get seemed to have a driver fiddling with five phones while trying to figure out where he wanted to go. Once he managed to actually spit out the new town he wanted to go to, the driver perked up. The driver started enthusiastically talking about how the new city was the talk of the town and how he was actually excited to go there again. Geoffrey, surprised and somewhat flattered, as he designed the city himself, indulged himself in his next novel.

Hunter's Valley. The newest addition to Geoffrey's new expedition. A new mangled mess of roads, shops, houses, and other places that people call a "city". Geoffrey's first breath of inland-Australian air and a little smog was instantly made less relieving by the realization that there might be another clue hiding within the city. An expedition through the streets and walkways of downtown proved to be rewarding; a shop titled "Treasures and Trinkets" was sandwiched between a food stall and a pharmacy. A smaller sign underneath read, "From all over Hunter's Valley!"

Geoffrey saw his chance and strode inside to search for any sort of object that could have been the answer to his riddle. The shopkeeper, definitely a man in his fifties or sixties, offered the kindest greeting and showed a sliver of teeth when he saw Geoffrey. The sign did not do the shop an injustice: treasures and trinkets from all over the sprawling town and Australia itself. The oddities in the shop ranged from maps of the town and the land tessellated on the walls, to spices from the far reaches of the world, to even snowglobes of the Australian Alps, and a booth of local (somewhat) delicatessen and pastries. Geoffrey, not finding his object of interest, inquired of a clue of sorts from the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper, interested in the request, checked the back of his cramped establishment and presented Geoffrey with a note written in scrawled

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handwriting. It seemed to be written in such horrible handwriting that Geoffrey almost dismissed it for a doctor's note asking for a rare medication or something of the sort. The sides were trimmed with odd symbols fading in and out, with visible gaps in the ink separating the runic sigils. The only words Geoffrey was able to make out were sand, port, and The Point.

He had the letters "N," "d," "a," "k," and "a" in a new, seemingly unique word when the note started to feel hot. A slight, acrid smell loomed upward, and an ember whiplashed and flew a few feet. Before he could react, the elaborate note was transmuted into an anthill-sized mound of ash. It all ended quicker than it started. The kind shopkeeper grew increasingly furious and immediately started ravenously unleashing the terms of his "you-break-it-you-buy-it" policy. Geoffrey plucked out a twenty Australian Dollar bill from his wallet and slapped it on the table before walking out. A few strides away from the doorstep, he calmly yelled out, "Keep the change!" before opening the doors and letting them fall back to their resting position, only leaving the subtle jingle of the bells attached to the door's hydraulic system. This gesture clearly seemed to silence the shopkeeper.

Geoffrey paced back to a main street and waved down a taxi. He told the driver where to go before the driver could even react, then pulled out his phone. The sand, the sun, and the rocky coast all painted a vivid picture in his mind. Wind whipping up around him and the subtle scent of the ocean mixed with earthy tones from the water hitting the rock made for an unforgettable moment. The bustling city around him juxtaposed with the sandy sanctuary filled with tourists. It was all too clear, too good to be true, and too early to go back. Reluctance and regret filled his mind and conscience, yet Geoffrey knew it was already too late. He checked his phone and packed his bags. 30 hours of travel time, which meant 30 hours of pondering how to seek justice. Hesitantly, he booked tickets for a flight to the one city he still despised travelling to—Dakar.

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A Warrior's Journey

By Haneul Choi

A new player has joined the game! Welcome, ItzRealRight, to Gladiators! Please head toward the tutorial NPC to start your journey!

The server that ItzRealRight had joined looked very interesting to him, as the description stated Gladiators, and he hoped to play the game to the fullest extent and 100%. He was overwhelmed by the size of the lobby and ran around it, exploring and talking to the various NPCs around. Many players rushed him, flying towards the game modes he had never seen before. Eventually, he found the NPC for the starting tutorial and clicked on it. Immediately, he was warped to a lobby, void of any players, containing only directions.

