

Nowhere's End
By Logan Deane

For Curtis, the lost king of Everywhere

Part 1

A Gathering

She was writing on her hands again. Less efficiently than usual, letting the ink feather into her skin, making words of the feelings; she blackened her palms. She had seen the man and he had leapt and vanished before her eyes at least 10 dozen times, until it hurt to look at him. She had spoken hasty words with him and now she was alone to think of them and remember how his eyes had eaten of her form, barely resting on her face. He was lucky she was used to such attentions.

She wrote:

"Such is darkness born of night
To darken thus all holy light
If the daughter would make right
The daughter must then surely fight"

All lay still, and in the air no sounds but violins, and her hair like a fence to hold back her eyes. She had spoken to the Shifting Man and his guidance had been solitary, brittle, breakable. And yet, she knew, his words had been invaluable to her desperate cause. She stood, now, at the gate to Shifting Sands and now she closed it, allowing the cold copper from her fingers. She walked, now, back along the road to her own struggling land.

Her thin, blue dress billowed in the winds that always blow between such impossible places. Here and there stars flung themselves at her feet, begging to be caught and carried home with her, to safer places than their sky. She allowed them all

into her pockets, knowing any ally is better than no one, be they humble as a fallen star. She hummed the softest tune and her feet made gentle sounds upon the path, strung out in semi-precious stone like the bauble on some giant's throat. Her fingers, eyes, nose, lips and ears were delicate as paper, and her skin as pale. Her hair hung down in winding curls, some gold, some auburn brown. She moved as a princess, for so she was. The Princess Of Nowhere.

The wind came in torrents like waves of freezing water, but she did not shiver. She was warm with a light her own, for her land was a place of survival, no matter whom the enemy. Nowhere must remain always or Somewhere would break down as well, and Anywhere would surely fall apart. Everywhere was nothing without the others—they fed it, gave it life and hope and breath. Nowhere could not die. This was her belief. *But why then must I fight?* The words were echoes of the dreams, prophecies perhaps, that she had seen for many nights and that had woken all her solitary realm.

'Fight' meant there was something to fight for—something to lose. She walked on and now she shivered only just a little. She began to notice the stars in her pockets were crying out dirges—funeral songs she'd forgotten or only half remembered from when Nowhere had been a place of many,

many mourning ones. She bit her lip. She walked slower now and she realized she could not fight this on her own.

Once home, she lit herself a fire of the stars she had collected, who cried out in complaint that such as they be wasted so carelessly. She reminded them of who she was and their mouths no longer spoke as they warmed her with their bodies. There was a breathlessness here, a waiting endlessly for things to happen. Nowhere was a quiet place-it's brutality in it's lack of landscape and it's lack of usefulness. There was only she, The Well, and her dome of Stately Mirrors. The fallen stars fizzed and popped and slowly their light left them and their soft bodies burned to powder to be taken by the winds.

She found paper and a ball-point pen and with her fragile, perfect hands she drew the faces of the ones she could remember. It was difficult sometimes, remembering all those things that had once been and were not anymore. Sometimes the easiest things are the most difficult to do and so it was with memories of love that once had been and was no more. Even so, she drew the hard lines of his face and the soft lines of his name amongst the rest. Perhaps he would still care for her enough to rescue her when she was most alone.

The Flying Boy. The Small Dead Girl. The Willow King. Her fingers bent the pen against the paper, making whisper sounds and lion's breath. The Prisoner. She drew him with a scowl. Old Pantomime. It was all rounded corners under the

black glare of the pen. The Dreaded Scars. They were difficult to make on paper, no matter the skill of the artist's wrists or the taper of her fingernails. The Dreaded Scars were never meant to be portrayed in such a way.

Her list complete, The Princess of Nowhere brushed her hair until it was soft and straight as silk, pulled a drink from The Well Of Tears, drank deeply, solemnly (as one must always drink from The Well Of Tears) and, as seasons grew and died and Summer wound it's vines all 'round Nowhere, she slept.

The princess woke with breathlessness. Emotions do not dream, and places only gently. The Princess of Nowhere was both those things and more and yet it had been long nights since she'd closed her eyes to anything but darkness. Tonight she had seen her little brother, The Sovereign of Somewhere, and he had spoken to her with his supple voice and she had listened, as always, with impatience. When she first had seen him, sanguine there on the dusty planks of some forgotten attic, he had been reciting from a list of words:

"Expectorate, Aqueous, Snapdragon, Xenophile, Shiver, Adumbrate..." He had seen her then, lifted his domed head, tilted his shaped and pampered eyebrows in a joking way, and slid his slender lips to make an uncomfortable smile.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"I must use these words and then all of the friendly men will then know I am smarter than the way my voice makes me." He was proud as he spoke, and yet his head hung at an angle that reminded her of the way a dog looks with it's tail between it's legs.

"Why don't you use them when you speak with me?" She asked, gently. They had never spent much time together, as was the obligation of their office. This brother of hers, a king in his own, was no different than the penitent few who passed through her gate, often on their way to him.

He giggled for a moment, a child's sound, and just as quickly he was standing and his mouth was straight and small. "I do not surely know the very meaning of the words, or of their worth, dear sister."

"Does it matter to the friendly men, brother, what the words mean?" She had asked him then.

"Most surely it is just that I do say them, sister, and with an intricate voice as well."

"Do they know the meanings, brother?"

"No." He frowned and she knew, then, that she had ruined his fun, taken his usefulness.

"Learn them, brother, and you are better than those men and they look upon you with jealousy."

He smiled, just a little, and his voice changed to a toneless drone. "Most surely, sister, it is now definitely time for you, sister, to leave Nowhere and to mass an army there to hope to save what you may of your land from the most terrifying thing."

"What 'most terrifying thing'?" She had begun to ask, and then all had been black and emptiness. And so she had woken, breathless and uncomfortable. She packed her mirror, 17 small red and orange gummy bears, a rock that spoke in poems, and her flask of water from the Well. As she left, she passed a pale young man and woman, arms entwined like snakes, and told them they would

have to walk the paths of Nowhere all alone for now and that she would come and find them when she finished. Their faces were thin and pretty, with a lackluster confidence and self-preparation in the way their mouths hung. She smelled kisses on their lips when they mumbled soft 'thank-you's and wished her luck on her journey. It was cold beyond the gate.

She arrived gently, her naked feet murmuring a weak slap against the cobblestone. She paused a moment to fuss with the wrinkles, though little more than creases, in the pale vinegar tinge of her gown. There was nothing for the body to experience here, save for the feel of cobblestone and the tender scent of Coriander. In measured breath, she filled herself with that heavy air, lowered herself to her knees, dropped her head and outstretched her thin arms in a supplicating bend.

With the hush of soft breeze through Autumn's sallow branches, the space around and beneath her filled. The Princess of Nowhere stood, eyes as yet unopened for fear of punishment unaccounted. So it was, gown awash in the gentle motion of this new air, toes tickling at the soft-packed earth, eyes tightly shut, that she waited. This was the structure of her visits here, as it had always been. And yet, by now, the Willow King had always breathed his wheezing chuckle and accepted her into his home.

Today, the only resonance that moved except the wind was a sharp, slow, pitiable moan. She waited still for several minutes. In her mind she puzzled at the words that she should speak. Finally, she spoke in gentle tones, her eyebrows furrowed and hands worrying at her gown.

“My lord, is it bad that I am here?”

There was silence for a moment, she still

wishing for the right words to speak, and a sound of effort spent in straightening a crooked frame. “My dear, there is no better time for you than now. Enter, please, but expect no hospitality, for I am nothing but a beggar anymore.”

Eyes opened to pale grasses soughing in an Autumn breeze. Before her stood an old and wrinkled man, the deep scarlet of his kingly robes now smudged with grass and dust, creased and furrowed in a way that reminded her of the tired lines of his face. His crown of gold and diamond lusterless, cocked, cobwebbed and forgotten.

Again, her tongue hung useless in her mouth for words to speak. “My lord... what’s happened here?”

There was a resignation in the shape his shoulders slumped. His eyes still wept in gentle streams across his mountain cheeks. “You have not seen the worst of it, my dear.” One fat and gnarled finger pointed past her worried face. “Look!”

Behind her, in a pool of fallen leaves, it’s branches thin as hair and motionless among the swaying grasses, was his Willow. Half of it lay in a tumble on the soil, the other half now stark and dying.

The seat of his throne (which the Willow had been) had been shattered in the fall; it’s base still in place, its back and arms twisted in the mass on the ground.

“Do you see, now, what has ruined me? Do you see I mourn my throne and so my kingship? For years I had this place and these,” he brought his hands down to caress the shivering grass, “my faithful subjects. This place was all of me.”

The Princess of Nowhere waited in that almost-cold, trying but not knowing what it was the old king meant. “My lord, you still have your faithful subjects. The tall grasses remain.”

The Willow King snorted, and shook his pallid head. “I am not your lord and neither theirs. Years I spent atop my throne and when I wished for my subjects to dance, they would move in such formations in the breeze! When I wished to hear their words they spoke to me in whispered voices. Now, devoid of that most important of all aspects of this place, I am no king.”

“But, my lord, you still keep your kingly crown...”

He smiled on her, then, and took her hand. His skin was soft and cold and he shook a little when he spoke. “Crowns are only baubles, keepsakes worn by aging kings to hide their growing frailty.”

He chuckled, and the sound spun ‘round like Autumn leaves to die upon the careless earth. “No. I am no king. I cannot rule over anyone. My throne is dead and I have mourned it’s passing long enough. I think that soon I shall travel to the gates

of *your* far realm, my dear, to beg entrance from *you*. I hope I won't be too much trouble for you, dear."

Taken aback, the Princess stammered. "My lord, you need not come. I had come to ask your help, though I had not wanted it like this. My home will be in danger, lord, and I would fear for your protection."

He shook his wearied head, his crown tumbling to the dust at his feet. "I must. There is no other place for me. I will say what goodbyes I can and will journey there tomorrow. Leave me with my people now, my dear."

Wordless, she bowed deeply to the once-king and took her leave from him. Outside, in the nothingness, she shook her head and wrung her delicate hands. Whatever was to damage Nowhere had felled a tree and killed a king. Where was it next to go?

Again she walked the placelessness, hands clutching at the void. There were lights here that whirred like tape recorders and made shapes that looked like words that said 'forget everything and stay a while'. She shook her head at these and carried on, though the air became thick as she moved toward her purpose.

Breathing softly, the pale Princess made her way towards the Palace of The Prisoner.

In this world in which you make your life, there are those who are not near as plain as looks prescribe. Nor are their situations quite so average as your own, assuming you, dear reader, are not one of them yourself. It was this way with The Prisoner.

The Princess of Nowhere always felt small chills when visiting this place, for it is never proper to walk within the places that define you, as you may already be aware. And so it was with apprehension that she found herself outside the steel door of cell 17 within the Southern Island Penitentiary.

