

AN EXPLORATION IN GENRE

By

SAMANTHA NICOLE MARKS

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in

Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 2 0

Approved by:

Christopher Cokinos
Department of English

Abstract

This thesis project consists of three stories involving the same main characters, but written in different genres. Jaxson faces a moral conflict when he discovers the secrets his mother has been hiding from him in suburban Connecticut, a dystopian planet, and a medieval kingdom. The purpose of this project was to explore the same theme in different ways. Each story is set in a different world, showing Jaxson's life and experiences dealing with familial issues and relationships. The innocence-to-experience trope is followed in each world as Jaxson discovers the truth. I wanted to get out of my comfort zone and write in genres that I grew up reading, but never wrote in. I found it difficult to incorporate the same storyline into each new genre and struggled with creating plots that put the characters in similar headspaces. I chose the genres of literary fiction, science-fiction, and fantasy because they were three genres that I had the most experience with. I wanted each story to be about the same length and follow similar plot patterns, but that was difficult to stick with. As I wrote more, I became more comfortable with each genre and the personalities of the characters in their new universes. This project gave me the creative freedom to explore different genres and try something new.

One.

“Jaxson Miller?” called the woman at the DMV. Jaxson’s mother nudged his sleeping body to wake up and walk to the desk. They had been waiting almost two hours for Jaxson to take his driving test. He was newly sixteen and ready to get his freedom. His mother was neurotic about timing and insisted they always arrive anywhere at least fifteen minutes early. That meant Jaxson was waiting at his buddy’s locker alone every morning before first period. His locker was next to Sasha’s, though, so Jaxson didn’t always mind getting there early because on days she wasn’t running late she would come over and get her Spanish book and flash him a shy smile before heading off to meet her friends. Sometimes, if he was lucky, Sasha would be wearing a skirt and her backpack would pull the edges up just enough. She usually noticed and pulled it back down before he could really see anything, but it was still enough for his mind to wander.

“Jaxson Miller! Last call.” The woman’s voice snapped his brain back to reality and he started walking with more purpose. He could feel his mother’s irritated stare from behind him. She hated how slow he walked and was always getting on him about being more purposeful in his actions.

“Hey, that’s me,” Jaxson said to the woman whose hair looked like it had been through a deep fryer. It was orange and poufy and Jaxson imagined if he touched it, it would flake off into his fingers.

“Got your permit?” The woman asked. He nodded and reached into his pocket to hand it to her. “Mr. Sampson will be taking you on your test. Go out those doors to the right and you’ll do the parking test first. Then you drive around the block with him and come back.”

“Okay, thanks,” Jaxson said taking his permit back. He looked to his mother to wave, but she was playing a game on her phone. It was typical of her not to wish her only child good luck on something important. She believed luck was for people who didn’t prepare. Jaxson used to mind when he was younger and she refused to wish him luck before a big test or a baseball game but he was fairly used to it now.

“Miller, right? I’m James Sampson. You can go ahead and drive the vehicle you’ll be taking the test in over to this area.” Mr. Sampson pointed to a small parking lot outside the doors.

“Okay,” Jaxson replied and took his car keys out of his pocket. His parents had gotten him a brand new Nissan Altima for his birthday last week. He liked the car but hated the color. Why they thought light blue was the color a teenage boy wanted his first car to be was beyond him. He suspected his father had very little to do with choosing the car; he just handed the salesman the credit card. His mother probably only bought him the blue car because it would look nice in their driveway. She was always complaining about how little color their house had. It was a white two story with only a few touches of brown here and there. Jaxson’s father was very allergic to flowers and grass so they didn’t have much plant life, which drove his mother crazy. He had told this theory to his friend Paul, but Paul just laughed at him and told him he was being dramatic. Obviously Paul didn’t know his mother very well.

“Okay son, let’s do a three point turn. You got a back-up camera in that thing?” Mr. Sampson said as Jaxson pulled the car around to the test area. He nodded and pointed to the camera. Mr. Sampson muttered something under his breath about kids being spoiled these days and handed Jaxson his clipboard. Upon seeing a clearly confused Jaxson, he added “Cover it with this.” Jaxson did. “So start in that spot, and then back-up, do the second point of the turn, and then pull into this spot? Understand?” Jaxson nodded and watched Mr. Sampson head off to the

plastic folding chair on the curb. He sat down and gave Jaxson the thumbs up. Jaxson completed the three-point turn and then finished the rest of the test with a similar ease.

“Over here, son,” Mr. Sampson directed Jaxson to the large white wall where he would get his photo taken. Now off her phone, his mother licked her fingers and came over to her son, fussing over his light brown hair. Jaxson whined at her to stop, obviously embarrassed. “Mrs. Miller, ahem,” Mr. Sampson coughed, cocking his head to the long line of people waiting for the camera and signaling to the woman that it was time for her to move out of the way.

“One, two, three,” said the short woman manning the camera.

“Wait, I wasn’t ready. Can I redo it?” Jaxson asked nervously. He had been looking off to see where his mother went when the woman began counting out of the blue. He barely had time to focus his eyes on the camera, let alone smile.

“No, sorry. Next!” And so he was ushered away from the wall to wait anxiously for the picture he didn’t want to see.

After a long few minutes, he was called to make sure everything on the new ID was correct. He and his mother both looked it over and saw that his name was spelled correctly, his address was right, and his height was just what he wanted, an inch or two taller than he really was. As they left the DMV and walked back to the blue Nissan, his mother teased him, “6’1” Jaxson, really?”

“Shut up, Mom. No one knows the difference between 6’ and 6’1”. Besides, girls lie about their weight all the time on their ID’s.”

“I know, I know.”

Aside from the occasional directions from his mother, they drove home in silence. Upon pulling into the driveway, Rebecca said, “Should we celebrate tonight? Maybe dinner with your father? We could go to Cody’s?”

Jaxson was taken aback. His mother hadn’t even suggested going to Cody’s on his *actual* birthday. Cody’s was an expensive steak restaurant where his parents celebrated all their important events. They went there every anniversary and birthday, but after Jaxson’s father had been laid off from his firm and moved to an even smaller firm a little farther away, they hadn’t been celebrating there. Now, if Jaxson wanted a steak, they went to Outback. For his birthday last week, his mother had driven into the city to pick up his favorite pasta and pizza from Eataly. She had also gotten him his favorite cupcake flavors from a small Manhattan bakery. Aside from the ugly car color, she had been incredibly thoughtful for his birthday. When he was younger and his father was working on an important case, his mother used to take him into the city on the weekends. They would get lunch at Eataly, stop in the park to play, and then pick up some cupcakes on the way home. They always waited to eat the cupcakes until they were with his father. Robert would look at the two of them and give them a big smile that never quite reached his eyes. Then he would pick up Jaxson and take him to the kitchen to eat the cupcakes together and watch a movie.

Now, Jaxson was lucky to see his father during the week at all. He spent a lot of time away from the house, at “work,” or at least that’s what he said. But Jaxson was suspicious. He never voiced his concerns, especially not to his mother. She seemed so unaware. She would sit around the house and clean all day and then be out running errands or working out after he came home from school. He was usually alone at the house which he didn’t mind, especially now that

he had a car. He could drive him and Sasha to his house after school if he ever got the courage to ask for her number.

Tomorrow, he decided. Tomorrow morning he would get to school a little early and stand by Paul's locker, waiting as usual. It wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. But when Sasha came to get her books for Spanish, he would talk to her. *Hey, you're in Calculus, right?* And she would nod, *Yes*. They would start talking and she'd ask him to tutor her after school.

For now, though, he needed to finish his math homework. His mother had made the MVD appointment at 5, giving him just enough time to start but not finish all his homework. It was 7 pm on a Tuesday. His favorite TV shows would be starting now, but he needed to finish his homework or else risk hearing his mother nag him the entire time. He could always just rewind the show. As Jaxson pulled out his math textbook and homework sheet, he heard his father come home. It was pretty late for him to be coming home now that his job was a lot less stressful, but Jaxson ignored that fact. He focused on his homework and pretty quickly he was done. He was just about to open his door so he could go down and catch up on the TV he missed when he heard his parents fighting. He couldn't make out the words, but he could tell his dad was really angry.

This had been happening for the last few months. He never understood why. His dad was the one who always sounded so angry, but *he* was the one coming home late when everyone knew he didn't have enough work to keep him at the office until 8 pm regularly. Jaxson sighed and hopped into bed. *No use in trying to go downstairs now*, he thought. He'd let his parents fight about whatever stupid thing it was this time for about 30 minutes before he went down. After all, he did need to eat something. He usually ignored the fighting and pretended it wasn't going on, but sometimes his coach would pull him aside at practice when he noticed Jaxson

wasn't giving his full attention. Then after practice he would sit with Coach Drew for about a half an hour and tell him what was going on. It was nice to be able to talk to someone who cared and could give him some advice. Drew told Jaxson how he dealt with it when his dad cheated on his mom which really helped Jaxson feel more normal. Drew was only 28 and had moved to Connecticut after working in the city for a few years after he graduated college. He was tired of the fast paced life he was living in the city and transferred to a smaller company in a smaller city where he was able to coach high school baseball in the evenings and on weekends.

He had practice tomorrow afternoon so he could talk to Drew then. Maybe they could even go get some pizza. Drew would always give Jaxson snacks whenever he mentioned that his parents fought in the kitchen around meal time. He never did it with pity though; he was careful to make sure Jaxson didn't feel like the protein bar was charity.

It was getting late so Jaxson headed to his bathroom to brush his teeth. As he walked down the hall, he noticed the light in his parent's bedroom was off and the TV was playing downstairs. He knew his mother was probably in bed and his father was downstairs sleeping on the couch. Again.

*

The next morning Jaxson woke up before his alarm. He was planning on talking to Sasha today. He had heard from a few people she was looking for a math tutor and was going to try to casually bring up his interest in tutoring her when he saw her at her locker. He got in the shower and made sure to actually wash his face this time. He found the process of washing his face to be tedious and annoying, so he rarely did it. But he would do it for Sasha. He didn't want to look greasy and pimply when he asked her out today. Not that he really had any acne, but still. It was the thought that mattered in this case.

He put on a light blue t-shirt that he didn't really love, but everyone told him it made his blue eyes stand out when he wore it. The problem was that he had a hard time matching this shirt. He didn't want to wear it with basketball shorts, but he also didn't want to wear something more dressy. Eventually he settled on his expensive gray 'athleisure' shorts his Aunt Karla got him for his birthday. He didn't really see the point in them when he opened them, but now he understood their purpose. He felt like he maybe looked a little too summery, but it was the middle of September so technically it wasn't fall yet. He grabbed a pair of socks from his closet and tossed his math book and homework into his open backpack. His black converse were waiting for him by the steps. He came down, expecting to find his mother, but the kitchen was empty. It was honestly for the better she wasn't there. She'd ask him about the shorts and give him a whole talk about driving to school and finding a parking spot and blah blah blah. *Shit! A parking spot.* Jaxson hadn't even considered the possibility of not being able to find parking and worried that if he left at his usual time he may take so long to park that he wouldn't get to Paul's locker in time to see Sasha.

Glancing at the clock, Jaxson realized he should leave. It was 7:10 and he usually left at 7:20 anyways. It wasn't like he could make a great breakfast in only ten minutes anyways. He had never taken this long to get ready and wasn't used to the repercussions. *I'll just sneak out the gate and get Chick-fil-A at lunch,* he figured.

"Bye mom!" Jaxson called as he slid his feet into his shoes and grabbed his keys. He closed the door before she could respond. He was not in the mood for a photo by his car. The drive to school was short and pleasant. He took the back roads because he wasn't sure which exit to get off at. Okay, technically he was, but he was also technically a little afraid to merge on and off without someone else in the car.

Upon arriving to school, twenty minutes before the first bell, Jaxson felt like an idiot. The parking lot was completely empty. He had definitely had enough time to toast a bagel or some waffles. His stomach grumbled. He hadn't even thought to bring himself a snack. Usually he packed his lunch in the morning because he just made himself a peanut butter and jelly and didn't like the bread being cold from putting it in the fridge overnight. He ignored his stomach as he walked into the gates. His mom usually only got him to school a few minutes later than he arrived so he figured he could stop by the bathroom and check his hair before heading to Paul's locker.

His hair was fine and there was nothing in his teeth since he hadn't eaten since before his driver's test yesterday. So he left the bathroom and waited for Sasha. As he arrived at Paul's locker and began to text him his plan, he caught a glimpse of blonde hair approaching. He looked up and saw Sasha. He choked trying to swallow his spit and she looked up at him. *That's awesome*, he thought, *way to go, idiot*.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he laughed it off. He was trying his best to appear natural and not scared out of his mind. She just nodded in response, though. "Hey, you needed help with math, right?"

"Huh?" Oh no. She looked even more confused than she did when he choked on his own saliva. How was he stupid enough to believe that the girl he had been obsessing over for months but had never even spoken to would just agree to let him tutor her?

"Oh, no, I just heard that you were looking for some help before the AP test."

"Oh, yeah, I was! Sorry, I'm spacey in the mornings sometimes," she smiled. "I have gym practice from 5 to 9 every night so after school is really the only time I can do it."

"Gym?"

“Yeah, I’m a gymnast.” This was news to Jaxson.

“Oh, got it. I actually have baseball practice right after school usually until around 4:30. But if you can’t find anyone I could probably help you after gym.” He wasn’t sure he should have added that last part. He was sure the last thing she wanted to do after a four hour practice was study for AP Calculus. But she gave him a grateful smile and reached her hand out to him.

“Okay, thanks. I’m Sasha, by the way.”

“Jaxson,” he replied, shaking her hand. He expected her hands to be soft and warm but they were rough and patchy, probably from gymnastics. As she walked away he noticed the muscles in her legs and her arms in a way he hadn’t before. She must be at a high level if she has such long practices every day. Jaxson’s baseball practices were only an hour and a half.

He stood there watching her walk away and contemplated his actions, wondering if he should’ve given her his number (he decided that may have been too forward and creepy, but then decided he was just a coward), Paul walked over. He was with their other friend George.

“How’s Sasha?” George laughed and winked.

“Apparently a gymnast?” Jaxson said. Paul and George just laughed at his cluelessness.

“Yeah, man. Everyone knows that, she’s always missing class for it. She’s like pretty good I heard.”

“Yeah, I guess. I just didn’t expect her to be complicated.”

“Complicated? She plays a sport, dude. Not that complicated,” responded George. Jaxson wasn’t always the biggest fan of George, but he and Paul had been friends since birth practically, so he had to learn to deal with it or risk not having any friends.

“Whatever. I can’t tutor her because of the times of her practices.”

“Oh, damn, that sucks. Sorry dude.”

“She’ll probably start studying with Matt McCarthy,” George chimed in. Matt McCarthy was the new student from California. He was tan and tall and a swimmer. Jaxson had seen all the girls staring at him and gossiping about him this year. There went his chance with Sasha, she would probably be all over him. “Honestly, I could see them dating. They seem really similar.”

“George, shut up. Jaxson likes her,” Paul finally spoke up. He knew it was mostly George who instigated these things, but it didn’t make much of a difference to him anymore. George and Paul had been teasing him like this for a few years. Jaxson was finally starting to think it wasn’t just friendly, as he had been telling himself. After all, George never did anything to Paul and Jaxson never did anything to either of them. Maybe it was finally time to admit to himself that George didn’t like him. It wasn’t like Jaxson needed George to like him.

“I’m gonna go talk to Coach Drew, see you later.” Jaxson left without another word. He walked to the gymnasium and went through the men’s locker room in search of Drew. His office was located at the back, past all the showers so he had to see all the track kids getting ready after their morning workout. When he got to Drew’s office, he knocked once before opening the door.

“Hey man, what’s up?” Drew was sitting with his back to the door, feet propped up on the wall. There was a half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich in his hand and he had headphones on. Drew lived his life like he was still 19 years old and living in a fraternity house. It was what made Jaxson so comfortable around him—he felt like an older brother and not an authority figure. Drew swiveled around in his chair and popped out a headphone and motioned for Jaxson to sit down at the chair across from the desk. “Parents or George today?”

“Right now, George, but my parents are still fighting every night.”

