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One Last Month, or Clancy's Time-Box

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*One Last Month, or
Clancy's Time-Box*

Draft manuscript by Safiyya Bintali

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Red

I'm going to have to wear an eye patch tomorrow.

A small puddle of blood pooled in front of Clancy. Thick and red and bright. Like lava.

The man—that Earthquake voice—was shouting at him again. Or was he? Clancy couldn't tell, but it was awfully loud. Clancy clamped his hands on his ears. Even that felt like he closed big, heavy castle doors over his head. Over the castle doors Clancy heard a moan—a moan distinct in how it was one of uncertainty, of a wrong, a terrible, terrible wrong that one may never solve.

“Why'd you do that? Why?”

What did he do? Clancy strained to remember. But beyond the moment he fell to the ground and lava began to pour, everything that popped into his head fizzled, like the last sparkling bubbles on soda about to go flat.

The Quake began to mutter. “Gosh, if you didn't freak out like that in your room, this wouldn't have happened...damn, kid, why can't you just give it back? It's not like anyone's gonna miss it anyway...”

Clancy heard glass scrape across the table somewhere in the distance. Then, he heard the glass hit flesh, again and again, like someone was slapping it on their own palm. It was tense. Anxious. Like it didn't mean the reality it caused.

“Kid, just tell me, where is it?”

Clancy groaned. His head was throbbing, and hot, hot lava was pouring all around. He wished that the Quake would go, go and leave him and get out of his head.

He felt something cold nudge his face. “Kid? Are you still there? Oh, jeez—that's bad. Oh jeez.”

That—the eye—was bad. The eye, the caldera, the messy new something on the left of his face, from where the magma pumped. So warm. So *much*. What an eruption!

Amid the eruption, the Quake began to whimper.

Allen

They found Clancy beside the river, the one below the little cliff near the outskirts of the neighborhood. When the word first got out, the townspeople said it was a terrible accident. Accident? Allen didn't deny that accidents ever happened. They were a believable enough cause. It was just that believing Clancy had an accident was the tough part. That Allen wouldn't ever again see him at school or at the library or play with him in the forest was surreal. Clancy was a constant. Clancy being there was like the sky being blue or the stars shining above at night. Allen was nearly convinced that the county chronicle was a tabloid when he saw Clancy's obituary in the column on the side, along with the article that revealed some police-y details about the whole finding. When he sat in the gym bleachers for the announcement at school, he thought that perhaps the principal had gotten some names mixed up. "Clancy" sounds a whole awful lot like "Carrie" and "Mandy" and...well, there's more for sure. Allen even shrugged off the kids in class when they came up to him and told him sorry and to keep his chin up and other nothings Allen wouldn't remember anyway. It simply couldn't be.

On the day of the supposed funeral, Allen was just about certain he was in some terrible dream. He stood in front of the mirror in his room, staring at himself clothed all in black, from his raven hair parted just right because Mother said he had to keep a Standard to the dark suit that hung too loose over his body since it was for older kids to his polished dress shoes that may as well have been made of onyx.

Maybe this is just a movie set, he thought as he walked into the funeral home with Mother.

High, strained voices of mourners surrounded Allen as he arrived. The bits in the newspaper Allen could handle. You couldn't always trust the news, as Mother said. He could even float about the funeral set for an hour or so, sure. He could have lived in that state of unbelieving forever; in the back of his mind, Clancy would have just gone off somewhere, and he'd never see him again. He wouldn't be...you know. But the mourners changed all that.

“His left eye was all messed up. How he must have fallen—!”

“Such a bright boy...such a bright boy. On his way to becoming a lawyer or doctor. All that snatched away in one silly little act of daring!”

“That poor, poor dear! It must be such a pain for the family.”

They all said the same thing, just in different orders, boo-hooing all the while. If Allen retreated to one corner, a black, veiled shadow would be standing there, kerchief to their eyes, crying about the poor boy who fell and...died. If he ran to the opposite side, another would be waiting for him. They were like dark rubber bands, continually snapping him with the truth he didn't want to accept.

Allen wanted to go. He wanted to leave the actors dressed in black and their fake, eye-drop tears. He wanted to leave behind the funeral set forever, with the most-definitely-cardboard coffin up near the front of the room, with the beat-up dummy inside that looked like Clancy. But Mother pushed him near the casket anyway for a last goodbye. The Clancy-dummy lie there, head on a pillow, wearing a tux. His left eye bore a large white rose, but the marks made from some injury crept out even under the

massive petals. Whoever set him up took the liberty to curve his mouth up into a little smile. Allen stood, staring at him for a long while. He was almost angry at how peaceful they made the Clancy-dummy look. Why, Clancy would've *pleaded* for a less pathetic sendoff, even if it was fake. In fact, Allen reckoned his friend would've demanded something all the more violent, like a dramatic slip from the coffin into a volcano. It certainly showed how much the production crew knew, right?

