WRITE OUTSIDE YOURSELF
MIND OVER MATTER

A YOUNG ADULT WRITING JOURNAL
VOLUME VI

SPONSORED BY
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY &
COMMUNITY WRITING CENTERS
Submission guidelines for the contest include:
   Author is a middle/junior or high school student
   Piece is an original composition (no fan fiction)
   Content is appropriate for young adult audiences

© 2019 UVU
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Recognition</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Kaleidoscope Existence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amber Holmes</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift in Destiny</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mikayla Maloney</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take-Off: Soaring in World War II</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Alivia Kate Scoresby</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trouble with Felons</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Melissa W.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stitches of Stars</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Danika West</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking Through</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Write Outside Yourself Staff</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So many stories have leading characters who overcome their obstacles by smashing into them head-on, come what may. There was a time when many of our heroes of the page and the screen took the path of brute force: lift this, throw that, break through these. However, I am always refreshed by stories that show characters who take the intellectual route to problem-solving—your Spider-Man, your Sherlock Holmes, your Hermione Granger. These characters whose minds are their greatest asset have to go about things a very different way: fix this, talk your way out of that, understand these. Whether you’re writing a story or playing Dungeons and Dragons with your friends, these choices must be made about every character; do you want a powerful, musclebound tank or an intelligent and charismatic thinker? This volume focuses on the latter—the pieces herein and the characters who lead them are the quick-witted, the introspective, the clever, and the wise.

Since the inception of *Write Outside Yourself*, I’ve been on the journal staff, and for the last two years, I have been editor-in-chief. Every year, I continue to be impressed by the pieces that we receive. The heart, the humor, and the messages in our pieces always impact me, and the professionalism and enthusiasm of our young authors makes the process simple and enjoyable. While working on this volume, I have loved collaborating with authors and staff, and I have loved, as always, seeing these pieces go through the publishing process to arrive in the journals you hold now.
Some special thanks are owed to the following people: Leigh Ann Copas, our director and constant supporter, who makes the Writing Center the wonderful place that it is. Kelsey Hixson-Bowles, our coordinator and an ever-shining light of positivity and guidance. Wes Parker, our technical editor, whose calm demeanor and constant willingness to lend a hand is a greater asset than he may ever know; it is thanks to him that our journal looks clean and error-free. Shannen Angell, who came on as managing editor for her first time on Write Outside Yourself staff and readily gave her time and insight to make this journal great. Our staff, for reading these stories and working with the authors to make them as good as they can be. Lastly, thank you to the authors and their families for adjusting to our new schedule and responding to my many, many emails. I have so enjoyed working with you. As I always say to our authors: keep writing. You all have special minds full of colorful characters, other worlds, and unique ideas. Share those minds, and we can make the world a more interesting place.

Stephen J. Allen
Editor-in-Chief
Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible by the continued support of the University College Dean’s Office. We would like to thank the Orem Public Library for hosting the Community Writing Center and Orem City Council for supporting literacy opportunities in Utah Valley.

Hard copies of this and previous journals are available for check-out from the UVU Fulton Library, and electronic versions are available on the Writing Center’s website: https://www.uvu.edu/writingcenter/community_outreach/index.html
SPECIAL RECOGNITION

Best Protagonist
*Take-Off: Soaring in World War II*

Best Antagonist
*The Trouble with Felons*

Best Setting
*Shift in Destiny*

Best Imagery
*Stitches of Stars*

Best Metaphor
*A Kaleidoscope Existence*

RETURNING AUTHORS

Mikayla Maloney
Alivia Kate Scoresby
A Kaleidoscope Existence

Speak Into Existence

Staying silent and staying out of external drama was once a blessing, but now became a curse of some sort.

A blessing for having your walls held up high—ideally, no one would be able to push you off that cliff.

You are in control of yourself.
You are safe for only speaking few words.

How this coping is a curse…
It runs deep into your soul.

Knowing that you are holding back a thousand screams.
Knowing that you have to resist shouting aloud to meet the expectations on your shoulders.
Knowing that people expect your silence rather than your voice.
You don’t want the sounds you create
to scare away the people close and dear to you.

Deeply rooted in your sanity,
you want to scream a million words that
run through your mind every single day—

Words that taunt you,
words that crave your attention,
words that you are repressing.

The words unspoken become ghostly thoughts,
continually haunting your mind in an endless cycle.

You hear the voices that everyone speaks of,
the voices that people warn you about.

The people are wrong—
the ghosts of the voices become
welcoming and reassuring,
promising they will fix you
with a little time.

The ghosts welcome you to their home with open arms—
soothing that you are safe with them.

But the ghosts become your demons—
lying to your face,
playing mind games with your vulnerability,
pitting themselves against your weak mentality.

Choking,
suffocating,
drowning out
your voice in a sea
of the echoes of everyone else.

Desperately wanting to wail out for help,
you would feel pathetic and pitiful for doing so.
This shield of silence that you built for your entire existence,
this was your choice of defense against
the battles of tragedy and loss.
You don’t want to appear vulnerable
or frightened of what life has for you…

You must appear to be confident and blessed,
to be everyone else’s pillar of support,
to be their thread of hope to hold onto.

Even though within your soul,
you are also enduring and fighting your own wars.

When you do have the chance to scream out for any hope…
your voice is rendered into silence
because people are distracted by other notes of sound.

Causing you tip over the cliff,
falling into the unknown dark.

You try your best to hold onto any bridge of hope,
holding onto any rope of control,
holding onto any rock of stability.

You need any grip that could save you…

but you fail at all attempts.

The demons of your sanity,
the ghostly voices that you nurtured,
are dragging you down to the very bottom
with every weight of force that they obtained over time.

Falling to the ground with chains of despair,
opening past wounds with fresh blood
and a bleeding heart that still has its heartbeat.

You’re still alive… you’re still here… somehow and some way…

Staring up at the starry night sky…

You see how far you had fallen from that cliff.
Witnessing how your hope became shattered and scattered fragments, only seen as flares that you know will eventually burn out. The climb up the heights to reach back on top is impossible.

Especially for the broken mess that is you.

Breaking down into glass pieces, curling up on the soil, your tears escaping, wetting the dirt on your scratched cheeks, your frail body heaving and aching from the fall.

The ghostly whispers begin. Your demons are winning this war; you are surrendering to these hellish creatures.

These sentiments of being forgotten, that you are the disaster to everything, that you have fallen into the rabbit hole of uncertainty to your sanity.

When everything in life seems to become shattered glass, you have the courage to look up at the sky again. The bright blue sky with wisps of white clouds.

The sky, the clouds, the sun...

All of them are the God’s Renaissance painting, having it be a beautiful scene to witness.

You are longing to feel the warmth of the sun’s rays, longing to feel the rush of the breeze, longing to stand proudly once again.

Committed to finally heal the wounds, rising above the nightmarish thoughts.
You start finding a grip on some earth before beginning to climb up towards that cliff, knowing how thorny and aching the journey is going to be.

Somewhere deep within your heart, you don’t care— you only want to heal from the tragedy.

Through many days and nights, as time goes on, you continue to climb higher and higher, chipping away the torment.

Creating more progress to heal from the past.

The demons in your head never left you… they will never leave you.

They will always be there to continue haunting and taunting your thoughts.

But you start to speak aloud, louder than you ever expected.

People are finally listening to you— speaking the words that you kept within— and people care about what you have to say.

The more you speak, the closer you are to the surface of that cliff.

Throughout the journey of tumbles and struggles…

you find the energy, the happiness, and the feeling of love.
From the external life, 
and more importantly, 
from within yourself.

You realize that there is meaning to your life, 
that you are needed in this mortal world.

Reaching up to the cliff, 
you pull yourself up to touch the ticklish grass, 
staring up at the sky.

The sky is painted with rosy orange clouds with hints of a blue glow. 
The sounds surrounding you are peaceful, 
and the sun is shining its rays onto you.

The sunlight is much brighter, 
here on the surface, 
rather than down below 
where it was only a flare of light.

Reaching your hand out 
towards the sky, 
towards the sun, 
towards the heavens…

there is a warmth within your body, 
within your soul.

The ghosts in your thoughts are still 
screaming at you with falsehoods, 
but your growing strength is able 
to not listen to them.

Not for the rest of your life, 
not for every day from now on, 
but for this present moment.

For this peaceful moment. 
For future happy moments.

The tranquility you feel in your soul, 
the warmth of the sunlight, 
the quietness of the present moment…
They all *welcome you*
in their secure arms,
whispering the most comforting truth
you have heard in such a long while.

Reminiscing on the times of your pain,
the times of struggle,
the times of shattering hope.

Here you are…
enjoying the better life that you deserve,
still healing with battle scars.

Musing at the fact that you have fallen into Hell,
but you have risen to a better place than you were before all this time.

You not only survived the voyage
as a silent ghost of your thoughts…

The fact is that, you lived the journey of life
as a breathing and voiced human soul.
There are three stages our soul goes through:

**Crystalline**
- Our “purest form,”
- our childhood selves.
- We lived life with no worries,
- believing the world was beautiful.
- When life was only a crystal clear,
- pristine piece of glass.

**Shattered**
- We start realizing the world is a cruel place,
  - beginning to lock ourselves up in order to protect us.
  - Perplexity and agony become the typical.
  - Our identities are based
    - on conceptions of what we let on.
  - The external world damages us.
  - Our minds become overthinking machines,
    - to the point of self-destruction.
  - The pressure of the expectations of life suffocating us,
    - burning up into ashes that fall on the ground.

**Kaleidoscope**
- We allow our souls to heal.
- We realize that our scars are
  - a part of our stories.
- We see ourselves as human,
  - not this perfect person
    - who has to be undefeated all the time
    - or someone who is a paragon,
    - nor this mess of emotions
      - or a waste of breath.
- Through the life experiences,
  - the lessons understood,
    - we learn how to allow this pressure
      - to motivate us through life’s obstacles.
- We learn to piece together
  - our broken diamond shards,
    - binded by our vitality to create beautiful, true art.
Shattered Crystalline

To a crystalline, 
emotions are their wings through life.

But to those shattered, 
emotions are our chains, 
our prison that we can’t escape.

In this society, 
crystalline are praised 
for being pure and perfect. 
For smiling through everything, 
for being blessed and nothing else, 

while the shattered are shamed and shunned 
for being too broken for anyone to fix.

I mean…

Can we blame anyone for believing that we are too broken— 
too scarred—
to continue on?

People say that we need to stop 
wasting our breath on 
our escape 
because we scare them away 
from discomfort, 
not by concern.

“Smile more, speak less, the pain melts away.”