“You eat dinner? Or was it in the kitchen?”

Jaxson shook his head ‘no’ and Drew tossed him his sandwich. Jaxson shook his head again, he didn’t want to eat Drew’s sandwich. Drew was kind of a disgusting eater and Jaxson wasn’t interested in getting some of his saliva mixed in with the grape jelly.

“Suit yourself. If you want to go get food, I can give you a few bucks and talk to your first period teacher for you. Tell him you’re helping me out with something so they don’t call your mom. You got your license yesterday, right?”

“Yeah, I drove to school this morning so I guess technically I could go get food now. I was planning on waiting until lunch though.” As he said the words, his stomach grumbled and Drew laughed. He pulled out his wallet from a drawer in his desk and handed him a ten dollar bill, which Jaxson took eagerly, grateful for the opportunity to get some food.

“Just pay me back, okay?” Jaxson nodded knowing that Drew wouldn’t take the money when he tried to give it to him. Instead he’d get him a soda or something. As Jaxson stood up to walk to his car, Drew looked like he was about to say something. His eyes looked conflicted and Jaxson knew immediately what it was about. The game on Saturday was really important and Jaxson had been slacking at practice. He knew Drew would need to put someone else in even though he felt bad. Not wanting to get more disappointing news, Jaxson turned away from Drew and headed out the door. The lingering silence felt strange, but he shrugged it off and headed towards his car.

The sun was blinding but there was a nice breeze in the air. Jaxson walked leisurely through the parking lot. He was more worried about where he would get food from than if his mom would find out if he ditched first period. Since he had decided on Chick-fil-A when he was planning on skipping at lunch, he was craving fried chicken. He put the nearest location into his GPS and let the voice take him to warm chicken and hash browns.

By the time he had gone through the drive-thru and eaten his chicken biscuit in the parking lot, it was only a quarter of the way through first period. He still had about forty minutes to kill before he needed to be back at school. He decided to rush home and make a sandwich for lunch quickly. The chicken was good, but it wasn't filling and he'd be starving by the end of the day. A PB&J would take him maybe three minutes to make—he'd be back at school by the time the first bell for second period rang.

He turned up the radio as he drove home, smiling and enjoying his new freedom. This was a life he could get used to. Who cared if he couldn't eat dinner at home because his parents were screaming at each other all the time? He got to skip AP Calculus to get breakfast. He was feeling pretty good about things right now.

Around 9 am, Jaxson was pulling into his driveway. His parents parked their cars in the garage, so he had no way of knowing if they were home or not. He knew his dad was definitely at the office and he figured his mom would be at the gym or the grocery store by this time, but part of him was a little worried. He tried to be stealthy and turn the key as slowly as he could, just in case she was home. As he was getting ready to turn the handle, he heard something coming from inside. His mother was yelling something from upstairs. He heard another voice, but couldn't place it, so he decided to let his curiosity beat out his desire to avoid getting caught.

As he entered his suburban Connecticut home, built for a husband, wife, and some children, complete with a big backyard for dogs, he realized his mother's voice was traveling to the kitchen, where he saw a shirtless man behind the island biting into an apple. It took Jaxson's eyes a few seconds to process who the man was. As soon as he did, he wished he hadn't come in the door.

"Hey kid, what's up?" Drew asked, crunching loudly into the apple.

“Drew? What are you doing here? Don’t you teach P.E. right now?” As soon as the words came out of his mouth, Jaxson was kicking himself for not thinking of something smarter to say. Anything would have been better than asking about his work schedule, but he was too thrown off by Drew’s calm demeanor.

“Nah, went home sick after our talk. Had some other stuff to take care of,” Drew gave him a weird smile and what almost looked like a wink. Jaxson felt a chill creep up his spine. “Don’t worry, I told Cooper about you helping me out so he wouldn’t mark you absent.” Relief shot through Jaxson’s body like a reflex before he realized that he had bigger issues than his mom knowing he left school to get food.

“Drew? Come back upstairs, you’ve been gone long enough,” whined his mother from the stairway. Jaxson turned to look, hoping that she might offer any sort of explanation, but she had already turned and was walking back up the stairs. All he could see of her was her ankle, pale and petite, with a small tattoo. He couldn’t quite make out what it was, but it looked like a butterfly. *When did Mom get a tattoo?*

“Okay I might be a minute or two longer. Just hang on.” His calmness was freaking Jaxson out.

“What could possibly be taking this long? You went to get a snack! And you better not have eaten Robert’s chips. I don’t have time today to go to the store and rebuy them, let alone throw half away so he doesn’t suspect it’s a different bag like I did last week.”

Jaxson stood motionless. Now he wondered how many of the snacks his mom bought him were the original bag or a replacement for the bag Drew ate. How was his mother so unaware of his presence? She was a smart woman. She used to be a lawyer in New York City. Did she not hear Drew talking to someone? How often did he come over? *Why* was he over and

why was his mother asking him to come *back* upstairs? Drew was twenty years younger than her and she was married. What was she doing with Jaxson's baseball coach?

After moments of uncomfortable silence watching Drew bite into the apple, Jaxson spoke: "Why are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious? Parent-teacher conferences," Drew gave him the same allusive smile and eye twitch before he tossed the core of his apple into the sink and walked towards Jaxson. He instinctively jumped backwards in fear. Gone was the man who brought him snacks and gave him lunch money when his parents were fighting. This man was someone completely different, someone sinister. "Hey, Becs? Something came up, I gotta run!" Drew yelled up and walked past Jaxson, brushing against his shoulder in an alpha male way. "See you at practice, huh?" He called over his shoulder before closing the door on his way out.

Jaxson stood stunned. The Drew he knew was *not* the man who had just been eating an apple in his kitchen. "Drew, I swear to God—" His mother had been yelling as she angrily marched down the stairs, only stopping when she caught sight of her son. "Oh."

"Mom. Why was Coach Drew shirtless eating an apple in the kitchen?"

"Oh, um, honey. I—I can explain that. Really I can!" For the first time he could remember, his mom was stuttering and nervous. She was looking around in a panic. "What did he say to you? Is he still here? Drew?!" Jaxson could tell she was desperate for help defending herself. When no answer from her boyfriend came, she looked at the ground.

"Well?" demanded Jaxson. His patience was wearing thin. His mother's out-of-character quietness made him feel more in control than he had been in the presence of Drew's unwavering confidence. For once, he was in charge of a situation that involved him. This wasn't like

choosing a car. His mother wouldn't be able to pick the color out for him. He wanted answers and she was going to give them to him.

The front door opened and both Jaxson and Rebecca's eyes flitted to the figure in the doorway. Drew, still shirtless walked back in. "Forgot my shirt," he said as his explanation for reentering the house.

"Drew! Thank God. I was just telling Jaxson that you were helping me with something around the house," his mother lied. Drew cocked his eyebrows up as he walked back from retrieving the gray shirt from the kitchen.

"Nice try, I said parent-teacher conference. Good luck with the kid, he's nosy!" he called over his shoulder as he left again. Rebecca's face crumbled as she watched him leave. Jaxson felt his chest tighten when Drew said he was nosy. Drew had been like an older brother to him. He had always treated Jaxson with respect and Jaxson had thought he was Drew's favorite player on the team. Maybe it was all about his mom and Drew never even liked him.

There was a silence as mother and son processed the hurtful words Drew had spewed at them. Jaxson broke the silence. "Well?"

His mother sighed. He assumed he would be getting his answer, but instead, his mother asked, "Wait, why are you home? Shouldn't you be at school?"

The sudden change in subject caught him off guard. "I wanted to come home because—it doesn't matter. We weren't talking about that."

"Well, now we are. You can't just leave school any time you feel like it!"

"If you must know, I was starving because you and dad were fighting in the kitchen last night as always and I couldn't come down to get food."

“Oh, Jaxson, that’s ridiculous. Your father and I were barely arguing.” Rebecca began pacing around the kitchen island, not looking at the apple core in the sink.

“Barely arguing? Are you serious Mom?” Jaxson spun around to face her, exasperated.

“Yes. I was frustrated with him for not helping with the dishes. You very easily could have come downstairs and made yourself dinner. Honestly, if you felt uncomfortable, maybe you’re just a little too sensitive. There was nothing to feel uncomfortable about, Jaxson.”

“You’re messing with me, right? You cannot be serious. I just caught you with my fucking baseball coach and you’re trying to tell me the fight last night was nothing? There are obviously issues in your marriage, Mom.”

“Jaxson Noah Miller! Do not speak to me like that! I’m your mother. I will not tolerate this level of disrespect!” Jaxson could tell she was trying to avoid talking about what really happened, and it was working. He was getting frustrated with her for being mad at *him* when he didn’t do anything. He needed to refocus.

“Mom, what the *fuck*?! Just tell me what’s going on. Stop lying to me, I’m not a kid and I’m not being nosy. You need to act like an adult.”

“That’s it! You’re grounded!”

“For what? Seriously, please tell me what I’ve done that deserves being grounded. I came home from school to get food. If you weren’t having an affair with my baseball coach then maybe you could be mad at me for skipping class, but since you’re *having an affair with my baseball coach*, I don’t see how you can ground me.”

“You’re grounded for the way you’re speaking to me. It’s uncalled for.”

“Jesus Christ, Mom, it is called for! You’re fucking my baseball coach! You realize you have a husband?”

The word ‘husband’ must have struck a chord with his mother, because as soon as he mentioned Robert, Rebecca’s face fell. The whole conversation she had been trying to avoid talking about what Jaxson had walked in on by deflecting her shame and punishing him for ditching school. But bringing up her marriage was unexpected enough to make her crack. Jaxson watched as her eyes began to water and the aggression left her body. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if he shouldn’t have demanded answers.

“It isn’t what it looked like, I promise. Jaxson please. It was a simple meeting. We were talking about your performance in the games!” Jaxson winced when she said ‘performance.’ “It was nothing. If your father finds out—” She was choking up. “If your father finds out, it will destroy our family. I love you and I love Robert more than anything or anyone. I know it might not seem that way to you right now, but believe me, Jax, I love him. I will be so broken without the two of you. I can’t have you hate me and him leave me. Please.”

Rebecca began to cry. A steady stream of hot, mascara-dyed tears fell from her eyes. Jaxson began to feel uncomfortable. He had never seen his mother this emotional before. She was usually a brick wall devoid of all feeling. It hurt him to know he pushed her to this. If he had just stayed at school or left when he heard her voice or even just left before she came downstairs, she wouldn’t be so sad. But if she hadn’t slept with his baseball coach, she wouldn’t be so sad either. Jaxson felt conflicted. His mom was obviously in the wrong, but he also hated to see her upset.

“Mom...” Jaxson trailed off. He had been intending on saying *I didn’t mean to upset you*, but she cut him off before he could finish.

“Jaxson, please. Your father can never know. I can barely live with myself. This was the last time I swear. I was just so nervous that your father was cheating on me that I got it in my

head that maybe if I did it too it wouldn't hurt as much when I eventually found out. Oh, Jaxson, I'm so sorry." And the waterworks continued. He wavered between believing her and feeling sorry for her and thinking she was spiteful and that her tears were an act. He needed to leave and clear his head. He couldn't think straight watching his mother break down in front of him.

Having never seen his mother like this before, Jaxson shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Mom, relax. It's okay," Jaxson stepped closer to her and awkwardly pulled her in for a hug. Her body was shaking from crying so hard. He began patting her back, but that felt like he was making things worse, so he tried rubbing his hand on her back to soothe her like she did for him when he was a child. Eventually, she pulled away, releasing Jaxson from his discomfort.

She looked at him with pleading eyes. He knew she was guiltily him into staying quiet, but he also knew how much she had given up to have him. He often felt like she regretted giving up her career for a child. He could tell she missed work. Keeping her secret was the least he could do considering everything she had done for him. It was the last time, right? His mom didn't tattle on him—when he hit a baseball into his dad's car and dented the side, she told Robert that the wind blew something at the car. She had protected him for 16 years. She messed up one time in all of those years. He felt like he owed it to her to protect her from her only mistake.

"I promise, it will never happen again." Her eyes flicked to the side for a moment before she maintained eye contact with Jaxson.

"I need some time," he muttered and grabbed his keys. His mother looked up, confused, but he shrugged her concerns off and closed the door. He didn't mean to slam it, but it closed hard. He thought about peeking his head back in to apologize—he didn't want his mother to

think he was mad at her—but he ultimately decided against it. She could handle thinking her son was upset with her.

He pulled out of his driveway slowly, putting the address of a place he hadn't been to since he was a child into his GPS. He turned the radio off and let the directions be the only thing to break the silence as he drove.

The batting cages where he had his fifth, sixth, and eighth birthday parties were still open. It was about fifteen minutes before he pulled into the parking lot. He pulled into a corner space and sat in the car for a while, unable to get out of his head. This place was where he first fell in love with baseball—the sport his mom had just ruined. He would quit tomorrow, first thing. He wouldn't even talk to Drew about it, he'd just walk right into the front office and tell them to remove him from the roster. He didn't really care if they didn't do it and told him to talk to the coach. He would just let his parents believe he was still playing.

Finally, he got out of the car. He took out his headphones from where he stored them in the glove compartment and walked to the entrance. He handed the woman inside the ticket booth \$15 for 45 minutes in the cage and picked up a metal bat and a helmet. He put his headphones in and blasted the most aggressive music he had. He usually listened to more calm music, but right now, he was only interested in hearing the songs that would expel the same angry energy he was feeling. The playlist he chose was created by Paul. He rarely listened to it but he was glad to have it now.

The guilt his mother forced on him asking to keep this secret was unfair. *Swing*. The fact that he couldn't ever seem to eat at his own house was unfair. *Swing*. The fact that the one person he trusted betrayed him was really unfair. *Swing*. The fact that that same person ate the last apple was not fair. *Swing*. Nothing was fair. He couldn't control any of it. *Swing*. He didn't know what

would happen if his dad found out he had been hiding this secret, but he also didn't know what would happen if he told his dad immediately. Would his parents get divorced? *Swing*. Who would he stay with? Would there be a custody battle even though he was almost old enough to live alone? Even though he practically already was? *Swing*.

He stopped the balls and tried to catch his breath. His parents would probably want to put him in therapy and make him talk about his emotions if they got divorced. That was the last thing Jaxson wanted to do. He wondered if his parents went to couples counseling. He thought they probably needed to. Maybe he could suggest this to his mom. She'd probably just insist they did family counseling instead, which sounded even more intimidating than regular therapy.

Jaxson couldn't figure out if he trusted his mom when she said it wouldn't happen again or if he just wanted to trust her.

*

Hours later, Jaxson returned home. As he pulled into the driveway, he saw that the garage was open. Curious, he parked at the foot of the driveway and went towards the garage. As he approached, he could hear music. At first it was faint, but the closer he got, the clearer it got. Someone was listening to Billy Joel. *Slow down, you crazy child, you're so ambitious for a juvenile, but then if you're so smart, then tell me, why are you still so afraid?* Jaxson stopped and tried to remember the name of the song from the lyrics. Just as he placed the song as "Vienna," a loud noise startled him and made him jump. He dropped his keys from his hands and bent down to pick them up.

"Jaxson! I was wondering when you'd be home!" he heard his father's voice call from the garage. Jaxson was shocked he was home so early. It wasn't even five p.m. yet.

“Hey Dad, what are you doing home?” Jaxson said, gathering his nerves as much as he could.

“Oh, I got off early for once and wanted to come have dinner with my family! I haven’t seen you in weeks it feels like!” His dad was wiping his hands and smiling big. He walked over to Jaxson and began to give him a hug. Jaxson’s dad had always been a hugger, but didn’t seem to share that gene with Jaxson or his mother. So, Jaxson stood uncomfortably still as his father’s head rested on the same shoulder his mother cried on this morning. Just as he was debating patting vs. rubbing, his father let go. “So, how’s it feel to be driving to and from school?”

“Pretty good, definitely better than the bus.”

His father chuckled and led him into the garage. “I’ve just been working on fixing up the gate for the backyard. I told your mother I would do it months ago but I’ve been so busy I nearly forgot about until this afternoon.” There was a pause. “Did you have baseball today? I wanted to come watch practice but your mother said she thought it was cancelled. I guess she was right, you’re not wearing your uniform.”