All around him, the mourners crammed themselves around the casket, doing their stupid routine. Sob, sob! There snapped that rubber band! Sob, sob, snap! Sob, sob, snap! Sob, sob—crack. All at once, a rage flooded Allen's veins. What did they know? What did they know about anything? As if Clancy'd ever fall! He was as careful as they'd come. If they'd actually paid attention when he was, you know...well, they'd already have their magnifying glasses out and go about Sherlock Holmes-ing the whole town. Clancy falling? Hah! That wouldn't even be an argument. The perp—he must exist, right?—who pushed him would be found in a day. But no. They were all clustered in a funeral home, wailing out sorrow and lamenting about a boy they barely knew.

Stupid Clancy! Allen cried in his head, his balled hands hanging beside him beginning to shake. *A stupid fall isn't the way you'd have wanted to die, even. We were gonna watch them put that shuttle Discovery in the sky again in September. You were gonna stick around longer than the date they put after the hyphen on your...*

Even in his head, he couldn't say *gravestone*. Still, just imagining the ghost of it—cold stone and eventual moss and Clancy not above it but beneath it—made the tears Allen was trying to hold back flood out noisier than he'd thought possible. He heard the concerned clucks of Mother and others, and the sadness that flowed out of his eyes mixed

with a heaping spoonful of embarrassment. He pushed away from the polished coffin and ran out of the funeral home, trying to push his sobs down from his eyes to his chest.

“Allen?”

He didn't hear a word. In fact, he barely knew where he was going. He just knew he couldn't bear to be around everyone, the people who acted like they knew him, the soft sniffles smothered by kerchiefs, the boy in the coffin that absolutely, positively could not have been Clancy. Right? Right...?

Allen dropped to his knees. Beneath his hands, the ground was dewy and soft. He glanced through the blur in his eyes and found he was near the woods where he and Clancy used to play. He gripped the ground and felt grass between his fingers, smooth and damp, some with little ridges bitten by insects. Tears dripped, falling noiselessly to the earth. He let them fall. He even let his nose help a little too, gross as it felt. After all, he just lost his only friend.

* * *

When Mother finally found Allen and helped him home, he collapsed on the bed without bothering to remove his suit or his shoes or the tie that he felt was choking him just an hour or so before. Even under all the clothes, he felt the hard cover of a notebook near the foot of the bed. He knew what it was. It was the World Journal, the little book he and Clancy shared and recorded all their adventures in. They planned one day to fill it with all kinds of information about their time so that they could bury it for a person of the future to find. Just remembering the Journal's existence brought more unwelcome tears to Allen's eyes.

Stupid Clancy, leaving me with all this to deal with.

Despite himself, he sat up and ran a hand over the creased cover. He felt the indents made by years-old pen marks; Clancy's and his initials, C.D. and A.K. The title. Their addresses, so that the people of the future would know who to thank (and pay, Clancy said) when they traveled back to meet the great historians who so helped their understanding of the past world. Allen felt himself open the book to the first page, soft from constant thumbing and stained from pencil rubbings. There were the first words, blurred slightly from the poor quality of the pencil from which they were written and the hasty writer's penmanship. Despite the slight obscurity, the words rang out as strong as if they were spoken in that voice Allen knew so well.

“To you readers in the far future! I would like to introduce myself as C.D., your author and historian of the late 20th century. Within these very pages, you will become a part of my world.”

From then, Allen went through every single entry in the World Journal every day after school. If the teacher was especially absorbed in an explanation about pre-algebra or something of the equally boring sort, instead of drawing star charts on his already ink-smudged arms, he'd chance slipping out the Journal and scanning an entry or two. While at first it was out of a sort of desperation, a desperation for some—any—little piece left over of his best friend, he soon had a realization, after reading the World Journal a couple of times, that there was something amiss about the accident. When reading, Allen went over everything with equal care. But there were times when he paid a special bit of attention to the entries where Clancy talked about nature. Being a bit of a showoff, Clancy liked peppering his informative pieces with mentions of his bravery.

“The oak tree is one of the biggest in our community park,” he had said in Entry 41, along with a few crude illustrations. “In fact, I’ve climbed it eight times, one with my eyes closed. But don’t worry, my fans of the future. A.K. stayed below just in case. Of course, it wasn’t necessary, cuz to an adventurer, knowing nature in and out’s in our blood.”

Allen remembered the day Clancy wrote that. He remembered how they’d argued about it. Allen said how stupid it was to say things like that. How arrogant. What would the people of the future think about such arrogance, right? And Clancy just laughed and said it was all in the character of the narrator, and how Allen’d thank him one day. One day...how right he was at such a wrong time. Allen almost hated Clancy for saying that and hated himself for remembering it. But Clancy was right—Allen did thank him for those entries, at least now. Every little brag dropped here and there, about climbing this and never falling off that and doing a number of other ridiculous feats...they were all evidences, Allen felt. Evidences of foul play—he was sure of it. He even had an eyewitness: himself. Sure, Clancy had that boastful streak, but he wasn’t a liar. So, why would he supposedly fall so terribly, so fatally, now? He had every opportunity the other hundred and one times. After scrutinizing every penciled and penned word his friend ever wrote in their shared journal, he knew exactly what he had to do.