Hello new player! Welcome to Gladiators! Gladiators is a multiplayer fighting game where you fight people to the death and win games. On this server, we have many custom weapons and items to help you fight other people that you will find out about. But first, the basics! Many recipes will pop up in your chat, and you will be able to click on them to craft them. Let me toss you some stuff, and you can test it out for yourself.

ItzRealRight received some gold and apples, and a recipe popped up in his chat. When he clicked on it, a menu showed up with the recipe for *gapples*. He clicked on the *gapple* to craft it, and in his inventory, a *gapple* appeared.

Great job! You have crafted a gapple! Gapples are the main healing source in this game, requiring only an apple and 4 gold to craft it. There are other sources of healing, but you will find that out later. Now for the basic items! There are 3 main items that are very useful in the game: the advanced pickaxe, the shortsword, and the lumberjack axe. You can find these, along with many other items, in the recipe book given to you at the start of each game. The most valuable custom items, however, are mythics. Mythics are very overpowered in games and can usually win it for you. They are difficult to craft, however, as they require many unique and rare items. Speaking of games, they are split into 3 phases: mining, PvP, and the final deathmatch. You will discover these phases in your first game. Now it's time for you to step into the world of Gladiators!

A cutscene then appeared of people fighting a long battle in the deathmatch, with many swords clashing and players

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Haneul Choi is a sophomore in high school. He is very studious and loves physics because there are so many new things to learn, like velocity and acceleration graphs and different forces on objects. He is also a very active person outside of school, doing FRC, coding, and Taekwondo. At home, he loves to do many things, including playing video games with his friends and reading books.

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healing up before heading back into battle. Lots of players were dying, and soon one player stood out from the rest, winning their fights. Soon, they won the game, and an explosion of fireworks, along with many custom effects, happened. The server name then appeared before teleporting ItzRealRight to the lobby.

"So this is what Gladiators is like. I hope I win lots of games!" ItzRealRight thought.

He walked to the section with game modes and decided to choose the civilization game mode. ItzRealRight was then warped to a new lobby, filled with 25 players waiting for the game to start. Many other players joined after him, filling up the lobby quickly. Soon, the countdown for the start of the game appeared, and everyone was warped down to the arena.

ItzRealRight was astonished by the sight of the arena and saw a middle area with some chests, deciding to loot the chests before running away. As the walls of the chambers lowered, most of the players hurriedly ran towards the chests, and ItzRealRight realized he wouldn't reach them in time, even if he tried. He decided to turn around and explore to find some resources.

Soon, ItzRealRight came across a structure filled with dangerous creatures, but found some loot he could use to fight other people, letting him craft some armor and healing. Soon, the sound of the PvP phase activated, and many players started coming up. ItzRealRight found his first player to fight and decided to rush in to surprise them. The player was hit a few times before they turned around and started comboing ItzRealRight. With his health dropping fast, ItzRealRight started to panic, trying to eat his *gapples*. However, he wasn't fast enough and died to the other player. ItzRealRight was immediately teleported to the lobby, realizing that there were a lot of good players compared to him and that he would have to work hard to get better.

***

A month passes, and ItzRealRight has honed his skills on the server and has even won a few games. He joins Gladiators once again to play more games.

"Dang it! The hacker killed me again!"

"Was it in a deathmatch that you got killed?"

"Yeah, he had so much gear!"

ItzRealRight joined the lobby, and he saw these players talking about a hacker. Curious, he typed a question into the chat.

"Who is this hacker you guys are talking about?"

"Oh hello! The hacker is the notorious BreadBreaker3. They somehow get super stacked against the rest of us, and they destroy us all."

"Yeah, I'm surprised you haven't heard or seen him before. If you join a lobby with him, good luck."

"Thanks, hopefully I don't see him." He said as he ran toward the civilization NPC.

Immediately, he was teleported to a lobby, where he looked in the tablist to see if there were any good players. Suddenly, he noticed BreadBreaker3 in the list. In the chat, there was a lot of commotion about BreadBreaker3 being in the lobby, and some people even left. He wondered if he should leave or not as well, apprehensive at the fact that BreadBreaker3 was dangerous. However, he decided against it, and he wanted to see what BreadBreaker3 was like.