“Yeah, um Coach Drew is sick,” Jaxson coughed anxiously. He wasn’t a great liar to begin with, but all this added pressure was getting to him.

“That stinks. Really wish I could’ve seen you playing. I haven’t been to a game in a while, when do they start back up?”

“Um, not for a few months I think. I don’t really know what the schedule is right now.” He began walking towards the door to the house to signal to his father he was done with the conversation. Much to his dismay, his father began following him into the house.

“Well, your mother thought tonight would be a perfect night to celebrate your birthday. She suggested Cody’s. I made a reservation for 7:30 since I didn’t know when you’d be home.

It'll give you a bit to get your homework done and then we can all head over." Jaxson would have gone straight to the bathroom and made himself throw up in order to get out of this dinner, but the smile on his father's face stopped him. He hadn't made up his mind about whether or not to tell his father or even considered *how* he would tell him. He was dreading dinner and wished more than anything he had the courage to tell his father the truth.

So, two hours later, he sat in the back of his mother's Lexus as she drove the three of them to Cody's. His father was talking all about the case he had just finished working on and his mother seemed appropriately engaged. However, she kept eyeing Jaxson in the rearview mirror. His father didn't notice, but Jaxson almost wished he had. The lying made his stomach hurt. He wasn't sure he'd be able to keep down a steak and potatoes tonight.

He was disgusted at the fact that he had caught his mother with another man just hours before, and there they were, all going to dinner like nothing had happened. He felt bad for his father. His mother was playing him for a fool. Jaxson supposed he was too. He stopped thinking about it.

Cody's was in the hills of their suburb. The long winding road took thirty minutes to climb and the drive was painful. As soon as the car stopped moving, Jaxson got out and walked ahead of his parents. He worried his father thought he was rude, but he was even more worried his face would say what his mouth couldn't. His father wasn't around much, so he couldn't ask the bigger picture questions as easily as he could the daily questions. Jaxson was dreading having to answer "So, how was your day, son?"

"Hi, we have a reservation for 7:30. Under Miller?" Rebecca spoke as they entered the restaurant. The hostess nodded and said something about the table not being ready yet. They were escorted to the outdoor patio to wait.

“Wow, 7:35 and the table isn’t ready? Not the Cody’s I remember,” Robert began. Jaxson knew his father was about to launch into a tirade on how the new management is different and ‘younger isn’t always better,’ but he could only take two trips to the bathroom at dinner in order to not look suspicious and he didn’t want to waste one before they were even seated.

Not more than five minutes into Robert’s speech, the hostess came over and walked the three of them to a small booth in the corner of the restaurant. They had a great view of the tables around them and Jaxson decided he would people watch instead of interacting with his parents. His mother was also acting quiet which wouldn’t work. Only one of them could act weird without Robert being confused and Jaxson thought he deserved to be the quiet one. After all, without his mother’s choices, they wouldn’t be in this situation.

But, of course, his mother didn’t see it that way. Instead of torturing himself by thinking about the things he didn’t think he could change, he decided to engage in conversation with his father. If he started the conversation, he had a better chance of controlling where it went. Or so he thought. After they ordered, he decided to initiate a conversation.

“So, I’m doing pretty well in school lately, Dad. Might not even need a baseball scholarship. I can probably just get one for my grades.” Jaxson realized the box he had just opened by bringing up college and understood how truly sad it was that he was more comfortable talking about the unknown that was his future than discussing how his day was with his own father.

“Wow, that’s great. You still thinking about playing ball in college or no?” His father wasn’t trying to put pressure on the question, but at the talk of baseball in college, Rebecca’s head lifted.

“Yes, he is. That’s the plan, right Jax?” *Thanks, Mom.*

“Um, yeah, as of now. Just have to see what schools are interested, you know.”

“Drew says he knows a lot of coaches and can get Jaxson recruited and some him good money. It’s very exciting.”

“Drew?” His father questioned. “Oh, Coach Drew, right?” Rebecca gave a small nod. “He’s a good guy. That’s awfully nice of him to do all of that for Jaxson. He must really see something in you, son.”

That comment prompted Jaxson’s first bathroom break of the night. He politely excused himself and left as quickly as he could. On his way out of the restroom, he looked over to the exit, trying to decide if it was worth the risk to take a walk and come back when the food was there. As he was contemplating this, he bumped into another body.

“Oh sorry about that,” he said, barely looking away from the door.

“It’s okay,” replied a familiar voice. “Hey! How are you?”

He looked at the face the voice came from and was surprised to see Sasha. “Hi, I’m great. How are you?”

“Good, just at dinner with my sister and her boyfriend. What’re you doing here?”

“My parents took me out to celebrate my birthday.”

“Oh, fun! When was it?”

“Last week. The tenth.”

“Happy late birthday.” Sasha smiled and Jaxon’s chest felt tight.

“Thank you,” he smiled back.

“Well, I better get back to my sister. I’m just meeting her boyfriend for the first time tonight so it would be rude to keep them waiting.”

“Yeah, no worries,” he said and watched her turn to leave. “Oh, hey, I actually can tutor you. I’m not gonna be playing baseball anymore. I um, got an injury.”

“Oh that’s awesome! Not the injury, the tutoring,” she laughed. “What happened?”

He coughed nervously, “Um, sprained my wrist. We haven’t gotten a splint or anything yet, but I won’t be able to play this season.”

“Awh, that’s too bad. Well, let me give you my number really quickly so that you can text me and we can figure out a schedule.” He handed her his phone and watched as she put each number in. “Okay, just text me later and we can figure it out. I’m glad I ran into you,” she smiled and walked back to her table.

Jaxson walked back to his table, feeling genuinely excited and happy for the first time all day. It was such a relief to have run into Sasha. She was so uncomplicated and direct. Clarity was missing from Jaxson’s life and it was refreshing to meet someone who could say everything with a focused mind. She wanted him to tutor her. That was it. It was so easy. He could spend time with her and help her with math—something else that was never up for interpretation. He couldn’t wait to sit down with a pretty girl and do something with a clear right and wrong answer for a clear and designated time. He absolutely couldn’t wait.

“You were gone awhile. You feeling okay?” His father asked when he returned to the table.

“Yeah, I just ran into someone from school.” He almost said ‘a girl from school,’ but wanted to leave Sasha out of his family drama for now.

“That’s nice. Who was it?” Thankfully he didn’t get a chance to answer his mother because the waitress came back with their food.

“Wow, this looks delicious, thank you,” his father said as the 8 oz. steak was placed in front of him.

“Be careful, sir, it’s hot,” the waitress warned Robert with a smile.

“Thank you,” said Jaxson’s mother curtly as she set her food down in front of her. Jaxson thanked her when his meal was placed on the table and she excused herself. “She likes you, Robert. Did you see the way she looked at you?”

Robert scoffed. “Rebecca, you’re delusional. She appreciated the thank you, that’s it. Let’s just eat our dinner and celebrate Jaxson’s sixteenth birthday.” Robert turned to face Jaxson. “We love you son, sixteen will be your best year yet. I can feel it.”

Jaxson wasn’t sure if it would be *his* best year, but he knew it wouldn’t be his father’s. He could feel the tension between his parents over such a small thing, he couldn’t even begin to imagine what it would be like if his father found out about the affair. Or worse, if his father found out Jaxson knew and didn’t tell him.

Jaxson muttered a thank you and began to eat. They ate in silence, breaking it only occasionally to comment on the tenderness of the meat or the amount of butter in the potatoes.

When the check came, Rebecca glared at the waitress and Robert rolled his eyes. Jaxson excused himself to “wash his hands” in the restroom to avoid the beginnings of what he knew would be another fight. He looked around the restaurant, hoping to see Sasha, but couldn’t find her. Maybe she left. As he walked back towards his parents, he could feel the tension rising between them. Robert had no patience left for Rebecca’s jealousy after twenty years of marriage and Jaxson was sick watching her manipulate his father. Unless Rebecca knew something Jaxson didn’t, she had no right to be so accusatory of Robert’s every move. There was no reason for her

to be angry at *him* tonight. Even if the waitress was flirting with him, wouldn't it be her doing something immoral and not Robert since he barely acknowledged her?

His parents saw him walking back towards them and got up to meet him, having already paid. Jaxson turned to walk out the door of the restaurant, not waiting for them to catch up. His mind was racing. Should he tell his father? Should he ignore his parents? What was the right thing to do?

“Jaxson, wait up!” he heard his father's voice from behind him. He turned and his father was jogging to catch up. “Phew, you got me out of breath. So, I was thinking. Want to hit the batting cages this weekend? I have time off I can use on Friday and meet you after school.” Jaxson stopped walking. “Is everything okay?”

“Dad, I'm quitting baseball.” The words came out of his mouth without him thinking about their consequences. He felt relief wash over him immediately. But that was short lived. He made eye contact with his mother who looked angry and then glanced at his father who couldn't contain the mixture of shock and disappointment on his face.

“What? Why? What's going on Jaxson?” his father questioned.

“Yes, Jaxson, what's going on?” his mother's manipulative voice reminded Jaxson of the events from earlier. He turned away, not sure of his next move. He wished that someone else could do the hard part for him. To speak up or stay silent. He wasn't sure. Suddenly, he saw Sasha walking towards a car. She was alone—no sister or sister's boyfriend in sight.

“Mom's cheating on you with my baseball coach. That's why I'm quitting.” Again, he felt the words tumble out. As soon as he saw the look on his father's face he wished he could take them back. “I'm sorry Dad.”

His father stood still and his mother's face went white. The expression on her face was foreign to Jaxson. She looked... hurt almost? He couldn't quite tell. He reluctantly pulled his gaze from his parent's and to the black SUV Sasha was climbing into. Just as she was reaching to close her door, he called out, "Sasha! Wait up!" He ran to her, leaving his parents behind to deal with their mess. He knew he had played a role in this, after all, he did tell his father. But it wasn't really his place to watch this fight break out between his parents. He wanted to be a regular sixteen year old and not deal with choosing sides. He knew whose side he would take if it came to it, which he suspected it would, but for now, he wanted to get away.

"Can I have a ride?" he asked Sasha as he approached her car. She looked at him and then towards his parents, who stood in the same spot, motionless, watching their son leave them. "It's a long story," he said by way of explanation. She shrugged and nodded and he walked around to the passenger side to get in the car, unsure of his next move.

Two.

The sky was light for this time of morning. It was 3 am on a Tuesday. Jaxson was out yet again, leaving his mother at home, blissfully unaware of his late night adventures. Well, out as much as he could be. The city shut down at midnight on weeknights and 1 am on weekends. He had taken a headset and drone from the security laboratory his father used to work at and was using it at night to escape from the insomnia. It technically wasn't illegal, but it would also call a lot of things into question. His mother would worry for him, the government would worry about him, and his peers wouldn't know how to approach him if the news of his excursions got out. It was best to keep it a secret.

He wondered what the ship that his father was on looked like. Was it green like the Super Charger in front of him? Or was it a plain, inconspicuous black Phoebus? Each night when he left his home through his bedroom window, he told himself he was just going to fly the drone around the block to clear his mind in order for sleep to come with ease. But each night, as the morning drew closer and closer, his insomnia worsened. The flights didn't lull him to sleep as he had originally hoped. They began to excite him. The thought of leaving without actually leaving made his heart race. He was anxious to see what ships would be parked along the streets each night. Some were his neighbors that he was used to seeing, but others were new and interesting. Once he found a ship he could imagine his father on, he could go to bed. Sometimes he located a ship that was fit for a man of his father's status early in his exploration and was back in bed by 4 am. But other nights he returned home at 5:45 am with no image of his father's ship in his mind. He barely got a chance to get into bed before the city's alarm went off at 6 am.

There were rarely others out when he flew the drone around, which made him feel safe and almost invincible. His mind was wandering, thinking of where his father was, what he was

doing, who he was with. He had gone off to fight a few months ago and Jaxson hadn't heard from him since.

His drone stopped above a blue ship and he imagined the look of surprise on his father's face if he could fly this ship to him. If only he knew where he was. A voice stopped his daydream: "Hey! What are you doing?" The voice was shrill but startling.

Jaxson recognized the voice. His face reddened in embarrassment and he was glad the citizen couldn't see him. "Sorry, I was didn't realize I was this close. I was sort of in my head," he spoke, hoping she couldn't recognize his voice too.

"Jaxson? Why are you out here? Why are you looking at my ship?" Sasha questioned intently. Jaxson cursed under his breath and moved the drone up so he could see her face. Sasha was wearing the city's dark black uniform reserved for those with high security clearance jobs. He wondered what she did. They had been in school together but he hadn't seen her since they finished.

"Nothing, I'm just looking around," he replied, hoping she didn't question him further. "Why are you out this late?" He couldn't contain his curiosity about her whereabouts either. Even though he was embarrassed about being caught, he was happy to see her. He had always had a soft spot for her.

"The same." Her response was curt and evasive. He wondered what she was hiding, but he knew he couldn't ask. "Think it's probably about time you get home." Her tone was authoritative. He was intimidated by and in awe of her confidence. He didn't remember her being that way. He turned the drone away from Sasha.

Jaxson checked his watch—4:58 am. He was further from home than he'd like to be, but he wasn't afraid of not making it before the alarm. As he flew the drone towards his home, he

fought the urge to spin it around and catch another glimpse of Sasha and her ship. The flight home was lonelier than usual. This time of morning made Jaxson feel abandoned, not just by his father, who'd chosen to go off to war, but by his mother too. She had barely been around in the past week, when he'd needed her most.

Around 5:40 he was flying the drone up the path to the small condo his parents rented from the city. As he guided the drone to his window, he heard a voice. It was his mother. He checked the watch on his wrist: 5:43 am. She was the type of citizen who always followed the rules; even if she woke early she wouldn't rise from bed until the alarm. Jaxson wondered what was so important that she was out of bed seventeen minutes early. He hoped it didn't have to do with him, but didn't have the time to snoop. He flew the drone back to his window and quietly let it in, catching it softly and storing it underneath his bed.

Once the drone was safely hidden, he let out a deep sigh. The high pitched alarm pierced his ears but in a few seconds it was over. He changed out of his barely slept in pajamas and put a new tunic. He went to the bathroom he shared with his parents down the hall and put some drops in his eyes to clear out the redness that accumulated from lack of sleep. At 6:30, he and his mother had to leave to walk to the dining hall for breakfast. He brushed his teeth and combed his hair back before leaving the bathroom.

On his way across the long, gray hallway, his mother stopped him. "Good morning, Jax. How did you sleep?" There was a sweet smile plastered across her face and Jaxson could tell she was genuinely happy.

"Very good, how about you?" He smiled politely back. The last few months without his father had been especially lonely, but his mother's insistence on not dealing with his absence just made things around the condo tense. He didn't feel at home anymore. He felt like he was

walking on eggshells and had trouble sleeping somewhere he didn't feel fully relaxed, which is what originally led him to take the drone out.

“Well, thank you. Would you like to walk to breakfast?”

“Yes, that would be nice. I'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes.”

His mother nodded and walked briskly to her room. He came downstairs at 6:35 and received a look from his mother for being late.

A few minutes into their walk, his mother spoke, “So, this week, I have decided that you are ready to go to work. I know your father being gone has been stressful and made you fall behind on your life's path, but I worry you're falling too far behind. I'll be okay in the condo alone.”

He stopped walking and looking up at his mother. He had finished with his education a few weeks before his sixteenth birthday and was supposed to have been looking into getting a job for months, but with his father's going off to war, Jaxson had put his plans on hold.

“What do you mean?” he finally spoke. His mother hadn't stopped walking and there were more citizens around walking to the hall, so Jaxson had to weave through groups to catch up to her.

“Well, after breakfast today, I'd like you to go around and look for a job. You can come home for dinner in the condo and tell me all about it.” She smiled again, but it didn't ease Jaxson's anxiety. He was confused about why she was suddenly urging him to get a job. His instincts told him that something was *very* wrong, but he didn't have the authority to argue. Especially since they were nearing the hall.