The first warm, sunny morning of summer break, he grabbed the thick envelope from the copy store—photocopies of the World Journal, since he refused to let the real thing fall into some dusty evidence room—stuffed it in his bike basket and pedaled off to town. With every pump, Allen felt a swell of excitement. He saw Clancy giving him a thumbs-up from Heaven and mouthing a “thank you.” He saw himself in the papers, the

whistle-blower of justice. He saw some terrible stranger lurking in a prison cell, awaiting the electric chair. Though Clancy's absence hung about like a storm-cloud, blocking out the sun from Allen's heart, he felt, for the first time since the funeral, that things would be a little better. Yes. He was going to make things better.

World Journal, Entry #64 Redux

To readers in the far future: I know C.D. wrote most of these entries, but I'm going to be taking over from now on. I didn't wanna continue this journal, but I thought it'd be a real shame if you were left without anything to read after so few pages. You should remember me as "A.K." from a few of my entries, the roly-poly analysis and stuff. I'm A.K., OK? Good.

So, you're probably in the year 2100 or something. (Travel back and tell me if I guessed right.) I'm sure our World Journal's been helpful, especially to 20th century history research. When you travel back and congratulate ~~us~~ me, please bring photographs of any museums established as a result of our extensive research. Maybe bring a little money too, 'cause I could use it. C.D. taped a few coins and a bill to Entry Two, so bring that kinda currency 'cause I don't think the cashier at the drugstore will take future money.

I know the World Journal's supposed to be about, you know, 20th century stuff. What we've got and all that. I hope you don't mind if I use it to talk about an investigation, though. Don't worry, I'll still be helping you guys build your history books. I'll be sure to mention lots of details about what I use and eat and see. As a matter of fact, I'm eating some candy now and I'll tape on a piece since I've got a whole lot

anyway. You can put it in a museum, maybe. I gotta say, though—they're fifty cents apiece, so please bring that back with you (with interest).

Here, I taped a newspaper clipping (we read the news in this century, but this is before everything starts getting telepathically transmitted) about C.D. You can probably see it's got his whole name on it. Clarence Deardorff, but I ~~ea~~ called him just Clancy. I know he wanted to be secretive so he might be giving me the stink eye from Heaven right now. Anyway, as you can see, it says C.D. fell off a cliff and his eye got all mushed up from the fall and his insides did too. So, he's dead. But I don't believe it. I mean, I saw him, but I don't think he fell. Take my word for it—he was the best climber ever. You guys have probably colonized the moon, so you'll know what I'm saying when I say he could run fast as a gazelle across its surface in all that heavy astronaut gear and not even trip. I'll get the point of why I'm telling you this, though: I think someone did it. I dunno who yet. But I think I'll be able to find out real soon.

Signing out,

A.K. (Heck, we aren't being secretive anymore. Just call me Allen. But I'll still keep the code-name 'cause it's cool.)

Tristan's Planner — Notes for May XXth

There goes Clancy's friend on his bike again. He's been in this side of town an awful lot these days. We see each other just about every day—well, at least I see him, when I'm on my way home from work. He always looks so sad, flipping through some ratty composition book over and over. I wish I could talk to him, when he's sitting there on the park bench alone. I want to sit beside him and cry and cry like he does when he thinks no one is looking. I know he has a deep hole punched right through his chest, an

emptiness that can't be filled by extra organs or food or anything here on Earth. We both feel the same sadness, after all—the one Clancy left us with. But our pain is different. Him...he's the lucky one. He just lost something, that's all. And me? I lost something, too. But, there's some nagging feeling deep down that tells me I'm the one who took it away.

I can't say. I know I wasn't supposed to do it. Drink, I mean. I had such a bad day, though. I couldn't stand it. I'm pathetic and I did it anyway because I just wanted to hide. I didn't want to be Tristan Deardorff—whatever that means—even if just for a little while. This time I overdid it, I think, because I can barely remember a thing. Every time I strain myself, trying to remember something, anything, from that night, nothing really comes. These memories come to me like ink blotches, dark and indistinct and shadowy, thrown wildly upon paper. But I remember the night. The cold, outside. When I really squint inside, I remember this feeling—this *knowing* of a loss, a loss you can't come back from. Every time that cuts through me I can't think anymore.

Who's to say I'm not hiding something? I was so sick of it anyway, being Clance's Ma and Pa and everything in between. I was so tired. What if...?

I don't want to think about it.

Allen

The station stood in front of him, warm and inviting, with its beige bricks and brown accents. An American flag flapped softly in the breeze, its stripes scrunching up and whooshing out again. The sign above the doorway proclaimed, both simply and powerfully, *Chesterville Police*. Allen took a long breath as he wiped the sweat from one of his hands on his khakis. It was so close, justice. He couldn't wait. He dashed up the

steps, envelope in hand, and then let himself into the building. He was greeted with the gentle hum of a fan, the soft crackling of the short streamers attached to it, and the shuffling of papers at a desk a few feet away. He approached the desk hurriedly, envelope clasped to his chest. The man shuffling the papers stapled them at the top, not bothering to look up. The papers were put aside, and then he busied himself with another stack.