Then there is the impossible, 
the souls that stories are told about, 
kaleidoscopes.
People scoff at them, 
mostly out of envy, 
knowing that kaleidoscopes are living their best lives 
while the rest of us are suffering. 
Knowing that they attract the world by their faith and content.

How can they heal their souls?

Unfortunately, 
we will never know, 
because having a kaleidoscope soul 
only happens in stories, 
fantasies, 
only in myths.

But…

Even Pandora’s box has hope—
maybe this society can have hope 
despite all the evils this world has.

The gifts of the Shift—given from the God of the Moon, Maoon—were meant to reward those of Eanim for their honor and integrity. Yet all that stemmed from these immense gifts was discrimination and war, driving the three clans into chaos.

When the Great War began, no one could have predicted the bloodshed that was destined to happen. For when warfare nearly led to the people of Eanim's extinction, the Gods delivered them a prophecy that promised a conclusion to the Great War. Through it came hope, enabling a time of temporary peace. The prophecy had made clear what was needed to resolve the war: the Chosen.

For through them, the victor of the Great War would be manifested. And it was through the prophecy, through this promise, that the Tiger was born.
Warm tears spill down my cheeks. Using the back of my hand, I catch them before they can escape too far. I try not to let the depressing reality sink in, try not to let it crush me. I hold my head low, allowing my long blonde hair to act as a curtain.

When I focus in on the sounds, I hear the occasional whisper. Anxious energy causes kids to fidget around me. Some, the lucky ones who got placed by a friend, elbow one another, giggling. They discuss the fantasies they’ve dreamt up over the past season—the ones about their new life and the great adventures awaiting them. My body stiffens at the thought, and my focus switches to putting one foot in front of the other. Simple enough, right?

At least I’m sure of one thing: I’ve never felt so alone.

No matter how I shift my attention, no thought makes me deaf enough to tune them out. It seems no one can wait to know what the Man on the Moon has in store for them. Of course, there’s only one of three options: a feline, a canine, or a winged one. No one ever seems to believe they could belong anywhere but their place of upbringing; yet, more often than not, the Man on the Moon’s plan for their life rips them away from their families. The truth is, once your shifting form is decided and your clan is identified, to others, if you’re not “one of them,” no one else in the world, except your clan, will accept you.

I hate the system. I hate the three clans that desire to live so separately because of their stupid prejudices against
one another. The heat of my anger fades, melting back into the sorrow it’d risen from. “I just want my mommy,” I mumble so quietly the words slur together. I rub away more tears at the overwhelming possibility that I might never see my family again.

Caretakers rarely discuss the Shift, so no one knows what to expect. The prospect of it has been brought up more frequently over the past four seasons, but the answers given always stayed limited to what the Juniority’s council has deemed “worthy to share.”

Hearing the penetrating voices of my peers, I’m able to grasp the major rules that no one either follows or enforces: Don’t make friends, and don’t get attached.

I understand now. What’s the point when you’re going to lose any progressing relationships anyways? The Shift’s inevitable. Everyone of age, thirteen years old, is eligible for the Shift whether they like it or not, the event marking the beginning of the season—Transnight.

I haven’t allowed myself to be optimistic about the situation because I know if I am and I’m wrong, it’ll hurt too much. My face grows numb, every feature relaxing until I know, apart from my red eyes, my face is devoid of emotion.

My feet grow heavy, the steps I take more of a shuffle than a walk. The white cotton of my uniform is unbearably hot in this pack of people, and I start to feel itchy. I switch my focus to the complex patterns of the room. Everything in this place—the Locus—is told to have been carved out with the idea of necessity in mind. But then I guess they’d gotten bored and decided to put unnecessary detail into every corner of each room.
We stand shoulder-to-shoulder, caretakers descending the large marble staircases that lead to where we stand. I brush away more tears, bordering on frustrated with myself. Even though I’d decided to quit crying, my body refuses to catch on. I sigh, the sound a tremble.

Someone nudges me, and I’m herded into a group. It doesn’t escape my attention that each of those in my group of five keep regarding me with various not-so-sympathetic expressions. I see disgust, confusion, annoyance… I dare to lift my head and glimpse the person who will lead me to the room that’ll determine my future. The caretaker—a young female with glossy red hair and strands curling around her delicate features—gives me a kind, reassuring smile.

She asks the names of the kids in my group before assisting them to each of their rooms. My group constantly tries to peek behind the doors the others are escorted to, but their attempts are futile. When everyone in my group is gone, the caretaker spins around to meet my eyes and asks my name. Clearing my throat, I say, “Dakota Tálson.”

Her head does a tiny nod. “Follow me, please.”

We weave through the other kids and caretakers until we make our way to one of the many reflective doors.

“Here we are,” the lady says, twisting open the golden knob.

I nod without much thought as she escorts me inside, making sure to close the door as she leaves. Another lady stands at a table, facing away from me. She hums to herself, too busy in her own cheerful thoughts. It twists me internally that anyone could be so jovial when so many kids are going to be ripped from their families in one night.
The room is one of mirrors, and I start to get disoriented. I know they’re meant to make this area feel big, but all it does is increase the pressure on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. There’s a lone chair in the middle of the room, its structure not leaving the person sitting in it much ability to lie in any other position but on their back. I sit down, the top of the chair compressing to fit my head. Despite an awareness of the extra gravity pinning my body, I’m rather comfortable. I look up and see the ceiling is purely made of glass, allowing full view of the endless night sky above. The full moon stands out perfectly among the stars.

I snap my eyes shut, the blindness amplifying the ticking that emanates from a distant clock. Footsteps echo towards me. I peek my lids open to see the girl at the desk making her way over. At the change in attention, I fully open my eyes and gasp.

The girl’s different-colored eyes—one green, the other blue—stare back at me with a smile crinkling their corners. Her hair is a much lighter blonde than the last time I saw her—almost white—and her face has grown with age. All the while, she’s still the same beautiful, loving sister I remember.

“Esteolle?” I breathe the name.

She nods slowly, the grin never leaving her face as tears shimmer in her eyes. Before I can give thought to what I’m doing, she lifts her arms. I jump from my seat and into her embrace. “What are you doing here?” I wonder aloud.

She brushes the back of my head. She smells clean, almost sterile, yet also damp and wet, like the misty air after the
season of Rean. Esteolle pulls away to examine me, seeing past the dried tears. “You look just like…” She presses her lips together, and I draw my eyebrows in question. I gesture for her to continue. Her smile breaks to speak. “Just as I imagined you to be.”

“How—where—when—” The words tumble across my tongue. So many questions fly in complicated zigzags throughout my mind. I’m able to grasp one in reach, holding on to it long enough for it to be coherent as it leaves my mouth. “Where have you been all this time?”

Dropping her arms, she holds my hand and leads me back to my seat; her lengthy strides shorten as she perceives my dragging feet. I plop down, not leaning into the slanted chair, instead preferring the extra effort of sitting up. Her mouth tenses into a thin line.

“After my Shift”—she pauses, her gaze far away, eyes tense as she relives the memory—“it was determined that I would belong to the felines of the Tresomee Territory.”

My eyes widen, mouth slightly ajar. Shocked from her bluntness in the matter—the location of where one ends up is typically secret to everyone but those accepting the new shifter—and in awe that, out of everywhere, she’d gone to our homeland’s enemy.

For a loving celestial, as the Man on the Moon is told to be, that’s a cruel joke.

“I was sent to what we call The Cove.” Esteolle takes backward strides as she explains. “It helps felines better transition to the culture down there.”

Esteolle’s glimpse behind me is swift, but the concern on her face has me turning around to see what she sees.
Behind me, the intricate clock carved in silver reads two minutes till midnight. The weight on my chest that I’d momentarily forgotten comes back—this time, with a vengeance. Rotating, I notice Esteolle’s concern as she stares at the sharp needle in her hand.

My breaths hurt, my airways blocked by some unseen force. In and out. In and out. Everything will be okay. Everything will be—

Esteolle is back at my side, rubbing a tingling liquid on my arm with a cloth. I refuse to meet her eyes, my vision swirling with moisture.

A sharp pain pierces my arm; it lingers as the fluid enters my body. Esteolle’s voice is soft, careful. “This will make everything numb and immobile. So don’t panic.”

The substance in the shot works fast. My heartbeat slows from a flutter to a low thump. The tingling shoots across my arms, my fingers immovable. My breathing becomes less stable as air sticks in my throat, lost and forgotten in my mouth until new shaking breaths break through. My body doesn’t tremble as I hold back sobs, the anesthetic forcing my body back into the plush chair.

Any feeling in my feet seeps out; the shaking of my foot eases to a corpse-like standstill. A cloud sinks over my thoughts, the edges of my vision darken, and I use all of my strength to keep the blanket from snuffing out my consciousness.

“It’ll all be over soon, Dakota.”

The weight is too much and my eyes roll back with my head. The last thing I see is the light of the moon shining—a bright blue sliding over its iridescent white—directly above
me. The image clears as the tears I’ve been holding in slide down my face. My eyelids droop and the blue glare of the moon shines even as my vision tunnels into blackness.

---

Silvery clouds hang in the sky, the shimmering haze a prism for white light. The surrounding field has a crisp outline, the colors more vibrant than ever before. I glance down at the curved, reaching bodies of tiger lilies; their red-orange petals are speckled black, their yellow center a metallic shimmer. I catch notice of the orange and black fur lining my new body. My feet and hands have turned into padded paws, squishing the moist mud beneath them.

I take in a deep breath of humidity, closing my eyes. Opening them, I step back from a crystallized mirror. Canines protrude from the mouth of the reflected animal, the tips a sharp point as I slide my tongue over the teeth. A faint breeze ruffles the white mane framing the creature’s face, its exposed tongue drinking in the misty wind. I gawk at the animal I’ve become. My stretched body curves with orange and black stripes stained along its outer covering of fur. The lengthy black and white tail extending from it swishes back and forth.

The most striking part are my eyes. Their irises are startling with their brilliant blue; the color is so vibrant, it’s near adjacent to the rich blue of the shifted moon.

I’ve only ever seen this creature once before, and it hides in a secret space in the Juniority right now. When my dad gave me the plushy, he called the animal a Tiger. A warm hand presses onto my back, and I shift my intense gaze to
the beautiful man next to me in the mirror. He is dressed in long blue robes that sway beneath his open, mighty stance. His white hair kisses his powerful shoulders. His smile is warm, his teeth a glistening white. Being by him, peace courses through me.

“I have chosen you, Dakota.” His voice is smooth, kind. “You are essential and destined for great things. The people of Eanim are at risk of destroying themselves. They need you to save them. For now, go, and remember: you are my chosen.”

With a wave of the man’s hand, the whole world washes away to nothing.