Soon, the game started, and everyone was warped down. ItzRealRight steadied his nerves and prepared to head to the middle of the arena to get the chests filled with loot. He spotted BreadBreaker3 on the other side of the middle and saw that he was going to run away. The countdown soon ended, and all the players were released from their chambers. Many players rushed to the middle chests, while others ran away to loot structures.

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ItzRealRight rushed to get some chests before running away and starting his routine of getting gear.

The sound of the PVP phase soon activated, and all players teleported to the surface. ItzRealRight soon found his first battle: two players in iron armor who were viciously fighting each other. He waited until one player was lower, and then rushed in to kill the player with lower health. Soon, the first person was dead, and he turned and ran towards the second player, and their swords clashed. ItzRealRight came out victorious, and he looted both bodies, finding better armor to equip and more gold to craft *gapples*. He then started running towards the center of the arena, looking for other players to fight on the way, finding some structures to loot along the way.

Suddenly, ItzRealRight was ambushed by a player with a mythic from behind, and his health dropped quickly. He turned around to fight the player and found out that they were wearing much better gear than him. The mythic weapon hit him again and again, and his health started dropping faster and faster. He realized he had to eat a *gapple* soon, so he started to run away, and that's when the player activated the mythic's ability. ItzRealRight received slowness for 6 seconds and could not run away fast enough. He tried to eat another *gapple* to heal up, but wasn't fast enough, and died.

"Dang it, I was so close to healing up and fighting that guy. Oh well, at least I didn't die at the hands of the hacker," said ItzRealRight as he was turned into a spectator.

He watched as his dead body was looted for the gear, and he decided to see what the notorious BreadBreaker3 could do. He teleported to him and saw firsthand the abilities of the hacker. ItzRealRight saw that they had an extended reach, allowing them to hit farther away than normal players could, and had no knockback. It also looked like he had perfect aim, not missing any of his hits. He realized just how powerful BreadBreaker3 was compared to other players, and knew that he would have to create a strong plan to kill him. He left the arena and went back to the main lobby to queue up again to practice his skills.

***

One week passed, and ItzRealRight practiced in games to prepare a strategy to take down BreadBreaker3.

ItzRealRight warped into a lobby and found himself in the same lobby as BreadBreaker3 once again. Running around the lobby, he found BreadBreaker3 among the players and saw that his hacks were still active. He knew what he was facing and had a plan to beat BreadBreaker3 and win one more time before readying himself as the countdown started. Everyone was teleported down to the arena, and this time, ItzRealRight saw BreadBreaker3 not far away from him. He knew that BreadBreaker3 would gear up quickly, so he would also have to gear up quickly as well and get some mythics. When the chambers were opened, ItzRealRight immediately ran away from the center to go down into the caves and get gear, along with resources for the mythics that he would use to fight BreadBreaker3.

As soon as he spotted a cave, he jumped down into it and started looking for resources, but surprisingly found a dungeon with cobwebs in it. He never thought he would find these, but knew they would be very useful for fighting BreadBreaker3 and gathered them up. Soon after, he found diamonds and gold, and then headed up to gather some resources for mythic weapons. When he surfaced, he noticed a nearby village and quickly gathered feathers and materials for a cake to craft his first mythic weapon, the Cloudwalker Sword. ItzRealRight also found redstone in one of the chests, used it to craft a

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clock, and saw the recipe for the Time Dilation pop up in the chat. He crafted it and saw its abilities, realizing how good they were. He went back to craft some armor and *gapples,* excited and ready to fight, with the PvP phase soon activating.