“Sir—” Allen peeped, suddenly shy. When no response was given, he tried once more. “Sir!”

The man finally glanced up. At the sight of Allen, he straightened, his golden name tag flashing from the fluorescent lights above. It said *Huxley*.

“Yes?” Huxley gave Allen a tired smile. “What can I do for you, son?”

“Uhm...my name is Allen...” Allen fumbled with his thoughts, unsure of where to begin. He knew he planned it all out, from his first words with the secretary to his speech of triumph to the city, but it all eluded him now. He offered a sheepish smile, well aware now that his cheeks were practically on fire. “Well...you see...there’s this case...”

Huxley nodded, signaling him to go on.

“You know...sir...Clanc—Clarence? Clarence Deardorff? Well, see, he was a friend of mine, and...” Allen trailed off and gripped the envelope tighter. “His death struck me as...weird.”

“It was certainly unfortunate.” Huxley nodded, somberly this time. “What do you mean by ‘weird’, though?”

“I knew him, sir,” Allen continued, “and he wouldn’t fall, I mean, just like that.”

Huxley sighed. “Son—Allen—I know it’s hard on you, but I can assure you your friend’s death was investigated thorou—”

“I have evidence!” Fearing he was losing Huxley, Allen shoved the envelope onto the desk. “It’s all authentic, a hundred percent. I’m even an eyewitness, sir, if you need me to testify or anything.”

“And this is...?” Huxley looked at Allen over the top of his glasses, questioningly.

“Oh, um,” Allen began, “these are some entries from the journal Clancy and I shared. Th...these are his, of course. He liked talking about his ‘adventures’...as you can see, he’s quite brave. Agile, too.”

Huxley took the envelope and pulled out its contents. Seeing the little mountains of paper the man had on his desk, Allen felt almost sorry providing him with yet another one for review. Huxley appeared to scan the contents of one page behind his glasses, and then idly flipped through the rest. Allen caught the slightest shake of Huxley’s head as he looked.

After a couple of minutes Huxley put the pages back in their holder, and put them aside.

“Certainly, Clancy was quite brave,” he said, his voice tinged with confusion.

“Yes, sir. See, that’s why I...well...I don’t think he fell.” Allen stopped a moment, gathering the nerve to continue. “I...it’s not any insult to the police, of course. It’s just, I knew him. He’d never fall.”

Huxley studied Allen’s face the entire time the boy stuttered shyly on. Allen wished he could use the fire extinguisher behind the desk on his burning cheeks. How would anyone take him seriously when his face was practically a cherry?

“Please, sir, look into this,” Allen finished, strongly as he could, trying to make up for his shyness.

Huxley was silent awhile, his face—Allen could swear—expressing some strange mix of annoyance and...was that a smirk?

Then, he spoke: “Thank you. I’ll be sure to pass this on to a detective.”

Allen knew what that meant. The tone, the look, the words themselves...they were code for “get lost, kid.” Maybe they weren’t, Allen secretly hoped. Maybe the words meant exactly what they were supposed to mean. But, if Clancy taught him anything, it was that adults liked to lie that way, saying things that sounded nice but meant nothing at all. It seemed like this was one of those times.

“Thanks, sir,” Allen muttered halfheartedly, offering a quick half-smile to the man behind the desk. “Appreciate it.”

“Not a problem, Allen. Have a nice day.”

Nice day...what a joke, Allen thought bitterly as he pushed through the glass doors. He wished he never rode up to the station or bothered to give the secretary his friend’s journal entries, even if they were photocopied. Heck, he wished he never took half his piggy bank and photocopied them in the first place.

Allen walked across the walk to where he left his bike, and stood staring at the station, its dull, disgusting colors, and the stupid word over the door. He said a word Mother would wash his mouth for, and then said it again, louder, and then again, a little quieter, because he didn’t want his voice to crack out in public. Still, tears sent the scene of the station before him into a blur, so he sat down on the sidewalk, forcing his fists into his eyes. With every snuffle, he cursed Huxley for not caring and the law for being too

complex and Clancy for dying the way he did. Then, he said a silent sorry to them all, because really, wasn't it his fault for not being able to do anything?

* * *

Everything was bright with life as summer carried on. The sky was its bluest, clouds were at their fluffiest. Lawns were bursting with flowers in every shade of the visible light spectrum. Birds' chests and throats swelled with song every second the shimmering sun was in the sky. But, to Allen, the world was too bright, insensitively so, for having held such tragedy only weeks ago. There was too much color overwhelming his senses. He was sure that, if he was nudged just a little bit closer to the edge, he'd probably hurl a rock at one of the feathered singers up in the trees. After a week of sulking about the house, aimlessly flipping through the World Journal and his unfinished summer homework, Mother whisked Allen off to the library to find something new to look at.

"Perhaps you can learn something new this summer," Mother said, guiding Allen through the labyrinth of shelves crammed with yellowing books. "Look, look at this book—it's about constellations. You spend half the night stargazing, so you might as well learn something."