As I bat my eyes, the world sharpens into focus. A figure grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet, catching me before I fall to the ground, sparks shooting across my vision.

“Dakota, we must leave,” the soft, urgent voice tells me. “You’re no longer safe here.”

Glass shatters, shards of it raining down, and I wake from my stupor. Esteolle covers me from the spray of glass, a grimace on her face as they slash at her back. My heart thunders in my chest. Quick to her feet, Esteolle pulls me over to the heavy metal desk, shoving black fabric in my hands as we go. “Put this on, then come help me.”

I throw lustrous material across my shoulders, tying the two dark ribbons together in a bow. Directing me to put the hood on, Esteolle grabs the edge of the table and begins to pull. The legs scrape against the floor with a loud
screeeeeeew, as we push it in front of the door, taking a good amount of my strength away with it.

Esteolle rushes me back to the chair, urging me to climb as she rubs at her wrist. Using her hand as leverage, she helps me through the jagged hole in the ceiling. Loud footsteps echo somewhere outside.

“Go, go, go!” I hear her say with a background of someone ramming into the door. With one last shove, I’m sprawled out on the clear roof, vulnerable to the midnight air. I swipe my leg over—to sit on crossed knees—and lean over the exposed, glass-shattered room.

Getting a head start, Esteolle runs then leaps to grab the glass surface. She kicks her legs as she tries hauling herself up. The metal table rakes into the floor, the high-pitched sound earsplitting. Esteolle’s hands slide as she loses her grip. I brace myself on the roof, kicking my cloak out of the way so I can grab her arm. Leaning back, my feet slip as I tug at her weight. She clasps a hand around my elbow for leverage, and I buckle to my knees. I’m able to help just enough that she can prop her arms.

A loud blow slams, and I see through the glass a man wedging himself between the door. Esteolle presses her weight onto her palms in a pained effort, scrapes lining her arms. The man’s head gets through the crack in the door. I lock my hands under her shoulders and yank with burning arms. A growl rips from the man’s throat. Esteolle winces as the sharp edge she shoves digs into her stomach. She drops onto the glass, throwing her legs over next. The man wriggles his leg between the door as he pushes with his back, face strained in effort.
Esteolle rests on the ground, but her weariness is met with my urgency as I yank her up. This brings her back to the moment. Interlacing my arm with hers, we rush into the moonlit darkness.

My sandals *fwap* against the slick ceiling, my heart picking up speed as the dim light of candles, emanating from the rooms below, grows closer. Crossing over the light, I peer down at those beneath it. A caretaker in white drops her vial containing the serum, similar to what Esteolle had injected in me. A boy’s jaw drops as he sees us running above him. Another boy runs the length of the room’s floor to get a better look at us. A girl glances above at our thundering steps a moment too late. A caretaker runs from the room to get assistance—because of the people running on the roof, I presume. The glass ceiling blends into a smooth marble, its surface indenting more the closer we get to the drop-off, the sound of crashing waves louder with each step. Esteolle surveys where we came from, where we’re going, and all other places in eye’s view. I turn my head as well, and not too far away is a man running toward us. I spin back about, clutching the cloak to my chest as I wrap its fabric about my hand to keep the hood more secure around my face. Wind blows the long fabric everywhere and caresses my body in ripples. My hair sticks to my face, and I try to unsuccessfully brush it away with my shoulder. The footsteps behind us are audible, syncing up to my racing heartbeat.

We round another ledge as Esteolle glances over her shoulder once again. My feet skid across the smooth stone to brace the sudden stop. I don’t have to look down to know we’re over another patch of water. Serious contemplation
crosses Esteolle’s face, her hand smacking at her wrist, mouth drawn. “Come on. Come on.”

Watching the man draw closer, my limbs begin to tingle with a sudden chill. I look up a moment after Esteolle does, my eyes grazing over the lengthy stained-glass steeples that gain in height. We rush to the closest one, making a diagonal from the man crossing the glass.

Wuh-PSSSH! My head swivels back, the motion causing me to lose my footing. Not far-off from the man, someone in blood-red slashes a long, dark whip in our direction. He aids others, uniformed in red cloaks, onto the building. One of the men strikes a whip in the direction of his comrades, this whip having many shiny, sharp accessories wrapped amongst its extra leather cords. I kick my legs into longer strides.

We reach the bottom of the shortest steeple, grab the closest, deepest handcrafted grooves, and climb. My hands continually slip from perspiration, and my feet somehow keep losing their footing.

Wuh-PSSSH! Wuh-PSSSH! Flinching at the sound, Esteolle heaves herself onto the fenced ledge separating the steeple’s two parts and shoots an arm down in my direction. I wave my hand until our palms smack together in a firm grasp. My hand slides down until it’s only our fingers holding onto one another. My foot slips from a ridge, my legs flailing for footing in response. Wuh-PSSSH! Esteolle reaches for me, her hand clasping my wrist. I dangle, searching for a crevice to use as a foothold. I find a stubby rod big enough for only my toes to rest on and use it as leverage, pressing my other foot against the flat surface. She lies against the high structure as I use her steadiness to help myself up.
Getting my base, I rest against the thick spire, all too aware of how my breaths scrape against my raw throat.

The drop looks higher up than it did on the roof. “This way,” Esteolle urges me.

Skirting my way about the forearm-length decorative fence, I take my time when finding footing on the steeple’s cornered edge. The cracking of their whips beat in sync with my heart. Turning around, I see the bloody figures climbing the bottom edge of the spire we stand on. Whipping back, I see Esteolle already has one foot on the far steeple closest to us, her movements precise and agonizingly slow. She takes in an immense breath, closing her eyes as she tilts her body towards the slope of the other side. Opening her eyes, she grabs one of the tiny, round white bars that stick out of the side’s surface. She loosens her other foot, leaving it to float in space as she brings it over. Lifting herself up, I see her hands visibly shake.

“Your turn.”

I shake my head. Is she out of her mind? The wall is cold as I press my already chilled palms against it.

Wub–PSSSH!

Fine.

Reclining on the sturdy foundation I stand on, I bring my weight down, advancing my foot from the platform, not daring to follow my older sister’s lead in closing her eyes. All I feel is open air as I wiggle my ankle in hopes of finding something solid. Creeping my body off my place of refuge, I get my foot close enough to prop it on the other side’s wall. I slide my foot until I find an edging in its structure and cautiously move the weight of my other foot towards
the side of the building, onto another edge. My hands shake throughout this process, the slick wall making it easy to let go.

A bite in the air whistles past me, and I carry myself over to the other side even slower than Esteolle. A punch of guilt hits me hard as I inch myself over. My hand hangs in the air as my pathetic attempts at getting over to the other side are noted. Esteolle snatches my arm and jerks me over. We’re not as precise as we ascend and slide our way across the edge of the second highest steeple. The corners are no less scary than before, but Esteolle drags me on.

Something lashes at my skin, leaving a thin slice of blood in its wake. Clutching my upper arm, I glance back to see a man looming the corner. His dark cloak billows in the gale.

My hair blows mad about my face, my voice shrill. “They’re right behind us!”

I round another corner, Esteolle already having thrown herself onto the next steeple. Being the tallest one, it towers over the building, casting a long moonlit shadow. My movements tremble as I stumble into a crouch, the fissure in my stomach crumbling into a deep gorge. Voices of the men behind me are audible, their faraway mumbling becoming less ambiguous as they draw near. They speak in a way that emphasizes every “s,” the noise a hiss that slithers up my back.

I’m able to make out the slur of a phrase. “Call the glider!”

Esteolle leans against the fence adorning the other spire. “Jump!”

A flash of red catches the corner of my eye, and I bound off the edge.
Legs swinging, arms reaching, I yelp in pain, my back arching in response to the intense lash of a whip. Esteolle shrieks, lunging out to seize me from the drop that could end my life. Another whip cracks against the back of my heel. I gasp at the sudden shock of it. Esteolle’s grip twists my skin, and I cry out. She jolts me upright and over the fence, its rounded point jabbing into my stomach as she heaves me over. I pant on my hands and knees, sparks in my eyes.

“You need to get up, Dakota. Come on!” Esteolle mutters for only me to hear.

The ground shakes as I rise from it with sudden tremors, the low rail little support. I stumble my way along, grasping at the intricate designs carved into the posts, the overdone complexity of them a blessing. The carvings become more curved, and I’m able to quicken my pace up the mount. My feet stumble from crevice to nook, hands sliding from pocket to post. A thick strand smacks at my ankle, the whip yanking me down. Screeching, I tighten my grip on a rod, my feet dangling to find anchorage. When they do, I continue scaling the steeple until my palms hit a slightly curved, ridged surface. Esteolle hoists me up the rest of the way. I hug my body tightly to a protruding pillar, the ground below too far away to see clearly.

“What are we going to do?”

Esteolle hits at her wrist, this time her sleeve folding down enough for me to glance at the reflective silver wrapped around her like a bracelet. She’s torn. Face tilting up to the bright blue moon, Esteolle says, “Maoon save us.”

A black gloved hand presses against the bottom of where we stand. Esteolle looks at me, regret crinkling the corner
of her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

She wraps her hand in mine with a light squeeze and jumps.

We plummet; the waves below us join like two hands weaving together, their grips loose as they swish back and forth from each other. Wind snags my clothing and blasts in my face as I spin closer to the water below. It’s as if the world’s slowed down. Silver-blue moonlight shimmers a path to the golden stars twinkling in the night sky, the haze a beautiful contrast in otherwise dimmed darkness. A flash of color ruffles a scraggly tree below then vanishes. My eyes turn up once again as my back leans into the free-fall, the air wet with moisture. I take in the comfort of Esteolle’s palm in mine and close my eyes.

A thick cord loops across my waist and yanks me up, halting my descent. I soar through the air, the wind a high shriek in my ears. A new load pulls from my hand, testing the already snapping threads of my leftover strength. Esteolle dangles from it. My arm, numb with exertion, is incapable to help her up. Instead, Esteolle makes good use of her upper body strength, climbing up my arm as if it is a rope. I hardly feel a thing besides the force of her body, which is more pressure than pain. She climbs up enough to get on whatever’s above me.

My hands grasp what’s holding me, what saved me. I run a hand over rough talons layered in bumpy skin. I strain my neck to see big soaring wings.

The claws dig into my skin, the dull throb of pain spreading on my ribs. My brain battles between amazement and fear. Esteolle whoops from above the wingedone, having
made a saddle of its back. From what I can tell from the corner of my eye, she wraps her arms around the large bird’s neck, her face pressed against its feathers like a nice pillow. Esteolle’s enthusiasm stretches my lips into a wide tooth-
shown smile. I echo her shrieked battle cry, extending my limbs full out. The fear that courses through me turns into exhilarating excitement. I stretch out my arms and legs as if I were the one flying, accepting the push and pull of the storm as just another obstacle, one that I don’t have to navigate.

