

PRESCOTT PUBLIC LIBRARY PRESENTS

SECRET

WE KEEP

**YOUTH WRITING CONTEST
FOR AGES 12-17**

Presenting the Top 5 Submissions
as voted on by
the PPL Teen Advisory Group



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Background and Thanks

2026 marks the 6th year of Prescott Public Library’s Teen Advisory Group (TAG) Youth Writing Contest. This year, as in 2025, TAG chose to require a theme from the writers, rather than a genre. After some deliberation the theme, “Secrets We Keep” won out, and seemed to create some outstanding inspiration as we received a total of 23 submissions from local writers ages 12-17.

The submissions were judged blind by the 14 teen TAG members at their meeting on Tuesday, February 17th, 2026. Blind judging means that TAG teens reading and determining the fate of the entries did not know the names of the writers. Rather, the stories were judged on their merit and how they fit the criteria of the contest, including the theme, length, and the inclusion of a few carefully chosen words. This year’s required words were: petal, esoteric, vanish, and honeycomb. See if you can spot them in each entry as you read!

After much discussion, the three winners were chosen. Thank you to all the writers for sharing your writing with us. We hope that you continue to pursue all your creative goals!

We also want to thank the Friends of the Prescott Public Library for making this contest possible by providing prizes and supporting TAG.



1st Place Winner:

Your Secret's Safe with Me by Aspen Butler

Growing up, we're told honesty is the best policy, that being truthful and open is better than hiding. What no one warns you about is what happens when everyone decides you're the place they can put the truth. The first secret was small — almost tender. After that they came faster, heavier, until I learned how to hold my breath without anyone noticing. But they kept coming, one after another. Everyone decided I was the one to confide in. And I let them. I let them pull at me like petals being plucked from a rose.

People have always told me I'm easy to talk to. Teachers write it on report cards. *Pleasant, quiet, mature for her age.* All the things I've heard for years from everyone. Friends say it like a compliment, like it explains everything good about me. I think what they mean is I don't interrupt. I listen, I don't flinch when it gets ugly. I don't ask complicated questions. I say "it's okay" when they need me to.

I've said it my whole life. *Okay* and *I promise.* The words were trained into me from a young age. But some nights these burdens feel bigger than most. Tonight was one of those nights.

The first secret that night belonged to my mom.

We were standing in the kitchen after dinner. The only noise being the faucet as she kept washing the same dish over and over, her movements sharp and distracted. I sat at the table trying to do my homework, but I could already feel that familiar feeling tightening in my chest — a warning that something was coming.

She didn't even turn around as she said it. She didn't even look at me.

"I don't think I'm happy anymore," she whispers. The words came out like a test, as if seeing how they sounded out loud.

I waited for her to say more. She always did.

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“I love your father,” she added quickly, like she was scared I might’ve misunderstood, like the walls might be listening. “But loving someone and being happy with them aren't always the same thing.”

I nodded. I didn’t know what the right response was, and she didn’t seem to want one anyway. She just needed someone else to help her carry this.

“Don’t tell him,” she said. “Please.”

And there it was. The moment it became mine to carry. The moment a petal was plucked.

I promised. Of course I did. Promises are easy in the moment. When you’re not thinking about how long you’ll have to keep them, or how heavy they’ll feel once you’re alone.

She kissed my head. Like that settled it, like it forgave what she confessed. It was like she hadn’t just handed me something fragile and asked me to never let it crack.

But before I could even process my mothers words, my phone buzzed. Before I even made it back to my room. It was my best friend.

“I did something stupid.”

I dropped my backpack to the floor, the weight clattering against the carpet with the same pressure crushing my heart. Sinking into my bed I watch the typing bubbles appear and vanish, over and over. I stared at the screen, my heart beating vaster with every flicker of those dots.

She told me about the party. About the music too loud to think, about the boy she said she hated, about how it wasn’t supposed to go that far. She told me about the hand, the kiss, the touch. About how she betrayed the boy she loved, how she wished she could rewind the night and not even meet his gaze from across the strobed room.

“I don’t know what to do,” she wrote. And with four words she placed her guilt on me. *“You can’t tell anyone.”*

I typed back “*I won’t*” without even thinking what I was promising. The response felt automatic, muscle memory. My phone seemed heavier in my hand after that, like it had absorbed the weight of her secret and refused to let it go, letting it follow in my pocket wherever I went.

I try to focus on my work, but I can’t. All I feel is the sinking pit of the secrets I’ve been told, the promises I keep.

My dad knocks on my door.

“Your mom seems quiet tonight,” he said, leaning against the frame, smiling the way he does when he’s trying to seem normal. “Has she said anything to you?”

For a second I froze, the thought of telling him creeping in my mind. Just a little. Just enough to make the weight change. But my mom’s voice echoed in my head —*please*— and the word wrapped itself around my throat, the thought drying on my tongue as the weight settles over me again.

“She’s probably just tired,” I told him, looking back at my work. The lie sat between my teeth, tasting my metal daring to draw blood if it slips.

He nods, satisfied, and walked away. The quiet click of the door felt deafening as a pit buried into me and I fell deeper and deeper down. I tried to do my work, distract myself with it. But the pencil trembled in my hand, the words scrambled on the page. I couldn’t focus. My shoulders sag under the pressure I’m carrying for everyone else.