Allen absentmindedly chucked every book Mother suggested into the canvas bag they brought along. He never mentioned he knew every constellation—and a good deal of their stars, too—by heart. He didn't bother saying he couldn't care less about building a homemade radio, or that he had no interest in wild animal facts. It was only when Mother presented him with a well-loved geoscience book that he shook his head vigorously.

"That was Clancy's favorite," he said.

Mother looked at it, her expression sad. Different than Allen's sad, but enough for her to put the book back into the shelf and let it be buried again.

So as to not worry Mother, Allen busied himself with the sack of books she picked out for him at the library. Really, it did nothing for his state; he could read half a book on ancient Egypt and not recall a single word or fact or the ghost of such. He couldn't answer where his mind wandered off to either. It was just gone, somewhere invisible and otherworldly, like Clancy was.

Allen wasn't really sure when he started going back to the forest. He just found himself there, apple or something in hand, wandering about in the shade. Memories flashed at him from every corner—there was the place they went digging for dinosaurs, and there was the “fort” they tried and failed to make, and there was that sundial, markers drawn on with permanent marker, in the one place the sun broke perfectly through the trees. Oh, yes, of course—there was the pile of rocks Clancy swore were volcanic; they unearthed those just a few days before...well, it was one of their last adventures now, wasn't it? The forest practically emanated despair at this point. Every time Allen found himself beneath the leafy canopies, phantoms of memory clawing at his vision from every nook and cranny, he couldn't help but run out.

It was on this particular day when Allen was, again, walking through the woods. He hadn't noticed just yet, for he had brought along a drugstore comic book this time and was flipping through its colorful pages. Images of superheroes punching this and that brushed his fingers as the pages were flipped down and then picked up again. Every once in a while, Allen's eye caught interjections like “zing” and “pow”, and he'd let a breath escape his nose; was it humor or annoyance, even he couldn't tell. Flip, flip, flip went the

book. Allen's eyes trailed over its illustrations again and again. But naturally, when one isn't paying attention to his surroundings, a disaster occurring, even a little one, is practically fact, and such a promise didn't fail in Allen's particular situation. He didn't see the stone jutting out. But jut out of the ground it did, and he was face down in mud, and his comic book was soaking in dirt a foot away. Allen groaned in pain. The ground, however soft from wet dirt, was not without a couple of sticks and stones. He managed to stand up, and leaned against a tree, viciously wiping globs of mud from his clothes and face. He stopped when he remembered he was wearing a camp t-shirt and old khakis that would soon go to who Mother called the less fortunate—though he knew his next pair would be from Goodwill anyway—and he sent a prayerful thanks that he chose not to wear something Mother would care about. As he let his hands fall beside him, he let his eyes sweep the scene before him.

“The forest...?” he murmured, gazing in the half-darkness at the wall of trees that sunlight could barely penetrate. “Again?”

But, as he let himself take in the sights, a heaviness made itself known in his stomach. The longer he looked, the more it weighed him down.

I'm lost?

Sudden tightness.

“I'm lost!”

World Journal, Entry #43

To you readers in the far future! It is I, C.D., the daring adventurer whose escapades are recorded within these pages, for both your pursuit of knowledge and delight. I've come to discover myself, when looking through these pages, that I have

never once spun a yarn about the place wherein most of my, and A.K.'s, adventures and discoveries take place: the forest. Me and A.K. dub this particular forest Kardorff Woodlands...for reasons you need not know. But if you must know *just* a bit for the history records, the word "Kardorff" comes from combining the last names of two of the greatest adventurers known to this little town. Or maybe the world. It's a secret.

I'm sure with all the advanced technology you've got now, all your clothes are "one size fits all" (thanks to your robot tailors, no doubt!), so you'll understand what I say when the Kardorff Woodlands is a "one size fits all" kind of place. It's got everything: places to climb, relax, run, build, everything. You might as well call it an adventurer's heaven. Using our expert skills, we of course transformed a part of it into our own little secret lair. You know, personal touches. Sundial, so ~~A.K.'s mom doesn't scold us for being late for dinner~~ we can tell time in the true way of the wilderness. Archaeological grounds. Secret traps, in case anyone tries to mess with anything. Normal stuff like that.

It's no exaggeration to say me and ol' A.K. spend most of our time in this forest. It serves our every need. Heck, if we stumbled upon a little oasis here one day, one with a couple of fruit trees and a river, all we'd need to do is drag our stuff out here and we'd be set for life. A.K. can draw his star charts and stare at the sky like he always does and I could spend every single moment of every single day exploring and writing for you, readers.

And that is your introduction to the most perfect place, and both my and your greatest sources of knowledge, at least in this journal. Please boot up your time machine and come soon. You'll love it here.

Talk to you soon.

- Great Adventurer C.D.