The wingedone twitters, diving between a cluster of small trees, twisting through and around the branches where there’s only a slight gust. Flapping its wings to catch the breeze, we land. The ground is moist beneath my feet, and the release of the bird’s claws is a relief on my midriff. Stretching back into a wobbly stance, I go back on my heels with a nice squish of mud.

Esteolle hops down off the wingedone’s back and pulls its face close to hers. Its red feathered head leans into her, its neck arching as their foreheads touch. Esteolle and the wingedone close their eyes for a breath. “Be safe,” she coos.

And the bird is off.

I run to catch up with Esteolle, not happy as my body screams at me, my throat burning. My exertion prevents me from asking any questions as we filter through a new grove of trees. At the end of this narrow cluster is an extending river trickling against smooth rocks, splashing. The dark sky carries a haze of light, bringing color to the grass’s intense
green. The dispersed trees catch some of the windstorm, taking away part of the control it exerts on us.

We don’t stop for rest, but Esteolle graciously slows down to a walk as the grove of trees open up to reveal a pile of rocks surrounding a small pond. A faint whir hums in the air, tickling the inside of my ears. “Come quickly,” Esteolle says, taking to a jog. “We’re almost there.”

I groan in protest but hobble my way over, hoping now is the time for a water break. My adrenaline has long faded, everything around me a dull buzz. Esteolle peers at the stones, walking along the line of them. I take this as an opportunity to sit down, my body shakier than I thought. I fold my hands as they tremble in my lap. “Ah,” she says, bending down to twist a rock.

“You know, rocks aren’t meant to perfectly line up.” My voice borders on hysterical.

Esteolle frowns, seeing through my attempt at sarcasm before politely playing along.

“I’m not sorting rocks. Look.”

The water splits, pouring out into a waterfall as it cracks open to reveal a staircase. I crawl over to her. The gray and white staircase continues sloping downward, leading towards a narrow ebony door at the bottom.

“Once I place this rock back, it leaves little time to get to the bottom of the stairs, so we’re going to have to run.”

“Yay,” I deadpan, peering again at the long set of stairs, no longer amazed.

I get up on wobbly legs and loop my arm around Esteolle’s, while she nudges the rock back into place. “Now!”

We plunge into the narrow tunnel, the water washing
down the sides of the marble structure as the level above us closes. Esteollle places the device on her wrist into a crevice in the wooden door, lighting a ray of blue specks across the door in a star-like pattern.

We thrust our way through the door, only a sliver of light emanating from above. With a last glance to the sky, I see a silver glider hover above the pond for a moment, the humming a vibration now. The glider darts away as Esteollle slams the door.

The world is quiet as I turn to face the dimmed cave. The walls sparkle with glittering jewels as Esteollle leads me down the hallway. Torches line the curved walls. Stalactites drip with liquid, plopping onto mini lakes carved into the limestone. We move our way around the rock monuments adorning the walls, stepping our way around stalagmites. I slow down instinctually to observe the scenery, but Esteollle’s ever-dragging presence causes me to rush on.

A dark figure emerges from the end of the carved tunnel, the torch in its hands casting an eerie glow. As we close in on the man, I observe the light bouncing off his rust-colored skin, his long black hair tied in a braid dangling at his waist. His face is worn with age, the gray streaks in his hair prominent, but his eyes are kind, and the warm smile he wears is one of a host greeting his guests. He wears a long black cloak similar to the one I have wrapped around me. I pull its fabric closer as we near the man.

Esteollle nudges me toward him, unraveling her arm from mine. I drift towards him and he wraps me in an embrace.

“Dakota, this is Dantay.” Esteollle moves closer to us, her face alight with a grin.
The man pulls away to look at me. “We’ve long expected your presence and are beyond glad to have you here with us now.” His voice is deep and smooth, and I find myself leaning into it. “Here you will be safe and protected from those who wish to harm you.”

“From who? Who wants to hurt me?” My eyebrows draw together as I step back.

Dantay stoops to meet my eyes. “They’re called the Scourges. Also known as the ‘red-cloaks.’ They see their mission as being the ones to eliminate the possibility of war before it has the chance to begin. They’ll do anything in their power to achieve their goal. Even if it means killing a child.”

His eyes are meaningful, and I glance down. Dantay gently places the pads of his fingers beneath my chin, raising it so that I have no other choice but to look at him.

“We’re not going to allow that.” Esteolle’s voice is firm in her decree.

Dantay nods. “Welcome,” he motions his arm out to the cave, “to Lanti headquarters. Like the Scourges, we have a mission too, one that was commenced by the goddess Lantiamou herself, and that is to protect you.”

The space grows brighter as others cloaked in black enter the room, their hands wrapped around torches. They share different expressions—wonder, amazement, reverence…

Dantay wraps an arm around me and guides me toward the people in black. He keeps his gaze on me as he says, “Child, it is our duty to protect you so that we might live to fight this war. We need you to bring the clans to battle, to bring them to justice. Most of all, we need you so that there may once again be harmony amongst the clans.”
Dantay shifts his focus to the crowd. “Lantis, the time of prophecy has finally come to pass. Maoon has sent this child as one of his chosen, and it is of significance that we were able to protect her this night.” He takes in a large breath. “Lantis, meet your destiny.”

Everyone in the crowd drops to their knees, their covered heads folded into bows. I squirm from the sight, mouth drawn.

Dantay gives me a comforting squeeze. “Don’t fret, little one. For it is you who will save us all.”
Flying is a sense of freedom, a source of relief, when all my burdens are lifted and dispersed among the clouds…

Today, however, my plane dragged through the air with my burden directly underneath. Gunshots rang out this way and that; I could only hope no bullet would take me down. The funny thing was that no enemies were deliberately aiming at me—all the bullets came from soldiers fighting for my side. My job was to help them practice getting a clear shot for when enemies eventually did come.

Looking below from the cockpit, a line of soldiers could be seen, guns in ready position, firing skyward at flying targets. I was lucky that these men had good aim. The target my plane carried was taking all the shots, and whenever a new one hit, my seat jerked from the force. Pilots like me were all around, jerking as their targets were shot, too.
Pilots like me, who were all here for a common determination.

Pilots like me, who went through the same effort I did to get here.

Pilots like me, wearing lipstick and clumsy, oversized zoot suits.

Women. Currently ruling the sky on behalf of our country.

The pride in my chest jerked out of me as yet another bullet hit my target dead-on. Being a target-tower was not my favorite job as a WASP, Woman Airforce Service Pilot. It was, however, what we had been trained to do for the past four months at Avenger Field Base in Sweetwater, Texas, along with learning to ferry military planes from base to base and to transport cargo. This was how we earned our wings we wore so proudly after training. This was why I left Mother home alone in Pilger, Nebraska. To serve America in every way we were allowed.

Back on the ground, Rosalie, Margaret, Ruth and I met up. Rosalie greeted us all with an enthusiastic high five. “Helpin’ out the boys! That was fun, yeah?”

Margaret, Ruth, and I exchanged unconvinced glances. Ruth scrunched up her nose. “I don’t mind being done with that now, actually.”

“I’m thankful none of us were hurt—so far, I don’t think there were any accidents today. Well, I’m ready for some lunch!” I declared and immediately headed for the cafeteria. I knew my way around Avenger Field eyes closed and dizzy. I especially knew where the food was. The other ladies followed my lead, and eventually, we got settled at a table with our
hamburgers and lemonade—it was the same meal every Tuesday, but my stomach growled for it. Next to me, Rosalie wolfed down her hamburger with hardly a breath in between bites. As WASPs, I guess we really were taking on men’s roles as well as their appetites.

A tap on my shoulder caused me to turn around. Behind me stood General Roberts, my favorite general at Avenger Field, who saved my bacon months earlier after my plane came down during a flight test. He was the reason I was still there eating hamburgers every Tuesday with my fellow pilots. I immediately popped up and saluted.

“Lillian Marley James, an invitation for you.” He handed me a crinkled brown paper with an old-man wink. “Report to Instructor Scott whether you accept or refuse.”

I started to read the small handwriting, needing to squint due to smudges and faded letters. The note was addressed to Instructor Scott from an unfamiliar signature. He pleaded for available supplies to be transported from Texas to his base in Nebraska… my mind slowly put the clues together.

“Lillian?” a woman’s voice from the other end of the table called. Looking up, I saw she held a similar brown paper and was looking right at me. I nodded and she smiled.

“Looks like I’m going to be flying with you tomorrow!”

She sounded as excited as I felt. Jumping up, I hurried over to greet her. “What’s your name?” I asked, holding out my hand. Then I paused. Taking in her fancy brown curls and pleasant smile, I realized I already knew who she was. Nancy Harkness Love, executive of the WASP program. It was thanks to her that women were privileged to fly military aircraft in the war effort; she was the one who got
it all started and received permission from the first lady herself, Eleanor Roosevelt.

She accepted my hand. “I’m Nancy, Nancy Love… Nice to meet you! What do you think of this new assignment?”

“I’ve never ferried a plane before,” I replied calmly, but inside I pictured my imaginary wings were wiggling as if excitement was piloting my body. A ferrying mission took place when a plane needed to travel from one base to another for soldiers to use in combat, or to transport supplies in a short amount of time.

Nancy laughed and took both my hands this time. “This is a big part of being a WASP. General Roberts reported to me that we are to meet Instructor Scott in the northeast hangar at 1800 hours. Oh, I’m so excited!”

Her enthusiasm took me to cloud nine. “See you there.”

Nancy nodded, then arose to leave the mess hall. I noticed a steadiness in her stride and the confident level of her eyes. She would make a good partner.

With a skip in my step and plenty of time to spare, I made my way to the meeting spot in the hangar at sunset. I arrived even before Nancy, and Instructor Scott was there to greet me with his usual curtness and characteristic impatience. Not that I was expecting a big hug or “congratulations” from the flying coach. In fact, I was half expecting him to send me back to the barracks, saying General Roberts had made a mistake. Maybe a girl who could keep a plane in the air and out of flames would be a better fit for the job.
Months earlier, flames were precisely what had happened to me and Rosalie. During our very first flight test in WASP training, the old plane’s engine malfunctioned and, with a few bangs, began descending, forcing us to evacuate with parachutes. Instructor Scott was on the verge of sending Rosalie and me home, but General Roberts gave us a second chance after we tried to prove ourselves with a few pushups. He saw our hard work despite an unfortunate event.

This mission was it. My second chance. I was a WASP, and I was about to show Avenger Field what I was capable of in my contribution to the stars and stripes.