ItzRealRight soon found his first enemy, and their swords briefly clashed before he killed him; he found a few diamonds and got a *gapple.* He repeated this a few more times, getting more gear as he kept fighting. He noticed in the chat while he was fighting that many players were dying to BreadBreaker3 or leaving the game. He knew that the current amount of healing he had wouldn't be enough to fight BreadBreaker3 and hoped that he could find more players. Soon, however, he found his main enemy: BreadBreaker3. They were fighting another player, and ItzRealRight decided to wait until the fight was almost over. When the other player died, he immediately ran to BreadBreaker3 and started fighting him. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that the dead player had a few *gapples* left on the ground, and picked them up, along with something called an enchanted golden apple. He wanted to eat right away to see what it would do, but decided against it, saving it for later when he got lower.

BreadBreaker3's hacks made them very annoying to fight, and he soon used one of his mythic weapons, the Time Dilation, to gain an advantage over BreadBreaker3. He slowed them down before healing up and going back in to keep fighting. Soon, BreadBreaker3 started to run away, and ItzRealRight noticed that he had a glowing golden apple in his hand. He realized that BreadBreaker3 was going to eat an enchanted golden apple of their own, and decided to eat his as well. They started fighting again, and ItzRealRight used his Cloudwalker Sword to cover BreadBreaker3's vision with the cloud platforms before healing up. After some fighting, ItzRealRight heard a breaking sound and saw that BreadBreaker3's boots broke, making their health drop faster and faster. BreadBreaker3 tried to run away, but ItzRealRight used his Time Dilation's special ability to stop time for a few seconds and started hitting BreadBreaker3. They tried to fight back, but it was futile, and BreadBreaker3 finally died. ItzRealRight looked around for any players, amazed that he actually killed the hacker. He then looted the dead body, which was filled with riches, and then went on to fight more people.

Many players started to congratulate him in chat, and when he met players, many gave up their armor and gear to ItzRealRight and died. Soon, only a few players remained, and the game transferred to deathmatch. ItzRealRight saw that only the skilled players were left, but knew that he could kill all of them. The players all congratulated ItzRealRight before getting ready to fight. He realized this fight would be similar to the scene he had seen at the start of his Gladiator journey, only this time the winning player would be him. He started fighting the players one by one, and soon only one person remained, whom he easily killed. The final kill triggered the fireworks, and ItzRealRight was ecstatic about his win. He was warped out of the lobby and was greeted by hordes of players congratulating him. ItzRealRight realized what a huge thing he had done, surprised that he actually killed the notorious hacker, and in awe at the celebrations. The message of BreadBreaker3 being banned from the server was soon broadcast, and ItzRealRight received a special gift from the owner of Gladiators, celebrating his victory over the hacker. He was filled with gratitude for the gift and felt that it was very worthwhile that he had fought BreadBreaker3. He then went on to enjoy more of the server and play the new game modes that were being slowly introduced.

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Those Trusting Eyes

By Mingyu Kim

Metal spines shivered as sleek train cars clothed in black steel raced over the worn tracks. Neighborhoods of trees and gullies streaked by. The window before Miranda fogged as she sighed into a leaning slump. Her eyes floated across the landscape, not taking in the vivid greens and dark blues of the Colorado mountains. Sounds within her car dimmed to an insignificant surface of murmurs, the passing conductor a brief ripple calmed by an outstretched hand, ticket tilting between slender fingers.

Closing her eyes, Miranda clutched the armrests, her face writhing to block hot tears threatening to spill. Her trembling fingers sliced through static air as she traced shapes unknown to all but herself over the jagged outlines of distant peaks. The images her fingertips outlined grew louder, brighter, and faster.

Desert. A girl. A breath in the night. Those trusting eyes. Soft quilts. A crackling hearth. Innocent hazel with golden flecks. Tents and caravans. Wet lashes stained with betrayal. Whispers and orders. Objectives, targets, contacts. Irises clouded by broken cries. Flames. Cacophonies of drumbeats. Her steady, scarred gaze. The glint of a medal. Clicking of pens and flashing of cameras. Those trusting eyes.

"Khalto, is Amrika as big and beautiful as they say?"

"How do you know *she's* the target?"

"Thank you for everything, *binti*… It's a dangerous world."

"For us, it's a leap of faith. For you, that's an order."