Allen

There was not a single sign of tampering in the entire area before Allen. It wasn't like the shallow part of the forest, no—that was well footprinted and messed around with. Not one indent, save for the marks in the mud by Allen's slide, made itself known on the ground. No pawprints, no bird feet. The trees were bushy and thick with leaves; there was certainly no trimming done. Their trunks remained clothed in bark; no teenagers carved hearts with initials in them, and no woodpecker had been drilling away. Allen's breath caught. He pressed his hands against the trees, feeling for a slash or a marker. Nothing. No nailed ribbons either, like the ones Clancy put as "landmarks." The ground was dark with dirt and leaves. No flags or signs, even little ones. With a cry, he ran forward, nearly stumbling on one of the many rocks that stuck out of the ground. He spun, caught his balance, and then turned backwards and began to run. His comic book crunched beneath his muddied sneakers. Their slapping the wet earth and Allen's labored breathing were the only sounds—but they were loud enough in the solitude. No matter which direction he turned, no matter if he went forward or back, it was all the same dark, deserted place. As he wove between the trees, he groped his pants pocket for some small savior, compass, whistle, even. At least an energy bar to keep him going if all hope was lost. Yet, his fingers only grasped a penny and a peppermint candy. In frustration, he threw them both down and hit the back of his head against a tree.

"Help!" he found himself shouting, even though it felt as if his heart was in his throat. "Please, someone, tell me where I am!"

The only answer was the echo of his voice, ricocheting off some unknown surface buried deep behind the strong trunks of the trees. He tried again and again, fear beginning to make itself known as a terrible, frozen sensation in his veins. On what was the third—or was it the fifth?—desperate call for help, Allen caught a rustle. It was soft at first, and then it turned into what was practically an auditory telltale of something walking. Allen edged away from where he thought it was coming from, almost frozen with both curiosity and terror. But, as it grew in volume, it seemed as if it was coming from everywhere—above, in the trees, from left and right and even in the trunks of the trees. Then, it stopped, just when Allen felt like his legs would turn to jelly and collapse terribly right beneath him.

“What is your name, boy?” A voice boomed around him, as if the sound was emanating from every nook and cranny of the forest.

Allen choked and made no sound. He shut his eyes, wishing he still had that penny, even if it made the lousiest weapon. A footstep in the leaves crunched in front of him.

“Boy, you’re trespassing in my forest. You owe me an answer,” went the voice, louder this time.

“Y...y...your forest?” Allen managed. “I a...apologize.”

The entity before him let out a grunt. “At least you’re polite, boy, but you didn’t answer my question.”

When Allen again said nothing, another footstep sounded across the forest.

“Allen Karman!” he burst out.

The owner of the voice made a sound of approval, yet still went forward another step. Allen noticed that a dim light now flickered behind a bush—it looked like a flashlight, and his heart calmed ever so slightly. Perhaps it was just some agitated old forest hermit that was terrifying him. The thought, ridiculous as it was, was oddly comforting.

“An interesting name, boy. Allen Carmen, then?”

Allen found himself shaking his head, and what came out of his mouth was an automatic response he offered every time someone made that mistake. “K...Karman. Like the atmospheric line...y’know, between outer space and, uh, our air.”

A chuckle. “An interesting name. Where from?”

“Well, you know, it doesn’t matter...I’ve been here my whole life...”

There was silence. Allen contemplated on whether to run or stay put. Sure, the obvious answer was to run...but what if the old coot had a gun?

Then, the voice spoke again. “Boy, tell me the year.”

Did he live under a rock?

“Nineteen eighty-eight, s...sir.”

“Oh—an interesting time to wake up indeed. Very interesting. The last time I set eyes upon this world was in 1943. What do you think of that?” The voice let out a choked laugh.

“I’m not sure what to think,” Allen answered quietly. He was now sure that the hermit was looking insane in the rearview mirror.

“Hmm, not talkative, are we? Well, speak up a bit, boy. You made enough noise before, with your crashing about and your wailing. You remind me of a hoyden I had the displeasure of meeting the last time I woke up.”

Allen let the voice do its grumbling. He didn't ask what a “hoyden” was; whoever was speaking seemed like they would mind if he did. It's not like he cared much anyway, since the new voice that throbbed in his head kept telling him *run, run, run, you idiot!* Still, he couldn't. He felt like if he moved, he would vomit, and the world would fall away.

Hadn't it already?

“You did wake me, though, boy.” The light grew brighter suddenly, illuminating a dark mass of fur and odd symbols around what looked like a clock. Allen whimpered at the cryptic sight. “And I sense a pain within you. Tell me, what is it? And do not play your quiet game with me.”

Allen moved himself from the gaze of the circle of light. A sway. It followed him.

“Don't you try and run either, boy. I'll make sure you wind up here again.”

“S...sorry.” He didn't know why he said it but he felt his chest wobble at what he felt was a threat. “Um, well, see, I lost my friend...”

“I'd help you locate your friend, but I detect no life in this forest besides you,” the voice interrupted. “There's some birds and whatnot near the front of the forest, unless you'd say those are your companions.”

“No, not that kind of lost.” Allen's voice dropped sadly. “I mean he's...you know...passed on.”

“My condolences.” There were a few seconds of silence. Then, the voice asked, “Do you know who I am?”

“I...I’m afraid I don’t,” he replied, almost scared to ask.

“Then let me introduce myself.”