Instructor Scott didn’t utter a word; he didn’t even look at me through his bushy eyebrows. The silent hangar was mocking the past experience I knew we were both reliving in our heads. Unsure if I should say anything, I tried to tolerate the quiet by tossing ideas around in my head and doing my best to appear confident. After what seemed like ages, Nancy entered and broke the silence.

The instructions were short and sweet. We were told our mission was to ferry a C-93 loaded with supplies from Sweetwater, Texas to Scribner, Nebraska. We were given headsets along with pocket-sized maps to study and plan our route. Lastly, we were given our plane: the two-crew 30,000-pound C-93.

_Scribner, Nebraska._ I knew that town. It was where Mother and I sometimes went on a special day to shop and go out to ice cream. It was 37 miles away from home, just 45 minutes. My home would be almost close enough to touch, but I wouldn’t be able to even try to reach.

Many “yes, sirs” later, Nancy and I departed from the
hangar to go straight to bed, both our minds stuffed with wonder from the details of the evening.

The first thing I noticed as I left the hangar to head back to the barracks was the sky. That was the first thing I always noticed, the first thing I always marveled over. The colors. The changes. The clouds, moon, or sun. Tonight, Sweetwater, Texas was blanketed by a black sky spotted with seemingly small stars. I knew the stars were big though. Bigger than anyone could imagine, more powerful than anyone could comprehend. Distance took all that power away, until all could be seen from Earth was a little sparkle among millions in a black sky.

Distance was a mighty concept. It determined time; it determined chance.

My thoughts consumed me until I reached my room, dark and full of sleepy sounds. Though my mind was wide awake flying with thoughts, my body pleaded for rest. I got ready for bed as quietly as I could, hardly thinking about my routine—my body was on autopilot as I went through the motions, including covering my boots so scorpions couldn’t move in. Before climbing in bed, I looked at the stars through my small window one last time. The same stars that Mother could see back home in Nebraska. How excited she would be for me. How crazy she would go if she knew I would be so close to her so soon.

“Goodnight, Lillian Marley.” I suddenly heard Rosalie’s soft voice in the darkness. “Good night on a big day.”
“Buckle up, Buttercup,” Nancy said, sitting beside me with a wide grin. The cockpit had two seats, two steering wheels, and a control panel that she and I both had studied during the days leading up to the big day—today! She sat up a little straighter, which made me do the same. Mother taught me that good posture and a good smile were signs of courage.

In front of us stretched the runway that seemed to go on forever in the middle of the bare Texas plains. As soon as we got the signal from the control tower, Nancy and I began to push the plane forward.

   Slowly, ever so slowly.
   A little faster.
   Picking up speed.

This was by far the mightiest take-off I had ever experienced, for the C-93 felt much heavier to lift off and more controls were needed to get us airborne. We accelerated forward, force and power fighting against time. As soon as the wheels lifted off the ground, all noise and pressure vanished as if reality was swept away and lost in the clouds. I was back in the sky—this time I was there to stay for my longest flight yet.

   “My, my, feels good to be going places, honey!” Nancy exclaimed, her focus on the control panel. Mine was too, still working on pushing the plane up. “You know, this C-93 is one step closer to controlling take-off in the fabulous B-29 Superfortress. What a dream that would be,” she said.

   “I can only imagine,” I responded, letting my mind wander. The B-29 was a newly introduced military plane that had state of the art technology. Every WASP would be honored to have a chance to fly that.
My mind continued to wander even more. The plains beneath us, ever so far away now, seemed to be going by too fast. Things were flying by and I wasn’t ready; I couldn’t go back to Nebraska yet!

Clearing my throat, I forced my thoughts to stop. I couldn’t let them wander, not on a mission like this.

The C-93 was the smoothest ride I’d ever been on. Though it took more leg and arm strength to get it up and steady, it tore through the sky at a controlled speed. No plane at home was ever like this. The usual joy I got from flying boiled up, mixing with anxieties. I took a deep breath.

“Feels good to leave base!” I turned to Nancy.

She smiled. “Is this your first official mission? I’m glad I can be a part of it.”

Looking down at my map, I counted down in my head. 5… 4… 3… 2… 1. We crossed the border.

“Welcome to Nebraska,” I said. So close to Mother.

“Landing should be in about ten minutes then,” Nancy responded promptly, checking her map. “When we get there, we need to move quickly. I understand Scribner is dangerously low on supplies, so your first mission is a vital one.” She winked.

The day was perfectly clear; a bright blue sky and no breeze were conditions every pilot hoped for. With such clarity, the base could be seen even earlier than expected. I talked into my headset, hoping to connect with the control tower.
“Permission to land C-93 on approach?” I inquired clearly. There was a long pause where an immediate answer usually came in, based on my training.

I turned to Nancy and she tried, “C-93 coming in to Scribner Air Base. Permission to land?”

The second attempt brought a scratched response: “Lady, we’re trying to land a real C-93. Get off the air.”

It took me a second, but I realized what had happened. My internal engine fired up to fuel the words, “For your information, the ‘lady’ you’re hearing is piloting the C-93. Permission to land.” My tone was a statement, not a question. Nancy gave me a nod and we steered our C-93 down for landing, the controller in the tower reassuring us that we were coming in “just fine.” But we already knew that.

Before climbing out of the cockpit, we stuck with WASP tradition and wrote a small “good luck” note for the soldiers who would use this military plane next. Nancy had told me about the tradition after our preparatory studying for this flight, reassuring me that we would do the same thing.

General McHan, first in command at Scribner Air Base, greeted us on the runway and shook both our hands.

“Good to see new faces today. We appreciate your delivery.” He helped us unload the plane of all the supplies we had ferried, things that would be made into materials and tools used to help build and repair military aircraft and other vehicles for soldiers in combat. We carried them to a surprisingly quiet factory, not many workers bustling around. *Shouldn’t it be peak worktime?* We put our supplies together in a back workroom. Stepping back, we had only created a tiny heap.
“We’re having what we call a ‘material drought,’” General McHan explained. “We are only able to create half of the vehicles we need at this rate, and more and more vehicles are coming in ready for repair. We need as many ferrying planes as possible to bring in more supplies.”

Our contribution seemed miniscule. While I knew it helped a little, I felt an urge that we could do something more. This factory needed to be busy. Planes needed to be made. Our soldiers needed supplies, and I knew the WASPs could help.

I was going to do something; I just needed a little time to think.

Nancy and I wandered around base looking for a quick bite to eat. With all the supplies loaded on the plane, we hadn’t been able to bring anything for ourselves. We went into what we assumed was the mess hall, and I suddenly felt out of place—no fellow WASPs, only enlisted men everywhere. Good thing Nancy and I fit in with our similar appetites. We got our food, only having to explain our status and gender to one soldier, showing him our silver wings.

“Women Airforce Service Pilots, huh?” he questioned with a slight smirk. “Didn’t know women could fly planes. Or eat that much food.”

Deciding on a small table in the corner, we both hesitantly sat down to eat. I couldn’t take my eyes off where I was. Though home was just miles away from me, I couldn’t help but feel lost. So many puzzled faces from men. Nancy seemed to be a little more used to the environment, having completed training before me. She stopped eating and faced me.
“After this meal, we will fly a different plane back to Sweetwater, and we may have to practice landings and take-offs before leaving. Instructor Scott and General Roberts are expecting us back in Texas by evening. I would eat quickly—we need to hurry!”

I wasn’t convinced; instead my mind was clouded with the memory of the day and the new environment. Something wasn’t taking off right and I had to fix it—because I knew I could.

“The supplies are so low here…” I began. Nancy nodded reluctantly in response. “…And we can make it better. We have the perfect opportunity to get more supplies and help out.”

Nancy gave me a cynical look. “That’s not our duty, Lillian. We need to stick to the plan because WASPs are flying on a thin line. If we do anything out of place, our reputation is ruined.”

Of course she was right. But we saw the matter in two different lights. She saw it as a distraction—I saw it as an opening. A WASP’s mission was to serve in the war on noncombat missions. There were not enough available men to bring Scribner, and other bases like it, anymore supplies. Today, we could help in a different way, and only we could do it. Only I had a home 45 minutes away.

“We just need to get permission. If we got General McHan to agree—which I’m sure he’d be happy to—he could send a letter to General Roberts back in Texas,” I explained to Nancy, standing up. “I could get my mother and eventually my town to donate supplies. Everyone in America is looking for a chance to participate in the war effort.”
Her expression was unsure, as if she wanted to crack but thought she couldn’t.

“I just don’t know if it’s worth it—”

“It’s another minor way to help out our soldiers. Another way to serve.”

There was a long pause, and Nancy stirred her food around for a moment, foot tapping. “I could also get some other WASPs going on more ferrying missions to other bases that are low on supplies…” she responded distantly, her brain seeming to formulate a plan. Then she stood up with me. “Let’s talk to the general.”

Why was it that I always had to do things differently, do things my own way? A couple months ago I was almost sent home but was saved by General Roberts, who thought my mother’s idea of showing them hard work through pushups showed genuine commitment. This time I didn’t have to prove anything to anyone with physical strength; I was here, I was a WASP. Though something was telling me that I needed to be the one to get more supplies. It was my place to help here. When my heart started beating rapidly in response to ideas, I had to satisfy it. Maybe I listened to my heart too much. No matter, I liked what my heart had to say.

General McHan agreed to our suggestion to help with a desperate “yes.” He went right away to inform the men back in Texas, and Nancy and I could only hope they would be satisfied—after all, we weren’t planning on making it back
as soon as they thought we were. Instead of spending the
day getting our plane and taking it on test runs before flying
back, Nancy and I drove a military vehicle to the place I was
most anxious to see: home.

I longed for it and I dreaded it.

We were going to talk to Mother; to see her, hug her
(me at least), ask her for her contribution to the war effort.
The 45-minute drive was a long one, seemingly longer
than the flight from Texas to Scribner Base, but I knew I
wanted to get there. Soldiers were in need, and it was
exhilarating to think that Nancy and I could start with the
place I knew best to spread awareness and ask for donations.
My hometown, Pilger, eventually came into view, and it was
like I never left.

Had I even changed since I became a WASP? Surely I
had. The town had not. It seemed like home stayed constant,
ever moving forward, so I could come back to it and start
over if I desired. Right then, though, I desired nothing more
than to keep pressing on, to get this war over with, and to
let our country have the victory.

A few turns later, I inhaled deeply. “This is home,” I
introduced to Nancy. We pulled into a driveway in front of
a small brick house with a sky-blue door—painted for both
me and my mother’s love of the sky. The victory garden was
right in the front yard, bordered by purple lilies, what I was
named after. Shutting the military vehicle’s door, I realized
how out of place it looked in front of my familiar home.
Perfectly out of place.