The door stood open, The Prisoner within, his undersized frame misshapen by the folds of his own royal attire. A scowl hung ever over the faded orange jumpsuit, eyes always holding looks of shame and angst.

Letting herself in (for his door does not have locks) The Princess kept her eyes a little higher than his face.

“So, you still won’t look at me. As if your sins are any less than what I am!” He spoke with his accusing tone, his voice a unity of scorn.

“This is the way the rules dictate, Prisoner.” She spoke without emotion, as was proper in this place.

“And so it ought to be. So it will always be. So it has always been.” He spoke in sing-song fashion, mocking her, his thin lips curled. “I know

the rules, girl. I wrote them myself.”

“Prisoner, why do they keep you?”

“Because I am a sick man and a sinner.”

“What did you do for them to keep you here?” She’d asked him this the last time they had met, but she had been much younger then and had not understood the things he said. He had frightened her.

“I don’t know. Besides, that’s not important. What matters is I’m cold and they won’t let me out of here.”

“The door is open, Prisoner.” She’d mentioned this before as well, and he had closed his greasy eyes and shook his head at her, as if she’d never understand.

“Quiet, girl. That’s not the purpose of all this. Why are you here?”

“Prisoner, I’ve come to ask your help. There is something come to take away my home. It has already hurt The Willow King and I can’t stop it on my own. I thought a criminal might know how to steal its breath away.”

His eyes grew large and he stood, as she spoke ‘criminal’. She struggled to keep her eyes away from him and struggled not to choke on his damp smell. He moved close to her and spat “I am *not* a criminal.”

Disgraced by his proximity, The Princess of Nowhere clenched her gentle fists and turned her

back to him. “Fine. I’ll leave you here, then. Do not expect fair lodging next you come to visit Nowhere.”

She heard him mumble as she left “No one ever understands. I wish they’d bring the food. I haven’t eaten in a week.” With grace saved for finer hosts, she walked away from The Prisoner. As she moved down that long hall, she heard his voice a final time.

“Why doesn’t anyone shut the door on their way out?”

After stepping from our Earth back onto the hidden path, the place between places, The Princess of Nowhere, frustrated and hungry, took the 17 small red and orange gummy bears from the bag she carried with her and chewed them carefully. She walked slowly, spending as much time as warrants gummy bears, for she walked in the direction of her once true love.

Nervous, she found herself too soon at the simple door that opened to The Flying Boy.

He was there, circling the empty air, as if he'd waited by the door for her arrival. His was a simple place. Islands in the ocean and a spattering of stars at night. He'd told her there was nothing more he wanted, save her here with him, but that had been long years ago.

Frustrated, blinking back the fresh light reflected in the churning surf, The Princess of Nowhere wrung her hands in anticipation of what was surely to come. He said nothing, only falling just a little nearer her height.

"Hello, Promise." That was not his true name. *That* she had forgotten long ago. Now he was only Promise, The Flying Boy of the Isles of Wandering, the name she had given him.

He had named her too. Now he spoke in his voice of boy-nor-man, his ever-almost-grown voice and he spoke with the authority of youth. "Hello, Truth. It's good to see you... though not really."

"Why not really?" He had said he could not lie to her, and this she still believed.

"It isn't fair to come here and act as if things are right with us. But I don't imagine you would come here any other way. And why is that, in the end?"

She shook her pale head, her hair a tangle in the ocean breeze, and rolled her eyes. "Oh, grow up."

He laughed a boy's laugh. "And what would

that bring? I could be like you, you know. I could. I could leave my feet on the ground and I could walk between places and I could pace when I'm nervous and frown when I'm mad and, oh! What games we'd play! We could play at chess or words. Write poetry that doesn't rhyme. We could cut open the sky to see the way the stars shine and all the while them bleeding on our hands until the sky is only clouds.

"No. I leave those grown-up things to you, though it's often that I wish you would have listened when I cried for you to stay."

She hadn't expected this much truth to come from him. Last time he had told her jokes that only made a little sense when she tried not to think about them. She tried to smile at him now, though it felt less than it used to. "I'd rather things had never changed but you know I can't come back. Promise, I'm here to ask your help."

The Flying Boy crossed his arms over his chest. "I'd rather you'd pretend you still believed in anything."

Now her hands were on her hips and she slowly paced the sand, the spray of surf in measure with the howling of the gulls. "Fine. If I pretend will you at least listen to my problem?"

He seemed not to hear. "I'd rather a foot race than a swimming match."

She remembered how the games had been,

before. She had loved them then. She had loved everything that happened here, for here *was* he, The Flying Boy, and she had loved him. Or so she thought. She remembered that his games would never last and thought it best to let him finish it before she carried on.

He spoke again, this time a smirk against his face, his eyes turned toward the sky. “I’d rather pie than cake. I’d rather dusk than dawn.”

He turned his eyes on her and for a moment their eyes met and she remembered why it was she’d stayed so long here; why she’d left Nowhere to rust and slowly fail until her untimely return. “I’d rather found than lost. It’s your turn now.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “That last one doesn’t count. The sentence isn’t whole. Doesn’t make sense.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, with the small points of a smile at his cheeks. “You’re stalling now. You never were much good at this. I’d rather find a slow, fat fish to play against than play with you.”

The Princess of Nowhere giggled, then, in the thin breeze beneath a sky of afternoon and the slow tide dully aching up the shore to tickle at her toes. “I’d rather you would come stand on the ground than wallow in the air where I can’t go.”

“I’d rather you would meet me in the air than stand down there complaining.”

“I’m not complaining! I’d rather you would tell me if you’ll help instead of wasting all my time.”

He made a wide circle in the air. “I’d rather waste your time than have you leave.”

“But I can’t stay! I’d rather you’d stop thinking you could ever keep me here.”

“That isn’t fair! You have to say ‘instead’ or ‘than’! I’d rather you’d remember how things were than choose to think it’s all the same.”

The Princess nodded. She saw a way to end his aimless game. “I’d rather you a man than a boy.”

He stopped his spinning. "I'd rather you a girl than a woman."

"So neither gets what either wants? It's never too late to grow up, you know."

"It's never too late to come back home."

He hovered just above the sand, his toes testing the salt water. And there were never any answers to be given for such talk. This is what he'd left her with before, all alone in the nothing place just beyond his small, chipped door. An invitation to return. An invitation to forget the way things never stayed the same, never left her anything but choices to be made.

She closed her eyes; put in place the memories of choices she had made—memories of Nowhere and the prophecy, the sickly dreams, the

chasing after those she felt much stronger than herself. Memories of the choices and the weight that was her duty and her homeland.

Opening her eyes, she saw his feet upon the ground, his fingers supplicant to wrap around her own and so she took his hand and let the water coil and sputter at her ankles. He spoke.

“You used to close your eyes for a very long time and when I’d ask you why you’d say that you were busy thinking, and it helped you think. But what you meant was that you could not dream with your eyes open. I never could agree with that. What I see is no different than what I dream and before, when you first came to visit and you stayed much longer than you’d planned, you were all my dreams, and never was I happier to sleep.

“But now, if you dreamed as you see, as I do, all your dreaming would be nightmares. I see this. I am not so small as to ignore the things I see and I am not so childish as to forget them. I *understand* you close your eyes so you don’t have to dream the things you see.”

The ocean at her knees, seaweed feathering her ankles, holding tight to the hand of the boy she had chosen to forget, The Princess of Nowhere hung her head so as not to see the way the sunlight played against his face.

Once more he spoke, his voice a coloring of innocence to countenance the hissing of the surf.

“And I will do my best to help you how I can.”

She smiled in the afterglow, the place between places, and let her naked feet caress the wrinkled path. Her eyes wide, mouth moved in an extravagant loop, repeating like a prayer the last words they had exchanged.

She had spoken with one hand wrapped around the warm and delicately sticky doorknob that led into the place that she now walked, the other still around his warm and delicately sticky hand. “Listen. This is the truth. We used to think that we’d always be together and things would never have to change. But always is an empty word. Forever always ends. I will see you when you come to save me. Let that be enough.”

He had winked a crooked wink and weakly let go of her hand. “Honestly? All the truths you’ve told me are always just a little less than true.”

And she had left, then, with his promise to protect her if he could. And so she was, feeling more trusting of his thoughts than her own as she ran them through her head and through her mouth and the path led ever onward toward The Abyss, the writhing, desperate dwelling of The Dreaded Scars.

To give description to such a desecrated landscape, though place it was not, and to describe the roiling coils of reddish spewing steam that stunk of burning meat and afterbirth would be as difficult as to describe the moment of death. Just know, dear reader, that immediately upon crossing the stretched and shuddering boundary that drew her near The Dreaded Scars, the Princess Of Nowhere began to scream.

Limbs made clumsy in the searing, uncontrollable cold of winter shadows, summer oven driving blood in churning currents away from her heart, away from her mind. Desperate for air, choking through the inescapable pain that was now master over all her smallest motions, the Princess screamed until her voice collapsed within her. Her eyes swam in shallow color, no light to give them focus, and it was then she realized she could not pull them open anymore. Feverish and twitching, breathing for a moment through the hurt, she understood, as memory played gently at her spine, that The Dreaded Scars lived nowhere but within her and there they'd always lived.

In a puppet's dance, marionette strings wrapped tight around her ligaments, her tongue twitched within her mouth. Someone spoke inside her. "Thank you. You had been so well for so long... we've had no chance to stretch our aching limbs in such a very long while."

Something ratcheted within her stomach and, blind and weeping, the Princess doubled over. Another voice spoke and it was as if all the skin were slowly unwinding from her delicate fingers.

“But she’s not in need of us! She hasn’t even wept in months, except the tears we just now gave her... perhaps we weren’t right to show ourselves.”

The first voice spoke again, in chills of dissonance all down her spine. “Hush! Maybe she’s realized how much she really needs us. Maybe we get to stay this time...”

There was laughter and her ears began to bleed in gentle, sickly soft and sickly warm drops. “She can’t make us leave!” It was as if something kicked, brutally, at her knees. She fell, whimpering, against the soft and arid earth. “Look at her! She doesn’t *breathe* unless it is our will that she should do so! And this is where she starts to understand how miserable that fragile strength, that hoping that they all do, really is.”

With this new voice there was a new pain, a kind of quiet sorrow ebbing at the slow, weak tide of thought that told her now to clench her frail fingers, breathe a little, beat away the helplessness. And as this new voice spoke, she felt a unity within herself—a filthy, careless, miserable unison of voices, content in their one thought. And now they spoke as one.

“Break at the heart that filters the mind. Break at the mind that swallows the thought. Break at the thought that nurtures the hope. Break at the hope that gives life to the heart.” It was with a desperate fervor that the words grew long and thick, the one-and-many-voices rising in a sick harmony to shatter at the now thinning walls of her endurance. And this they repeated to the war-drum of her heart until all her head was noise and all the things she felt were pain and terror.