My older brother came barreling into my room just after midnight, flopping himself onto my bed. He hovered there in silence for a moment, it was tense and unnatural for him. Picking at the edge of my blanket, he looks up at me.

He didn’t usually come for things — that should’ve been my first warning. The red eating in his eyes should’ve been my second.

“I think there’s something wrong with me,” he admits. The room went suddenly too quiet, and I felt the lump returning in my throat. I sat up and faced him, every instinct in my body screaming at me to pay attention.

“I’m destroying myself,” he tells me. “But I can’t seem to care, I love it. It’s like I can’t live without it!” He explains. He was addicted. Like a bear to honeycomb.

I wanted to say a hundred things. I wanted to tell him we could talk to someone, that this wasn’t healthy and he needed help. I wanted to tell him someone needs to know.

Instead, I listened. I didn’t say a word.

I listened for a long time as he talked. About school, friends, drugs. About how everything felt so much better when he wasn’t in his right mind. How he couldn’t even eat anymore unless he was on it. When he finally looked up at me I saw it; the glass in his eyes, his wide pupils.

“Don’t tell Mom and Dad,” he says quickly. “They’ll freak.”

I hesitated. Just for a second. Then, I said *okay*.

When he left, the room felt different, like the air was being sucked out. I lay back on my bed and stare at the ceiling, watching the lights shift as my eyes burn.

My phone buzzed again. Another message. Someone else needs something, another burden someone wants to share. I glanced at the screen, then flipped it over. I didn’t open it.

I started to look back at how long I’ve felt this suffocating force. I started to wonder how long it would last. If I’d ever break free.

Earlier that day, one of my teachers had pulled me aside at lunch. She had tilted her head, concern softening her voice as she looked at me with kind eyes. The eyes I’ve met and smiled at everyday this year.

“Are you okay?” She asked me. The question seemed unreal, esoteric almost. People don’t ask me that, those words have only even fallen from my lips before.

I laughed it off. People don’t ask questions they actually want answers to, especially teachers. She has hundreds of other students, why would she actually care about me? Besides, they’re not my secrets to tell — only carry.

But deep down I knew the answer was no. I was carrying too much. Too much pressure. Too much work. Too many promises. Too many secrets. I screamed in my head, begging someone to let me free. But instead of opening up I went on with my day, letting all of the burdens that were never mine burn within me like a candle that refused to blow out.

Even under the sun I felt hidden in the dark. It felt like my shadow stretched longer with every word, every breath, every step.

By the time the house went quiet tonight, my chest ached. Not sharp, not enough to be alarming. Just a dull, constant pressure, like something heavy was sitting on it and refusing to move.

I thought about who I could tell. I ran through the list in my head — friends, family, anyone. But each name came with a reason I couldn't. Too busy. Too fragile. Too involved. I realized, slowly, that I had become everyone's safe place, and yet no one had thought to be mine.

When I finally turned off the light, the room felt smaller, colder. The dark pressing in around me. I curled onto my side, blankets tugged to my chin. I had no one to confide in except my own thoughts, but even that felt dangerous. All I had was the quiet as the final petal fell. And I held the silence the only way I'd always been taught — close and careful, so it wouldn't spill.



2nd Place Winner:

Lake Talksa by Gwen Herbert

Mendel and I read the crumpled, stolen pages of doctrine from the Talmud in the flickering light of the candle sitting on the bedside table. It is just us awake in the orphanage, and Mendel is curled up beside me as I murmur the prayer written on the paper. I can feel his little arm against my side, and I pause as his breathing slows to a sleepy rhythm.

“Mendel...” I whisper into the stillness, but his eyes remain closed. I don’t bother him anymore, so I slip out from his bed and into the empty one next to his and tuck the writings under my mattress with the few others I brought. We arrived at the Catholic orphanage a few weeks ago. Contrary to the implications of where we have been living, I have faith that Tata and Mother are somewhere, just like us, in hiding. I watch the shapes the little flame makes against the wall. After I say my evening prayers, I reach over and blow it out.

One of my many chores today is to sweep the front steps. I am hesitant at first to be in the open, but my thoughts slowly drift to my brother as I rake the broom across the dirty steps to the orphanage. His disinterest in our meager studies has become increasingly obvious. His faith has started to wither and die, and with every passing day another petal falls. I wish I could have my friends here to pray with me. It feels as if my quiet prayers haven’t been loud enough to reach God. I would not be surprised if God is upset with me and has not been listening. My brother and I were baptized by a Catholic priest a few days after we arrived, and we call ourselves Christians so we won’t be captured. I always dream of a day I will be as wise and knowledgeable as Tata in the sacred texts, maybe one day even in the esoteric Kabbalah, but that day will not come soon. I glance at the occasional passerby. It’s a quiet afternoon today in Siauliai. I hear another set of passing footsteps, and I raise my eyes to see a Lithuanian soldier glancing at me as he walks past. He is wearing that ugly green uniform I have seen multiple times before, and his silver buttons glint briefly in the midday sun.

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I look back down, but it is too late; he had already met my eyes and seen my fear. I freeze as I hear his arrogant footsteps come near, and I feel like running back inside.

“Little girl, what is your name?”

I can feel my fingers trembling against the broomstick as I remember the cruel, leering faces of the soldiers who patrolled the fences which enclosed the streets of Kaukazas, where I lived, just a few miles away. I remember when they demanded our valuables, and Mother, fearing for our lives, gave them the little gold and money we had. I remember when they stopped us from going to our factories and forced us to gather and watch Bezael Mazowiecki hang for smuggling food and cigarettes.