They walked through the doors in silence and took their seats. They stood again when the governor entered and sat when he motioned them to. He gave a short thank you to the citizens

and released the diners to the buffet to eat. Jaxson stood and waited patiently in line to fill his tray full of eggs, turkey bacon, and waffles. Jaxson's mother always insisted he put some fruit on his plate, but today the only options were bananas and oranges, so he politely passed when the server offered to scoop some onto his tray.

They quietly returned to their benches and waited for the rest of their table to sit down before they ate. Jaxson wasn't particularly friends with anyone who sat at his table with him, but his mother had made friends and loved to gossip over her meals. They were always greeting her with the newest drama: "Rebecca, you'll never guess what happened!"

He chewed his food slowly and thoroughly, a habit he had had since childhood when he choked on a piece of broccoli and was put through the embarrassment of the paramedics coming to forcibly remove the vegetable from his airway. His mother and her friends poured sugary syrup over their waffles and giggled about the governor's new haircut—not too loudly, of course. He had eyes everywhere.

Jaxson was placing the last bite of waffle into his mouth as the governor stood and rang the bell, signaling the morning recess could begin. Every weekday morning, citizens had an hour of leisure time before work and classes began. Jaxson used to spend this time with his friends, but lately he hadn't been. He had been going home to sleep during the leisure time, telling his mother he was reading in his room. Even though he felt like he would fall asleep at any moment, today he wanted to go take a walk with his friends. He hadn't seen Paul or George in a few weeks and with the prospect of getting a job soon, he wanted to hear about their experiences.

He walked quickly across the hall, positive that Paul and George wouldn't be waiting for him. He didn't take offense to it; he knew it was his fault that they hadn't hung out in a while. He

caught sight of them leaving the hall and called out. They turned around and smiled at him—well, Paul did. George looked annoyed. George was always annoyed.

“Hey, man. Long time no see,” Paul teased, holding out his hand to Jaxson.

“I know, sorry I’ve been so MIA lately.” Paul looked at him wanting a more in depth explanation, but that was all Jaxson wanted to say. He wasn’t in the mood to talk about his father.

The three boys walked in silence to the park where the teenagers hung out during leisure time. Once they got there, they met up with some other boys from their class. Jaxson sat towards the back of the group and listened to them while they spoke. It was partly because he was tired and partly because he had nothing to say. He heard about the drama at George’s job working with the government and Henry’s writer’s block. Paul had the most interesting job. He worked at the cloning studio and was always doing different experiments.

Jaxson was beginning to dose off when he heard his name. “Jax! When are you gonna get a job, dude?”

Jaxson laughed a little and said, “I’m actually going to talk with a counselor today about that.”

The rest of the group laughed and teased him for being so far behind. He didn’t take it personally, but he was beginning to regret not going home to sleep. “You should come shadow me at the cloning studio today. It’s a super interesting place and you’re definitely smart enough to get a job there,” Paul offered.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks, Paul.” Jaxson shot a grateful smile to his friend.

The group sat around talking for a while longer until the bell rang. They had about fifteen minutes to get to work and class before they were late. Paul motioned for Jaxson to follow him to

the cloning studio. As they approached the studio, Paul took out an identification card and scanned it, opening the gates. “The security here is pretty high,” he explained.

They walked in and Paul, in his black uniform, held his badge high for the cameras to see. They got to the main entrance and Paul spoke to the guard. “This is my friend Jaxson Miller. He’s currently unemployed and will be shadowing me today.”

Jaxson cringed at the word “unemployed” but he knew that his society valued work and education. It was part of the reason there was a war going on. The other side wanted more freedom. Apparently, one hour of leisure time wasn’t enough for everyone. Luckily the majority agreed that the emphasis placed on education and work wasn’t too great, so the fighting wasn’t occurring in their cities. Besides Jaxson’s father leaving, the war didn’t interrupt his life at all.

The guard took down Jaxson’s name and let the boys in. Once they were in the building, Paul led Jaxson to the lockers. There, he opened his locker to get out his protective gear. He looked very professional in his lab coat and eye goggles. “Stay right here, I’ll run to the back and get you an extra coat and goggles.” Jaxson nodded and sat on one of the benches to wait.

“Hi.” It was Sasha. *So this is what she did.* “What brings you in?”

Jaxson was about to ask her to keep quiet about last night when Paul returned and greeted her. “Oh, hey Sasha! You remember Jaxson, right? He’s shadowing me today.”

“Yeah, I do. It’s good to see you, it’s been a while.” She must have understood that Jaxson wanted to keep last night a secret.

“Yeah, you too. I didn’t know you worked here.”

She nodded and replied, “Well, it was good to see you. I have to get back to my experiment.” She walked away, her blonde hair falling out of her protective cap slightly.

As soon as Jaxson had stopped staring at Sasha and put his gear on, Paul said, “Alright, let’s start the tour. So, obviously this is the break room. We just get ready for work in here and chill in here. This is the room we don’t have to wear gloves and stuff.” Jaxson nodded and let Paul lead him out of the break room to another, darker room. “This is a Dark Room. These are the rooms where the DNA goes when it’s first delivered. It needs to be kept in a cool, dark place. We have a bunch of them, but this one requires really low security clearance, while others require a high level. This room is typically used for plants and stuff like that.”

“So, citizens send in DNA samples of plants they want to be cloned and then this is where they go?”

“Not just plants, but other *citizens* too. Some citizens send the DNA of a plant they had and loved but died. But sometimes citizens want to take their dead loved one and have them cloned so that they don’t have to live without them. What’s really cool is when we get to mesh human DNA *with* a tree or something. It sounds weird, but the citizens who request it usually plant it in their backyard. It’s really interesting. Of course, it’s all confidential. So I can’t actually tell you who gets cloned and we never know *why* anyone wants a clone of something. We aren’t allowed to ask any questions.”

“What if it’s unethical? How would you know?”

“We won’t. The leaders of the studio get more information than we do and usually if something is really awful, they won’t even send it to us. But most citizens want clones of their pets or loved ones after they’re gone. It’s a pretty normal process these days. The technology is so good now that the only real difference people can see between the real thing and the clone is in the smile. And even then, you can’t always tell. During orientation they tell us about how there’s probably all these clones we’ve interacted with and never known they were clones.”

Jaxson couldn't understand why anyone would want a clone of their loved one. Or why anyone would want to combine the DNA of a person and a plant. What would that even look like? It wasn't even *close* to the same thing. Family and friends died, it was how the world worked. It wasn't unnatural, but cloning was. Still, there was something that intrigued him about it. He didn't agree with it morally, but as Paul continued the tour and told him more and more about the process and the studio, Jaxson knew that he would be interested in working as a cloning assistant.

*

Rebecca smiled to herself as she walked through the streets of the city. She had been able to keep her secret from her son. Robert had been gone a few months, but Missing In Action only a week. She was surprised how long it took for her plan to go into action. She had been waiting incredibly patiently. She had sent out the DNA sample and detailed exactly what she wanted for the *real* Robert before he even left for war. After months of waiting, the clone was finally ready. She could hardly contain her excitement. She passed crowds of people going to the hall for lunch, others going to their homes to eat the prepacked brown bag lunches they picked up at breakfast.

The cloning studio was a little out of the way, but it was one of her favorite buildings in the city. The standard brick that adorned the other buildings was absent. Instead, the building was covered in glass windows. Citizens walking by could see everything happening within. Or so they thought. Rebecca had briefly worked in the cloning studio when she was younger, before she met Robert, and she knew that there were rooms in the basement that were hidden. That's where the *real* cloning happened. The windows were just to convince citizens that the workers and the industry were completely transparent. But Rebecca knew that wasn't always true. That's

why she trusted them to clone her husband. She knew only the best cloners would see her request, and they were sworn to secrecy. Robert would be cloned in a Dark Room in the basement and his clone wouldn't be delivered. She was on her way to pick him up. The rooms on the first floor were reserved for harmless clones, like dogs and flowers.

The walk gave her the chance to think over how she would explain all of this to Jaxson. Would she tell him that Robert was confirmed dead and never coming home or would she wait for a government official to make the house call? Or maybe she could just pretend that Robert *did* come home and hope Jaxson couldn't tell it was a clone.

She was still undecided as she approached the gates to the cloning studio. She showed her city identification to the guards and waited as they checked for her name on the list. The guard nodded at her and opened up the gate, directing her to head towards the pick-up dock on the back side of the studio.

"Rebecca Miller." She stated her name clearly and loudly to the camera at the pick-up dock. The door opened and she walked inside. The walls were crisp and white and it smelled like the chemicals the maid service used to clean the condos.

She sat in the waiting area for close to fifteen minutes before an attendant came out to collect her identification and her paperwork. About fifteen minutes went by before the attendant came back and motioned for her to follow him through the corridor into the inner rooms of the studio. The deeper into the studio they got, the fewer windows and the more walls they encountered. They turned a corner and came across a door marked "STAFF ONLY." Rebecca knew to wait while the attendant went in and got the clone for her.

"Here you are, Mrs. Miller. Unless you have any questions, you're all set to go."

“Thank you. Have a nice afternoon,” Rebecca smiled at the attendant and took the new hand of her husband, smiling.

*

Jaxson walked out the front door of the cloning studio, confident that he wanted to walk in the next day and apply. He was thinking over how he would approach the manager when he heard his name. He turned around and saw Sasha walking towards him.

“Hey,” she said. “Figured we could walk together. I live near you.” He was taken aback at her statement. She must have seen the confusion on his face because she explained herself: “I saw your drone hovering outside your condo as I was pulling into my driveway.”

He nodded, uncomfortable with her knowing his secret. “Yeah, we can walk together. Thanks for not mentioning the drone last night to Paul. And I’m sorry again for freaking you out about being so close to your ship.”

She laughed, “Yeah, of course. I don’t want him to know what I was doing out that late either.”

Unsure of what to say, Jaxson continued walking, unconsciously synching up their footsteps. He noticed that in her regular clothing, she had nice legs. She obviously used her morning leisure time to exercise.

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked what I was doing out in my work uniform.”

“Oh, I wasn’t sure if you’d be comfortable talking about it,” he replied.

Laughing, she said, “I’ll tell if you tell.” There was a glimmer in her eye; Jaxson almost thought she was flirting.

He coughed, choking on his spit a little. “I have bad insomnia. My dad went off to fight and last week we got the news that he was Missing. It’s been harder to sleep lately so I’ve been flying the drone out to keep me from thinking about it.”

“Sorry about your dad. I was putting in my resignation and had a hearing. I won’t know if it’s accepted until later which is why I was at work today.” Jaxson was shocked. She had only been working there a few months, why would she want to quit already? Reading his mind, she kept talking: “I just have seen some things that don’t sit well with me and want to find a job where I feel more comfortable.”

“Oh, well I’m sorry things aren’t working out for you. Do you mind me asking what specifically happened? I was thinking of applying.”

“I would, but it’s confidential. I’m sorry.” She seemed genuine.

“That’s okay, I understand.”

They continued to walk together in silence, occasionally commenting on how lovely the sky looked or how nice it was that the leaves were changing, but they left the heavier topics out of conversation. Once Jaxson reached his home, Sasha stopped. “I live down the street a bit, if you ever want to talk again. It was nice to see you, Jaxson.”

“You too.” Feeling happy for the first time in a while, Jaxson stepped away from Sasha and walked into his home. He was excited to be eating at the condo tonight instead of in the dining hall. It would be nice to tell his mother about his day without anyone else’s opinions.

As Jaxson opened the front door, he heard conversation. He wondered who his mother would be talking to, maybe it was whoever delivered the food. He heard a voice that sounded just like his father’s. Was his father really home?

“Mom? Who are you talking to?”

There was no response, so Jaxson timidly walked into the kitchen. He was trying not to get his hopes up about seeing his father, but it was difficult. He wanted it so bad. When he turned the corner, he saw a man sitting at their kitchen table. It looked like his father, but there was something a little off. The smile wasn't quite right.

“So nice to see you! How was your day? Your mother told me you'd been out looking for work! Anything good?” the stranger stood and walked forward to hug Jaxson. Jaxson flinched but eventually hugged back, feeling his shoulders tense up as the man chuckled.

“Um, yeah... it was good,” he paused, looking at his mother. “Mom, can we talk?”

“Oh, sure dear. Just one moment! Still waiting on the food to be delivered.”

He couldn't believe how casual she was being about this. Where was his father and why was there a clone of him? You couldn't order clones unless the original person was confirmed to be Missing half a year or dead... Did that mean his father was dead? He doubted the cloning studio would approve a clone for someone that could return at any time. When did his mother request the clone? How long had she been *planning* a clone? She must have put her request in immediately after his father left and lied to Jaxson. He was disgusted.

He had spent all day learning about the cloning studio and being in awe of the process, just to come home and find out that the people he wanted to be like were nothing more procedure monkeys. He wondered if Sasha had helped clone his father. This is probably what Sasha was talking about. To have to clone someone who wasn't even being mourned yet? Jaxson was still thinking he'd see him again. And here his mother was, cloning him without a care in the world. Jaxson couldn't believe it.

He was planning on speaking to her as soon as the food arrived, but she dodged his questions again: “Oh honey, let's talk after we eat. You don't want your dinner to get cold do

you?” He clenched his jaw and bit his tongue. He knew he couldn’t say anything to her now. It would be impolite to discuss their *guest* while he sat at the table next to them, slurping up his noodles like it was soup.

The conversation at dinner was exhausting. Jaxson was no longer enthusiastic about finding a job and definitely didn’t want to discuss his time at the cloning studio today. He considered lying and telling his mother and the clone that he had shadowed another schoolmate at the library, but he knew that he would have to provide specifics that he didn’t have. So, in the end, he chose to clench his teeth and reply in short yet polite sentences to his fake father.

It was around 7 pm when they were finally done eating. Jaxson, frustrated that he hadn’t even been able to enjoy his dinner, headed to the kitchen to help his mother clean up while the clone went to the living room to relax. Although Jaxson hated the idea of the clone replacing his father, he couldn’t deny how similar they looked and acted.

“What the hell Mom? Where’s Dad? The *real* Dad.” Jaxson blurt out as his mother scrubbed the butter off a dish.

“Excuse me?” she replied innocently, not taking her eye off the sponge.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You can’t get a clone without a good reason! We haven’t gotten any word of Dad’s status!” Jaxson wanted to scream, but because of the clone in the other room, he kept his voice low. He picked up a towel to dry the dishes with to keep their conversation looking normal.

“Oh. Jaxson, I knew you would have a hard time with this. You don’t understand what it’s like to be in my shoes right now. With your father gone, it’s very difficult.”

“Mom, you don’t even know if he’s not coming back! The government hasn’t declared him dead! He’s just Missing.”

“Jaxson. A wife knows. I will not become a sad, old widow. I don’t want to hold you back from your life either! You should be getting a job, going on dates. There’s no reason for you to mourn your father either. With the clone, we can resume our previous lives. We can be a normal family again!”

“Nothing about this is normal. Don’t you get that?” Jaxson was getting frustrated. How did she not understand that what she was doing wasn’t only incredibly selfish, but morally wrong? “How did you even get a clone with no proof of Dad being gone?”

“*Jaxson!* I will not allow you to talk to me like that. You may not agree with my decision or understand my reasons, but that doesn’t give you the right to treat me like I’ve done some horrible thing. I used to work at the cloning studio. The leaders know me and they agreed to this. Nothing is illegal. There is no reason for you to be so upset.”

“Maybe to you it isn’t wrong. But I would rather have my real father than spend the rest of my life pretending.” Jaxson set the drying towel and climbed the staircase to his room. He couldn’t feel at peace with that *thing* in his home. He needed to get out, but he had to wait until it was dark. He sat down at his desk and began to review his jobs packet, looking for anything besides cloning. One thing was certain, if this clone was going to stay, he was going to go. He would get a job, date the first girl who was interested (Sasha, maybe?) and marry her shortly after. He could be moved out completely in a few months. As he was reviewing careers in teaching, he heard a knock on his door. “Jaxson, it’s me. Can we talk?” It was his mother.

He slowly put his things away in a drawer and got up to let her in. He sat in his chair, leaving her to stand. “Well?” he inquired after she stood silent for a moment.

“Jaxson, I’m sorry about springing this all on you; I just didn’t know how to tell you. It makes me sad to think about your father. I’m scared. But I have a strong instinct that he won’t be coming home and this was the easiest and most natural way to cope for me.”