"I love you, *khalto.* Please don't go."

I am so sorry, tifla. Their leap of faith means your downfall, and I am the cliff.

A creak sliced through the barreling thoughts as Miranda jolted up. Hazily, as if steel ropes were pulling at her ankles, Miranda hobbled through the train car. Small beads of sweat mingled upon her brow. The lights blared. The carpet felt rough and uneven beneath her thin, worn soles. She blinked, once, twice, hard. Although her eyes were fixated upon the tarnished silver letters strewn across the door, labeling her surroundings as 'Car 7', Miranda could sense pinpricks of other passengers' stares along the sides of her face. After what seemed like a decade-long trudge, Miranda reached the end of the train car. Her hand fluttered as her fingers slid around the knob. White

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Mingyu Kim is a 12th grader at Desert Vista High School. He leads DV's speech and debate team and peer tutoring organization, and he is a senior member of Scouts BSA Troop 17B. In his free time, Mingyu enjoys playing chess, reading, writing, and enjoying time with friends. Outside of Blue Guitar Jr., he has been published in Scribblr, Young Writers, and the Harvard Crimson Global Essay Competition, where he was a regional finalist.

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knuckles contrasting against the faded bronze and deep mahogany of the door, Miranda gulped in a shallow breath. The door swung open with a whoosh.

The stars glittered accusingly as Miranda stepped out into brazen winds and squinted up at the sky. Below her, gravel and tracks whizzed by, and the thrashing gusts of mountain air smelled arid. Craning her head, Miranda could see a small service ladder crawling up the side of the car. She crept to the side of the narrow platform between train cars, gripped the bottom rung of the cold metal ladder, and swung herself around. Streams of wind buffeted around her, roaring indistinguishable words of blame. Miranda shook her head as if shaking off incessant flies and pulled herself up the side of the train car.

A light patchwork of snow and dust dotted the top of the train car. Miranda lay face down beside the top of the ladder, panting. Whistles of frigid air and the hissing of wheels and engines screamed at her. *Murderer. Traitor. Heartless*. Feeling grit rub against her bottom lip, Miranda staggered to her feet and spat off the side of the train car, but filth still coated her mouth. Crouching low to the car, Miranda took two wobbly steps forward before collapsing again in a plume of snow. A choked sob built in her throat.

Those trusting eyes had been circled with beautiful freckles, accentuated by ever-present dimples hanging from a childish grin. The warm brown of the eyelashes curtaining those eyes, untouchable by the gray rubble of destruction everywhere else. At least, they had seemed that way.

Miranda rested her head against the aluminum top of the train car, tears freezing against her lean cheeks. The train car rattled. Tops of pine trees swayed by, and the wheels far below rumbled. Straining, Miranda pushed against the frame of the train car's roof and rose to her feet. *One foot in front of the other.* She straggled towards the front of the train, guided by the billowing steam that engulfed the engine and dissipated into the night.

"Khalto, what are clouds made of?"

"A dance of air and water."

"Could I eat a cloud?"

"I suppose you could… I don't think it would taste very good."

"Are the clouds in America white?"

"Yes, *tifla,* very white, unless it's going to rain. Then the clouds are gray."

"Why don't the gray clouds here bring rain?"

Miranda didn't know. Perhaps nobody could ever comprehend why those snarling gray columns of smoke brought weeping, grief, and silence, but never rain. How could Miranda ever explain to this little girl that men in rooms and uniforms untouched by death morphed lands thousands of miles away into wastelands? How could she justify the whirring of drones and screeching of explosions replacing birdsong?

A pebble struck the bridge of Miranda's nose. The snow and dust were eye level again. Groaning, Miranda flipped over. The metal beneath her, gilded with snow and painted with dirt, clawed at her back, but she paid it no attention. The whispers of the stars and swirling of the wind stole away the scream that ripped out of Miranda's mouth, but the tears that followed lingered on her face. The night was a blanket that enveloped her every sense, and her eyes quivered before drifting shut again.

"Oslo 99, do you copy?"