“My name is Janina Petrauskaite.” My voice is quiet as I lie with a Lithuanian name that has been forged onto records by kind Sister Angelika. By now I have inched closer to the door, my hand grazing the splintered wood. I will myself to look at him in his now suspicious eyes, which observed my Jewish face.

“Blessed be the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forever and ever.”

The fear I had felt that first day after running away from the ghetto had returned, and I spent the rest of my cleaning in paranoia. I feared for my family, I feared for my friends I had left behind, I feared for my friends that were taken away, and I feared for my soul. To my great relief, no soldiers had come looking for me. But I couldn't guarantee tomorrow, or any day after that. I made a promise to myself to become more careful.

I did not tell Mendel about the exchange with the soldier. I kissed his forehead and wished him good night in Yiddish; I have not spoken my beautiful language in many weeks. I did not sit with him to read tonight. I pulled my thin blanket over myself and lay awake again, long after the last candle was blown out and the last child was asleep. I felt alone as the oldest one out of the whole orphanage, and in moments like these is when I think back upon the clandestine prayer groups and youth movements with my friends within the ghetto.

Idel, Treina, and I had the first copy of our hebrew publishings that we and others had come up with as a way to rebel against the Germans. With no access to a typewriter or a printing press, we'd written the newspapers by hand.

“Your handwriting is very neat, Vichna. It's perfect.” Idel's excited voice paralleled what we were all feeling over this one little win over our oppressors. It was a triumphant moment. His smile was enough to alleviate my worries. We liked to talk a lot, and Idel described his weekly meet-ups with other boys and adults at Masada. Masada was a secret organization that would collect what little weapons we had and train boys with the objective to one day resist the Germans and allow families to escape. I feared for him because those kinds of meetings would certainly get him killed if discovered by soldiers. Rebellion by newspapers and rebellion by fighting were two different things. Changing the subject, I asked a question.

“When we all escape, what would you want to do?”

Treina hummed thoughtfully, tapping her pen against her small chin. Whatever she wanted to say, Idel beat her with a joking tone.

“Become a Christian—it'd make things much easier.”

A few months later, I would have never guessed I'd escape, especially not the way I wanted. November fifth I was preparing for prayer group later that day by reading from my Tata's precious Talmud. I was about to retrieve my family's Chumash when my Tata called out my name, frantic and loud. The difference from his deep, calm tone told me something was wrong.

“Vichna!”

I could hear the loud rumbling of trucks outside approaching and passing. And then the wailing. The heartbroken, desperate shrieks of children calling for their parents in Yiddish. “*Ma'ama, Tata!*” The cries of the little children made me turn towards Mendel who began to perk up from his toys. My Tata quickly rushed into the room with a look in his eyes I'll never forget. A terrible anguish filled his eyes that was etched with panic.

“Vichna, take your brother and leave right now—go to the leather factory and hide there.”

I was frozen with fear. We usually hid in the basement. Where was Mother? Mendel stood and then stepped over, sensing the same urgency I felt from my Tata. Only I could not move.

“Tata?”

Mendel’s voice quivered.

“Vichna, are you listening??” My Tata said with frantic exasperation, and he reached over to grab my arm, promptly hauling me up to my feet. The cries did not stop and seemed to get louder. “I need you to leave with your brother *now*.”

My hand reached for the page of the Talmud I was reading and I tore it off along with the next pages with it. I still don’t understand where the impulse came to bring a piece of the Talmud with me to this day. As we scurried out the door, Tata had picked up our jackets from the floor and handed the bundle to me. A parting gift.

“*Ikh hob dikh lib!*” (I love you)

We were not the only children in hiding in Frenkel’s leather factory. I said many long prayers. After many anxious hours, no one came, and I did not know what to do. What I knew is we could not stay here. The moon was bright, and the sound of the crickets was soothing. I felt free. I found great joy in passing by Lake Talksa, and I stopped to view the rippling water which glowed silver in the moonlight. I used to visit the lake frequently with Idel and Treina two years ago. I cherished those times before the war. No matter how much I wanted to stay in the peaceful memories of the past here by my lake, we had to tread on. As I tugged my jacket tighter around me, I felt the scratchy patch of the yellow star. I paused and then shrugged it off, and I took my brother’s off as well. Better to be cold than captured.

Mendel and I have been living in the orphanage for many months now, and the Germans and Lithuanians still torment Siauliai, now challenged by the growing force of the Soviets. Many of the children are rowdy today during the Sisters' teachings because of the summer heat. My attention is diverted outside the open window, and I feel like I will die of boredom before the heat. I blink and then it happens: A sudden, earsplitting roar shoots through the streets of Siauliai, and our classroom shakes violently. Dirt billows inside from the rattling windows, and the children scream, and the Sisters pray. I duck onto the floor, coughing, my heart pounding as I turn and crawl towards Mendel who is crying loudly on the floor, covering his eyes. It feels as if the room has gotten hotter. I can hear the walls crack and dust trickles from above as Sister Angelika gathers children near her. And in a few seconds, Hell on Earth is over.