He was shocked at her honesty. “I don’t know what will happen either, Mom. But I’d rather wait and see than replace him. This doesn’t feel natural to me at all.”

“I know, but I have already done this. It can’t be undone. And I’m happy that I did it. I don’t think your father is coming back, as hard as it is to accept.”

“I disagree.”

“I know you do and that’s okay. I’m sorry that I’ve hurt you and I hope you can try to understand and forgive me.”

Her honesty and vulnerability was making Jaxson feel bad for getting so angry before. Maybe he didn’t understand her reasons fully. How could he judge without trying to put himself in her shoes? “I can try. Thank you for coming in here to talk to me about it.”

“Of course. Thank you for trying. I’m sorry that I didn’t consult you first. I guess I just needed to do this and I figured if the officials at the cloning studio approved of it, you would too.”

Jaxson was frustrated that his mother hadn’t thought of consulting him before replacing his father. Or even waiting until he was confirmed dead. He was even more shocked that someone actually approved of this. The cloning studio was a lot more messed up than he originally thought. He was convinced they did more harm than good and was ashamed that he ever wanted to work there. “So let me get this straight. You have no problem with cloning someone you don’t have proof is gone for good and because you got special permission, you expected me to be okay with it?”

“Well, if the studio didn’t think my reasons were good enough, the clone wouldn’t be here. I trust the officials of the studio and the city.”

Jaxson knew his mother had purposely backed him into this corner. He couldn’t really tell her that he disagreed without a consequence. “So do I. I’m just surprised is all,” Jaxson relented. He knew that was the end of their conversation and that his mother had won.

She gave him a short, insincere speech about improving communication and then left. As soon as she cleared the doorway, he closed and locked his door. It was only 10 pm, a bit earlier than he usually went out. He would risk being seen, but he was okay with that. He needed to clear his mind.

He took the helmet and drone out from under his bed. Jaxson carefully opened his window and flew the drone out. He peered into the downstairs window to see the clone watching TV, his mother by its side. She looked fine. He knew she was manipulating him and he hated it. He hated that he was letting his mother win, but he knew that he couldn’t have said anything to her regarding trusting the officials. That was an unfair statement for her to make. After this, he didn’t know if he would ever be able to trust the government again.

Shaking these thoughts out of his mind, he wandered aimlessly around the city for hours. Flying the drone through the city calmed him and for once, he wasn’t imagining what kind of ship his father would return to them in. He wasn’t imagining anything. He had shut his brain off completely and was grateful to have been able to do it. He felt like he had only been flying a short period of time when he heard the bells. Shop owners rang their bells to signal five minutes until close. It was 11:25. Lights out was in 35 minutes. He was too far from home to return in time and he wasn’t sure he cared if he got caught anymore. It’s not like the drone was his personal property or anyone could see who was operating it. It would be easy to throw the drone

remote out his window and pretend he'd never seen it. So, he kept wandering around, going through alleys and flying high by the trees. Eventually, the lights turned off on him. It was dark and he was alone. He liked it better that way.

He had been flying for a few hours when he heard a cough. He slowed the drone's pace and looked around. It was hard to see in the shadows, but he thought he could make out a figure a few feet behind him. He had no idea how long they were following him or how he hadn't noticed. He was usually so vigilant. Tonight he was off. His mind was elsewhere. He wasn't sure who the figure was, but its cough didn't sound threatening. He wouldn't expect to see any of the government guards out tonight, but they rarely did what one expected. The figure coughed again, this time louder. He grew nervous and flew the drone faster. He felt like a child who was afraid of the dark and was ashamed of it. He upped the speed again at the third cough and didn't stop or look back until he reached home. It was still dark and when he checked his watch he saw it was only 2 am. He would have plenty of time to sleep. His mind was exhausted from the anxiety he had just felt, but his heart was pounding from the adrenaline. He was worried that whoever or *whatever* was out there was looking for him—and knew what he had been doing. It wasn't uncommon for the government to investigate the lives of citizens they were “concerned” for, but he hadn't realized he may be on their radar.

Flying the drone back into the condo, he decided that he should take a break from his nightly excursions. He couldn't risk a hearing or his mother finding out what he had been doing. He wasn't sure what he would do to keep himself occupied through the long nights and it worried him to imagine sitting in bed, unable to relax until the alarm finally went off in the morning.

These were the thoughts that usually kept him awake, leading him to take the drone out, but tonight, they lulled him to sleep. Jaxson woke up at 6 am to the alarm blaring in his ears, wishing he had gotten more sleep. He hadn't felt so tired in a long time. He was aware of the reason, but hadn't been ready to admit it to himself. He knew that his father was probably gone. He had distracted himself for weeks, but it was finally time to face it. It was time to accept his disappearance—and the appearance of his clone.

*

Waking up next to the clone, Rebecca felt comfortable. She was warm in his arms. Sure, they weren't *technically* the same arms that hugged her at her wedding or that held her newborn son, but they were close enough. She knew from her experience in the cloning studio that Robert had been briefed on everything he needed to know about his life and his personality. She knew that there was a possibility of him veering from the path she chose for him, but as long as she kept him in line and snuck his pills into his food, they should be fine. She didn't like that she had to hide his pills, but clones were known for being resistant as soon as they began to develop their own thoughts. You could clone someone's DNA easily, but it was harder to clone their brain exactly. They had gotten pretty good at it, but it was still impossible to control someone's thoughts. The pills helped keep the clones submissive and sedated enough that they were never fully able to form their own thoughts and become their own person. Rebecca understood how some people couldn't agree to it morally, but she saw no other option. The last thing she wanted was for this clone to become a different man than the one she married and the one that raised her son.

She felt him stirring next to her and quietly got up. She needed to crush his pills before he awoke. She had them hidden in her personal safe; every citizen had one. It entitled them to a

certain degree of privacy from their family members and visitors to their homes. Of course, the government could come in and snoop through them at any time, but she wasn't worried. The pills were perfectly legal—encouraged even. She knew that without them, the clones would be unable to be controlled.

Crushing the pills was simple. She locked herself in the bathroom and put them in the processing machine designed to crush nutrient pills for newborns and the old who could no longer swallow pills. She had kept hers from when Jaxson was a baby and was glad she did. It turned the pills into a fine dust and she could sprinkle it in the clone's water without him noticing, as long as he didn't catch her doing it. She carefully took the dust and put it into a hidden compartment in her bracelet and locked the pill bottle back in the safe. The clone was still asleep. She walked downstairs and filled up two glasses of water, one for her and one for the powder to dissolve into. Once it was invisible, she walked back to her bedroom and roused the clone. "Robert, dear, it's 6:30. We need to be leaving for breakfast soon. Here's a glass of water to help wake you." The only side effect of the pills was the heavy sleep they induced. It made the clones nearly impossible to wake up.

*

Jaxson was walking downstairs, waiting for his mother and the clone to walk to breakfast together. He felt sick, not wanting to engage with the clone, but knew there was no easy way out of it. He was wondering where his mother was when he heard a knock on the door. How unusual. No one ever came by the condo unless it was the leisure hour. Or there was something terribly wrong. He wondered if maybe his mother was right. Maybe her gut telling her that his father was never coming back was right. Jaxson opened the front door and stood still, completely shocked at who was standing on the other side.

“Jaxson! My word, I missed you.”

It couldn't be.

“Dad! What are you doing here? How did you get home?” His father hugged him tight. Jaxson felt his eyes start watering. He was unable to process how this had all happened so fast.

“Where’s your mother? I’ve missed her so much.”

It was only then that Jaxson remembered the clone. How was his mother going to explain this? Was she expecting him to explain it? Jaxson was too deep in thought to answer his question.

“Robert!” Rebecca exclaimed, walking down the staircase. Jaxson felt his breath catch, waiting for what was about to happen.

“Oh Rebecca. How I’ve missed you.” His father brought his mother close and pulled her in for a hug. Jaxson could see the discomfort in her mother’s posture. He thought that’s how he must have looked when the clone hugged him. He couldn’t imagine why his mother felt that way about her own husband.

He was half-expecting the clone to stumble down the stairs at any minute. Part of him wanted it. He wanted his mother to be punished for her obvious lack of caring. As much as he wanted his father to know the truth, he knew that as soon as he knew, everything would be changed. He wasn’t ready for that yet. He wanted to enjoy a few more minutes of happiness before his mother’s decisions ruined their family.

“Oh, Robert. What happened? They told us you’d gone Missing.” His mother spoke.

“Well I had. Here, we can sit down and I’ll explain it all to both of you.” For someone who had gone missing, his father looked surprisingly good. He was in better shape than when he left. His military uniform was incredibly dirty and a little ripped. He was missing a shoe, but

overall, he could have been worse. The worst part was the bruise along his chin and the scratches on his face. Jaxson knew they were deep because he could see them through the overgrown facial hair.

“I was just clearing the atmosphere of our planet. We had spent a few weeks training and learning to fly in space and not just on the streets. I had been such a quick learner and had no issue taking off. Once I got into the atmosphere though, my ship started acting up. I couldn’t figure out what was happening at first, but then I realized someone must have tampered with it. It was about to take off into light speed, which I had neither the gas nor the training for. I spent a few seconds panicking but I saw the countdown until it would take off. It began at 10 seconds. I hit the eject button as soon as I realized, about 3 seconds into the countdown, but nothing happened.

“I began hitting the glass with my helmet, trying to break it so I could jump out. I made it with one second to spare. One of my shoes got caught in the ship and my leg felt like it was going to be torn off, but luckily the shoe came off with the force and my leg was just horribly sore. Well, it still is. I was falling pretty fast but they had taught us how to use the parachutes so I was ready. I got caught in a tree, which is how my face got like this.” He motioned to the cuts. “I was nervous to try to find base camp, since I felt like I had been sabotaged. So I hid until my leg felt okay enough to walk on. I began walking in one direction. I thought I was lost for such a long time, until last night. I saw a drone that I recognized as one of the ones from my old laboratory and knew I was close. I waited until it was light and I could see the streets and then I finally was able to find my way home.”

The three of them sat silent, taking in the story that Robert told. Jaxson spoke first, “Why would someone sabotage you? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, that’s the thing, son. I have no idea. I didn’t have any enemies at the camp. I mean sure, they were a few guys I wasn’t *best* friends with, but pulling something like that is a huge deal. I don’t think anyone there would have risked it. I don’t understand what happened to me or my ship. It’s possible that there was just a malfunction, but it seems a little unlikely.”

“Rob, that’s so scary. I’m so glad you’re okay.” His mother said. Jaxson felt sick as he watched her squeeze his hand. He wondered if his father could tell she was lying. “Aren’t you hungry? We should get to breakfast. You must be starving!”

Her voice was shrill and gave her true intentions away. Jaxson could tell she was trying to get him out of the house so that she could figure out what to do with the clone. He hoped his father would see through her.

“Yeah, I am. But I’m more tired than hungry. I’ve been walking for almost a week. I’d like to take a nap in my own bed for the first time in a long time. Maybe you could bring me some biscuits and waffles from the dining hall?”

“We should just get food delivered. The governor would understand why we’re asking on short notice. I’d like to stay home and talk with you, Dad.” Jaxson wasn’t lying per se, he *did* want to talk with his father and didn’t feel right going to breakfast while his father lay at home alone, hungry. He also wanted his mother to come clean about the clone and not have the chance to hide it.

“Oh, of course! Let me go get the bedroom ready for you, Robert. It’s a bit messy.” His mother said, obviously wishing Jaxson had kept his mouth shut. Jaxson watched her hurry upstairs. He decided to follow. He wanted to know what she was doing with the clone.

“Mom? What are you doing?” He approached her just as she was opening her bedroom door.

“Oh, getting the room ready of course!” He watched her force a smile.

“You’re getting rid of the clone, aren’t you? Why can’t you just tell Dad?”

“The what?” Jaxson turned to see his father behind them. He watched his mother’s smile fall. “Did I hear you say *clone*?” His father’s voice was joking but Jaxson saw fear in his eyes.

“What clone?”

“Jaxson was just talking about how he wants to work for the cloning studio!” His mother said, feigning excitement. She gave Jaxson a look, urging him to lie with her, but he was unable to.

“No, Mom. That’s not what we were talking about.” Jaxson felt brave. He knew that his mother would be angry, but she was old enough to deal with a few consequences.

Jaxson’s mother had nothing to say once he had called her out, prompting his father to ask again: “What clone, Rebecca?”

When no response came, Jaxson understood. “It was you. You sabotaged Dad’s ship.” Jaxson looked up at his mother, horrified at her actions. She remained silent, keeping eye contact with his father.

After a few seconds, she tried defending herself, “Robert, honey, no. Of course not. I just didn’t cope well with your absence!”

But Jaxson broke in: “Mom, you ordered the clone *before* he was reported missing. You did this.” He watched his mother turn away. His father’s homecoming had been ruined, just like he knew it would be. He just couldn’t process that his mother would be behind it.

“I knew it was.” His father’s voice came out in a whisper.

Jaxson didn’t understand. He didn’t know his mother could try to get rid of his father and replace him with a clone. It didn’t make any sense. Jaxson was unable to process it. The shock

and hurt was too much. He felt like he didn't know either of his parents. How could his father have come home if he knew it was his wife who tried to get rid of him? He couldn't bear to be in the condo with them when they talked about it. The anger in the hall was palpable and Jaxson thought he was going to throw up.

He walked out of the house. The streets were empty—everyone was enjoying a drama-free breakfast at the dining hall. Jaxson felt uncomfortable on the streets alone, but reminded himself that it was just like the helmet. He kept walking, no destination in sight. He came across a bench by what looked like a completely empty park. It was silent. He sat and let out a deep sigh.

“Hey stranger.” It was Sasha walking up behind him. His mood shifted when he saw her. Without telling them to, his lips curled into a smile as he watched her sit down next to him. “Rough morning?” She asked with a knowing look.

“Something like that.” Jaxson felt her reach over and put her hand on his. He turned to look at her and she gave him a reassuring smile.

“I hope your parents work it out.” Jaxson looked up at her in surprise that she knew. “They asked me to work on his clone; that's why I resigned. I couldn't tell you until I knew you knew.”

Jaxson looked up at her, “Thank you for resigning.” He felt like he had someone on his side. Even though she knew and left him in the dark, she refused to be part of it. He knew that he would be worried to talk about confidential information too. He didn't hold it against her.

“Do you wanna take a walk?” She asked. Jaxson nodded and reached out for her hand, happy to leave his problems for a while.

*

Jaxson returned from the walk with Sasha feeling relaxed. Talking with her had helped him to clear his mind and figure out a way to cope with everything that had been going on. He wasn't sure who he could trust besides her. He wanted to trust his father, but part of him wondered what made his mother act the way she did. Did his father do something to make his mother angry enough to try to get rid of him forever? Or was she simply cruel without reason?

Sasha had tried to help Jaxson understand what could have been going on in his mother's brain, but even she had no clue what the woman was thinking. She assured him that the best thing for him to do would be to talk with his father, then his mother, and try to figure out what was going on. He was nervous to tell authorities because of how involved they were in the entire thing. He thought that if he tried to tell officials that he would get in trouble. Jaxson wondered how his mother had so many connections. What did she say to make those officials agree to her terms and assist her in trying to kill her husband? It just didn't add up. Jaxson was determined to understand.

When he walked up to his front door, he felt a surge of emotions. He wished he could take the drone and headset and just spy on his parents, but he knew he couldn't hide this time. He needed to face his parents in person. The door to the condo was unlocked. He slowly opened it, careful to avoid swinging it and making a loud noise. He expected his parents to be gone, so he was unprepared for what he saw when he walked in. His father and mother sat next to each other in the living room. It didn't look like there had been any fight. Jaxson felt faint.

"Jaxson, son, please sit down," his father said in a calm tone. Jaxson listened, worried about what could happen if he made the wrong move. "Your mother and I talked. While I definitely wish things had happened differently, I was able to see what your mother was thinking. I don't think it's something that you'll be able to understand until you're our age. There

are some things that are too stressful. Your mother was ill. She wasn't herself when she made these plans and she has agreed to get some help. She will be meeting with Dr. Hart each Monday from now on. I will not be returning to work for a few weeks and will be meeting with some officials each week to discuss what has happened. You will not need to talk with anyone about this unless you wish to, but we ask that you not mention it to anyone besides officials or health counselors. It is a family matter. I forgive your mother and I hope you can forgive her as well."