The creature the voice belonged to slipped out of its hiding spot in the bushes, revealing itself as what Allen could only describe as a monster. It looked like a bush itself, big and bushy and dark-colored. There was an enormous clock on the center of its face, glowing. Where the clock’s numbers should’ve been, there were odd symbols and many tiny ticks that seemed to move along with the minute and hour arms. It had paws, and the glowing of the clock revealed an eye on each one. Allen shuddered at the sight but he didn’t try running away, immediately at least, for fear of the monster’s previous warning.

“I don’t have a name, at least not one of this realm,” it said, “but I suppose you can call me Henry. I quite like the sound of that name.”

Allen nodded, wide-eyed, with a half smile frozen on his face. “O...okay.”

He went back a few paces, just to create some distance; it was now that he was ready to sprint away, right into his room with the curtains drawn and the closet locked and the blankets drawn over his whole body. But, with every step of Allen’s, Henry drew closer.

“Don’t bother, boy,” it half-growled. “Show some respect to your elders.”

Allen remembered the threat and quickly nodded, and Henry seemed to relax a bit.

“I’m the keeper of this forest—or at least this bit of it,” Henry continued. “It’s quite a special piece of the place, don’t you know? It’s called the Museum of Time. I’ve taken parts of different time periods on Earth and ‘saved’ them here. ‘Saves’, that’s what they’re called. You can explore any time you can dream of here, really—within reason, of course.”

Henry explained as though the Museum of Time was the most workaday thing imaginable. It sounded almost bored, as if it had rehearsed this speech a hundred times.

Allen continued to nod, unsure of how to respond. “Do...do you take those times right out? Like, they just disappear when they’ve been saved into your, um, forest?”

“No, I simply copy them. It takes a while, maybe a month.” Henry sighed. “It’d be easier simply taking the time—rip it out and so forth. Alas, I can’t, what with moral responsibility and all.”

Allen whistled lowly. “So...you use magic?”

“Naturally,” Henry replied, as if it was obvious, “but I’m telling you this for a reason, boy. As you have woken me up, you’re considered a contributor to the Museum.”

“Contributor?” Allen took a sharp breath.

“Yes, boy, and for that, I owe you two things,” Henry went on. “In exchange for a Save of your time—perhaps a piece of your neighborhood or town, if I may—I shall allow you to explore the Museum as long as it takes for the saving process to complete.”

Allen did not quite believe it was real. Perhaps he was lost again, somewhere in his head, like he had been all this time, floating in a perpetual state of strangeness and unreality—but the throbbing pain in his legs and chest gave away the situation. It was real. Real enough, at least. Allen liked to consider himself a rational boy, a not-quite-a-

man-*yet* of science who knew magic was the stuff of books and movies and arcade games. But his legs didn't lie and everything that had happened was just so, so much and so ridiculous and unbelievable and outlandish anyway that he let himself think whatever he wanted.

Gosh, a whole museum? Of time? All mine? To explore? Thoughts exploded and crackled in fragments through his mind. Firecrackers that he half-wished he would stop believing.

How Clancy would've loved this.

The thought broke into his mind before he could stop it.

It was like the Fourth of July, when the last firework popped and its glimmer mixed in with the stars, and everyone waited and watched, hoping there would be one last cluster of explosions and sparkles that let everyone know the night was not yet over and there was still much to be had. But it was the last one. And people would fold their blankets and children would be ushered to cars and sky-magic was not a thing on minds anymore—just getting home and washing dinner dishes and other workaday things that didn't really matter as much as glorious, popping delights.

“Is that not satisfactory, boy?”

Allen looked up again at Henry. He readjusted to its strange clock-face with the cryptic symbols and the fact that it existed at all.

“No, sir, it is wonderful. Thank you. I just—I mean—I was thinking of my friend, is all.”

Henry's symbols bobbed slowly again, as if it was nodding. For a moment, the symbols looked like hieroglyphics. But then, Allen blinked and they were suddenly

different and reminded him of petroglyphs he saw in Pickens once when Mother and his father would take him on road trips. He didn't want to blink again.

“Oh, boy, that reminds me.” The petroglyphs in Henry's eye floated up rather suddenly, as if Henry whipped its head up in realization. “While I am Saving your little part of time, you may notice some...hmm...some funny happenings. Not around the Museum, but in your own time.”

“Funny happenings?”

“I call them ‘Time Dichotomies.’ See, boy, time behaves funny when it has magic applied. You may see...things in your world that are not meant to be there. People that should be long gone, pieces of night when it should be day. You understand.” Henry brushed its paw on the ground, appearing to draw something in the dirt. Two lines, forming an X, with both lines drawn over many times. “Now, listen to me closely, boy, or you will face punishment: you cannot touch people in Time Dichotomies.”

Henry stepped back. The X was deep, wounding the ground. Were it a wound, Allen imagined it would leave a terrible scar. “While touching Dichotomies does not ruin the Save, it...how can I put this, boy...it creates an issue for me. I will not be particularly fond of you if you do this.”

“Of course.” Allen nodded.

“I know it was a lot, but do you remember all I said, Allen Karman?” Henry asked.