The next few days are loud and contentious. There is fighting in the streets between Lithuanian and German soldiers against the Soviets. We children do not do many chores or any more classes. I keep Mendel by me all hours. I pray, and sometimes he joins me. On July twenty-seventh, nineteen forty-four, there are shouts of joy in the streets: "The Germans are gone! Praise the Lord Almighty!" I look at Mendel and I hug him tightly, and I start to laugh and I don't stop for a long time. But then the celebration fades, and I am faced with reality: The bomb the Soviets had dropped landed on the ghetto where we lived. Our home was surely eradicated...but Tata and Mother and the others could very much still be out there, and I am not willing to forget them.

To avoid the commotion on the streets, we take the same route we did around the city. The green nature out here has turned into a dry, tan landscape, and the lake is ruined. It's no longer the sparkly blue I remember; it has turned into a murky, dark sludge as thick as honey from honeycomb. Rank and dirty, my lake has been tainted by the war.

Upon arriving at the beginnings of the ghetto, I can tell there's not much left. Even though I knew it wouldn't be the same, my spirits drop, and I squeeze my brother's hand as I take in the remains. We walk among the ash-covered roads and stop before the mess that was once my home. I cannot stop the tears that...

...start to fall down my cheeks and onto the pavement and I feel like crying until they have cleaned all the blackness away, and poor Mendel stays silent next to me, unsure of what to do except to hug my side. After many minutes, I hear a voice.

“Vichna.”

I gasp violently, turning my head to that distant, familiar voice... and it is Idel. He is alive and well, with the same brown hair and teasing eyes that now seem more weary than ever. My despair seems to vanish, and I do not care that he is wearing a Red Army uniform. Hope, relief, joy, and every good thing bubbles up in me again, and I run to him, and he hugs me right back. With loud, unconcealed voices, we praise God in our beautiful language.



3rd Place Winner:

Clockwork by Eliana Richie

Imagine for a moment that you are able to fly. Now place yourself high in the sky, up in the clouds, soaring over green hills that fade slowly into dense, dark wood. Drop down, now, until you are almost hitting the tops of the trees, and soon you will see the woods begin to thin, ever so slowly, until suddenly they end altogether, and you are skimming over the smooth surface of a glassy lake. And there, on the opposite shore, is a building.

“But Grandma,” I cry, impatient, “Skip to the action.”

“Be patient, my love.” Says Grandma. “All in due time.”

Its white marble walls gleam in the sunlight, dazzlingly bright. You glide slowly over an ivy-covered wall that encircles the building and swoop over a neat grass lawn that gives way to a flower garden, crisscrossed with thin stone paths. The building’s marble walls loom before you, so you bank to the left, circling higher and higher, around a wide, glass-domed tower. And there, growing right through the middle of the glass, is an ancient tree, with gnarled branches like fingers, reaching for the sun.

Here you alight, and peer down through the glass, into the room below. The walls are lined with shelves overflowing with books, dusty glass jars, rolls of parchment, wilted flowers with each petal hanging limp and dry, broken vases, and hundreds of little tools and inventions. And at the far end of the room, is a door. It is an ancient door, with cracks running like a spider’s web across its rough wooden surface and the screws poking out of their holes.

Suddenly the door flies open with a crash, and in marches a woman. She is tall, slim, and beautiful. Her silver hair is swept back into a knot at the base of her neck, and her gown is a dark green, with gold lining the edges. Crinkles line her face, and there are lines around her eyes that suggest she smiles often, but right now, the ones on her forehead are most pronounced. They are dark and deep, and her stormy grey eyes flash in anger.

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As she strides to the opposite wall, another woman staggers in through the open door behind her. This one is young, with light golden hair that is falling out of its braid, and dark blue eyes. One of her hands is wrapped in a bloodstained bandage and her dress is muddy and torn. She sags against the doorframe, watching the other woman stride across the room to a bookshelf and begin to rummage around in the junk heaped on its shelves.

“Phoebe, please.” The young woman straightens and, holding her bandaged hand to her chest, walks towards the other woman. “This isn’t necessary!”

“Phoebe?” I cry. “Phoebe? But that’s your name, Grandma!”

“Why so it is.” Grandma murmurs.

Phoebe turns on her heel and begins searching another bookshelf.

“Miss Alina, I have told you before, and I say it again. This is absolutely necessary.” Phoebe knocks a jar to the ground in her haste and it shatters, the sound echoing off the walls.

Tears well in Alina’s eyes. “Fine. Be that way! See if I care.” She kicks aside the shards of glass and storms to the opposite wall.

Phoebe sighs, pulling a dusty book off the shelf and examining its cover, “You should care, Alina, as this concerns both you and your family.” She tosses the book back onto the shelf and picks up a chunk of moldy honeycomb. Wrinkling her face in disgust, she drops this back onto the shelf as well. “It concerns you a great deal.”

Alina turns and watches Phoebe, picking up random objects, examining them, and depositing them back onto a shelf.

“You think I don’t know that?” she says, her voice rising, “you think I don’t know that I and everyone I love is in danger? Do you?”

“I know that you know it, but you seem not to care.” Phoebe sounds annoyed. She sets a vase back on the shelf and walks to the opposite wall, and searches that shelf.

“What are you even looking for, anyway?” Alina asks, rather crossly.

“We need both a door, and a key for the door.”

“What do you mean, a door? There aren’t any but the one we came through.”