Jaxson was stunned. He couldn't believe what his father was saying. It sounded like a well-rehearsed speech. It seemed so unlikely that his father would have truly forgiven his mother for all of that. Even if she was genuinely ill, she *tried to kill him*. What part of that didn't he understand? It wasn't until Jaxson's father shot him a reassuring smile that Jaxson understood how he could forgive his wife so quickly. Paul's words ran through his head: *The technology is so good now that the only real difference people can see between the real thing and the clone is in the smile.*

Three.

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a young man. Jaxson was born a peasant, to a blacksmith and a seamstress; Robert and Rebecca. He lived in a small cottage at the edge of the kingdom, walking miles to the well to get water. His mother was unhappy because she had married a man who was not able to give her everything she wanted. They were happy when they met, but when their son was born, they were forced to share their cottage and their money with him. His father loved him and didn't mind, but his mother was a wicked woman. She wanted to get rid of her son so that she could move into a bigger home and stop working as a seamstress. The wicked woman went out every morning when her son was walking to the well and looked for a girl who had no suitors. She was desperate to marry her son off to the first girl who said yes, no matter her appearance or the size of her dowry.

The boy was very smart. He knew his mother was not as kind as she pretended to be. When one evening she came home with news of dinner the next night at the farmer's home of all places, he knew she was scheming. His father was a kind man. He never suspected his wife of any wrong doing. The boy first caught on to his mother's games when he saw her flirting with the cobbler after his apprenticeship. He was only 10, but he knew that she looked at the cobbler the way his father looked at her. Since then, he had been very careful to trust her word. He was unsure of his mother's goal behind the dinner, but he was not excited to find out. He went to bed that evening suspicious.

Like his father, he enjoyed the simple things in life. He loved waking up at dawn and walking to the well to fetch water for the day for his family. He enjoyed sweeping the floors of their cottage as his mother rationed one egg and a few pieces of ham between the three of them for breakfast. Most of all, he loved walking from the edge of the village where they lived, past

the farms and through the town. He cherished his morning commute to the cobblers. His favorite part was looking up at the castle that overlooked the town square with all the shops and markets. He wondered what it was like inside. Unlike his mother, he wasn't sure he ever really wanted to find out. He liked the guessing game. Depending on his mood, he imagined the inside of the castle and the people who lived in it to be big or small, humble or stuck up.

On his walk the day of the dinner, he imagined the castle to be bustling with servants and suitors. The princess had reached the age of marriage recently. It was all anyone was talking about. Jaxson had overheard the chatter about her beauty and grace on his way to the cobblers. He had known the princess was near his age (she had just turned 15), but he was uninterested. He had never seen her and likely never would. His social class didn't get to see the royal family very often. He was okay with it. He wasn't interested in marriage yet anyways. He was still working on mastering cobbling so that he could take over his master's shop.

The day was like any other. He worked alongside his master and together they cobbled into the late evening. Jaxson looked out at the setting sun, got his cap, and put away his needle. He said goodbye to his master and went off through the town back to his small cottage. He knew if he were late his mother would punish him with an extra chore. Usually it was something that made no sense. Last time he upset her he had to sweep the path leading to their home. Even though their house was small, they had one of the longest paths in the kingdom. It was only because their home was so far off the main road. So, for close to a mile, Jaxson swept twigs off of the path of dirt that led to his cottage. When he was younger, he did things to upset his mother just to see how creative she could get. It was sometimes entertaining, but sometimes it was simply cruel. Once she made him sleep outside. He stopped upsetting her after this. He figured that once her creativity was gone she would just start being cruel.

As he approached his cottage, he saw his childhood friend Paul walking back towards town. Paul worked as a logger. He cut down trees and cut them into smaller, more manageable pieces. He delivered them to the peasants living on the outskirts of the kingdom, but his master delivered them to the guards at the castle gates. One day, Paul would take logs to the castle.

“Hello Jax! How was your apprenticeship today?”

“It was quite nice! What about you? Did you cut down any particularly big trees?” This was the boys regular banter. They had lived near each other their whole lives and went from playing in the woods together every day to working for different master craftsmen. Now, if they were lucky, they would see each other on the walk back to their respective homes. Paul’s family lived a little closer to the main square than Jaxson’s, but they were not dissimilar in their wealth, or lack of it. Paul’s father worked in the same trade as Jaxson’s. They were both blacksmiths. For a time, they competed against each other for business in the town square, but eventually, Paul’s father burned his hand and was unable to work for a while. When his shop closed, Jaxson’s father gave him a job at his. That was the kind of man Jaxson knew his father to be. It was also the type of man Jaxson was turning out to be.

Jaxson’s friend laughed and the two nodded their caps at each other before walking towards home. Their conversations were frequently short these days. Jaxson was always rushing home to make it in time for whatever dinner his mother had haphazardly prepared and Paul was off to discuss the impending reality of marriage with his mother. She loved her son to a fault and was unhappy that he was interested in leaving her for another woman. Lucky for Paul, he had an annoying younger brother. George would be enough company for their mother once Paul met a girl. He had told Jaxson about his interest to marry recently. A few weeks back, they saw each other on the trail and Jaxson asked what Paul’s evening plans were. His mother was feeling ill so

he preferred not to go home. He wanted to get a drink with Paul. But, Paul told him he already had plans. He was going to meet the father of a girl he was interested in. Of course, the father hated everything about Paul. From his unkempt hair to his forester work, he said no the moment Paul entered the home. Jaxson had seen a red eyed Paul walk into the pub he was in and asked him what had happened. It was the first time Jaxson had realized that he wasn't as interested in marriage as he should be for his age. If Paul was so upset about a girl he had only spoken with a few times, shouldn't Jaxson at least be thinking about marriage and leaving his cottage?

Suddenly, it dawned on Jaxson that tonight's dinner was probably going to be about marriage. He knew the farmer had a daughter. She was a bit younger than Jaxson. She had just turned thirteen. To Jaxson, she was still a child. To his mother, she was a bride.

He turned up the path to his home and took a breath before entering. As soon as he opened the door, his mother commented on his appearance. "Jaxson! We must leave for dinner with the farmer and his wife very soon. What have you done to your hair? Oh, Lord. Come, let me fix you." In a rare maternal moment, his mother licked her fingers and smoothed the light brown flyaways on top of his head. As soon as she was done she pointed to the armoire and he got the hint that he needed to change. He quickly got a cloth and put some lukewarm bath water on it and rubbed the dirt of his face, arms, and legs. In just a few minutes he was ready for dinner. His father walked in from the backdoor and smiled at him. He ruffled his son's hair only to receive a look of anger from his wife. Jaxson's father threw his arms up in an act of surrender and she once again set to work smoothing her son's hair. Jaxson knew this kind of fuss must be related to a woman. His mother never cared how he looked enough to touch up his hair twice.

On the walk over, Jaxson hung back while his parents discussed their days. He tried not to overhear their conversation, but some of it was inevitable. His mother spent her morning

cleaning the home and was visited by a craftsman's wife who brought her three shirts to repair. Jaxson's mother days were all very similar. She cleaned, she sewed, she cooked. It was more interesting to hear about his father's day. Today, it seemed his father had visited the castle. This bit of information peaked Jaxson's interest enough for him to walk next to his parents to hear better.

"—who the princess was talking to. There were so many men." Jaxson assumed he was talking about the suitors running about the palace.

"What was it like inside?" His mother's eyes glowed with enthusiasm. Jaxson had never seen her look as genuinely happy as she did when she was talking about the royal family. She loved every aspect of the castle. She loved the money, the crowns, the big rooms, the fine clothes. She always looked up at the gates as she passed with such longing it was almost sad.

"It was very ornate. Everything down to the doorknobs was made of gold. The rugs were handmade by the best rugmakers. And the furniture was obviously carved from the most expensive trees in the kingdom. It was something out a dream."

"Did you see anyone important? The king, perhaps?" For some reason, Jaxson's mother clung to a small bit of hope that she would be able to see the inside of the castle someday. He thought she half-expected that her son or husband would make such a good tradesman that the king would require their personal service and she would get to enter. Jaxson thought she had a better chance at seeing the castle as a maid.

"Not today. I heard the princess though. She was turning a corner when a guard finally let me in and I caught a glimpse of her gown. It was lovely. She seemed disheartened by the men she had met so far. I do hope that she finds a prince soon. Her father isn't getting any younger. We will need a new king very soon."

Jaxson's mother nodded in agreement. The two continued to discuss the qualities the princess was looking for in a husband (though neither had actually ever seen or met her) as they approached the farmer's land. Jaxson's mother stopped, turned towards him, smoothed his hair again, and gave him a look that told him to be on his best behavior. She let go of her royal dreams and put on a smile. His mother loved to smile. Her teeth were in surprisingly good condition. Even Jaxson had to admit that she had the nicest teeth he had ever seen.

The door to the house opened and Jaxson saw a womanly figure wave. The figure wore a loose fitted dress with an apron over it. He knew it was the farmer's wife. He had yet to see the farmer or the daughter. The house was not bad for a farmer, but Jaxson remained uninterested in courting the young girl who lived there.

Finally, they approached the door and were welcomed by the wife. Jaxson's mother said hello to her and greeted her with a hug warmer than one he'd ever received. Next, it was Jaxson's father's turn. He kissed the plump woman's cheek and followed his wife inside. Jaxson bowed to her and she curtsied in return, motioning for him to come inside.

"My husband is out back finishing the harvest. He sent his workers home early this evening, but he'll be here soon." The woman smiled. She had introduced herself as Mindy. Jaxson and his parents exchanged their names and waited for the farmer and the daughter to come in so that they could be seated. It was incredibly awkward to say the least. Jaxson was sure that his mother had not spent more than five minutes with Mindy before inviting herself over for dinner. After a few moments, his mother began to socialize and create conversation.

Finally the rest of the farm family entered. The farmer was a tall man. He wore overalls and a hat and didn't bother to wipe the dirt from his body before dinner. He greeted his wife with a kiss and his guests with a curt smile. The girl was young. Jaxson had a hard time believing she

was even thirteen. She introduced herself as Faith in a small voice. Her strawberry blonde hair had been braided and pulled back behind her ears. It made her ears look much too big for her face, but he pretended not to notice. About thirty minutes after Jaxson's family arrived, the six sat down to eat.

The meal was satisfying, but the conversation was lacking. The farmer's wife had prepared a cornmeal loaf, fresh vegetables, and a few pieces of steamed potato each. It was clear they were trying to impress their guests with the potatoes, but they rationed it so much it only made them seem poorer. The conversation was dry. Faith was shy. The boy's mother prodded her too much and she seemed uncomfortable. The farmer's father began to understand what was going on and decided to interrogate Jaxson. Both Jaxson and Faith were scared of the other's parents and were waiting impatiently for the evening to end.

It was the seventh day of the month. There was an old legend that between days 5 and 18, evil would appear in the form of a dragon. This occurrence had not been recorded in many years and was not something that most of the villagers took seriously anymore. It was as juvenile to believe the tale of the dragon as it was for a young peasant girl to dream of becoming a princess. Faith did not believe this tale, but she was so afraid of potentially being promised to a stranger the very evening she met him, that she spoke of the rumored dragon. "Oh, my. It sure has gotten dark, now hasn't it?" she began. "Mommy, don't you think they should be heading on home? I wouldn't want these lovely folk to be hunted by that dragon."

"Oh, Faith, you know how childish that tale is. Now, hush up and finish your cornmeal. It took me all afternoon to bake." Upon realizing he had hardly touched his cornmeal, Jaxson tried to shovel it down out of guilt, but there was something so unappetizing about the little kernels of corn that stuck in his teeth. "However, it is getting late and we do have to be up straight away at

dawn for the harvest. It's our busy season, you know." The farmer's wife continued, politely urging them to get on their way. Jaxson took this as a sign it was okay to stop munching at the cornmeal.

"Yes, of course. This was such a wonderful evening. It was so lovely to meet you Faith. If you and Jaxson would ever like to get together, I'd be so happy to chaperone." Jaxson's mother said, standing up from the table.

Faith gulped and nodded. Jaxson could tell she was uninterested. After all, she was so much younger than he was. And he was still an apprentice! He wasn't ready for marriage. Slowly, Jaxson and his father got up from the table. The wives were making pleasantries in the kitchen while their husbands and children stood awkwardly at the door. Finally, Jaxson's family said goodbye to the farmer's family and started on the long journey home.

As they walked, Jaxson's mother berated him for being too shy, then too forward, then too modest, and then accused him of altogether ruining the evening. The way Jaxson remembered it, he had barely spoken at all. In the midst of his mother's tirade about what social niceties Jaxson had ignored, a bright light appeared in the distance. His mother tried to talk over the excitement that came with the brightness, but Jaxson's father realized it was coming from their cottage. He ran away from his family, attempting to stop whatever intruder was in their home. Jaxson sped up, leaving his mother behind. He got closer and closer to their cottage and realized it was getting warmer. The light was not just bright, but it was warm. *A fire.* But how had their home caught on fire?

That was when Jaxson heard it. The loud growl of a dragon. He finally saw it above the flames. It was a big mass of bluish-green scales with large black eyes and sharp claws that were longer than a man. Jaxson stood a few hundred feet away from the cottage, stunned. He only

moved when he caught a glimpse of his father leaving the front door. He was carrying a box that didn't look familiar and coughing from the smoke. Jaxson ran towards him, planning on helping his father safely navigate the flames. When they were only a few feet from each other, the dragon's large tail came crashing down in between them. The impact on the ground made Jaxson fall backwards. He had just regained his standing when he saw his father being lifted into the air. At this sight, his mother ran towards the dragon. Her panic made Jaxson's fears even worse. He jumped and barely grazed his father's hand but was unable to fully grasp it. The dragon flapped its wings, once again knocking Jaxson's small, boyish frame to the dirt. He and his mother watched as the man they both loved was carried off by a beast.

He saw his mother sink to her knees and sob. Jaxson knelt beside her and stroked her back, providing the wicked woman some comfort. It was only when her tears slowed and her speech became intelligible that he understood that she was crying over the cottage and the box, not her husband. Jaxson stood and took his hand off of her. "What?" he asked incredulously.

"The *house!*" His mother shrieked. "Where will we live? What will we do? What about the box?"

"The house?! A box?! Dad just got taken by the dragon! How can you think of anything else?!"

"Oh God, the *box!*" his mother once more began her crying and Jaxson, deciding he had had enough of her whining. He turned his back on his mother and the fiery pile of wood and brick he once called home.

He was just reaching the path that lead to the main square when his mother called out his name and ran to catch up with him. He was surprised that she intended to follow him. "Jaxson, what will we do? Don't you leave me too, I won't survive."

Jaxson had a suspicion she meant she wouldn't *financially* survive, but he didn't want to admit that to himself just yet. It felt good thinking that his mother needed him—he wanted to believe it for as long as he could. “On one condition. Tell me whatever you know about the dragon. And that box that Dad went back for.”

Jaxson, unlike some of the other kids in the village, was unaware of the dragon's story. It was supposedly an old wives tale, but after tonight, Jaxson knew that it was real. Since he lived so far from the main square, his childhood friends consisted of other poor kids whose parents were far too busy working to tell them a silly story about a dragon. Jaxson wondered how Faith had heard of it. He knew his mother had. She had grown up in the main square, just a few hundred feet from the castle's gates. Her father had been a very well respected blacksmith and often did work for the king. Jaxson always thought that the reason she was so unhappy with their current life was because she had given up so much for what she thought was true love. It saddened Jaxson to think that his mother no longer loved his father, the man that he knew loved her more than anything. But, as he watched her sigh and heard her tell him the legend of the dragon, he saw some part deep within her that still loved and cared for her husband.

“The dragon's story is very old. It has been around for many, many centuries. No one is sure if it's the same dragon or if there is more than one. It's always the same color scales, which is why people think it's the same. My father liked to tell me it was a mother and her baby, but no one knows for sure.