Nancy smiled a little, her eyes friendly, but there was no
denying that she would be more comfortable flying back to
Texas instead of visiting her friend’s neighborhood. We walked up to the front door together. I knocked. And again. Then the door opened… and then I saw Mother.

It had only been six months, but it seemed like a lifetime. When I left, I didn’t have wings, I had never flown a C-93, and I had never met Margaret, Ruth, Rosalie, or Nancy. I kept moving forward. And right then I continued to do so.

“Mom, the soldiers need your help,” I stated, after a hug or two and a couple exasperated “hellos.” I wanted to let loose, stay a while, but I would not give in. Right on the doorstep, Nancy and I explained to Mother the desperate need for supplies just 37 miles away that affected soldiers across the world.

“We need this town to come together with all the supplies we can get to bring to the factory at Scribner Base. We need to spread the word, and hopefully it will spread even beyond Pilger so other people can donate, too.”

Mother agreed in a heartbeat, like I knew she would. Until sunset, the three of us scavenged around the house, digging out anything that could be of use. Rubber tires on my childhood bike, old pots, pans, and bowls. Things that would eventually turn into aircraft parts or medical supplies to heal bullet wounds. We handwrote posters and signs to take to a store on Main Street to be printed and bolded. It was all in a day’s work, then it was over.

Nancy and I loaded all the materials we gathered in our vehicle and started the engine. Already leaving again after only staying for a few hours felt like the time had rushed us on, ushering me back into a war reality. Like I wasn’t supposed to come home in the first place and time was covering
for me. I wasn’t sure if leaving this to Mother was what General McHan had in mind, but I knew I could trust her.

“I can do this for America. I’m really doing it for you though, Lillian,” Mother said. She uncurled my fingers and placed a small purple lily in my palm. When Nancy and I drove away, I knew my neighborhood would at least have one person doing their part in the war.

The night swallowed us up as we travelled from the streetlights of Pilger to the plains of Scribner. Back at base, Nancy and I unloaded all the materials we had gathered, giving the pile at the factory a little more company. General McHan thanked us for our help, and we informed him that loads of materials from Pilger, Nebraska should be coming in shortly. A lot had happened in one afternoon, yet I felt like I could only trust Mother and my neighbors to do the job Nancy and I began. There wasn’t much else left to do except fly back to Texas with high hopes that things would turn out okay for the soldiers and start gathering more WASPs for ferrying missions like Nancy had suggested.

I’d never made a night flight before, but Nancy advised we should instead of waiting until morning so we could have a safe place to sleep. That way, we would be back in Sweetwater with more time to get settled and start more ferrying missions for WASPs by morning. General McHan showed us our plane we’d ferry back: an RB-1, a little smaller than the C-93, but just as mighty. Because it was nighttime, we practiced a few take-offs, then were off back to Sweetwater, just like that.

Avenger Field officials took care of the RB-1 Nancy and I flew in, leaving us only with the responsibility to report
back to Instructor Scott about our arrival.

“You know, I wasn’t sure about it at first, but I think the donations from your neighborhood will go a long way for Nebraska,” Nancy commented on our way to Instructor Scott’s office, talking to the ground. Then she looked up at me. “I’m glad we did it.”

Her words were like a parachute for my thoughts. After my past experience with the bushy-eyebrowed man, going to report to him made me slightly nervous. I knew I had done what I wanted. Instructor Scott had a way to pierce me with his eyes, even if they were hiding under big eyebrows. But after hearing Nancy, my thoughts calmed down and I saw things in perspective.

As WASPs, our duty is to do all we can with what we have. We serve our country behind the scenes, and in this case, we encouraged others to serve behind the scenes with us.

“I’m glad we did it, too. Instructor Scott is intimidating, but I have full confidence that our mini contribution is just something WASPs are meant to do. Let’s help him see that.”

One rubber tire can contribute to building a part of a military plane. Lots of rubber tires can serve the entire Air Force. One person can help a base in Scribner, Nebraska. Lots of people can serve bases around America.

Nancy and I explained to Instructor Scott exactly what we had done. His positive response was nothing either of us would expect from the old man in a million years. Thanks
to his help, a few old materials turned into thousands of donations from people all over Nebraska and now Texas. They would all go to helping the soldiers in combat.

As the executive of the Woman Airforce Service Pilots, Nancy got the engines fueled for more and more pilots to leave on ferrying missions. With all the supplies being donated, several planes a day could be filled and ferried to bases in need around the country. More and more letters came in each day from other generals in other states, asking for a WASP plane to descend on their bases.

Rosalie’s natural spark had ignited a fire. “Instructor Scott sent for me last night, just before you got home. He told me what you girls did and invited me to start our own drive here in Texas. We’ve been working together to get the word out. Margaret and Ruth have helped, too! Donations have already been coming into Avenger Field from all over the state,” she exclaimed the next morning when we finally had a chance to talk. It was as if she had been storing all her words until I got back and then let them explode on me. I didn’t mind.

“It’s such a good idea!” She went on, “When I heard your mom was in on this, I immediately called my aunt back in Florida. You know, the one who owns the beauty parlor! She was ecstatic to help. Florida will soon join Texas in donating supplies!”

At lunch break, we went over to Sweetwater’s military factory so Rosalie could show me the pile of materials Texans were donating. Sure enough, things were already being shipped to other bases and made into something useful. Something life-saving. On the way back, we checked
the mailboxes for our barracks as we did once a week. Usually it was empty. This week was lucky.

From proof of a handwritten letter and a few developed photos that Mother had sent, I knew she was doing her part. The news was spreading around Nebraska, resulting in the piles at the base in Scribner getting much taller. My little hometown was a homefront doing its job.

The feeling of soaring is a wonderful effect of flying a plane. The feeling also came from starting something big. Starting something good. Starting something because you know it’s what you need to do.

Soaring was serving.

I am glad my fellow WASPs—my best friends—were soaring right there with me.
Sangria glimpsed down the dimly lit hallway leading to the control center. She glared suspiciously at the lack of guns, traps, and guards as she pulled out a small spray canister from the pack on her waist. As Sangria bent down and sprayed the fine mist into the air, tiny red lasers slowly appeared, shimmering as the particles touched them. Sangria quickly analyzed the configuration and formulated the best path to take. She slipped under, between, and through reasonably sized holes in the defense system until she had cleared the laser field. Sangria let out a small laugh. *Too easy,* she thought, twirling the can in the air before replacing it in her satchel. *It’s almost as if he wants me to get in,* she mused. The thought, however, made reasonable sense, and Sangria sharpened her senses, becoming increasingly aware of anything that might seem like a trap.

Sangria reached the door at the end of the hallway and analyzed the keypad before her. She recognized the model
as one she had studied in her Codebreaking and General Weaponry class back at the academy. Felon always had such predictable passwords, and after just a few attempts, the door slid open. Sangria smiled for a moment at her own savvy. Ironically enough, she had never been very good at C&GW. It was her worst class, second only to P.E. It just went to prove that not every skill can be taught in the classroom.

Once inside, Sangria’s eyes were met with a towering countdown timer, announcing the time until Felon’s rocket launched and her planet was destroyed, as it almost was every week or so. She glanced around the room, not surprised to find a lack of security. “You would think Felon would learn,” she chuckled.

She bee-lined for the computer, pulling a small chip from her pocket and inserting it into the computer console to override Felon’s rocket launch commands. A large, overdramatic loading bar appeared on the screen, inching towards “finished” at a painfully slow rate as the timer neared zero. Sangria held her breath as the computer informed her of the installation phase, knowing that this would bring either success or failure of her mission. The loading symbol spiraled round and round at a hypnotic rate until finally the screen glowed green, indicating that her mission had been successful. A sigh of relief escaped Sangria’s lips. Now she just needed to get out. Sangria was mid-pivot towards the door when she realized the platform she stood on was sinking ever so slightly.

Springing to action, Sangria began to run for the exit, knowing from experience that she had approximately six seconds before the pressure plate set off alarms and warned
the entire facility of her presence. She broke out into the afternoon moonlight just as the alarms began to ring. Within moments, a large horde of Xorphian guards had mobilized around her, blocking Sangria’s further escape. From within the center of the guards emerged her arch-nemesis, Felon. He wore his usual flamboyant apparel—a shimmering maroon suit complete with a black silken cape and matching gloves. Felon’s silver hair, caked in layers of hair gel, shone in the moonlight like ice. Sangria glared at the extravagant villain, wondering how many people’s lives had been ruined for the money it took to fill his closet.

“Sangria. How charming of you to visit my humble home here on this small, insignificant planet. How ever did you find the address?” Felon asked, gesturing wildly at his property, complete with ominous topiary and many traps for unwanted visitors.

“It wasn’t hard. You never have been one for subtlety, Felon,” Sangria shot back, visualizing at least four different possible escape routes and weighing each against the others.

“I suppose you are right,” Felon sighed. “No matter. In mere moments your entire home planet will be nothing but particles floating about the frictionless void,” he mused deviously, steepling his fingers in front of his chin. “I figured you would want a front row seat.” Felon nodded at his group of savages to move in closer.

“Not a chance, Felon. Your plans never work, and today won’t be the exception,” Sangria vowed, kicking up a conveniently close pile of loose dirt into the air, temporarily blinding the guards and giving her the chance to dodge through two of them.
“After her!” Felon commanded shrilly, jabbing a harsh finger in the hero’s direction.

Sangria dodged traps left and right in the courtyard, each reacting too slowly to catch her. Upon exiting the garish gates, she spied a jet ski floating in the river nearby. Perfect, she thought, I can ride that right down to where my ship is docked. It was surprising how many times Sangria had found rides fueled and docked, sitting with the keys right in the ignition. Sangria had often wondered why people weren’t more careful with their vehicles, although she had always been taught to never look a gift garzac in the blowhole. Sangria sprinted towards the pier, hearing heavy footsteps gaining on her from behind. “Almost there…” she huffed. P.E. was definitely her worst subject.

Luckily for her, Felon staffed his facility with Xorphians, the dumbest and slowest aliens around. Easy to outrun, but someone wouldn’t want to try and wrestle with one of the brutes. Sangria jumped onto the pier and stopped just short of the jet ski, taking a moment to glance behind her as she stepped forward to mount the vehicle. She immediately regretted doing so. Her leg slipped out from under her and Sangria went spiraling into the water below, her lungs seizing up at the sudden shock of cold water. Darkness filled her vision, and her mind went numb.

Felon watched as the hero tumbled into the waves. “Someone grab her, quick!” he shouted, urging his guards forward.