“Not that you can see.” Phoebe gingerly sets a clouded jar of what looks like yellowed toenail clippings onto a shelf. “Aha! Here they are.” She holds up a dusty cuckoo clock and a small iron key.

“Um, Phoebe, that is not a door. Or a doorknob.”

“Actually, child, it is both.”

“Grandma,” I say, “A cuckoo clock is definitely NOT a door. Or a doorknob.”

Grandma smiles.

Phoebe marches to a stretch of wall not covered by bookshelves, places the back of the clock on the wall, inserts the key into a hole on the clock’s face, and turns it.

Instantly, an outline of a door appears on the wall.

“It’s time you learned some things,” Phoebe says, tossing aside the clock and key.

“Follow me.”

Alina is still gaping at the wall now turned door. “I didn’t know you could do that!”

“There are many things you don’t know about me, child. I keep many secrets.” Phoebe steps through the door.

Alina followed Phoebe down a flight of damp stone steps. It grew darker with every step, until it was impossible to see anything. Phoebe murmured something, then, and a ball of flickering flame floated on the palm of her hand. They continued down, down, down, so deep that Alina wondered whether they were below the lake. As she thought this, she rounded a corner and almost ran into Phoebe who was turning the knob of a black iron door with leaves engraved on its cold surface.

The two women entered a vast cavern that looked like it had been hewn from the earth. Tree roots twisted in and out of the walls and snaked along the room's floor. Little hexagonal pockets lined one wall, giving the impression of a giant beehive. The ceiling was hung with a million pieces of colored glass that sparkled in the light of Phoebe's flame. This she touched to a torch hanging in a bracket on the wall. Each torch along the wall sputtered to life, even though she had touched but one. Phoebe barely glanced at any of this, and instead turned to face Alina who was staring open-mouthed at the torches.

"I didn't know you could do that, either!"

"Like I said, Miss Alina. I keep many secrets. However, I am now going to reveal three to you. But be warned. Much of this information is rather..." She paused, "Esoteric."

"What does 'esoteric' mean, Grandma?"

"It has a few meanings, dear, but here it is used to describe the information as 'difficult to understand'."

"I'm sure it won't be that hard to understand." I say.

Alina crossed her arms. "I'm sure it's nothing I can't handle."

Phoebe raised her eyebrows. "Well, then, what do you think of...this!" She seized the pointer finger of her left hand and jerked, hard. The skin up to her elbow rippled and stretched, until it slid off like a glove.

Beneath the skin, there was no bone, or muscle, or tendons, or even blood. Instead, there were hundreds of gears, screws, tiny pistons, metal rods, and springs, gently whirring and ticking away.

Alina gave a little shriek, tripped on the hem of her dress, and landed with a *thud* on the dirt floor.

"You—you—how—why—what?" Her hand shakes slightly as she points at Phoebe's arm.

“I thought you said you could handle anything, so I skipped right to my biggest secret of all. As you can see, I am not a true human at all. I can think, feel, and act just how a human would, but my entire being is like a clock. I am run by gears, springs, and the like.” As Phoebe spoke, her right hand strayed absently to one of the coiled springs on her forearm and began gently plucking it, making a soft twanging sound.

Alina was struggling to stand, but was having difficulty as she couldn't use her bandaged hand. Phoebe paid almost no attention to her, and continued on.

“That is the first secret. Here is the second.” Phoebe crossed her arms over her chest, shut her eyes, and disappeared. Alina had just managed to stand, but promptly fell back down with a cry of shock and dismay.

Phoebe's voice came from somewhere in the room. “As you can see, or, actually, not see, I can vanish at will. However, this has its limitations. For example, I can only vanish when in a building; it is absolutely impossible to do so outside in the open air. Second, I can remain invisible only for about ten to fifteen minutes.”

There was a small popping noise, and Phoebe reappeared at Alina's elbow. Alina shrieked.

“My goodness, child, I will have to ask you to stop making such ridiculous noises. And do stop acting so surprised.” She leaned down and grasped Alina under her arms and hoisted her to her feet. Alina swayed gently on the spot; the good hand pressed to her head.

“What—how—why—how?” she muttered feebly.

“It seems you are in shock. I told you it would be difficult to understand, Alina.” In response, Alina blinked slowly and shook her head like a dog trying to rid itself of an annoying fly, buzzing around its head.

“I will get it over quickly, then. Here is the last secret.” Phoebe knelt on the dirt floor and swirled her hands in circles in the dust. Slowly, the circles she made...

...began to glow golden, brighter and brighter, until it was so bright, Alina had to squint to make out her companion's form kneeling on the ground. Suddenly, the lines cracked, split, and deepened into dark crevices in the floor. Phoebe stopped, and stood.

“As well as being a part-human, made out of clockwork, who is able to vanish, I am also an Earth-Splitter. Earth Splitters are people who can bend the ground and dirt to do their will, as you can see here.”

Alina collapsed on the spot.

There is silence.

“Grandma,” I whisper.

“Yes,?”

“You’re the Phoebe in the story, aren’t you?” I murmur.

Grandma’s grey eyes study me. “Yes.” She whispers. “But that is a secret I keep.”