“Anyways, centuries ago, there were many more dragons and they lived harmoniously in the kingdom. There were not horrible fires and kidnappings like there was tonight. The dragons mostly kept to themselves. But one man, an awful, selfish man, decided to hunt the dragon for sport. He believed that their blood, when ingested by humans, would allow the drinker to live

forever. He tracked down dragon after dragon, killing mercilessly by shooting arrows into their eyes and blinding them. Then, he would stab them and let their blood seep out into carts.

“The dragons are not as mean as their reputation makes them seem. They are actually incredibly kind and gentle creatures. However, this one man’s actions caused them to be frightened of humans. They began to fly over the castle less and less. Soon enough, only a few dragons remained. There were some members of the king’s court who would bring food and refuge to the dragon’s caves so that they wouldn’t have to fly around and risk their lives. Eventually, the castle banned this practice after a dragon burned down a building out of fear. It thought it had seen a man carrying a bow and arrows, but it was really a loaf of bread slung over his back. This led to revolts from the people. They felt like the dragons had been invasive in their land too long and had been taking valuable resources from them. Large groups of people gathered with pitchforks and torches and went to where the dragon’s lived. They killed many dragons that night. That was the last time anyone has seen one. But, the rumors are that there is still one living amongst us. It is hiding out, waiting to take revenge.” She saw Jaxson look to her, expecting more and continued: “As for the box... I have never seen it before. I don’t know why your father would have gone in for that.”

Jaxson suspected she wasn’t giving him all the facts, but he didn’t think there was enough time to debate it, so he let it go for the time being. He was stunned at his mother’s story. He wondered why she had never told it before.

He was so focused on the story, he hadn’t noticed that their distant neighbors had seen the flames and come to inquire. He saw Paul first. Then, his parents and the farmer, his wife, and Faith. There were a few stragglers coming behind the two families, but Jaxson could tell they

were hesitant to come any closer. Upon seeing Jaxson and his mother, Paul's face went pale. "Oh Lord. What happened?" his friend asked.

"A dragon took my father." Jaxson heard the small crowd share in a gasp. He watched their faces as they turned to one another and whispered. He could almost hear Faith tell her mother that she didn't mean to curse us; she just wanted us gone. He saw the farmer and his wife and daughter walk away, heads held down, ashamed.

From the quiet crowd, Paul's father emerged. He was a tall, large man with a black beard and even darker hair. He had always intimidated Jaxson, but in that instant, Jaxson met his eyes. "Son, you need to go to the castle. The King can tell you how to get to the dragon. I have heard him and his counsel discussing it in the last few weeks. I was unaware of the troubles that lay ahead. I implore you to go to him. Don't stop until you reach the gates. Tell the guards that the dragon has returned. And that you intend to stop him and rescue your father. Go! You must hurry. If you are slow, your father may not make it." As he saw Jaxson look nervously at his mother, Paul's father continued: "Your mother will be safe with us until your return."

Jaxson gave his mother a quick hug and seeing no other options, left in a hurry as Paul's father had advised him. As he went on his way towards the castle, he began to replay the evening's events over in his head. He wanted to make sure he hadn't missed anything important.

He first saw the smoke in the distance, then he smelt the awful burning of their belongings. He had no idea why their home was on fire. He couldn't imagine why any human would want to set fire to that small cottage, let alone a dragon. Upon reaching the cottage, he saw his father disappear inside to retrieve something. What it was, he was unsure of. He had never seen the small box that his father had fought through flames and a giant beast to get. Was that the reason the dragon took him? Jaxson decided to bring it up to the King. He wanted to know what

made his ordinary family suddenly extraordinary enough that a mythical creature came out of hiding to hunt down his father.

The walk to the castle felt like it took much longer than it ever had. Technically, Jaxson had never been to the castle. The castle was a foreign place to him and he was intimidated by walking up to the gates and telling the guards that he, a nobody-son-of-a-peasant, needed to speak with the King immediately. He was sure that the guards would laugh at him and send him to the dungeons where the mentally ill were kept.

He had so convinced himself of this that by the time he arrived in the main square and could see the tall towers of the castle in the distance, he thought about turning around. He could find the dragon on his own, couldn't he? As soon as this idiotic thought popped into his brain, he gathered up his remaining courage and remembered it was his *father*. It wasn't about the dragon or the King or the kingdom's safety. It was about retrieving his father and figuring out what was in that box and why the dragon wanted it. He now wished that he had the guts to press his mother about the contents of the box before starting out on his journey. He had no doubt that the King would be interested in knowing what it was that made the dragon return and kidnap such an unexpected victim.

It was near dawn when he finally arrived at the gates. He felt his adrenaline running out and his pace was sluggish. He had been walking for hours. He didn't realize how far away the castle was. Just because he could see it from the cobbler shop didn't mean it was anywhere near it. He had reached the main square hours ago and continued to walk several miles to the gates. The guards were standing just as Jaxson had expected them. They were tall, covered in armor, and carried swords. They were incredibly stiff. Jaxson wondered how long they had been standing outside.

“Move along.” One spoke up, assuming that Jaxson was as unimportant as he looked. When Jaxson didn’t move, he repeated himself, but with a harsher tone. “Move along.”

Jaxson coughed. He was incredibly nervous and the guards indicating that he was unwelcome knocked what little confidence he had right out of him. He could smell the fresh flowers beyond the gates and the contrast between the bright, happy smell of flowers and the hot, engulfing smell of smoke he remembered hours earlier brought him back to reality. “I need to speak with the King.” He paused a moment, waiting to see what their reactions were before continuing on. One moved as if he were to draw his sword, while the other simply took his eyes off of Jaxson as if he was mentally removing himself from his physical surroundings. Jaxson continued: “The dragon has returned and I intend to stop him. He has taken my father.”

This got their attention. The sword-grabbing guard dropped his hands and turned to the other, fear in his eyes. The second guard returned his gaze to Jaxson, studying him intently before opening the gates and calling to the guard inside. He was to escort Jaxson to the waiting room until the King’s advisor had heard Jaxson’s tale and deemed it worthy for the King himself to hear it. Only then would Jaxson be granted the privilege to speak with the King and seek out his knowledge and advice.

He waited for a long time in the large, ornate room. He understood why this was the waiting room. Upon entering the castle, there was the grand foyer and extending beyond it was the rest of the castle and its beauty. He had unconsciously continued walking forward when the guard obnoxiously cleared his throat and held out his arm, indicating that Jaxson was not permitted to walk further into the castle, but that he would be turning to the first door on the left. It was a beautiful door, but compared to the rest of the castle, it indicated that whatever was behind it was not for the royal family but for people of a lesser social standing. The room was

still beautiful. The walls were a rich dark blue and the large, plush furniture was velvet. There were even gems on the edge of the chairs. If this were just the waiting room for peasants like himself, Jaxson couldn't imagine what the rest of the castle looked like.

As he waited for the King's advisor, he imagined what it would be like to live in the castle. He imagined waking up in a bed three times the size of his, with a mattress as soft as a cloud and more pillows than one person could ever need. He would throw off his heavy, warm blanket and ring a bell to signal to the servants he was ready to get up. He would walk to a golden bathtub already full of warm water. The servants would bathe him as he lay there lazily, still waking up from his restful sleep. They would dress him, comb his hair, escort him to breakfast. He was just beginning to imagine what sorts of pastries a King had for breakfast when a sound startled him. He jumped slightly and immediately came back to reality. In the doorway was a short man wearing a large velvet tunic with poufy sleeves. Jaxson stifled a laugh at the outfit and stood to greet the man.

"This way, son." The man turned and walked rapidly out of the room before Jaxson had even begun to introduce himself. He jogged to catch up and followed the short man through the ground floor of the castle, looking around him the entire time. The ceilings were higher than if he stacked his cottage on top of itself five times. There were crystals and beautiful gems on every piece of furniture and each wall had a beautiful painting.

Suddenly, the short man stopped. Jaxson, who was busy staring at a painting featuring a beautiful woman and a rose, ran right into him. The man glared at Jaxson but said nothing. He rapped on a door and took a step back, forcing Jaxson to jump back again. He was unfamiliar and, as a result, quite uncomfortable, with how different walking felt in the palace.

The door opened slightly and the short man walked up and whispered something before the door was suddenly shut tightly again. Jaxson looked at the short man, waiting for any kind of explanation, but none came to him. Soon, the door opened again. This time it was opened fully and Jaxson was able to see the inside of the room. It was even more beautiful than the last, but he still imagined he was in the lower parts of the castle. He longed to be able to climb the marble staircase and see a bedroom.

“Sit.” The short man motioned to a plush chair in the center of the room. Jaxson sat and was so absorbed in how soft the fabric of the chair was that he didn’t realize the short man had left. He was alone again. He assumed he wouldn’t be leaving this room like he did the last. There was a large wooden desk with an even larger, fluffier chair behind it. The desk was empty save for a quill and a jar of ink.

Jaxson had been in the castle for close to an hour and had said nothing. He was beginning to feel impatient and almost angry. His father’s life was at stake! Did that not matter to anyone else?

Finally, the heavy door swung open and a new man walked inside. “Morning, boy. I am here to listen to your tale. If you are lying or pretending, you will be sentenced to a most terrible life in the dungeon.” When Jaxson didn’t respond (out of fear! Not to be dense or rude), the man continued. “Well, go on, then.”

And so Jaxson related his story. He spoke of the flames, his father, and the dragon. He wasn’t sure if he should mention the box or not. He wasn’t sure if it was important enough. However, after Jaxson finished his story and the man sat across from him, eyes narrowed, determining Jaxson’s father’s fate, Jaxson decided to tell him: “My father went in the cottage for something. I saw him carrying a box. It was small and I had never seen it before. My mother said

she didn't know what it was either. But that's when the dragon took him. When he was holding the box."

This got the man's attention. "A box? Was it, by chance, orange in color?"

"I think so. I was too far away to see it in detail but it looked like a yellow or orange color."

"Interesting. Wait here." Jaxson had no time to inquire anymore about what would happen and where the man was going. He never even got his name. He was hoping that the man had gone to get the King, but the short man returned to take Jaxson to a new room a few minutes later. Jaxson expected his sudden stops and his few steps back that time, so their walk was much less awkward. Jaxson was feeling hungry and tired from his walk. It was mid-morning now and he had accomplished close to nothing. The short man abruptly stopped again, this time in front of the staircase. Jaxson immediately assumed that the man in the room had determined him a liar and he was being sent to the dungeons. Instead, the short man looked at Jaxson, made a *hmp* of disapproval, but went ahead up to the second floor of the castle. He didn't look behind him to see if Jaxson had followed, which, after realizing he wasn't going to the dungeons, he had scurried up after the short man.

The last stop of their walk was a modest yellow door marked *Guest* in small cursive letters Jaxson looked at the short man confused. By way of answer, the short man opened the door and motioned for Jaxson to enter. There was a large bed complete with what must have been ten pillows and a desk with a steaming hot bowl of oatmeal and a large pitcher of water on top. "The King will be with you at dinner. Eat and rest. Lunch will be brought in a few hours and after lunch, you will be visited by servants to help prepare you for dinner."

Without another word, the short man turned on his heels and disappeared from the room leaving Jaxson more confused than ever. He didn't have time to focus on his confusion. The strong, sweet smell of the oats made his stomach grumble. He quickly ate them and drank all the water in the pitcher. He burped loudly and looked around embarrassed. Thankfully, he was all alone in the room. He went over to the bed. He wasn't intending on falling asleep, but he couldn't help himself. As soon as he sat down, he felt his eyes grow heavy. He lay back and let sleep take him over. His rest was a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

When he awoke again, there was yet another warm meal laid out on the table. He walked towards it, his stomach grumbling slightly. He was in the middle of slurping down the chicken soup, bowl up to his face, spoon discarded on the table, when there was a short knock on the door. He put the bowl down faster than intended and splashed warm broth on the table and himself. Before he had the chance to clean up his mess (yet another indicator of his low status—he couldn't even eat soup properly), the door opened and a servant entered. The servant bowed to Jaxson and Jaxson stood there, wondering what to do in response. Luckily, he didn't have much time to deliberate as the servant rose and hurried over to him. "Sir," (no one had ever called Jaxson 'sir' before), "it is time to get you ready to dine with the King."

"Dine? I just dined." Jaxson said stupidly. He had forgotten all about what the short man mentioned to him before his nap.

"Yes, sire. Come, this way please." Jaxson followed the servant into a bathroom that he hadn't known had been there. The bath was already drawn and warm, just as it had been in his imagination hours before. The servant motioned for Jaxson to undress and step in, which he did. The servant quietly bathed Jaxson, who had not been bathed since he was a child and was

incredibly tense the entire time. The servant didn't seem to mind and ignored Jaxson's squirming body. The bath was over soon enough and the servant proceeded to get Jaxson ready.

While they had been in the bathroom, another servant had come up and laid out a new tunic and pair of leggings for Jaxson to wear to dinner. There was also a pair of brown loafers and a small piece of paper, folded up next to the tunic. Jaxson, feeling a little more relaxed once he got some undergarments on, allowed the servant to dress him. He felt important for the first time in his life. He was just beginning to enjoy the pampering when another servant came in. This one cut and styled Jaxson's hair so expertly that when Jaxson saw his reflection he didn't recognize himself. But in a good way. He smiled, but quickly dropped his smile when he saw how hollow his cheeks looked. He hadn't ever thought that he didn't eat enough until this experience. He was lucky to have a piece of bread for dinner most nights, however, if his family had people over for the evening (like they had gone to the farmer's), his mother would cook a three course meal and they would ration the same few pieces of bread between the three of them for the next week and a half. Jaxson had eaten more in the last few hours than he did in a typical day.

There was more pampering to happen before dinner. Jaxson's mouth was rinsed with a foul, almost-spicy mixture that burned his gums and throat. His feet were attended to with a rough edged stone and scissors were taken to his fingernails. When it was all over, he was shocked at his appearance. He looked hungry, but not horrible. There was color in his face (either due to the makeup they used or the nerves) and his skin was free of dirt. He was wearing new clothing that felt hand-tailored for him instead of a hand-me-down tunic from his father. The servants instructed Jaxson to open the paper once they left, read it, and then wait for someone (probably the short man) to take Jaxson to the dining hall.

Before they had even shut the door, Jaxson was scrambling to the bed to open the small sheet of parchment.

Greetings. We trust that you have enjoyed your rest and your meals. I am looking forward to dining with you shortly and hearing your story, though it is a sad tale. My daughter and I will be the only others in attendance at dinner, with the exception of guards and servants. Please do remember that you are in the presence of a young lady and to keep your manner appropriate. We will be having a turkey for supper. Please wait for Henry to fetch you and show you to the hall.

Jaxson was astounded. He had an actual note from the King! He wanted to run home and show his father, but of course, he couldn't. Thinking about his father caused him debilitating anxiety and he sat restlessly awaiting the arrival of Henry. Whoever that was. Jaxson was trying to picture the short man as a Henry, but it just didn't seem to make sense. He saw the fat man as more of a Randel than a Henry. As Jaxson was picturing a taller, slimmer man with a fuller head of hair taking him to a large room with a full turkey and the ruler of the kingdom, the short man appeared. So he *was* Henry. It disappointed Jaxson that he wasn't going to see more of the people who worked within the castle, but he couldn't expect too much. He was shocked at how much he had already received.

Henry took him through the halls, down a staircase, through a long hallway, down a smaller staircase, back up a staircase, and around a corner until they reached two large doors with heavy gold knockers. Jaxson steeled himself for his first impression with the King, but when the doors were opened the dining hall was empty. Jaxson was shown to his seat and a glass of water was poured for him. Then he was left alone in the large room.

Jaxson was just contemplating whether or not he should break some bread without the King (that's how hungry he was) when suddenly a trumpet sounded. The noise shocked Jaxson so much that he jumped. He turned his attention to where the sound came from and saw a squat man put down the instrument. "Announcing King Griffin of Forsbourc and his daughter Princess Sasha of Forsbourc."