And, as the breath died slowly in her lungs, so slowly died the voices, ‘til there was nothing but the violent hum of broken eardrums and the empty feel of dirt in her twitching hands. In a mocking sing-song, the legion spoke. “Before we desecrate you, make you ugly beyond recognition, it is customary to give breath to one last thought-give you something to hold onto as we scar you ‘til you’re nothing.”

The voice was simple in its arrogance as The Dreaded Scars offered their advice. “Most of them make pleas, confessions, lists of days wasted, regrets. A strong few try to struggle-lash out with old, pathetic dreams or moldering loves. There was a man who thanked us. Said we’d showed him more of himself than he’d ever seen before. We didn’t enjoy him as much as the others. Take your time. This is the way you’ll be remembered.”

Her ears, eyes, nose, fingertips bled in

sticky trickles down her too-hot, too-cold, shivering flesh. Though it felt her bones were broken and no muscle left to lace herself together, The Princess of Nowhere drew herself to her fallow feet.

Her voice was thin and caked with difficulty. “You’ve used me. Now it is my turn. I am more than what you’ve taken from me. I have more strength than you can squander. I am no *thing* to be beaten and ruined. I am the sovereign Princess of Nowhere and you will hang your heads before such royalty.”

The voices faltered. “Forgive us Princess. We are so many things to so many. We did not know to whom we spoke...”

New strength ached into her voice as new air into her crumpled lungs. “You used my body. Give it back to me. Take away the hurt you gave to me.”

There was a jagged intake of breath as the Princess found her feet. Again, the ugly voice spoke through her trembling lips. “Princess... we thought you knew. There isn’t anyone who can remove the scars from you. You carry your pains with you everywhere, forever.”

Tears fell, muddying the caked blood, cool against the anger on her face. Betrayal, disappointment, worthlessness washed themselves in waves all up and down her spine. “You are mine, then, until you have repaid me for the hurt you

made me feel. You will come to my aid when you are called to it.”

There was a shudder and a struggle as the voices moved her lips. “We are yours, Princess.”

And with one last muted trembling they were gone. The Princess of Nowhere gathered her now desiccated, now bloodied gown around her delicate form and straightened her chin. The twisting path, as incomplete and beautiful as ever, hung in silence and, it seemed, also in concern for the thinness of her breath. Without a word, only a quiet shaking of her head as if in disbelief, The Princess Of Nowhere continued on down the muted path toward the next name on her list.

Sexless, Old Pantomime was all your actions never taken. It's swollen fingers, many-colored, smudged with makeup and with blood and sweat and semen, trembled at the sound of her arrival. One eye, wide and crying, swiveled then to watch her. The other, deep in dreaming, spun and shook beneath a bruised and battered eyelid. It's mouth was endless smiling. And, in a voice barely a whisper, Old Pantomime spoke.

"I never told you but I always wanted to. You're the ugliest thing I've ever seen. How can you expect anyone to look at you?"

The Princess nodded. To speak with Old Pantomime, one must expect riddles. It can only speak such words as you had never said but always meant to say. Old Pantomime was something like a mirror, except to show you only what you weren't but could have been.

"Yes. I do wish my apologies, Sovereign. I had not meant to come here bloodied. I... came across my Dreaded Scars and I am told I cannot heal from their wounds."

Old pantomime blinked and caught it's breath. "It's ok. I'll love you no matter what it means I have to lose. I promise."

The Princess Of Nowhere smiled, then, in memory. She had practiced those words until they were sing-song and soluble. And the day had come, her eyes caught up in the wild culture of his face

and she had said instead that she was leaving, never to return. Now she straightened her chin and spoke with a purpose she'd forgotten, left for dead on that warm beach, her mind made up and her hand no longer holding onto the Flying Boy.

“Sovereign, if you don't mind, I'd like to know what I'd have said next, had I spoken my heart and not my head.”

Old Pantomime shifted and shivered and drew forth the phantom, could-have-been conversation from somewhere deep within itself. It began slowly, with a watery burble, and grew to an almost chant, an incantation. Old Pantomime spoke in voices not unlike her own and that of Promise, the Flying Boy.

“It's ok. I'll love you no matter what it means I have to lose. I promise.”

“But what about your house? Won't it get lonely without you?”

“Nowhere is nothing without me... but I am nothing without you. Nowhere will survive, though only in decay. I'll give it up for you.”

“You'll stay? And we'll play new games and we'll dance and hold hands and never ever fall asleep?”

“I'll stay. Promise, do you love me?”

“I love your heart and your face and your jokes and your voice and I love the wrinkles in your dress.”

Old Pantomime made a choking wheeze that must have stood for laughter. The Princess nodded.

“I know what happens next. I’ve dreamt it a million times. Sovereign Pantomime, could I beg of you a favor?”

Bones clacked and ligaments wound tighter as Old Pantomime frowned and shook its bulbous head. Again it spoke, this time in a quick, high timbered sing-song.

“You always get whatever you want. Look around you! Can’t you see the glories? Can’t you see the way the whole world shines for you? And what’s left for me? Where’s my comfort? Where’s my salvation?”

The Princess crossed her arms, now gently pock-marked and still pale beneath the fabric of dried blood left over from her Dreaded Scars. She would not be confused or be deceived. Not this way. Not as before, when she had come here seeking solace after losing all her love.

“You have the decadence of my regrets. You have the endless plunder of each dull mistake I never made. You have the triumphs that I missed. The passions I never allowed. But most of all, you have still the love I lost and cannot find again. Sovereign Pantomime, you are in my debt.”

It growled a gentle resignation and labored to its crooked feet. Arms wide, Old Pantomime

bowed low before the Princess, it's here-perfect, here-grotesque form shaking quiet earthquakes of effort to stay balanced and intact.

“My friend... I've always been yours for the taking. You've always been too afraid to see me as you see me now. But now you see. Now you know for sure. I'm yours forever. I promise.”

The Princess reached her slender fingers forth to thank Old Pantomime and as they touched it was like holding her own hand. She spoke once more before taking her leave from that polluted place. She said

“I thank you for your help, Sovereign Pantomime. I do not wish upon you all the terrors you will feel once those terrors have been stricken from my land. But I call you forth to Nowhere, nonetheless.”

And with those few cold words, she put her arms around herself as if to ward away the growing chill and stepped back through the gate into the nothing place.

And so she stood before that final doorway, having used up all her list except for this, the weakest hope. The Small Dead Girl. They had called her Sara, all the times before the accident had come and beaten the breath from her body, bent her limbs and battered what little life she'd grown to cultivate.

And her small empire was no bigger than a room and her form no more than pictures on the wall or pictures held so tight as to smother what was left of her in hands of family. Here she was princess and queen. In the small room, with no words spoken or motions made to let her from their minds, mother and father and cousins and uncles and aunts, grandparents and teachers and others who'd come just to notice what they'd never noticed before and to know a small girl that had died. And The Princess Of Nowhere now opened the door and took her place among the mourners, unnoticed.

She expected no help. The Small Dead Girl was dead and could not even help herself. This place was for memory and for seeing all the world in shades of mourning, in all the colors of loss. And so she stood beside them and among them, inhaling their mumbled apologies, parading in the same sightless mask-looking through their faces and past the colored pictures on the walls. Looking inward until, at last, head hung and body trembling with

that common hurt, that shared failure, The Princess
Of Nowhere turned and walked away from what
was left of Sara, The Small Dead Girl.

Once more within the nothing between places, she realized there was something she had meant to do when visiting The Small Dead Girl except that now it seemed so meaningless as not to warrant memory. And so, with delicate and weighted steps, The Princess Of Nowhere made her way again towards her homeland and whatever nameless cruelty lay waiting for her there.

All the world was grey and blue, the almost-chill, the somber cold of dusk. The emptiness of Nowhere hung like a shoddy curtain only barely covering, it seemed, some new and wretched change. The Well of Tears still bubbled in its salt-sweet voices. The Stately Mirror Dome still shone and doubled, tripled the emptiness of Nowhere. And she'd never felt a comfortable tension such as this.

Upon arrival, The Princess Of Nowhere had whispered a happy sound and danced a quiet dance of memory. Her bare feet, now travel worn and tempered by the broken path that led her home, had shivered at the marvel of Nowhere's simple dirt. She walked a solemn solitude along the paths of Nowhere, feeling once again the sweet and solid loneliness of home. With a smile touching at her lips she found the pale young man and woman, arms still entwined with snaking graces, and told them it was time for them to leave. They said they hadn't known they were still here, thanked her for her hospitality and left in clumsy steps that made the Princess smile with jealousy.

And they began to arrive. First came The Prisoner in chains he had to wrap and re-wrap, ever falling, never binding as his hands moved in self-pitying shrugs. There was an uncomfortable smell, like sweat and anger, when he stood beside her, much too close.

Then came The Willow King, a small root in his hand and no belief to glimmer at his weary eyes. He had lost his crown along the path and he hid his baldness as if it were obscene. *Strange*, she thought, *the crown had never covered that before*. His body shook as he bowed before her, as she had done in supplication, begging at his door. *How easily we break*, she thought. *how quickly we are ruined*. He dug the sterile soil of Nowhere and, whispering soft promises, he planted what was left of his willow in a delicate and reverent funeral.

In a shrill and whining wheelchair, Old Pantomime made a slow and awkward entrance. It had lost both legs along the path, it said, inside someone else's never-lived mistake. They shone improper and unnatural-pale stumps feathered with a sickly red that bled, it seemed, into its dirty tatters. At times it seemed to drown and others it would laugh and blush and turn its head away.

Her brothers came, also. Young Somewhere, with his thick books of thin words and the ever injured eyes of someone almost forgotten. Brave and supple Anywhere, his dark lips laughing, tall arms dancing with each sure step, shaking the world with his laughter. He was her favorite. Then was Everywhere, his eyes hiding behind the shine of thick-rimmed glasses. He struggled always, it seemed, with where his hands should go, moving them awkwardly from pockets to clasped back to

pockets again. His clothes never seemed to fit right and he tried his best to hide his weight behind layers of nondescript cloth. Sometimes she felt sorry for him. It was not his fault. Usually he just made her sad.

Her Dreaded Scars boiled and grew within her, this time only threatening to menace her already desecrated body. They moved like cancer inside her, hungry, and yet she moved within them too, a form of control to cull their mindless murder from her bones. And still they shivered at her spine in reckless excitement. She made them swear their allegiance in their seven strained voices. She made them swear until she was sure of their intention and still she, now dominant with the quiet strength of Nowhere all around her, held them leashed and wound in circles 'round themselves.

Finally, with innocence untouched by travel or by time's dull blade, stood Promise, The Flying Boy, with artful ignorance, spinning in small circles at the gate. He seemed uncomfortable so far from his small island in the sea. The Princess smiled and took his hands and pulled his floating, delicately sun burnt form into her solemn home. She saw his cheeks begin to blush and realized she ought to let go of his hands. He had brought her a shell in the shape of a heart and she took it and put it beside what was left of the stars she had burned before she left.