Honorable Mention:

The Eyes of the Dread

by Louis Ford

Lieutenant Colonel Murphy Staves was lost, in his own space station no less! It felt like he had been wandering around for hours. He didn't even know how he had gotten lost. He tried to remember. *Let's see*, he thought, *there was a formal dinner, Lord Admiral Chikofskée had been there, as well as some members of the high council, the staff of my Summer Station of course.* Okay, he was getting somewhere. *And after dinner there had been a heated discussion about the problem of the Dread. It was Master Sergeant James A. Schmit who had done most of the talking. A right nutty one that Schmit, but when it comes to a computer error, rogue AI that needs hacking into or data eating virus; I would take Schmit over a hacker drone any day*, Murphy thought. *Schmit had talked about welcoming the dread with open arms*, he recalled.

He was getting frustrated now. Though he could recall the events of the night before, he still couldn't remember how he had gotten lost or where he was! Murphy sighed, venting his anger. Ever since the white hole had opened, things had gotten weird everywhere. One scientist had suggested that clashing physics from our universe and the Dreads universe was causing waves of psychic disturbance that wreaked havoc on basically everything.

He couldn't figure out where he was and he couldn't ask because he had passed nothing but a couple of silent security drones bearing the floating petal symbol of the Summer Station. *Those drones*, Murphy reflected, *are the best gift of technology ever given to humans! Along with that exceptional AI to command them of course. God bless those big-headed geeks from Vadum 4.* Murphy suddenly stopped. He thought he had heard something. But, up until now, the entire station had gone quiet. Except for, what was that scraping? A huge shadow loomed around the corner. Murphy unsheathed and activated his Eve weapon, the purple glow of the magical mineral illuminating the dimly lit hallway. Because of his extensive combat experience, he instinctively got into the standard starting pose. With his sword up and ready as if it was second nature to him.

An unholy beast stalked around the corner with long strides. A retched, hunched creature with scales the color of charcoal, a pulsing glow burning within it. It had a sinister snakelike head that sat atop a long neck. It leered at him with eyes that glowed a menacing orange. It was a Dread! It flapped its leathery, bat-like wings and stamped its taloned feet in an act of challenge. Murphy accepted his challenge by charging the beast, giving a war cry that would have made the most battle-hardened veteran pause. The Dread didn't even flinch. It simply charged with a war cry of its own. Halfway down the hallway, the dread opened its mouth and exhaled an unnatural amount of fiery slag! Murphy lunged and ducked into a doorway. The huge amount of glowing energy hit the space behind where Murphy had just been standing! Murphy jumped out of the doorway and swung his Eve blade at the Dread. The beast parried the blow easily. Where sharpened wing and Eve blade met, purple and orange sparks flew.

This dread was strong enough to take on the biggest of the house sized Vanguard Drones, but Muphy had fought in many hard wars. They dueled their way across corridors and up elevator shafts, down long hallways, and through claustrophobic barracks. Neither one gained any ground on the other. Until finally they had danced each other nearly to exhaustion, both their blows softening and their reactions slowing. Soon they found themselves in a massive room backed up against a pillar of Eve. One of the many generators that runs the Summer Station. Murphy was breathing hard, the long fight taking its toll on his old body. Suddenly, he tripped, his tired ankle giving way! The beast, who was equally as tired, took the opportunity and lunged despite his exhaustion. Murphy had hoped it would. When the beast got close, he stood up and leaped out of the way and gave the Dread a good boot on the backside. The foul creature went tumbling head long into the pillar of energy. "Be gone!" Shouted Murphy, and vanish the beast did, leaving nothing behind but the smell of burning flesh.

Murphy sheathed his Eve blade, breathing heavily. He crouched down, weariness overcoming him. But he was now able to finally focus on his thoughts. *Why was there a DREAD in my station?* He asked himself. *The last incursion was at least a year ago, surely all of them had been exterminated by now, and why didn't a security drone hear me and come to help?*

He suddenly remembered something. Pulling his data tablet out of its discreet pouch on his belt, he switched it on and thumbed the dial to the station's security database. At all times the station's advanced AI computer was recording surveillance video with full audio. Murphy accessed the recordings from the previous night. The speaker burst to life, playing what sounded like a conversation between a ship and a traffic control operator...

"This is Alpha bra...[STATIC]...cho 1 9 2. Do you read me, I repeat, do your rea... [STATIC]"

"We hear you alpha bravo echo 1 9 2, this is Lieutenant Timothy Nokk, What is your situation?"

"Sir, my ship the VNS Indomitable ha...[STATIC]...had a mutiny of the most disturbing kind."

"Alpha Bravo Echo 1 9 2 clarify, how can your ship have a mutiny? according to the VNS Indomitable ship plans, your crew is made up entirely of drones. Is that correct?"

"That is correct sir, but... [STATIC]... that is what is disturbing, because my drones aren't responding, their just sitting at their stations, plugged in, doing absl.. [STATIC]... othing. permission to... [STATIC]... ake a emergency landing, because I cant fly this ship by myself ."

"Permission granted. Sentinel 0739, secure hanger 08 permission key and- hold on!"

"What is it?"

"Now my drones aren't responding! Like you described, their just sitting at their stations!"

"Well then could you open the hanger manually- what the devil!" "My ship is out of control, I can't steer! oh god, I'm heading straight for the command tower!"

"I beg your pardon. Alpha Bravo Echo 1 9 2, please clarif-"

"Oh for God's sake! My ship controls aren't responding! I'm plunging into the command tower! Get out of there!"