The guards looked back and forth at one another, the same thought running through all of their heads. None of them knew how to swim.
“Now!” Felon commanded, shoving the nearest guard into the water.

The creature thrashed about wildly for a moment before realizing that he could stand on the seabed with his head comfortably above the water. He moved towards the motionless hero and began the task of heaving her to his compatriots on the dock.

Before long Felon’s lackeys had hauled the unconscious Sangria onto the dock. “Good. Very good,” Felon chuckled, his laugh slowly growing to be more maniacal and eccentric.

Floor tiles lit up beneath Felon with each step he took down the cold, dark hallway. He turned to face a steel door with his insignia burned into the metal. Felon nodded at one of his guards and watched as the creature flipped the lever. Compressed canisters released an artificial fog as he stepped through the door.

“Ah, right on time,” he commented, glancing at his watch with a gleam of humor in his eyes. Sangria eyed Felon, his deep purple cape flowing deviously behind him as he approached her, flanked by several garishly adorned guards.

“It’s kind of hard to be late when your goons dragged me here, Felon. But you sure did take your time getting changed.” Sangria scowled, still dressed in her dripping clothing as she struggled at the cuffs that held her wrists pinned particularly painfully behind a support beam.

“I suppose,” Felon chuckled, “But I imagine you wouldn’t have been quite as… civil had we restrained you while you
were conscious,” he retorted, dismissing all but one of the guards with a wave of his hand.

“I guess not,” Sangria shot back, rolling her eyes and taking the opportunity to survey the room for an escape. Her eyes were assaulted with ominous flashing lights, floor-to-ceiling blackout curtains over every wall, and numerous self-portraits of Felon, each as disturbing as the villain they portrayed. Beside each was a small plaque describing the occasion for which the painting was commissioned. Sangria took delight in the realization that each marked a new scheme to destroy her planet, all of which she had foiled single handedly. “I don’t suppose you brought me here for a nice cup of tea,” she said.

Felon’s smile melted slowly from his lips, a cold stare replacing it. “No, I suppose not. Sangria, you have meddled in my affairs for far too long. I have tried to be reasonable, but to no avail,” he remarked, gesturing grandly around the room. “You leave me no choice but to eliminate you.” Felon snapped his fingers at the only remaining guard. The Xorphian stepped forward and opened the lid to a velvet-lined box containing a brownish-red gun. “I had it specially commissioned the first time we went toe-to-toe, knowing I would someday be able to use it,” he mused, lifting the light weapon into his hand and sliding his finger over the trigger. “A fitting color, is it not? Sangria is such a lovely shade.”

“How touching,” Sangria grunted, slipping a thin wire film off of her bracelet and bending it straight. The bracelet had been a gift from an anonymous thankful citizen and had come in handy more than once. Sangria worked the metal sheet between the handcuff’s teeth and their housing. “What
model is that? Please tell me you at least got something that will finish the job quickly,” she mocked with a forced laugh, needing to stall for more time as she began squeezing the handcuffs tighter around her wrist, shoving the metal deeper into the mechanism.

“Oh, don’t worry, I can assure you the weapon is quite capable,” Felon replied, stroking the shimmering finish on the gun with his free hand. “In fact, allow me to give you a first-hand demonstration,” he said coolly, closing the distance between himself and his enemy and raising the gun to an even level with Sangria’s forehead. Her emerald eyes shone brightly from beneath her raven hair, and a slight hesitation nagged at the back of his mind. Strange, he thought, contemplating his newfound sympathy before quickly brushing off the notion. “Goodbye, Sangria. You were an admirable foe,” he sighed, preparing to fire the deadly weapon.

Sangria smiled ever so slightly as the restraint popped off her wrist. She sprang, grasping the gun and pointing it at the guard as the weapon fired. The goon dropped to the ground, a pool of greyish-green blood seeping from his uniform. Sangria tore the pistol from Felon’s hand and pushed him to the ground, cringing as his head collided against the metal floor with a sickening crack. Her sympathy was short-lived as she aimed the firearm at Felon’s head. “You’re right, I do like this gun. It really does suit me,” Sangria said snidely as she glared down at the villain. He lay there motionless for a few moments before he began violently twitching all over. Sangria watched with confusion for a moment before figuring the whole thing must be some kind of trick. She held her aim. Finally, the seizing stopped as a disheveled Felon regained consciousness.
Felon squeezed his eyes tightly for a moment before working up the will to open them, despite the throbbing pain in his cranium. He stared up at Sangria in surprise. “Oh, good. I was worried for a moment that you wouldn’t find your way out,” he remarked, a warm smile spreading across his face. “I should have never doubted you.”

Sangria was caught off guard, glaring at the villain. “What kind of game is this?” she demanded.

Felon focused on his limbs, slowly moving each one with care and precision. “Fascinating. It seems that nasty fall must have caused chaos in the mental hierarchy,” he mumbled, flexing his digits in front of his face as he lay on the ground.

Sangria sighed, placing her foot on Felon’s chest and pressing down heavily. “Okay, buddy, you have about three seconds to start making sense before I open fire on your crazy hide,” she growled.

“Hyde… yes, I suppose that would be a fitting way to put it,” Felon mused, tapping his chin. “The man you know as Felon isn’t—how do I explain—the only person existing within his consciousness. I’ve always been there in the far reaches of his mind, only able to prompt small ideas or desires. Haven’t you ever wondered why there is always a fueled speedboat in the perfect location or a convenient lack of guards blocking an escape route?” he questioned, wincing at the stabbing pain shooting through the back of his head. “I guess holding the wheel means feeling the pain as well.” Felon raised a hand to gingerly massage the growing bump on the back of his head. “I’ve always been on your side, Sangria.”

Sangria looked down at the villain skeptically. “You expect me to believe that you have, what, a split personality?”
she asked, glaring at Felon.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” Felon replied, his excitement overcoming the pain gnawing at his attention.

“How do I know that you aren’t just lying to me?” she questioned, her voice stern.

“You don’t. Quite possibly you never will,” Felon reasoned. “What a conundrum we find ourselves in,” he chuckled, running his fingers through the silver mess of hair on his head and loosening the gel that felt as if it was gluing every hair to his cranium.

“Whatever, I don’t have time for this,” Sangria said in exasperation. “I am taking you back to HQ and they can figure out what to do with you there.”

“Oh, what a wonderful idea! I’ve always wanted to see the inner workings of such a daring organization!” Felon exclaimed, pulling himself to the feet that were now under his control with the hands that now obeyed his every whim. “Oh, this really is remarkable,” he breathed, wiggling his fingers in front of the eyes that looked exactly where he told them to. “I trust we will take the escape pod I left docked and fueled for you?” Felon asked, taking tentative steps and relishing in his newfound authority.

“Actually, yeah,” Sangria muttered, scratching her head as she now wondered how safe her plan could be. “Put these on,” she insisted, kicking the cuffs towards Felon as she pointed the gun at his chest once again.

“I assure you, there is no need for you to continue waving around that thing. You could shoot someone,” Felon reasoned, his eyes drifting down to the fallen guard. “You could shoot someone else,” he corrected, sliding the cuffs over his hands
and smiling with exuberation at the fact that he could actually feel the cuffs tightening around his wrists. “ Shall we?” Felon asked, gesturing awkwardly at the side door with his restrained hands.

“This is the weirdest day ever,” Sangria mumbled, following her captive to the escape pod.
Many legends about the stars have sprung up over the years. Some believe they were holes poked in the heavens by a woodpecker when the world was first created. Others are convinced the stars were candles held aloft by angels. The king’s scientists claimed that the stars weren’t any more mythical than a fire is, each star a bundle of gas and light. Daria didn’t particularly believe any of the explanations, especially the scientists’. She didn’t know what was up there, but she felt that there was something alive in each star.

Each night, Daria would slip outside under the heavy cloak of the night sky and gaze up at the stars. As she did so, she would draw a needle out from her sleeve, pull scraps of silk from the pouch at her side, and begin to delicately push the needle through the fabric. Though no thread could be seen following the needle, the fabric puckered and gathered, each intricate stitch intangible and invisible. Daria
would tie off the unseen thread, and suddenly a glimmering string of starlight ran through fabric where each invisible stitch had been. Retrieving another fragment of cloth, she continued her sewing with the invisible starlight thread, gradually turning the snippets of fabric into a stunning robe.

Daria folded it carefully inside her pouch, and began to create an embroidered scarf with what was left of the scraps she’d found in the nearby town. Although it was dark, and the stars her only companions, Daria was not afraid. She occasionally glanced up to the sky, thinking of the many legends about the stars, and her belief in some sort of life in each one. It was what she channeled into each careful stitch, what gave her embroidered clothes their unique properties. Each piece of clothing simply gave them new life, a new purpose. Daria occasionally felt that presence and life around her, even as she sewed late into the morning. As she knotted her last stitch, her fingers indented with marks from the needlework, Daria smiled up at her stars, her sky. Exhausted, she quickly packed up her supplies and shuffled towards home to sleep for a few hours.

Early the next morning, Daria crept out of the makeshift home she shared with her two younger sisters. On the balls of her feet, she silently crossed the old straw covering their floor and pushed aside the torn blanket that served as the door. As the bright morning sun shone through the gap, Asha, the youngest of her adopted sisters, opened her eyes and stretched up her pale, mottled hand.

“Daria? Why is it so early?” she blearily said, her eyes still clouded from dreaming. Daria swiftly moved to her side, pressing a kiss to her cold forehead.
“Shhh, go back to sleep,” she whispered, soothing her. “The market in this area is much farther away, but I’ll be back before sundown. Ren will be here with you,” Daria said, giving Asha’s tiny hand a comforting squeeze before padding out of their home and onto the stony dirt path.

She hiked several miles eastward, into the town with a festive, gaily-decorated market, and pulled out her only two items of merchandise. Daria draped the scarf loosely across an arm, holding onto the iridescent robe with the other. She wandered down cobblestone paths beneath bright banners, paying special attention to fashionable tailoring stalls where she might be able to find some more fabric pieces to use. Quickly, Daria traveled from street to street, trying to convince just one person to buy her wares.

“This robe will give you the courage you require to succeed at any trial! Or this scarf, it will take away your sadness and give you peace,” she attempted to explain. Most simply scoffed, disbelieving in magic and scorning her foreign features. By the end of the afternoon, Daria leaned dejectedly against a cold stone wall. She began to consider how she might be able to tell Asha and Ren they would have to wait another day to purchase food when a dark-skinned lady paused in front of her.