"Roger, go for 99."

"Has the target been identified?"

"Yes."

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"Have assets been secured?"

"No- I don't… I know what you're going to do. They're an innocent family."

"Do it by tomorrow."

"But why them? Why- hello? Hello?"

Hurling the evil device away from her, Miranda struggled to silence her wavering sobs. She didn't have a choice. The Agency knew everything about her, and she knew too much. Beyond that, an Agency safehouse was the only barrier keeping her sisters from the despicable monster their stepfather was. *A family for a family.* It was a horrible trade-off, but the memory of her sisters' smiling faces forced Miranda to her feet and into the darkness outside her tent.

It had been a quiet night, that night when the darkness did not yet smother Miranda as it did now; that night when the explosions had stopped for the first time in weeks; that night when Miranda crumbled inside. She had wished upon everything sacred for that night to last forever.

Metallic, oily warmth floated around Miranda. She knew this smell: steam from a train engine. Somehow, she must have gotten closer to the front of the train. Wrenching her eyes open, she let out a guttural wail that was once again whisked away from her by an unforgiving gust of snow. Miranda clenched her fists and beat the roof of the train car, heaving uncontrollably. There was no escape. She didn't deserve to escape, anyway.

Miranda could no longer discern whether the anguished moans slithering around her were from the train tracks or herself. Not that it mattered. Aching, she stood once more and began lumbering forward. Miranda wasn't sure anymore what car she was in or how far from the front she was, but the loud whistle of the engine felt closer than before. Steam now enclosed Miranda, but the moon's beams shone straight through as if nothing obscured them at all.

"I trusted you, *binti.* I thought you were one of the good ones."

"I- There was nothing I could do."

"Save your breath. Your accomplices will soon ensure I am a dead man walking, and I wish not to perish resenting you."

"I'm- I'm so sorry."

"Keep my daughter safe, please. I believe in your goodness, even if Amrika does not."

I failed him.

The thought reverberated through Miranda as she woke. Her legs trembled as she looked over the precipice at the end of the train engine. Ahead, sleek nothingness was cut briefly by the train's lone headlight. The ground below was a blur as it raced by and away. The train shook with its speed. Miranda rose to her full height, no longer concerned with the rippling wind or the thundering rails. Quick, hot tears streaked down her face, yet she no longer wore an expression of anguish. She wore none at all.

Her name was Yasmin. Vivid images grew louder, brighter, faster. *She wanted peace. So do I.* Miranda's feet stepped onto the foremost platform of the train engine, the ends of her shoes curling over the edge. *She dances in the stars now.* Miranda took a stuttering deep breath and closed her eyes, allowing the visions of Yasmin's eyes to wash over her. *The clouds should never have been gray to begin with.* Miranda leaned forward and spread her arms. Then, she took a leap of faith.

The stars shone brightly that night.

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A Call to Writers for The Blue Guitar Jr.

Open to children and teens who write and to adults who write for children and teens

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine seeks literary submissions for its next annual issue for children and teens. Submissions from children and teens and adults who write for children and teens are sought by Oct. 1, 2027, in all genres — fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction — all geared to appeal to youthful audiences. Writers must submit original work and must live in Arizona (no AI-generated works). Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple genres. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your submission. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For additional information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

A Call to Artists for The Blue Guitar Jr.

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Elena Thornton, publisher: Founder and president of The Arizona Consortium for the Arts, Elena is an educator, artist and poet and lives in Phoenix. Reach her at info@artizona.org.

Rebecca Dyer, co-editor: A Tucson native, Rebecca is a poet, journalist and teacher residing in Mesa with her husband, Rick, her Blue Guitar co-editor. Reach her at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org.