"Oh my god, I see you! Evacuate tower! There's a ship coming! head for the emergen-... [STATIC]"

[LOSS OF SIGNAL]

[TOWER OFFLINE]

The recording faded out with a last, sorrowful "beep."

The tortured screeching of a rusty door opening made Murphy jump. In the far corner of the generator room, a secret door had opened. Beyond which was a honeycomb of cubby holes, each one with a pair of menacing glowing, orange eyes peeking out of it. But it was the figure in the doorway that drew Murphy's attention. It was Master Sergeant James A. Schmit, and he was holding an Eve blaster.

"Wha... why... how?" Murphy managed through trembling lips. He composed himself and said, "What's going on here, Schmit?"

"It's really quite simple," Schmit responded, grinning maniacally, "I modified the plans on the Summer Station so that anyone else would think that this secret room is simply a large sewage tank! And then I hacked all of the station's drones in order to get rid of any of the real threats. Now all I have to do is move in. You do recall that the Lord Admiral Chicofskee was taking an overnight stay, don't you?" Murphy did recall.

"But why?" Murphy said, "Why would you betray your own species to a bunch of simple-minded monsters..." Murphy didn't get to finish his sentence, because at that moment, his hand was blown right off his arm! The bright purple beam had sliced clean through Murphy's wrist! He looked down at the stump where his hand had been with disbelief "Don't you dare call them that!" said Schmit, his Eve gun barrel smoking, eyes burning with rage. Behind him, the multitude of Dread shifted in their cubbies; their eyes fixed hungrily on the severed hand on the floor.

"This information was too esoteric for anyone's ears but my own, I mean, come on," he added, shrugging. "A entire colony of Dread living in the same space station as a bunch of people? Anyone else would have exterminated these lovely creatures." Through the excruciating pain, Murphy realized with a twinge of panic that it had been Schmit that he sent to kill the Dread in that last incursion a year ago! Obviously, he had instead sealed them away and kept them safe. "But of course," Schmit said, his grin reappearing, bigger than before. "All secrets must eventually be revealed!" And with that, Master Seargent James A. Schmit shot his commanding officer square in the chest! Murphy collapsed to the cold, hard floor with a huge smoking hole where his heart used to be! Even as his vision went black, he could hear Schmit saying, "Come my beauties, dinner"

Honorable Mention:

E Pluribus Unum

by Jackie Jiang

Some people say that when one gets close to the end of their life, they can feel it. It's described as this bittersweet, slow realization that the wonderful feeling of existence is coming to an end. The French have labeled it as *énouement* but I'd rather call it the end. I know it's over, still I try. It's so close but I just can't pinpoint when it's going to come out and take me. I've lived a long life, yet it still feels like there's so many things I haven't done. I keep telling myself I'm fulfilled, but what does that even mean?

The warm hug of sunlight embraces the skin of my eyelids as I pry them open in the early morning. My curtains have fluttered open during the night again from the soft breeze that flows in. I slowly sit up, the years of work relentlessly pushing back on my spine each day I choose to wake up. Like any other 80-year-old man, there is not much I tend to do on a day-to-day basis. After getting ready for something that seems to never come, I, once again, find myself sitting on the sofa, wondering what to do with the rest of my short lived life.

I glance to my left. Pictures of my estranged family neatly stacked beside each other along the wall side-by-side like dominoes, patiently waiting to be tipped over. This makes me remember. Nowadays, I find myself remembering more things than I am doing. My children, who have long left my life, are captured in those framed memories. That's not to say that they have completely cut me off but rarely do I communicate with my son or daughters anymore. Perhaps at Christmas or Thanksgiving I'll see their faces again before returning to my little lonesome life. My attention is brought to a strip of sunlight that glares over the face of a woman I once loved. I tell myself that she didn't just vanish but the truth is she did. On a quiet, rainy day in March—one moment she was here, and the next I was staring down into a 6ft hole, accompanied by our families. It's safe to say that her death was unexpected. We had our doctors check-up recently, just before she left. Back then, everything was fine. I was fine.

I look to my right. Rows and rows of books I'd never fully finished. I bought most of them, if I remember correctly. Or my wife did, I'm not so sure anymore...

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I'm sure those books are very interesting, but those are just the ones I decided to take out of my library. Out of everything on that shelf, I'd say I had read about one-third of the stories present. I wasn't much of a reader, more a story-teller—if anything. I can't seem to remember why there were so many books on that damn shelf. Where did they come from, anyways? As my eyes scan the thick and thin spines pressed up against each other. The titles don't particularly amuse me. I looked over the esoteric genres of wisdom captured on thin pages that only the select were allowed to enter once they thought themselves worthy. My eyes finally lay upon the lowest row of books. Picture and memory books quietly wound up on the bottom, gathering dust. Yearbooks, memoirs, scrapbooks, and much more were desperately trying to entice who had the time or interest to revisit long forgotten ideas. They didn't matter very much when it seemed that your world could end at any given moment.

I am shaken out of my own thoughts by the soft rumbling beside me on the couch. Oh, it's just purring.. I often forget I own a cat when there's so many nooks and crannies in the house to hide away in. I was never really fond of animals anyways. It was my beloved who was so desperate for the affection of nonsensical creatures in the first place. Why focus on organisms that cannot even understand the emotions you feel or the words you say when there is a whole world to explore? Pets are simply money-drainers that lonely people admire for a sense of comfort. I reach out and pet it, regardless. In a sea of so many things to do yet so little time, the warmth of its soft fur brought a wave of calm over my stiffened body. I let out the same tiring sigh I have done so many times before as I get up and make my way to my garden.