Looking with new hope at all those brave enough to care for her, their worries like paint against their faces, The Princess Of Nowhere began to understand what it is to feel safe. And looking, it was then her eyes remembered something the Shifting Man had said. She had thought them random words; that he had spoken amongst his myriad spasms and twitches. He had said “friends aren’t just for fun, Princess.” And then, in silent terror, The Princess knew the thing that was to break her home.

With a wrenching, gutless, sputtering inhalation all of Nowhere went dark then light again. And the sky began to fall like plaster and to sliver into shards that lay against the heaving ground like glass. Everywhere was terrible noise and all those gathered fell like jumbled masses, their mouths held wide and desperate in surprise.

Nowhere was a cataclysmic, helter skelter tempest of noise and pain and a tearing open of the world and then Nowhere was nothing. She stood alone with no ground beneath her feet, no far horizon. No Stately Mirror Dome or Well Of Tears. No brothers. No friends. No noise to carry as she screamed, eyes wide but seeing nothing.

For, dear reader, Nowhere is not Nowhere when surrounded by your friends.

Part 2

Loss and change

The expanse was monstrous and shockingly intimate. Locked within the overwhelming consequence, the tearing down of aspects of reality, the Princess struggled weakly to reach out. There was vacuum here - not even nothing - and with each breath she filled herself with void. In her far periphery, on her right, there was an enfeebled shade of yellow light that told her there was something there behind her. Something for her shaking hands to brush against, she hoped. Something to awaken her to whatever was to come beyond this horrifying vacancy.

She closed her eyes for endless time it seemed, for there was no way to tell it in the null. Outside, it was as if her ears were choked with silence. Inside, her heart had flown into a helpless rage, battering her cage of fragile bone and gentle flesh until all her body sang with frightened fire. Somewhere inside, she knew, remained her Dreaded Scars, alive as she was alive though overwhelmed indeed.

It had been *their* station to create a fear of damage and of death but this thing that all her senses now engorged upon had placed that fear in *them*. (Thus is the common way when faced with duties that are done effectively. A fear creeps in that all the effort you have made was just to bring your

purpose to it's end a little sooner, and no glory to be had in its unfolding.) There was no more damage they could do than had been done to her by now. And so they'd crawled their way inside of her to ravage at the places not even she knew how to reach. Still, she called to them.

“Wake up now, and find yourselves inside me. There isn't any time!”

Her inner voice was an avalanche compared to the nothingness outside her, and she hung as long as possible within those moments of motion. And yet, there was no voice that rose to match her, even as she waited. And in her rose an anger that was colored in despair.

“Come out! You are in debt to me!” She could still feel all the marks they'd left upon her, all the memories of nameless pain.

There began a small twinge in her stomach, a heat that rose into her bones, and the lowest whisper in the back of her throat. “We are still here...”

“Good!” She was relieved, no longer alone within the overwhelming void. “How can you help me leave this place?”

A jarring laughter shook inside her. “There is no way, Princess. This is your forever. Had we known, we would not have ever offered to remain.”

She raised her head, instinctual of her office. Her gentle features fraying, determination

on her lips, she spoke out loud. “You belong to me. And you will give your lives for me until you're nothing if that's what I need of you. What can we do to get away from here?”

There was silence then, for a while, and her heartbeat was a hammer in her chest. A slow mumble began, as if the Scars were arguing among themselves. “It's possible...” “That's childish! She can't...” “What danger could there be?” “There would be absolutely nothing left!”

There was a silence again, this time fiercer and less sure. “What is it?” she asked with apprehension.

“Princess... we aren't sure. There is one thing. But if we try and it still fails, you will be as empty as this place. There will be nothing left inside you and all of us will die.”

She crossed her arms, alone inside herself, entrapped in nothing. “There is only one thing?” She began to tremble, collapsing into exhaustion, conceding whatever royal fortitude she'd kept within.

“Yes, Princess. You must conceive a hope. It is the only thing left you may be able to hold on to. If you can grasp onto a hope, perhaps it will lead us from this place.”

She shook her head, derision in the laughter on her lips. “I'd have to build a strong hope! Something real enough to wrap my hands around! I

do not think there is a hope alive enough to take us from here.”

There was an angry grinding in her bones and her hands began to tremble as the Dreaded Scars replied. “There is nothing else! You, Princess removed, are all we have to keep from dying. Hoping is the only thing that's ever devastated us the way we've devastated you. Find yourself a hope or we are all going to die.”

She began to look around, craning her neck as far as it would twist. There it was—that dull and soulless yellow in the far distance behind her! She closed her eyes and raised her head in silent thanks. That yellow light was the one infinitesimal skeleton on which she might drape some frail hope. She did not know what type of thing had made that light and so that light, for her purposes, was whatever she could hope that it would be.

“Scars! What should I hope the light to be?” Her inner voice was stronger, just a little.

“Princess, we cannot hope. We do not know. We only know what ravages within you.”

“And what is that?”

They spoke with respect now, with stern realization that she was savior or devastation for them all. “Princess, you must ache for family. To see your brothers again. Perhaps that is your hope?”

And so it was. The process began slowly, as

if stretching broken limbs. She began to wrap thin sinew all across her pale skeleton of hope. The memory of young Somewhere's bony knees, his chin pressed up against them as he huddled in the corner by his little window, looking out. A meal of burgers from a paper bag, alone with her eldest brother as he drove them through the rain away from Anywhere. And Anywhere himself, always the corner of a smirk against his rough and eager face.

Quicker now she ran the sinews tight, layer upon layer, arteries and veins and muscle forming on their own. A trace of light from Everywhere. The smell of sawdust from the Land of Anything. The ruddy creak of worn-thin floorboards in Somewhere's attic kingdom. There was a body there before her-the body of her Hope-though glistening and skinless it remained. She arrayed it then with pale skin, soft and ardent as her own had been just days before. With a start she realized she'd left it naked in the void. She garmented her Hope in clothes for mild and quiet weather, for that is where she hoped to take herself.

There, before her, stood a full and ready Hope, a replica of herself as if she saw within a mirror. As she wondered at the next step in this process of creation, her Hope opened it's eyes and smiled a gentle smile. It reached out and pulled something from behind The Princess, attaching it to

her waist. Looking down, she saw the thinnest yellow thread wrapped tightly round and round her slender waistline. There it was, finally! Something to hold onto! Something that led to something better-anything at all!

Her hands trembled as she wrapped her porcelain white fingers delicately and deliberately around the tiny thread. One tug too sharply and this newest conformation of her hope would unravel. She used the string to slowly spin herself around, and saw that distant yellow tint was the radiance of a faraway and lonely planet. And, at that moment, it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. With the greatest relief, she saw her tiny cord seemed also attached to that far distant globe.

She began her wary journey towards that world, slowly gaining speed. As she pulled, she tried to calm her jackhammer heart with a recitation of all the planets she remembered. After all, a great many of them belonged as settlements of Nowhere, and she had visited each in stately finery before. Many of them she'd named herself. She began:

Wunides, Osonoe, Trozuno, Uoplyke, Skayostea,
Ogswichi, Shuaomia, Uostriion, Pruiheutania
Apioslonoe

She paused upon that last long-winded recitation, marveling at the way it always tasted

coming off her tongue. As she slowly pulled herself towards that tentative sheltering, she could feel a rush of life reenter her. Hope grew like sugar in her veins, lungs pumping confidence in deep, steady breaths. She felt a fire slowly lit-a warmth of confidence and confirmation growing in her bones. Even the Scars seemed pleased as they settled comfortably down inside of her.

The planet was much larger now, like a clock set in the stern wall of the night. Stars had begun to fill themselves around her, row on crooked row of glorious lights, a patient symphony of universal joy. It startled her to see them in this way. She, the damaged homeless princess. They, the perfect endless globes of light. She struggled with the memory of burning fallen stars for heat. Who had she been to snuff the light of stars away? Who had she been to risk her friends to save herself? She shook her weary head and began her list anew. Perhaps there was some solace or some sign or explanation in the naming of her planets.

Fenope, Ecrion, Snoitera, Aispao, Whayacaro, Edeacrrao.

She paused in her recitation. Looking ahead she could now see an almost faceless, smooth and shapeless mass of sand. Drift upon drift, centuries of suffocated forests down beneath-the foundation

of an overwhelming wild. She remembered this place. Edeacrao. The Land Of Shifting Sands.

He awoke, feeling tight within his skin. He blinked, a new and nameless weight against his eyelids. Something was different.

He remembered being in Nowhere, the small comfort of his little sister asking for his help. It felt good-that familial longing. The needing of others. For Everywhere, it was often felt but rarely acted on. He wanted them to know that he was always thinking of them, always loving them, so he had come to help.

Nowhere had been broken, he remembered, as he rolled onto his side, the low creaking of an aging mattress unnoticed as he worried for his sister. He sat up, and felt for the first time troubled. He could not see except for hazy colors in the middle distance. *Where am I*, he wondered. *Who am I?*

His hands fumbled gently around himself, settling on a pair of thin-rimmed glasses. He put them on, appraising the room around himself with a wistful restiveness. There was a twin-bed, a television, crumpled blankets that smelled faintly of sweat, some sort of small kitchen in the corner, dull orange light that spilled through half-closed blinds and a mirror against the far wall. He stood.

Before him was a sight he did not recognize. Average human height, glasses slightly out of style that covered small, almost animal eyes. A face unshaven for a week. A white undershirt

pulled tight against a girth that seemed foreign to him. Perhaps he had looked like this before, but he'd never felt this... impermanent. This temporary. Everywhere touched the hair at the top of his head, rubbing his fingers quizzically through its thinning gray.

The mirror was attached to a door, which he opened quietly. Outside was a hallway of similar doors. Nothing stirred, and he realized it to be early morning. He closed the door and sat back down on the bed.

I am Everywhere, he thought, and attempted to reach out into the distance, to travel far away from this small, square room. Where before there had been endless destinations, each calling in their own enlivened voices, there was nothing but the hum of a refrigerator. There was no feeling of a new world at his feet. There was only here. This dusty little room. No grand and sweeping vistas; no endless shimmering ocean; no lustrous cityscape cut high into the clouds. Only the reflected silhouette of an aging, solitary man.

There was a sour feeling in his stomach as he pulled the blankets tight around himself, covering his head to hide away. *Soon the air will feel close and choked*, he thought, *but where am I to go?*

He had been nothing more than a brazen stranger, impertinent and impudent and ill-behaved. And yet, she reminded herself as she pulled a little closer to his home, she was not the same as she had been just days ago. She had been devastated by her Dreaded Scars, and they had left their marks in noticeable ways. Her once resplendent caparison was ruined now as well, tattered and disgraceful for a princess such as she. Perhaps the Shifting Man would not give much thought to her this time.