“Y...yes, I believe so,” Allen answered, his voice tinged with a sadness Henry had heard many times in its countless years. “You'll ‘Save’ my ho—I mean, my time. Right? Yes...and I can, um, explore the other things you Saved.”

Henry's symbols, now something new with many slashed lines, bobbed.

"And I must never touch a person that is not meant to be there," Allen finished, "in my time."

"Because I've gotten all sorts of curses upon me from people who don't remember the terms, I'd like you to tell me one more thing," Henry said. "How long will you be able to explore my Museum?"

It took Allen a moment. He realized he was barely paying attention. "Oh, uh—one month."

"Do not sound so lackluster," Henry said. "I assure you, there is much to see. Walk deeper into the forest, where the leaves grow thick and the sun never shines. There, you will find tunnels. I like to call them 'Saveholes.' Peer in them if you will, but I suggest simply leaping in will lead to a more fun route."

Allen nodded, slowly, carefully.

"And, boy, I'm a call away if you need anything. Simply shout my name."

Then, without a warning, the mass of fur and eyes vanished, and Allen stood alone. The mud on him had dried and caked on his pants and in his hair. There was a crumpled comic book page he didn't notice before, crushed into a hole that one of Henry's massive paws made. It was a transitional page for a new story, proclaiming on it the name of a superhero called Kairos.

Allen picked it up and looked at it, not feeling much of anything, and began to walk toward what looked like a pocket of light in the distance.

Tristan

It was like the whole world was a painting someone spilled water on. Everything came to be known to Tristan when the task was over and done. It's how he managed to comb the sleep-wildness from his amber hair and got his sweater vest on and tied his tie and managed to tug on his shoes. He remembered nothing of the process or even what he was doing as his body did all the things it was supposed to do as he—could he even say *he* did it, he thought?—got ready for work. Work. Tristan had been going there every day even when they said he could take some time off. But, what would time off do? Tristan knew it would kill him, that's what. It was better to be occupied. He'd talk to people, they'd talk to him, and he'd be helpful like always and things would seem so normal and fresh. It almost perked him up to think about it all. To think just a month ago, he dreaded every day and every pathetic paycheck that served as a constant reminder of what he could've done.

When Tristan got over to the library, he noticed the front desk temp at the desk, talking to a family about a library card. Tristan shuddered as the temp glanced at him. He couldn't stand it. There was something about that look that made the temp seem unsettling. But Tristan couldn't pinpoint why.

Then again, I'm going crazy already, aren't I? What's a look? Really, what's anything?

He found his station and busied himself with some paperwork at the desk before book duty. He already felt better. Placing orders, reading this and signing that, and making notes here and there, and—

“Tristan.”

He barely heard his name being called. He almost ignored it and went back to scribbling the library's address.

Then, again: "Tristan!"

He glanced up and found a man beside him, gently shaking the top of his chair. The man had a modest officer uniform on, sans a badge, and was holding a manila envelope in one hand. When Tristan turned to face him properly, he handed him the envelope, already with the top part torn open. Tristan asked what it was.

"It's something I thought you might want," he answered. "Boy brought it to me at the station, talking about your brother."

"Oh. Th...thank you." He thought for a moment. "What was the boy's name, if you know?"

"Oh, I think it was Allen. Yes, Allen. Black hair. Nervous-ish. Think I seen him aroun' before in town, wearing polos and whatnot. Sharp kid."

What's Allen doing at the police?

Something inside him hardened and a fear he'd been trying to avoid thinking about began to creep into his mind from the dark hiding place he'd shoved it into. The man gave Tristan a smile that was not exactly a smile. It was that little upturn of the mouth that people made when something awful happened and they knew you didn't want to talk about it, but they felt sorry for you anyways and wanted you to know. Then he turned and left, past the temp and out the door and into freedom that Tristan didn't think he'd ever have again. Hoping to hit the waste bin, Tristan dropped the envelope, but it landed on his desk.

Damn! Damn that Allen and damn it all!

The top part of a paper in the envelope slipped out as the envelope hit the wood. Something was scrawled on in pencil. Terrible handwriting, Tristan could tell, and he wasn't even really looking at it. Yet, there was some familiarity to the chicken scratch, so he found himself pulling out the paper and started scanning what was written. As he read, the first sentences made enough sense, despite the handwriting.

“World Journal, Entry #15,” it began. “To you readers in the far future! I, C.D., have some special news to share with you. Today, I braved the peaks of Little Cliff, the not-so-little cliff near my house.”

The cliff...Clancy...

Only snippets of whole sentences registered after the first bit.

“...A.K. helped me ... really easy ... practically climbing a hill ... come see it sometime...”

After that, the words ran together and made no sense. But one word still throbbed persistently—viciously—in Tristan’s head.

Cliff, cliff, cliff, cliff, cliff...

He was no longer in the library, but he wasn't sure where he was. It was so dark. His curls stuck to his forehead with sweat and his glasses were slipping down his face. There was nothing before his eyes—and he couldn't muster up even a make-believe image in his head.

Every muscle is so tense...I feel so rigid. There's something so damn heavy weighing on every limb. Something worse than just a thing...

For some reason, he felt like he was trapped in the remnants of some awful memory.