I advance across the living room, down the stairs, through the backyard, away from the pool, up the old brandished stone path by the rose bushes, and into my own abyss of dense weeds and everlasting invasive species that never seem to want to die out. I could easily hire or just tell my current gardeners to clean up this place and make it my own but there are still traces of her left in here if I just look closely enough. After so many months of stagnant carelessness, the greenhouse is a space that oddly reminds myself of me. Petals adorn the unswept floor...

...accompanied by overgrown vines stuck on the thin borders of polycarbonate. In the center of it all, lies a single yard chair and a lonesome bedside table. It seems out of place when you approach it. but when you sit down, the only thing that matters is what you see and what you feel. Here, when it's just me, myself, and I, the box of vinyls and a record player on the table beside me is all I need. Sure, I could be doing other things. I have the money, wisdom and whatever remaining time my soul contains. But once you get to my age, you start preferring to stay right where you are. Maybe one day I'll plan a cruise or catch a plane to some far off land I've never been to before. Maybe one day I'll really look into my mind and try to figure out what I want. Perhaps I'll do that thing or make that sacrifice, but for now, I am here and this is where I want to be. But still, something tugs at my heart and soul, begging me to do more.

In the blink of an eye, it's been two hours. I'll go for a walk around the lake and 30 minutes pass by. I'll go to my library and an hour will pass. I'll sit on my balcony, scrolling on my phone and an hour will pass. Time seems to go faster and slower than it used to. When I was younger, I'd go to these wild meetings with my friends and it was as if time itself was a blur and my own world seemed to blend into myself for a while. Nowadays, the world isn't very accepting of senior citizens no matter how much power they may possess. I understand that I am one of the very few people on this Earth that can truly do anything they want to do. I have it all now. Wealth, success, a legacy, but all I crave now is the sweet anointment of youth and caress of extra time. I have plenty of things planned out for the future but something tells me that I'm not going to get very far. In a week and a half, I'll take my jet to Costa Rica and meet up with some old business partners. They call me the chairman of the company but I know damn well that they don't let me in on any of their big plans. They think I don't notice but I know that they're just waiting for me to die off. I'm one of the richest men in the world for god's sake!

I am a billionaire. I really don't think people know how much wealth that is and even if you did, do you really believe that I worked justly and righteously for every single dollar bill that has found its way into my life? Do you think all the people with the amount of wealth you can't even fathom did as well?

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A million dollars, given for free and without consequence to anybody, would probably change their lives. But there are a thousand millions in one billion. Do you see what I am yet? Picture this, one one-hundred dollar bill. That's some money. You could buy lots of things with that—although, I'm not exactly up to date on the current rate of inflation anymore. But a million dollars is 43 inches worth of dollar bills. That's just about 3.6 feet. Perhaps the height of someone's little brother or your crappy bedside table you got from IKEA or Facebook Marketplace that was made by some labourer in a third-world country. On the other hand, a stack of a billion dollars is about 3,600 feet high. That's one thousand feet taller than the tallest building in the world. Now imagine having a net worth of 300 billion. You do the math, I'm sure you're capable. Imagine how many people I could've saved, how many lives I could've changed, different events I could've influenced the outcome of. Can you tell what I'm getting at now?

Night comes as it does, just like every single day in my life as the sun begins to set. The sun begins to dip below the horizon and I wonder what makes it look so different from all the other times I watched the sunset. Why do people watch the sunset or sunrise repeatedly anyway? It's the same sight every time. Perhaps sometimes a new color may arise in the blend of luminescence of the sky or different cirrus clouds will appear, whisking into the pigmented heavens, but at the end of the day it's just night greeting you and daytime bidding its farewells. In my lap, there lay a plate of strawberries, drizzled over with honey, pieces of honeycomb quietly sat beside the sweet pieces of fruit. Here, I could have anything I wanted. But I didn't really need anything. Just a little more time, and I swear I'll get everything sorted out. I keep telling myself that one of these days I'll tie up all of my loose ends but with my lack of incentive, I don't really care anymore. I don't think I ever cared in the first place.

As I sat there, I awaited the cool shiver of dread or perhaps even regret to crawl over my skin but I felt nothing. Not even calm, peace, or a cool state of mind. Not an ounce of guilt even drifted over my heart. I was alone, but I was me. When all of this is over, I think I'll pay my family a visit...say goodbye to my beloved, mother, father, and brother. Perhaps I will see them again, some sunny...

...day when the weather gets nicer. I suddenly remembered my doctor telling me to get my affairs in order. Death is nothing I'm not scared of, so why don't I feel a sense of urgency to do the things I wanted? Not yet a corpse, I still can feel my body rotting from the inside. I don't know what I'm looking for anymore. But it doesn't really matter, does it? I think that when I'm gone the world will just keep on moving along. Time doesn't stop for anybody and it sure as hell doesn't stop for me. Those books I never read, movies and shows I never saw, people I never visited, places I never went, decisions I never made, choices I regret, it won't matter to me anymore. No amount of money can bring back what was lost. For the time being, there is nothing I can do about the things I never did. But it's late, I guess I should go to bed. It's getting late. Enjoy your life.