The planet was so big now that it dominated the boundaries of her vision. Yet, she seemed unaffected by the gravity of Edeacrrao, as if the planet would not recognize her presence. It would have looked strange to anyone on the sandy landscape looking up; an upside down girl pulling herself ever closer to those dunes. The moment her trembling fingers touched that place it was as if she was accepted by it's natural laws and, in a graceless sprawl, she tumbled headlong to the surface of the sand. She lay there for a moment on her stomach, hugging the overbearing warmth, thanking it for being what it was. Within her she could feel her Scars rejoice, a strange sensation that, for a moment, brought a parched grin to her lips.

She found her feet beneath her. She could see a shape that flickered like a silent sheet of flame on the horizon, a billowing echo of light against the bluest cloudless sky. Everywhere was

sand, dusty waves frozen in motion. There was an overwhelming feeling of almost drowning here. And yet she knew that shape on the horizon. The Grand Hotel of Shifting Sands. And so she began to walk.

Out here in the endless desert nothing moved. There was no wind to push and lick at the dune tops. Even when her feet forced little streams of sand to trundle down behind her, they always stopped quickly, as if some force was working hard to keep this planet motionless. Everything except The Grand Hotel, which spasmed, jumped and undulated ceaselessly. And so it was she traveled for some time until she found herself at that strange doorstep and opening that ever-changing door.

Inside was a breathless deco palace, rich with glass and gleaming metal and rare woods. There was no trace and no feel within the air of the quality of motion, no idea within that from outside this place was a trembling mirage.

As she walked the long lobby to the sharp and elegant front desk she felt as if she were traveling through time. Each footstep took her further across a delicately woven tapestry rug which seemed to tell the story of her life. Each joy and pain and harrowing mistake was laid out and frozen in the carpet, brilliant tendrils of need and regret and breathless ecstasy beneath her feet and leading her towards some secret final end. As she

moved forward, she felt a need to keep her head up-to attempt at least-to miss this fate someone had woven for her.

Still, there it was from her periphery, some dazzling and melancholic end. And yet her timeline somehow managed to emerge again, spun in wavelike patterns that both comforted and frightened her. She moved her eyes yet further upwards, settling them on a smiling desk clerk. He was the type to easily disquiet you or I, his face a shapeless maze of contours, never seeming to simplify in form or color tone. She did not seem to think a thing of this, for this was the way they all were here, in the Land Of Shifting Sands, and she was still a princess after all. There were expectations still of her, no matter how her gown had torn or how her fragile face had scarred.

“Milady?” He asked, his voice a calming husk of quietude.

“A room, please, and a word with your employer.”

“Yes, Milady. He will be in your room as soon as we are.”

“Hello?” He asked it quietly at first. The hallway, with its musty, metal smell was comforting and familiar but he felt naked out in it. No one responded. He asked again, a little louder.

“Hello?”

“What do you want?” came a voice from the other side. It was a groggy voice, full of sleep, from a man who hadn't wanted to be woken.

“I want back in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This cell is mine. Let me in.”

There was a rustling as the man inside walked to the bars and peered out. “What are you doing here? How did you get out?”

“It doesn't matter. You've been sleeping in my bunk.” The Prisoner could feel the panic rising in his throat. “Let me in. I shouldn't be out here. Come on! I'll switch you places! Just let me in!”

“Man, you must be crazy. You know I can't open this door. Leave me alone.” The shape inside the darkened cell turned away and slumped back on the bunk.

The Prisoner reassured himself by holding tightly to the bars of his cell and closing his eyes. And yet it all felt wrong. The air moved around him and he knew he could walk away if he wanted to. Terrified, he began to scream.

“Let me in! Let me in!”

The guards came, bewildered by his

presence, and pulled him away from his cell.

The room was lit by thick and ornate windows, the swirling honey glow of desert skyline dribbling in, dry and sweet and dusty even with them closed. The rich woods of distant, foreign places lined the ceiling and the walls. The room seemed themed with a maroon redness, the finest tapestries cascading all around and carpets, bright and elegant and soft as summer grasses, heavy on the floor. And there he was. The Shifting Man.

His hair was tall and slicked back, greasy in the glow from the windows. He had wide eyes that never fully opened and he seemed to always look through her. His nose was small but crooked as if he had broken it before. A thin but noticeable mustache lay frail just above his widely-smiling mouth. His chin was long and gently pointed with a small cleft that had the look of caving in. And he flickered in and out of view, as if his body lost substance with a random regularity.

His voice was measured and slow and crisp. It did not disappear each time he shivered in and out of presence. “Ah, the once-princess. Did you ever even have a name? Or was it just the title?”

She had not played this game before, though he had never been respectful of her station. There was venom when she spoke. “I am still Princess of Nowhere! I do not need another name.”

“I'm sorry. Princess of where, exactly?” He twitched in almost rhythmic patterns now, as if he

were more controlled, composed and triumphant than usual. As if he were the ticking of some endless, breathing clock.

She clenched her dirty fists instinctively, though she was becoming unsure of her footing here, in his shifting hotel among motionless sands. “You know where I rule. You warned me in a poem, last we spoke. Do not waste my time.” Even as she spoke those last words hastily, she wished she could have had them back. She could feel her Scars begin to move within her, a reminder of how much she'd lost and would never have again.

“I'm sorry dear.” He smiled knowingly and made his way towards a globe that waited in the corner. “I just don't see you on my map anymore. And I've looked everywhere.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked at her appraisingly, one eyebrow at a tilt, and he seemed to shimmer now in a slow and rhythmic cadence. “Why is it you never call me by my name? Do you know it?”

She crossed her arms painfully, purple and green with collected bruises, red with ripening scars. “I've heard you called the Shifting Man.”

He put his hands in the pockets of his rich blue suit. “Who do you think I am? How did I know about Nowhere's end?”

“I don't know.”

He took one step towards her and stopped.

In a near whisper, he said “I'll tell you a secret. My name is Time.”

Her pulse jumped with new expectation, this man before her suddenly seeming much more valuable. “If you are Time, then I have only to convince you to send me back to before Nowhere was lost! I don't have much to offer, sir. But once I have Nowhere returned to me, I can give you many things!”

“Don't be silly. That's all nonsense. Anyways, *you* can't go back. There is no going back, not even for me. I've spent a very long time, much of myself, trying. No. There will be another Princess, and she will have always been, and you will be no one at all.”

She sank to the floor, her legs buckling under immeasurable weight. “There is nothing left for me? What will I become?”

He made no effort to lift her back up, instead finding a well-worn chair in the corner and taking a seat. “There is one thing.

“Age, time, is measured by distances. The farther away a star is, if it's light is here-for example-the older it must undoubtedly be. Distances are measured by time spent traveling them. I exist in distances, some traveled, some assumed. There *must* be destinations to be distances. Each time a destination is lost, forgotten or destroyed, I lose a little of what I am. Time runs

out a little. Nowhere is already being rebuilt, for Nowhere must always be. But it will exist without you now. You've been replaced. You may be a princess but you are exiled, forever, from your land.”

Her face was raw with emotion, an island after careless storms. “What can I do?”

“Your brothers, like yourself, are already replaced and forgotten. They are nothing to me anymore. But all those others you left stranded from their own small destinations-Their homes are withering away without them there. But”, and here he chuckled in a not unsettling way, “there is still time enough left, I'd say, to save their little lands.”

“But what will happen to me? Where will I go?”

“*If* you can do this for me, I will make a deal with you. I cannot take you back to your better days. No one can. But I can give you something that will feel much the same. If, along your searches, you are able to remember some ideal time, when your land was rich and lively and you were powerful, I can let you live within that memory, til the dimming of your days. The real worlds will move beyond you as you slumber in that dream, but you will never know it. The dreaming part of you will exist, ignorant of growing years, forever in that perfect memory.”

There was an air of expectation as he waited

for her to respond, and he fidgeted with his fingernails as he flickered with each breath. Outside, a desperate wind sputtered against the windows. The endless sands stayed still. Inside, she struggled deeply with an ugly realization. Somehow, this is what was left of her, the Once-Princess of Nowhere. She could still remember earlier days; the pastels of her arrival. There was a hope then, that had kindled her and shown her what she could be. Her kingdom was the smallest of the four, but it was hers. Her focus had been singular, a poised and careful pedigree that informed her of her duties. And now what was she to look ahead to? The hasty fevers of an addict, ever hungry for the glory in her past? *Perhaps*, she thought. *Even a memory is better than the nothingness I felt before I came here. Even a memory is better than an end.*

“Alright,” she intoned with a weight that felt no comfort. “Where do I begin to look for them?”

He smiled his eel smile and leaned in closer from his chair. “Good. I do prefer you within my charge. I am old but I have never lost the joy of holding dominion over pretty little things such as yourself.” He rubbed his reedy fingers across his slight mustache. “It’s interesting. I found all of your ‘friends’ on the same small world. Perhaps that place is somehow familiar to Nowhere? It is called Earth.”

She lifted herself slowly from the floor and tried to straighten her frayed gown. “I know of it. But, if I am truly not the Princess I have been, I will need assistance getting there.”

Time let his eyes look her up and down, lecherous, indulgently. She did not bother to strike out at him or even to flinch, instead allowing him a modicum of power in this room at the center of his little world. Already, in her mind, she was believing in his promises-that she could be alright after it all.

“You certainly can't expect to go anywhere looking like that.” He shook his head, judgmentally. “I'll have them prepare you some new attire. Something Earth-like.” He gestured toward the door where a silent bellhop waited, the dusty blue of his uniform a sharp contrast to the rich and layered red of the room around them. “He'll measure you and begin working. It's best you get some rest while they're at work.”

“Very well. I will wait here.” She made an effort at a generous smile but found it feeling foreign on her lips.

Time moved to touch her on her shoulder, a thinly veiled reminder of her powerlessness here, a simple thing that shook her near to tears. She had been on his level. Above him, even. No one had ever dared to touch the Princess of Nowhere that she had not allowed. He left it there too long, testing his control.

“There is one more thing. If you are to go, you'll need a name.”

She dropped her head, a new sadness rising in her chest. “Who shall I be?”

“That is up to you. Now rest. I won't be far away.” And he was gone.

Everywhere felt stiff, his stomach sour. The nighttime air was cool through his open window but he felt like fire on the inside. *This is hunger*, he thought, but made no moves towards his squalid little kitchen. There was no food left anyways.

He sat as if transfixed, his eyes weary and sleep-brimmed, barely blinking as he stared at the television. He had found the travel channel, had watched it furtively with the volume low for several days. It made him feel dirty to watch his places from such a distance. Almost voyeuristic.

Somewhere in the corner of his room a telephone rang. The fourth time today. The first time he had picked it up a voice had called him *Thomas*. It had asked him if he had forgotten his shift. He hadn't said a word. The voice had said something about getting written up and then the voice was gone.

Perhaps if I stay still enough, he thought, *I just won't be here anymore. I will be anywhere but here.* The thought of his brother's name reminded him of what had happened yesterday. Two men had shown up at his door, knocking excitedly, their voices in the hallway hushed but clear through his thin door.