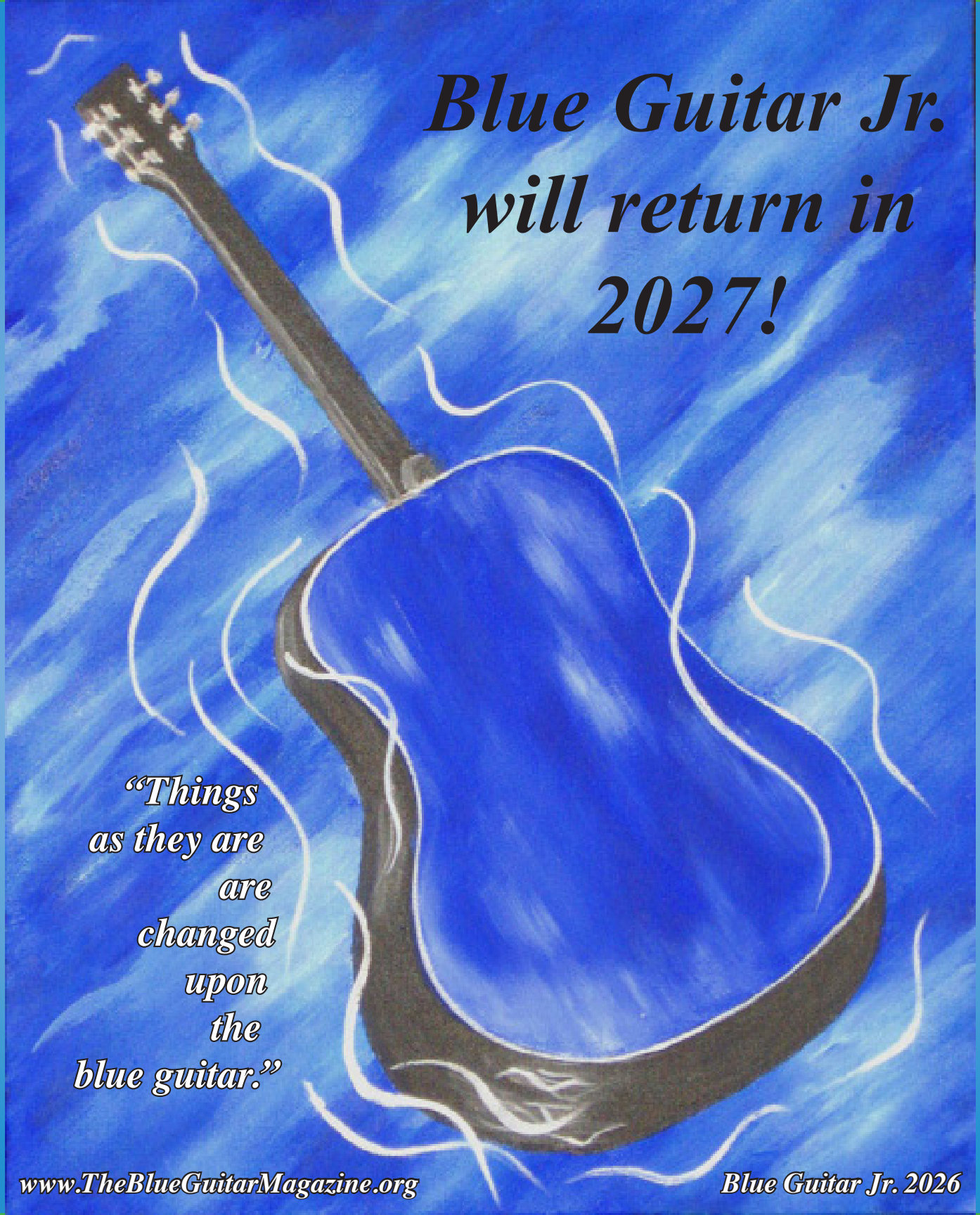




Richard H. Dyer Jr., co-editor: Richard (married to Rebecca, above) is the managing editor for six monthly newspapers and websites in the East Valley, a photographer and a welded-steel sculptor. Reach him at richarddyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org.

Marjory Boyer, cover design artist for The Blue Guitar Jr.: Marjory, of Scottsdale, is an award-winning artist, muralist and an acrylic-painting instructor. Her biography and contact information are available at mboyerart.com.

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