She was dressed in the indigo robes of the king’s astronomers, but found Daria’s expertly-sewn wares intriguing. Perhaps only out of curiosity and pity for the poor girl, she bought the scarf and robe for a few gold pieces before walking away and vanishing into the crowd. Although she did not know of the magical star-thread that ran through each garment, when she put each piece on, she could indeed
feel the bravery in her bones, the happiness in her heart. Daria thanked her good fortune and ran back home, stopping only to purchase some bread, apples, and leftover fabric scraps from the tailors with her meager earnings.

By the time she had reached her home, it was nearly dusk. In spite of the late hour, Daria’s sisters had waited eagerly for her return. Daria shared the food she’d bought at the market with Asha and Ren, sharing laughter and stories of the sophisticated and quirky people she’d seen, before they contentedly fell asleep on their straw beds. She softly sang a protective rhyme, then walked outside to spend the night sitting on hard dirt under the stars, sewing once more.

This pattern continued for several years, with the girl and her sisters leading a difficult but contented life together. Their little family packed up and traveled frequently, fleeing the persecution that came from being foreigners, outcasts. Yet after all those years, something strange began to occur in the sky.

Astronomers noticed it first, pulling out old star charts and searching desperately through old texts for an explanation. Soon the phenomenon was so widespread that even the king of their country came to hear of it. Constellations were vanishing, the stars disappearing. Slowly but surely, each nightfall brought fewer and fewer pinpricks of light to the sky.

The king brought in his top scientists, astronomers, and even previously denounced magicians to aid in finding a
solution to this strange phenomenon. He sent out messengers, searching throughout the kingdom for any people who had ideas to bring back the stars.

After a time, the news reached Daria, though she had traveled far and wide. Early in the morning, Daria roamed a cobblestone street, holding out her shimmering wares. She smiled at the strangers passing by, until a woman dressed in one of her star-sewn cloaks slowly approached her. She pushed back the hood, revealing the apprehensive face of the astronomer from so many years before.

The astronomer looked deep into Daria’s eyes, asking a question that shook her to the core. “What have you done with the stars?” the astronomer demanded, gripping her by the shoulders. “Where are they?!” she repeated.

Daria’s heart pounded, her mind racing as she struggled to comprehend the meaning of the astronomer’s questions. She dropped the clothes in her arms, forgotten. Struggling out of the astronomer’s grip, Daria fled the square, as if running might somehow leave behind the horrible revelations she couldn’t accept.

That night, Daria slowly walked out of the wooden shanty her family currently called home, hardly daring to look up to the sky. She thought, If I don’t look, maybe, somehow, it won’t be true. It won’t be real. But she slowly turned her face towards the heavens and crumpled to the ground. The cool, dry earth beneath her hands seemed to remind her of the harsh, unbreakable reality. The stars were missing, in spite of her denial over the past years, and she knew instinctively that it was her fault.
Daria had known that somehow her thread truly was made from starlight, but she’d never thought what she was doing would cause such damage. Her sewing had been more permanent than she’d imagined. Daria knew she had to fix her mistake. She racked her brain as she paced across the cool dirt before the doorway, thinking through all possible solutions. By the time the dawn began to spread its scarlet rays across the empty sky, the only solution she’d thought of was to undo all the thread she had sewn, hoping it would release the starlight.

The next morning, Daria set out once more towards the town. Only this time she was not selling her goods, but taking them back. Like a ghostly bird, she fluttered unnoticed from home to home, only stopping when she located someone wearing one of the clothes she’d carefully stitched. She bargained, argued, and begged, even stealing when necessary the stunning star-sewn clothes. Months passed with Daria and her sisters traveling from village to village, town to town, under the dim light of the remaining stars; finally, after far too long, she had retrieved each piece of clothing.

That evening, Daria kneeled under the empty dark night sky, slowly unpicking each stitch. Her sisters watched in silence as she untied endless knots in the thread, the brilliant colors and light faded from the vanishing thread. Hopefully released back to the sky where they belonged.

She worked tirelessly, barely pausing to catch a breath, for she knew that her nightly companions—the presences that had comforted her each night—were depending on her. She worked until her fingers were numb and her sisters had fallen asleep, until a pile of fabric taller than her rose from
the ground, until each and every piece of starlight thread had been undone. Daria finally wiped the weariness from her brow, turning her face to look expectantly at the sky. She gasped. Frozen. In shock.

The stars were still missing.

Although some of the stars had returned, the overwhelming dark expanse of night lay empty. All the stars in the sky were still dim, dark. Daria pulled apart the pile of fabric, searching each piece for any stitching she had missed. In a frenzy, she scanned again and again, even though she knew in her heart that all the thread was gone.

Daria sank to the earth, sobbing softly. She wept, her thoughts turning towards her sisters and all the people who would never again see the full beauty of a star-studded night sky, and for her failure in returning the heavens to their beauty. She cried for hours, until she began to notice something strange. Her tears were not dropping into the grassy earth, as they should be. Instead, they were falling... up; Daria watched in amazement as her tears continued to stream upwards, and amazingly, unbelievably, another star winked brightly into existence. She stood, staring at her tears, and her fingertips, as they began to slowly light up with the starlight she had stolen—and unknowingly retained—over those many years.

Immediately, Daria knew where her destiny lay. She could feel the tugging in her heart, attempting to pull her up to the sky. Yet as her face turned to the stars, she caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye: Asha and Ren peacefully at sleep in front of their shared home. The inexorable force beckoning her towards the sky did not lessen, but she
could feel another force binding her to her sisters. She couldn’t leave them! Not alone, not back to the same way they’d all been before they’d found each other.

Struggling against the pull of the sky, she carried Asha and Ren one by one into the carefully constructed lean-to, laying them down on the dry, crinkly straw. Sitting upon her own pile of hay, her head in her hands, she watched over them. Daria thought of their shared past, and the two futures she now knew were possible. She couldn’t imagine leaving them, but how could she continue to live on earth knowing about the possibility of her life in the stars?

When dawn broke once more over a cold earth, Daria was no closer to an answer. For the first time in years, she didn’t leave the lean-to in the early morning to go to the market. How could she? She couldn’t sew any more star-clothing, and she’d failed in her task to bring back the stars. What more could she do? After a time, the straw bedding rustled and Ren sat up. Her first words struck a chord in Daria’s heart.

“What happened last night? Did you fix the stars like you said you were trying to?” she innocently questioned, nearly noticing the surge of emotions Daria tried hold in.

“Not exactly,” Daria responded as lightly as she could. But Ren knew her too well, and she could see the pain in her eyes.

Ren brushed the straw from her knees, and shuffled over to crouch beside Daria. Placing her dark hand on Daria’s shoulder, she simply said, “It’s okay. We love you,” before skipping out into the warm morning sun to find their breakfast. She left quickly enough that she couldn’t see the
golden tears glimmering in the sun as they floated upwards from Daria’s eyes.

Daria spent the day running, playing, and gallivanting across the countryside with Asha and Ren. All the things she’d scarcely been able to find time for before. When night spread its dark cloak across their field once more, Daria slipped outside into the cool air. She’d kissed her sisters a final goodbye, brushed her fingers across their foreheads, and whispered one last song. It was somehow the same as every night before, and yet so very different. As hard as it was, her time had come and, no matter the cost, she had to restore the stars to the sky.

With a graceful sigh, she let go of her hold on the earth, on her sisters, and rose up into the sky with her nightly starlight companions. The light she’d stolen sprang to life from her fingertips, traveling down her body. She became brighter and brighter, until she could scarcely see the outline of her hand in front of her face. Her presence seemed to light up the space around her, and as she shone more brilliantly, she began to see the far-off stars begin to wake once more. The sky slowly flickered back to life, the stars returning to their positions.

Suddenly, the girl heard a faint whisper through the empty silence of space.

“Welcome home! We’ve been waiting so long to finally meet you!” one voice said.

Another spoke, replying, “We’ve watched you every night, wishing we could be with you in person.”

The voices’ words slowly sank in, until the girl finally understood. “You were my companions through those long
hours,” she said, turning towards the brightly shining people that she now realized were the true forms of the stars.

“Yes,” they replied.

Daria squinted at them in confusion, at their familiar appearance. She gasped once she realized the truth. “You… you, you’re my parents, aren’t you?” she asked breathlessly.

“We are,” her mother said, reaching out to cradle her in her arms. “We were with you even after we were gone. We were the voices that guided you to Asha and Ren, hoping you could still have a family.”

Her father continued, “You always knew the truth, didn’t you? About us, and the stars?”

Daria shook her head. “I had always wondered... but, then, it’s so different from what I thought. I never imagined that the presences I felt each night could be you, or any kind of person!”

“We’re not so different,” said the closest star, a boy still young enough to be playing with wooden toys. *As young as Asha,* Daria thought with a pang of sadness. “We were once people too, but we’re the ones who didn’t make it. Who missed the rest of our life, just like your parents.”

Another shimmering star-maiden placed her warm fingers on Daria’s shoulder. “You’re like us now. A flame burnt out too fast. But we still experience the lives we lost a thousand times over, through the people on earth, as you will too.”

“But how can you accept me so readily? After everything I did?” Daria questioned. “I was the one who stole your memories, your personalities, your souls from this beautiful world and turned them into clothing!”
Her father placed his hand on her shoulder, giving it a familiar, comforting squeeze. “It’s okay; we were grateful for the opportunity to be back on earth one last time. We can’t fully experience that from up here. But we’re glad to be back in our new home.”

Daria looked at her shining fingertips, her parents, the beautiful stars and galaxies surrounding her. *I’m warm, she thought, and loved.* Daria smiled brightly at her old friends and her parents. Soon, there would be time to fully settle into her new abilities, to watch over Asha and Ren, and to find a girl who needed them just as much as they needed her. But for now she was simply happy to be with her parents once more.

Miles below her, on the surface, Daria’s sisters mourned over her, touching her chilly cheeks and hands. Yet somehow, they felt their sister’s presence around them, a warmth they’d never felt before. Watching and helping silently from above, their sister stretched her arms around them, under the beautiful new star-studded sky.
The feeling of soaring is a wonderful effect of flying a plane. The feeling also came from starting something big. The ceiling was purely made of glass, allowing full view of the endless night sky above. The full moon stood out perfectly among the stars. She occasionally glanced up to the sky, thinking of the many legends about the stars, and her belief in some sort of life in each one. She started finding a grip on some earth before beginning to climb up towards that cliff, knowing how thorny and aching the journey was going to be, visualizing at least four different possible escape routes and weighing each against the others. She stretched out her arms and legs as if she were the one flying, accepting the push and pull of the storm as just another obstacle, one that she didn’t have to navigate.
guess holding the wheel means feeling the pain as well. When everything in life seemed to become shattered glass, she had the courage to look up at the sky again. Although it was dark, and the stars her only companions, she was not afraid. She was back in the sky—this time she was there to stay for her longest flight yet.