He had opened it, a little, and it had been his brothers. He should have been excited, he knew, but to see them only made his heart sink. They looked healthy. They looked like they belonged

here. Especially little Somewhere. They had said a great many things, their words rushing together, but he had only heard one: there was no way to leave. He had closed his door on them, his shoulders slumped, head heavy.

There is no way to leave. He repeated this like a mantra, some new spiritual awakening happening within him. Some firm and new resolve. *There is no way to leave. Nothing can be the same again. I cannot be the same again. I cannot be who I was or who I would have been. There is no way to leave. But I don't have to stay.*

He watched the travel channel, sickly and embarrassed, until his body slowly fell asleep.

She awoke to the sounds of nothing, a dense quietness that seemed to rob the hotel of its substance. Outside, through her window, there was the feeling of a world that ached for motion but could not move. Inside, she could not stop her heart from its staccato beat. She seemed to choke on each new breath, as if her body couldn't swallow quite enough to satisfy itself. It was nearly time to go, and she was not ready.

Though it was warm enough, she shivered and sat up with a start. Someone was here with her, at the far edge of the room, as a shadow in the dark. She reached for the bedside light, only to find Time there, his eyes never leaving her as he rhythmically pulsed in and out of view.

“Don't look so shocked,” he said very seriously. “Now you know who I am, you should expect that I never truly go away, especially not here in my own home.”

She pulled the blankets tightly around herself, feeling indignant and small in this very foreign place. He sickened her, but everything she needed came from his promises. “It's fine.” She spoke softly, pushing the words out like a thick and oily smoke. “But I think it's time for me to leave.”

“Very well. Your Earth clothes have been prepared. They're waiting at the foot of your bed. Have you found a name for yourself, little lost princess?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, remembering. There had been a name in the dream she had dreamed this last night. Her brothers had been lying in dark hospital beds, recovering from terrifying wounds. They had been whispering among themselves. They had turned to look when she entered the room, and smiled broken smiles that had torn at her dream heart. They had called her a name:

“Abrielle.” She whispered. “I will be Abrielle.”

“Alright, Abrielle.” He spun his tongue in little circles, as if tasting this new name. “I will give to you your everlasting memory to sleep within in peace if you can fix the selfish damage you have done. Prepare yourself and go.”

He looked at her, appraising, as if deciding on whether to reach out towards her. “You know, I had been thinking. Before, as a princess, you were flawless. But you were far from perfect. Now, you're damaged and you're flawed, but I find you much more fascinating. Perhaps that's just my way. Perhaps you'll notice me around you even more as you age. Most of you seem to.”

He left the room, with purpose, though she could still feel his presence there, like a residue. She changed into her new clothing-faded denim blue jeans and a t-shirt that said nothing. For the first time in her life she felt as if she were in

Nowhere, but this time as a visitor, alone.

She closed her eyes and breathed a brittle breath. It took some effort, but she found herself again on that long and sacred path that travels ever between every single place in all the universe and more. She took a left and started on the long and solemn journey towards Earth, the only hope left for a girl who'd only just learned her name.

I don't have to stay. This gave Everywhere comfort, a dull nothingness that felt somewhat like peace. He had prepared a tidy note, an apology for whomever would be first to push through his slender door. He drank a little water, just to feel the cold reach down into his stomach.

I don't have to stay. He sang it quietly to himself, a feeling of almost-excitement pushing at the corners of his lips. His brothers hadn't come for him again. The phone had stopped its ringing days ago. The travel channel had begun to show the same places all over again and he had finally turned his television off. There was a quiet. A sense of completeness here. Just one last thing to do.

I don't have to stay. He had found a belt in the closet, beneath a book of pictures of himself with people he didn't recognize. He looked around him at his room-sized kingdom. *I can't be here anymore*, he mouthed without sound.

I don't have to stay. He closed his eyes and tightened the belt around his neck.

Part 3

A long recovery

It was the afternoon of an underwhelming Tuesday when she found Earth. There was a cool vigor to the air, a strange touch of expectation, quietly ominous, as if the whole world had been waiting for her to arrive.

She found herself among the rich, sweet smell of senescing Autumn greenery, awash in gentle colored light as it filtered down through waves of titian leaves. The door she had opened to enter this world now belonged to a long lost cabin, the spine of it's roof badly broken and now sunken to it's floor. In the near distance she could hear the sound of passing cars and farther away, perhaps a couple miles, she could see the shine of traffic lights and window panes.

And there was something there, off in that distance, reverberant and shallow through that thinning autumn air. The sound of bells. They could have been wedding bells, except the tune was slow and joyless. *There must be a funeral*, she thought, and her scars wriggled in an uncomfortable delight. They were beginning to feel at home again.

She moved through waves of bracken, stumbling lightly against roots and pushing aside color laden branches. She began to ease into this small journey, a new adventure for the long-time ruler of a small, distant place.

Her steps took her to the open edge of a grassy park, the yellowing-green still soft and invitingly flat. There was a path that led toward town and toward the funeral bells, and she decided to follow it. The stillness was a comfort as she walked, reflecting on the tempest that had been her recent past.

The stones of this path were not as orderly, flat or prepared as the ones that lined the path to Nowhere. She found herself unbalanced by them.

With a start, she realized someone was speaking nearby; an indistinguishable figure so fully wrapped in scarves and sweaters that she could not tell if it was a man or woman. The figure sat on an old, rust colored bench, throwing bits of food and trash toward a small badling of cackling ducks.

“We should have stayed away. Who knows what'll happen now?” The figure spoke towards the air, squinting at the empty spot beside it on the bench. It's voice was vaguely feminine, but deep and tonal like a man. It seemed to speak ceaselessly in it's agamous pitch. “Who knows? Anything could happen! What did we expect? What could we

expect? Perhaps we'll never know. I always knew because of what it wasn't. We should have stayed away. Or perhaps we should have come sooner. Who knows?"

As Abrielle neared, the ducks raised their cacophonous voices and scuttled away. The person on the bench quieted and squinted aimlessly in every direction, testing the middle distance with their nearsighted gaze.

"A torturous device" they said. "This elemental change. 1-2-3 and we needn't make it four. A fundamental shift-the world has been squished smaller. And who could handle that?"

"Excuse me", said Abrielle, tentatively. "Were you speaking to me?"

It sat up straighter. "I don't know you. But I know everyone. Who are you, child?"

"My name is Abrielle. But really, I'm no one at all." She sat down on the bench beside what she could now see was an elderly woman-all tangled, cloudy hair and the smell of layered and unrecognizable perfumes. Small portions of her chin held random grasslands of short, white stubble and she seemed almost clownlike-caked in many shades of makeup, as if culling some old memory of beauty long since lost. She seemed to shake, but only when she spoke.

"You can't be no one. You have a name. Where are you from?"

Abrielle was quiet for a moment. Then she decided on the truth. “I was from Nowhere, a place you could walk to from here. I had a purpose there, until I made a mistake. Now I'm just nothing, until I can fix what I've broken.”

The old woman's eyes opened wide. “Princess?!” The word had a poisonous inflection, a mixture of surprise and disgust and the knowing of uncomfortable truths. “You've come *here*? And you think you can *fix* us? You can take us home?”

By now, Abrielle recognized that same strange cadence. This is what was left of Old Pantomime. For you see, dear reader, there is no true permanence, only varying forms of the perpetual. And when one thing changes, all things must. As was once said “Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.”

And so they had been lifted from a dying Nowhere and from their functions and taken here, to our small and glittering world. And perhaps even you could have seen them-this old woman in the park and the others we will meet.

Abrielle spoke. “I am not a princess anymore. I cannot go back home. I am only a reminder to myself of what I've lost.”

“Ha!” The woman coughed out a guffaw. “I could have guessed you'd be so pitying of only yourself.”

Abrielle shook off the rebuke. “No. I'm here

to help you get back home.”

“You wouldn't be if it didn't somehow mean that you could save yourself. I always thought a Princess should have special care for everything around her-that your position would make you gracious, but you never were. You used me more than any of the others. You wasted me away with your mistakes and with your vacillating. And now, by some mercy, your loss is my first freedom. Here, I may be Old, older than I've ever been, but I am no Pantomime.”

Abrielle was bewildered. She felt the beginning of her last hope slipping away. “I thought that you would want to go back home, like I do...”

The woman shook her head, a small sadness reaching at the corners of her face. “I am no longer ceaselessly entangled to all things, because of you. I expected to enjoy this second birth, but my own thoughts are unsettling and there are no others. I must be lost. I was so much potential! Now I feel wasted. So much time, and only now do I feel like using it. But now, too late.

“Still, a painful freedom seems better than no freedom at all. I like these ducks. And I am comfortable on this bench. No one even knows I'm here. Perhaps someday I'll learn to know what there is inside of me, that makes me think and makes me feel. I bet you never even knew I had a voice of my

own. I was surprised by it myself.”

Abrielle was a tangle of emotion as she listened to the old woman speak. Her Scars began to move in a dull rhythm inside of her as she began to see the toll she and all the others had taken on this calloused, shaking creature. And yet, there also burned in her that overwhelming need to be herself again. To be back home, locked safe away behind her favorite memory. She tried another tack, her eyebrows peaked and the corners of her lips downturned in pity.

“I am so sorry for all the things I took from you. I had assumed that you were satisfied with your purpose and your place. You're right. There is a level of decorum expected of a Princess, but I thought Nowhere gave me rights to be reserved and unencumbered. I did not live up to my purpose and now I have lost everything. Are you truly happier here?”

The old woman shook her desert head. “Everyone seems to think that happiness is the ultimate goal. But I used to taste all the happiness those people never felt. It was always empty. I think that was because I was without peace. Now, here, I am finally alone within myself and I feel peace and it is the best thing I have ever felt. I am not happier here. But I am better for it.”

The words made sense, and that confused Abrielle all the more. “Don't you feel worthless

without a purpose?”

Before the woman could answer, the bells again called their funereal cry. They filled the park with their mourning, reverberant hum. The ducks waddled further away in surprise, casting thin ripples as they buoyed in a small nearby pond.

“Are the bells for a funeral? Has someone died?” Abrielle asked.

“Yes”, whispered the woman. “The eldest of your brothers.”

She was running before she knew why she was running. There was an incapable anger burning at her chest, a sickened chill deep in her stomach and she had begun to cry strange, distant tears. Everywhere was noise.

This world seemed primed to suffocate her with each sound and smell and motion. She ran toward the short, uncomfortable building where the bells had made their noises. It was not a church or chapel. It was low and squat and brown in a fiercely tasteless way and she realized the bells had not even been real; she could see the speakers now. What a horrifying end for Everywhere, she thought, within her breathless haze. What a small and meaningless remembrance for Him.

Inside, beyond the foyer filled with nondescript artwork that seemed to be there for providing comfort but only truly seemed to confuse, there was a long rectangle of a room and rows of stackable seats. She sat down in the back row of the mostly empty funeral hall and stared at the backs of those few heads in front of her, trying to guess at who else could be here and why. There was a fluorescent hum and whispers as the music of the bells outside played itself away. Abrielle wanted to run; back to Nowhere-back to the reflections of her Mirror Dome.

But she was here, now, in the static pallor of

this horrible room, the funerary off-white of a ceiling that laid above them like a vision of a bland heaven and a vomitous brown-green carpet that served as a poor stand in for the dirt in which her brother, she assumed, would soon be buried.

“Good afternoon.” There was a small man at the podium. “The family has asked that I say a few words.” His hair, thinning and wispy, stood almost upright on the top of his head. “I was not a personal friend of the deceased, but after his death I spent some time gathering information about Thomas.” He seemed to smile a little and paused, as if to take some pleasure in his role. Abrielle was not sure if he was supposed to be consoling to the people in this room or if his role was only cursory, a remnant of times when death had been important. Either way, she was not comforted.

“From his birth in this town til now, it seems his 28 years had been relatively happy ones. The Celebration of Life, which will be held immediately after this service, in which you'll be able to all share your own stories about Thomas, will surely bear testament to that. But it's that fact that makes a death like Thomas', a death of suicide, so immensely difficult. The overwhelming sentiment, when I spoke with those of you who were closest to Thomas, was that you did not see any of this coming. Some of you are only just now beginning to piece together some small parts of

what may have caused him to take his own life.

“This truth is incredibly difficult. And we struggle to understand how Thomas could have been in such pain without us knowing it, or seeing it ourselves or without him trusting us enough to tell us. And we may always struggle with that. They say that the brightest stars often burn out first, overwhelmed or overcome by the crushing weight of expectation or regret or just life. The light of Thomas' star, and then its sudden loss, have left us blinking in the dark. But I am here to offer a message of hope.” He paused again to look at each row and smile through thin lips.

“I have done this for many years. And I've seen this to be true. My message of hope is this: though it may hurt deeply now, and you may grieve for quite some time, someday it won't hurt as much. Perhaps someday you'll be able to think of Thomas and remember first the good times you shared with him.” He paused again, that same thin smile reaching at the corners of his lips, pulling them into a shape that seemed wholly inappropriate for the occasion.

“Thank you. That is all for this service. Please join us in 15 minutes for the Celebration of Life. The family will now carry the urn to the Columbarium.”

With a sickening start, Abrielle realized that what she had thought was a vase was truly the urn

that held the last small, darkened pieces of her brother. Of Everywhere. It was her brother, held within that delicate, porcelain vessel that was painted with butterflies and birds, as if to signify some better place-to help those looking to forget the damp ashes and the smell of burnt flesh inside. And rising from the first row, each taking one of it's small handles were two man who looked like brothers.

The elder of them, weeping in shameless bursts of noise and fervor, seemed lost, occasionally tripping on the thick carpet as he walked out of the room. The younger seemed incredibly aware, a raw nerve, his eyes twitching about at everyone and finally settling, startled, on Abrielle.

“Sister?” he whispered, and nearly dropped the urn. Before he could say anything more, he was dragged along by the progress of the other man and was gone from sight.

She had sat stunned for a moment, these discoveries mingled with a deep and biting grief. She had wandered out into that hallway, some subconscious necessity leading her, only to be turned away by an usher who said something about the family needing privacy.

She found herself stumbling towards the outside air, a dull choke in her throat and the fury of a breaking heart in her ears. A recording of an organ played itself into oblivion somewhere in a back room and the world seemed to spin harder to her now than it had since she'd arrived. She pushed open the smudged glass door, colored by a plastic decal of stained glass, into the nothing outside. *This is far worse than the Void*, she thought aimlessly to herself. *To feel for more than myself...*

Absent, her mind spun on a loop that seemed to grow more nauseating with each revolution-*Everywhere is dead. Everywhere is dead. Everywhere is dead.* Abrielle made her way towards a row of black cars. There was a man there, in her periphery, sitting on the hood of an antiquated hearse, squinting into the sickly blue sky.

“Why isn't it raining?” He whispered to himself. “It should be raining.”

He stood as she stumbled his way, shivering with grief and head in her once pale hands, now colored with scar upon scar from her journey.

Can I help you?" He asked. "Would you like somewhere to sit?"

"I'd rather run away", Abrielle said, not attempting a smile.

"Well how about you sit for a while first. I don't know if you'd get very far right now." He opened the door to the hearse, and she sat in the driver's seat with her feet dangling out the side, just a little too short to feel grounded.

He stood beside the car, not speaking, staring again at the sky. Some part of her remembered the old rules, the things that made her a princess and gave her a kingdom. "Sorry. And thank you. Do you work here?" She asked.

He looked at her, then looked up at the small clouds forming just above their heads. "I guess I do. I don't know. It's like I woke up one morning and here I was. Wearing a suit to work. Working with the dead..." His voice trailed off. "Did you lose someone?"

She shook off the question, unprepared to say those aching words. "Is it that strange of a thing?"

"Maybe not. I don't know. I just... I never thought I'd be this kind of grown up. I thought maybe I'd be a little taller than I was, and maybe I would have a place to stay. And maybe I would feel like I was part of something important. But I clearly wasn't ready for this."

“What do you mean?”

“That's my friend's funeral in there. I'm supposed to be in there celebrating his life. And I should be double OK with all of this because this is what I do for work. But I can't even go inside. I don't feel ready for this. Today, I don't feel like an adult. And it should be raining.” He scowled up at the sky and pushed himself up on the balls of his feet, as if reaching for those slow, malignant clouds.

“It would be better if it rained”, Abrielle agreed.

“Yeah. Hey do you need anything? Technically I'm working right now, so I should at least be doing what I can to help you out.”

She shook her head no and looked at the ground.

“Well let me at least get you some water, OK? I'll be right back”.

He hung his coat around her shoulders and walked back towards the funeral home, his steps somewhat awkward and his back straight, as if he was uncomfortable walking. There was a familiar smell to his coat, and it comforted her, though she could not name it. On his coat was a small silver nametag, which said AUGUST P WEBSTER, FUNERAL ASSISTANT.

As he gave her water in a thin paper cup, she asked him “Your name is August?”

“I guess so.” He answered, looking down at the tag on his coat. “Do you like it?”

“I think it's good as a month, so it's probably OK as a name.” He smiled at that, and she tried to smile at him, though her lips didn't seem to know how anymore.

“What does the P stand for?” She asked.

“The P is for Promise, but that's probably too much of an inside joke.”

“Your middle name is Promise?”

“It's more of a nickname. An old friend gave it to me.”

She knew then, and leapt up, her arms around him, pushing her face into the comfort of his chest, breathing deeply of that old familiar scent—the smell of islands in a warm and salty sea.

“Promise?” she whispered through tears. “Don't you recognize me?”

And his arms were around her in a moment, this strange new embrace giving life to her withering hope. His arms were strong, not the arms of the boy she had seen last, slowly spinning in his little sky. And she herself was taller, she realized, as if she had grown to her complete height and yet he was still taller than her. All of this in a moment—her old friend discovered! And now she would not be alone!

“Truth?” He asked softly. “I didn't know it was you.”

His body went stiff. “And that's your brother's funeral! I'm so, so sorry!” He held her at arms length, as if looking for cracks in her porcelain-fragile face to repair.

She shook her head and pushed it further into him, breathing him in. “I don't know how any of this is possible. I came here to find all of you and to take you back home. But none of you are the same. Everywhere is dead. And they're calling him Thomas, like he had a life here.” Abrielle looked up at him. “And your name is August?”

Before he could reply she continued, new tears like fire on her reddening cheeks. “And I met Old Pantomime in the park. And it wanted to stay here. Why would anyone want to stay here? Everything killed himself to get away from this...” Her voice trailed off.

“I don't really know how this works. We all came to Nowhere, to help you, and then it all happened. And we were all here, in this little town. And it was like we'd taken the places of people who had been here. Who had lived here. Like we displaced them from their own lives and took their places. And Everywhere... We called him Thomas. I guess that was the name of the person he became. I was the one who found him. All discolored and alone.” August began to pick at his fingernails, nervous as he began to cry also.

“He left a little note. I didn't show it to

anybody. He said he'd lost everything that had made him who he was. That, after being Everywhere, he couldn't just be here. He said he'd never understood people and he didn't know how to be around them. He'd seen what they did all alone, and to each other. And he used to just be able to go away, somewhere else, but now he couldn't escape. He said it was the only thing left. Because this wasn't enough."

There was a consuming silence. Abrielle took his hands and held them in her own.

"I'm sorry." He said. "I'm supposed to be a grown up now."

"That's why I'm here." She squeezed his hands, forcing a little life back into her plan. "I'm here to bring you back to your islands in the sea. You can go back."

"Will you come too?"

"I..." she stumbled. "I can only get back to Nowhere in a very special way. I can go back, but I won't be able to see you again. But you'll be home. And you won't have to be a grown up anymore."

"Oh." He shook his hands free of her grip.

"don't you want that?" She asked.

"If that's what you want, Truth, I'll go." He smiled a small, disingenuous smile.

"Don't you want to go home?"

"I don't think it can be the same again. I can't be that boy anymore. I've grown up too much

now. I don't even know how to fly.”

Abrielle felt herself falling again, and she sunk herself down in that driver side seat. “Maybe it can't be the same. But it's got to be better than this.”

“The things that happened here... They can't go away. Even if I go home, it'll still be.”

“But don't you want to try to go back?”

He sighed and took her hand. “I will if that's what you want. You know I've always-”

“Sister!” Came the call from the funeral home, and there was her youngest brother, running through the darkening afternoon air.

“What happened?”

“I broke the rules of Nowhere. I should have known. And it knocked you all down here, to this little planet. And Everywhere is dead. I'm so sorry...”

The air was rich and humid, full with the golden glow of dusk. They stood and leaned against the mortuary walls. There was a smell of sawdust and drying paint from recent renovations to the crematory. Everything seemed fine to Abrielle, surrounded once again by familiar faces. Still, that new emptiness ate at her, the endless looping reminder of her brother lost.

Beside her was August, ever staring at the sky, and across from her, hands comfortably in pockets, was Somewhere. They called him Andrew here, which fit him well. And beside him there was Anywhere, still strong but looking thinner, with strange lines on his arms. There was a woman with him, wild eyed and sad. She called him Michael. Out there, by the small plot of burial stones behind the funeral home were two small boys and a little girl, running in circles to chase away the hollowness of death. She was surprised to find that they were Michael's too.

Her brothers had smiled to see her alive and safe. They said they had searched for her, worried when she alone could not be found in this small town. Their smiles fell away when conversation

changed to their lost brother, and she could see that they were tired and adrift. She shivered and moved closer to August, a new and yet familiar escape.

Besides the loss of his brother, Andrew seemed most comfortable here, as if he finally was himself. His world had grown, she realized, and all the endless hours he had spent studying the less important things was paying off. He smiled through the sadness as he told her stories of the person he'd awoken to here, and the person he'd become.

Michael was damaged, and it added layers to her grief. Anywhere was all about between, the open roads and airports and the scent of foreign land. He had been a traveler and that had been his joy and love. But he'd woken here, as Michael, and found a wife and children with his name. He had stayed, shackled to this little place, no open road to feed upon. Instead, he'd discovered new addictions, replacements for the travel in his blood.

And they talked about Everywhere until the air was crisp and thin and the night was well along. He had been wonderful, she realized. He had been special in ways that she had never thought to see. Each of them regretted never telling him his value. Each of them regretted never trying to understand the differences between them and the ways that made them perfect for each other.

They talked about how hard it had been for him to be here. Like Anywhere, he had never

settled in a place, because no single place was good enough for him. He had towns and cities and continents and planets all his own. This little place, with its little lights and its subconscious curfew, could not be enough for him.

He felt he had made some fatal mistake, that he had led himself here and he could not see himself ever going home. *If he only would have waited*, Abrielle thought. *I've come to take them all home*. But he could not be taken home anymore. And Andrew, Somewhere, seemed so captivated with the dreams of being more than what he had been, cooped up in his attic kingdom everlastingly. He had found the other side of the window. He told her that a few times, excitedly sweeping his hands toward the horizon. He had found the other side of the window, so why would he go back?

She found herself settling closer to August, noticing for the first time the electric excitement when their skin accidentally touched. She did not know what it meant, but she knew something had changed in him. She felt a small flutter in her stomach as her Scars gently laughed. "The change is in you..." they whispered to her and she blushed to believe they were right.

If I only stayed..., she thought for a moment, leaving the thought to mingle with the newborn stars. She looked out toward her older brother, collecting his children from their games amid the

graves. *He is broken*, she realized, *but he has more to live for than me.*

That thought hung in her head, tickling at the back of her mind as she hugged her brother goodnight. Michael smelled of nicotine and hard candy and he chuckled as she held him tightly.

“I’ll see you soon.” He said.

Andrew was excited to take her to his home, to show her what he’d made of himself in his short time here and to give her shelter while she worked on what it was she’d come to do.

What she’d come to do. Thinking on that made her restless, and she asked if she could take a walk among the gravestones before they left that solemn place. Andrew nodded and August smiled and squinted back up at the sky. She realized she liked the way his hair had begun to gray ever so slightly at the corners.

She shook her head and walked out toward the field and the night.

There, among the damp grass that clawed and tickled at her ankles, was a memorial of stone that seemed less worn down than the others, with flowers left there that seemed to mark it as loftier, or more tragic. It was a new grave, dark dirt still high and noticeably shorter than a full grown body. It said in noble letters SARA, and underneath a quote about bravery and memory and loss.

This is my small dead girl, she thought. *The one I had gone to see for help.*

“I didn't come to this world for you. I didn't even know you when you were alive. And you couldn't help me.” Abrielle found herself sitting in the grass, whispering reverently to the little body in the ground. She gestured to the dewy flowers draped around the stone. “People miss you. People love you still, or the memory of what you were. You are more powerful in death than you ever could have been in life.

“Soon I'll be like you. Asleep forever, though I'll be locked in the sweetest memory. But I don't think anyone will remember me.”

“I don't think I could ever forget you.” It was August behind her, and she turned with a start, his silhouette clear against the dusky sky.

“Sorry.” He said. “I convinced your brother to let me come find you and bring you back. He says it's time to go. But I wanted to talk to you first, alone.”

“Ok”, she said, and he sat down beside her. It was strange to her that she found their voices quieting, nearing a whisper, though they were alone in this place. It was as if they shared a secret-one she didn't know yet.

“Ok.” He seemed nervous and picked at his fingers, his eyes ever up in the sky. “I've been really thinking, while you were talking to your brothers, and listening to you talk to each other. And I don't want you to go back. I don't want to go back either. I don't even think I could.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can't fly again. I've grown up too much. Besides, now that I'm down here, I notice the sky much more. It's really beautiful.”

She looked up at the endless stream of galaxies devouring the darkness with their blinking, twinkling joy. She had not noticed them til now. He did not wait for her response.

“I know you miss Nowhere. You think that it defines you. But look at your brothers. Two of them are better for being here. And, if you leave, would it really be any different than what happened to Everywhere? You wouldn't really live. I can't let you disappear.” He looked her in the eyes.

“But Nowhere is home. It's everything I've ever been.”

August took her hand in his and she felt summer in her veins, a comfort and a warmth

unlike anything she'd felt before. There was a smile on her lips before she knew it.

“I heard you talking when I was walking over here. You told this little girl she was more powerful in death. That's because of her potential—everything she could have been. But that's all that she can ever be now. Unfulfilled potential. But you're alive!” Her Scars giggled like children inside her as he pulled her to her feet.

“And you have so much potential here. *We* have so much potential!”

And he pulled her close to him and whispered gently in her ear. “I've always wanted to do this. I was never grown up enough before...”

And he kissed her, then. A small and sweet and gentle kiss that brought rapture and delight and she was whole, then, in that moment and all the stars shone glorious and fervent just for them. And when it was over he whispered one more thing.

“Stay this time.”

And they walked back down the path, hand tightly in hand, toward her brother's car and in her heart she knew that everything had changed for her forever.

August left them to go home, smiling a secret smile and hugging her goodnight, and they drove slowly through the darkened town towards her brother's house. He was so proud of this small place, an eager tour guide; he seemed to point every small thing out to her. But Abrielle was lost, back in that graveyard field, and her mind reeled in heady circles in an overwhelmed delight. She didn't hear a single thing he said.

In a dizzy, sleepy haze she followed him through the small, two bedroom apartment and let him introduce her to his roommate. With a start and a small laugh she realized she'd known this man before. He had been The Prisoner to her and here, she realized, he was still a prisoner.

He had come to the door of his room to meet her, but would go no further. She could see he had put bars over his windows. She asked him why and he said they made him comfortable, made him feel like he was back home. He recognized her too and welcomed her to his world. He was the only one of them from here, he reminded her.

“Why aren't you in your cell? In the prison?” She asked, and yawned.

He crossed his arms and shook his head in memory. “I tried to go back there, after what happened in Nowhere. They said my cell was full. They gave it to someone else.”

Abrielle cocked her head to one side. “I

don't understand. Aren't you a prisoner?"

"Well... My sentence was up years and years ago. And they said I couldn't go back. It was at others expense I had been in there in the first place. So I had to leave. But I'm still guilty!"

She could see he had shackled one of his feet, a chain disappearing back in the darkness of his room. "But what did you do? What was your crime?" She asked.

He looked away. "I hurt someone. Someone very close to me."

"Are they ok?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them since."

"When did this happen?"

"It's been a long time. Maybe twenty years."

He shook his head, covering it with his hands. "My sentence was for 15 days but I stayed in because I deserved to be there. I deserve to be punished for what I did. And if I'm the only one who thinks I still haven't paid my dues, then I'll be the one to make sure I get what I deserve."

"It's strange. Everyone else has changed so much since coming here. But you seem pretty much the same."

"I'm right where I'm supposed to be. Maybe the rest of them can forget their homes so quickly, but this is where I belong. In my home. In my cell I'm free."

Abrielle looked him up and down pityingly,

head cocked and caught in his irony, seeing a dim reflection of the confidence that had only just begun to die in her.

Without warning, she took him by the hand and pulled with all her weight. He made a small, startled sound and fell out into the hallway. Before he could get up she slipped the shackle off his leg.

“It's better to move on.” She said, smiling, and left him there, bewildered, as she made her way to bed.

She awoke, weary-eyed and yet alive in new ways. There was the sound of bacon sizzling, and the smell of maple syrup and the citrus of orange juice. She had slept on her brother's couch, and her body was a little sore. She smiled because it reminded her she was not a princess anymore.

“Wake up.” Andrew said, from somewhere behind the couch. “We have a visitor!”

She sat up straight, expecting handsome August, but instead it was an elderly man. He was hunched and mostly bald, his face rich with worry lines and laugh lines, and he seemed pleased to see her there. “Princess?” His voice was husky and gentle.

“Not really anymore.” She answered.

Andrew put his arm around the older man, and helped him to a seat at his small table. “Here, this is our great uncle, but you know him as The Willow King. I told him yesterday, at the funeral, that you were here, but he had to go home to take care of his wife. She's very sick.”

She felt herself instinctively bowing a little but decided, here, it was better to hug him. “I'm so sorry to hear about your wife. Will she be alright?”

His eyebrows were thick and squinted his eyes into sadness, though his mouth seemed steady, unwilling to frown. “No. I don't expect she will be.”

His gaze was steady. “Your brother's been

telling me about your plans. To go back to the past and to sink yourself down into it. Root yourself there. I'm here to tell you not to.”

She sat down beside him and took his arm, reassuringly. “I'm not really sure that's what I want anymore.”

“Good! Once something is gone, it's gone. Life changes. You can't stay the same. God! You know how much I used to want to go back to when my wife and I were young? But then I realized something.” He paused and took a drink of water. He seemed to be struggling for the right words.

“I realized that even if I could do that, I'd be giving up all the years I had with her, just to have some barely remembered thing that wasn't actually any better than what I have now. Sure it's hard now, but that's *because* of all the beauty that our lives have been. If I went all the way back, it would be like none of this that's come since was important.”

“But I don't want to give up my past.”

“No. Don't do that. Don't forget. But let it show you all you've done to get you here, to see the value of what you have *now*.”

And he smiled at her and squeezed her hand in his and wiped away a tear that seemed equally sorrow and joy.

They ate breakfast together-she and The Willow King and her brother, Somewhere. The Prisoner even left the confines of his cell to get

some bacon. He waved at her and thanked her for her help the night before.

August came by later and took her on a walk. The sun was in and out behind a patchwork of Altocumulus. They walked beside a river, throwing pebbles, holding hands. They talked in their quiet whisper voices, and now she knew the secret that they kept.

She almost forgot what she had come here for, until he called her 'princess' jokingly. She shook her head and kissed him gently on the cheek and then she ran across the riverbank and he ran with her. Not away from anything, but toward a future brighter and more full than anything that Nowhere could devise.

Seasons passed. She found herself a place here, on our little spinning planet. And, one day, she married the boy who had loved her since before he knew what love was. And her kingdom became him. And Time, seeing he had failed, left them all to live their wonderful, incredibly ordinary lives.

And she was happy then, as hopefully you, dear reader, have been happy. The true and full happiness of a life that's found it's purpose, awash in love and hope and the comfort of family.

And she was no more a Princess of Nowhere. And this made her happiest of all. Because, dear reader, Nowhere is not Nowhere when surrounded by your friends.

If only it could be that easy. But Time is vengeful, and Time remembers our escapes. Time makes only one promise, and it is this: "I am coming for you."

There is no comfort in that truth, but I tell you this to tell you also that she found a rescue from him. She became timeless. But that is a story for another day. It is time, now, to sleep, and meet her in your dreams.

THE END