The man ran away and the large doors opened for the King and his daughter. Jaxson noticed how different the King looked than what he had imagined. He had never seen the King and so he had simply pictured him as every other adult man he had ever seen. Boy was he wrong. The King was tall and slender; he had the body of a young man, but you could tell that he was older by the deep wrinkles in his forehead and the gray hair peeking out from under his crown. Sasha, on the other hand, looked as young and beautiful as any girl could. She had long, flowing blonde hair and her tiara was solid gold. She wore a pale pink gown and smiled at Jaxson. Her smile made him forget his purpose for being in the castle, but he quickly remembered why he was there and what his responsibility was.

The two royals sat and more servants came in the dining hall to serve them. Their bread was broken for them and their wine was poured into their cups. The King hesitated to say a prayer, which surprised Jaxson. In the end, the King simply decided to say "Bless this castle and this man, Amen."

The three ate in silence for a little while. Jaxson was too scared to talk first. He was unsure of how to even begin his story and a small part of him wondered what the princess would think of him. Eventually, as the first course was being brought out, the King spoke: "Now, son. My advisor tells me you have an extraordinary tale for me. Do tell."

This was not the introduction that Jaxson was hoping for. He felt too stiff, too uncomfortable to begin a heartbreaking story about his cottage being set to fire and his father being taken prisoner. But, he had no choice and so he began his tale as the King slurped up soup.

“My father has been taken by the dragon.” This seemed as good a way as any to begin his story. And Jaxson had figured that the King’s advisor had mentioned what the evening’s talk would be about, but he had figured incorrect. The King began choking immediately. A guard rushed over and helped the King. Once the King was breathing regularly, he shoed away the guard, embarrassed.

“The *dragon*?! What in the Lord’s name do you mean? I have been searching for the dragon for years and I have not seen it nor have I found a soul who has.”

Jaxson told the story the same way he told the advisor, though, he made sure to try to say things as delicately as possible in order to prevent the King from choking again. As Jaxson spoke, the King stared intently at him. Only Princess Sasha ate until the story was done. Then, suddenly, the servants returned and took away the soup dishes and replaced them with plates of thick slices of turkey. They bowed and left the dining hall.

“The orange box that you spoke of... I think I know what the dragon was looking for and I think it may have been in that box. Did you ever hear the legend of the dragons and what their fate was?”

Jaxson nodded yes, “My mother told me after my father was taken.”

“Did she tell you that there was one vial of dragon blood left? It has never been proven to be real, all legend of course. But, if this did exist, and if that was what was in the box, it makes sense why the dragon would come for your father. The dragons will only ever be free from poaching if there are no more vials of their blood. That way, the legend of it being an elixir will

be just that: legend. If that vile exists, the dragons will do anything it takes to destroy it. It seems to me that your father somehow got ahold of one of the last remaining vials of dragon blood and the dragon found out. I have had strong beliefs that the dragons were growing in numbers for a while, but I have not been able to confirm it until now. I believe the dragon who took your father is the leader. She is the dragon who is strongest and most capable. She sniffed out the vial and took it to destroy it. That way, her kind can live in peace. Dragons are not a terrible enemy. They are kind and gentle creatures—unless you steal from them and kill them. Then they are wicked and fierce in their protection of themselves.”

Jaxson listened carefully as the King explained his theory. When the King mentioned what was likely in the box, a switch flipped for Jaxson. He had been trying to see his mother as a grief-stricken woman. However, now, after hearing about the vials of blood, he connected the dots. “Your Majesty,” he began hesitantly. “I believe you that there was likely a vial of blood in my home. I do not think it would have been my father’s. I believe it was my mother’s. Please, do let me go and try to save my father and destroy the vial for the dragons so that our kingdom may be in peace with them once more. If I am correct and my father is innocent, put my mother in the dungeon. If I am wrong, you can put me in the dungeon.”

The King looked at him and narrowed his eyes in surprise. It was a bold offer to make. Dragons were not easy creatures to fight with. And Jaxson was a small cobbler’s apprentice. He had no experience fighting. Finally, the King responded, “Very well. If that is what you wish, I will grant it. I will give you all the directions I can and send you out. If indeed you do come back and have completed this noble mission, I will grant you one other prize in addition to relieving your father of possessing the vial. I will give you the hand of my daughter.” At this, Princess Sasha looked up at her father, then towards Jaxson. Jaxson tried desperately to read her face, to

get a clue into how she felt about her new destiny, but there was no sign of happiness nor disappointment.

“If that is what you desire, Your Majesty. If I return with my father and the destroyed vial, I will marry Princess Sasha.” Then he added, “If she wishes to follow through.” At this, Princess Sasha gave a small smile, but quickly regained her expression of neutrality.

“Go. Supper is finished and you must rest before you head out tomorrow. I will go over the instructions and warn you all I can, but it is up to you to complete this journey. We will meet in my quarters at half past 7. There, I will give you what you will need.”

Henry returned and guided Jaxson out of the dining hall. They went back to the room where Jaxson had spent his afternoon and Henry stood outside the door. Jaxson sat inside waiting. The King called him to his private quarters exactly when he said he would and Henry led him there. The route from the portion of the castle where Jaxson was sleeping to the King’s quarter’s was long and complex. He suspected it was done purposely to make it close to impossible for a potential intruder to find the King and assassinate him.

Henry knocked four times on the door, two short, two long. The King opened the door, thanked Henry, and bowed for Jaxson to enter. Jaxson stood, hovering close to the door, unsure if he should sit or stand. The King answered this for him by saying, “Please, sit.” He motioned to a large, plush chair in the center of the room. Directly across from it was an exact copy of the chair. Jaxson had expected every chair that the King sat in to be encrusted with gold and jewels. He felt naïve and impressionable, but still in awe of the humble man he was meeting. He had promised his daughter’s hand if Jaxson was able to save his father and destroy the vial. The King had admitted to not being able to do what Jaxson was about to attempt. He was a genuine man. A good King.

“Son. I will be honest with you,” the King began when Jaxson had sat down. “I do not know much about the path you are about to embark on. But, I do know the dangers it will hold. The dragons are not forgiving creatures. If they haven’t been able to get your father to destroy the vial, they will not have an easy time trusting you. In the legend, it is said that the way to destroy the vial cannot be done with fire or simply pouring it out. It must be put back inside the dragon. You will need a dragon to allow you to pour the vial into their throat. This will be an almost impossible task. I suspect that is why they took your father with the box, and not simply the box alone. I am sorry I’m just telling you all this now, I didn’t think it was appropriate conversation for Sasha.” Jaxson nodded, waiting for him to continue. “So, my boy, do you think you’ll be able to handle this challenge?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Of course I will. I know my father had no ill intentions and I cannot let the dragons return and have the kingdom think it was his fault that danger is upon us.”

The King nodded his head slowly, as if he agreed with Jaxson yet pitied his hopefulness all at once. “Then it is settled. Good luck my child. You will face many challenges but as long as you remember your purpose, you will be safe. I will have my guards give you a sword and a map. After you get a good night’s rest and a full meal in the morning, you will be off.”

Jaxson stood, shook the King’s outstretched hand, and departed. Henry walked him back to his room silently. He undressed and got into the large bed in the long gown that had been laid out for him while he was at dinner.

The next morning, Jaxson rose with a pit in his stomach. He tried to eat as much of the oats as he could, but his stomach felt heavy. He hadn’t slept well. He had tossed and turned until the early hours and once he was finally drifting off, the trumpet sounded, waking him. The King was standing by the palace entrance when Jaxson was escorted down by Henry. Sasha was to his

right. As the King wished him good luck, Jaxson couldn't stop remembering that if he returned successful, he would have a chance with her. The King gave Jaxson a parchment map and a metal sword, Sasha gave him a shy kiss on his cheek. Then, he was off.

The map, once Jaxson was holding it correctly, was surprisingly easy to follow. The lines were straight and distinct. He would need to walk *past* the castle—something he had never done before. Only travelers went beyond the castle walls. He would have special permission from the guards to do so but he still felt nervous when he approached. They allowed him to pass without saying a word. The King must have alerted them. From there, the journey wouldn't be more than a day or so. Jaxson was expecting a bigger challenge. He knew that the real challenge would come when he faced the dragon and was met with the fire-breathing wrath it held for him and his father, so he tried his best to enjoy his small hike.

The travels would take him across a river and along the edge of the forest. The forest by Jaxson's cottage was mysterious, but not scary. The forest outside the kingdom walls was rumored to have beasts and monsters of all kinds. Jaxson was expecting the dragon's lair to be in the forest. But the King's map had it in the most unexpected place of all: a cave overlooking the water. The cave was carved out into cliffs and was very precarious to get to. The ocean waves were fierce and anyone who fell in would meet their immediate death. Jaxson knew that this water was one of the main reasons the kingdom was walled in. Before the walls, there were many deaths—accidental or purposeful—that were attributed to the easy access to these cliffs. It was something that each child, no matter how rich or poor, was warned of when they were growing up and beginning to wander away from their homes to play.

He expected to be at the caves by noon the next day. He just needed to get through the first day and the night. It would be his first night sleeping away from home, well aside from

sleeping at the palace the last night. He was unsure of what to expect. It wasn't cold out so he didn't have to worry about snow, but he did worry about the creatures that were rumored to live in the forest. If he could just make it past the forest and arrive at the cave by night... But then he would have to sleep next to the dragons. He shuddered at the thought.

There was no way to win. He would be sleeping on the cold, hard ground no matter what. He was anxious to get to the caves and by sundown he had only just made it to the river. He was worried that he had been going the wrong way and sighed of relief once he heard the water. He wasn't expecting it to take him so long to get there. When he arrived at the water's edge, he sank to his knees and drank some of the cool, fresh water. It felt nice to splash it on his hot face. He was sure he was red as a tomato from the sun, but he knew that if he wanted to have a chance of saving his father, he couldn't lay around by the cool river all day. He needed to be at the forest's edge before nightfall. He didn't want to arrive at the forest when it was already dark out. He would never get any sleep.

As he continued walking, he let his imagination run wild. He had half-expected to find someone out there. But, he was all alone. He wished that the King had sent someone with him, but he couldn't have expected that. That would have been too much generosity.

By the time he reached the forest's edge, Jaxson had begun talking to himself. He was having a conversation about the pros and cons of coming back to the castle having accomplished his missions: pros, he would marry Sasha, clear his father's name, and give his mother what she deserved; cons, he would lose his apprenticeship, costing his master an apprentice and he didn't *really* know that his mother was responsible—he just suspected it. It was this thought that had been giving him sharp stomach pains all day. He had tried to ignore it, but as he approached the lush trees and saw the sun going down, he knew he would have to address his fears and concerns.

He decided to camp out for the night. It was beginning to get dark and he didn't want to go any further if he couldn't clearly identify the landmarks from the map. The last thing he needed was to get lost. He took out the small sandwich the King's servants had prepared for him and took slow, delicate bites while he thought.

He knew that his mother had been planning something. He had thought she had been scheming to get him married. And maybe that was all she had done, but it seemed too suspicious. Lately, she had been out of the cottage more and Jaxson had attributed it to her trying to find him a wife, but what if he was wrong? What if she had been trying to find the box and she finally did? Was it her plan to get rid of just Jaxson? Or Jaxson *and* his father? Jaxson was uneasy at the fact that he couldn't ignore his fears. He wished he could believe his mother was a good woman who wouldn't conspire to have her husband and her child out of her life, but something in him knew she was capable of it. It unsettled him immensely.

How would she have gotten the dragon's blood vial? Jaxson knew that she came from an interesting family. She had grown up wealthier than they were now, and Jaxson always wondered why she married down instead of within her own social class. He had figured it was because she loved her husband, but now he worried that she couldn't find anyone else to marry her. What if her family was the one that was responsible for all the dragon murders? That could be how she knew where to find the vial. That would explain why she had to marry someone who was so much poorer *and* why she was so willing to get rid of him.

These thoughts kept Jaxson up. He had been in his makeshift bed (a patch of grass covered in a thin blanket he carried in the pack with his food and water) for hours. His eyes were wide open, partly because he was thinking of the truth behind his family and partly because he was scared of what may lie ahead in the forest. Eventually, he had thought of every scenario that

he could encounter and was absolutely exhausted. The last few days had been hard on him mentally and physically, but his body was not ready to rest just yet. He felt little surges of adrenaline each time he relaxed his muscles, as if his body was warning him not to let down his guard.

Around three a.m., he finally gave in to his tiredness. He felt his jaw unclench and his eyelids fluttered closed. Just a few seconds after he reached this peaceful sleep, a noise woke him. He jumped up, suddenly wide awake. In the distance, he saw a light. *Flames*, he thought.

He rolled up his blanket, stuffed it in his bag, and walked toward the light. He was aware of the risk of traveling at night, but he couldn't imagine staying where he was and letting his father suffer alone. He was much closer to the cave than he realized. In about an hour, he could feel the heat from the fires. He began slowing his pace, careful not to step on a branch and alert the dragons that he was there. He wanted to make sure his father was alive before he made his presence known.

With the help of the light, he saw the cave. He saw a large rocky makeshift walkway that he would need to climb in order to enter, but thankfully, there were dragons outside the cave. They were sitting on the rocky cliff's edge. Jaxson was in awe. There they were, three dragons. One was the beautiful blue-scaled dragon that destroyed Jaxson's home. The other two were smaller. They looked almost like children. They were still bigger than Jaxson's cottage had been but they were tiny compared to the blue dragon. Maybe the dragon who took Jaxson's father *was* a mother and these were her babies. They were identical. Their eyes were the color of their mother's scales but their own bodies were glistening and white. It was like staring at a diamond. Jaxson was so caught up in their beauty that he didn't recognize the figure hanging off the ledge. There, attached to a rope that was being held up by the mother dragon's claw, was his father,

dangling off the edge of the rocks. Next to him was the fire that the dragons had lit. Jaxson was glad he had come when he did. He couldn't imagine what he would have found if he waited til morning.

He knew that the dragons were planning on killing his father, but he didn't know how. He needed to create a distraction. He needed them to look away so that he could pull his father back onto the cliff and dump the vial into one of the baby's mouths. He had no idea how to pull this off. It seemed almost impossible.

But then he remembered the sword the King had given him. He held it up in the light of the fire, hoping it would shine in the eyes of the dragons and make them leave their post. By some miracle, it did. The mother dragon saw the light first. There was a screech followed by the commotion of the children looking around. They flapped their iridescent wings in the direction of the light. Jaxson shined it far to the left of him, hoping it would fool their eyes. When he heard the *whoosh* of their wings fly by him, he knew he had tricked them. His mission was now to save his father. Carrying the sword, he slowly made his way closer to the cliff. Looking closer, he could see that his father's rope was secured around his waist and to a boulder on the cliff. All he had to do was pull him up and cut the rope. Then his father could help him fight the dragons.

He was about to attempt to contact his father when he heard a loud growl. He turned over his shoulder and saw a dragon flying towards him. It was one of the white ones, but it was alerting the other and its mother. Jaxson ran towards the cliff and screamed out for his father, "Dad!"

Stunned, his father looked up. Jaxson made it to the rock and pulled at the rope, trying to bring his father back to land. The small white dragon was circling the air above Jaxson, waiting for its companions to join it. When they did, the other white dragon joined in the circling, but the

mother dragon landed beside Jaxson with a thud. A soft blue flame escaped her mouth and caught Jaxson's bag on fire. He had barely made any progress pulling his father's body up from the cliff and was losing all hope once he realized he was surrounded.

"Please," he begged. "I want to destroy the vial. I know how to do it!" He had no idea if the dragons would be able to understand him.

"Jaxson, it's no use. They haven't been able to understand a thing I've said. You shouldn't be here! Run! Go home! We don't both need to perish like this."

"Silence!" the noise that came from the dragon was more of a hiss than anything else. He stood still, holding his father's dangling body just a few feet from the cliffs. The dragon continued, *"I intend to destroy this vial. The man who took it has the intentions to use it for evil. It belongs to us! Not to your kind. It is my children's. He who stole it will get what he deserves!"*

"But I didn't steal it!" Jaxson's father said, moving his arms when he spoke. This caused the rope to slip from Jaxson's hands and his father fell with the rope's slack.

"Silence! My mind is made up. You, small boy, move aside."

"No." As Jaxson heard the word leave his mouth, he was just as surprised as the dragon and his father. He hadn't expected himself to speak. Suddenly, there was a great noise and fire spread around him in a circle. The dragon flew into the air, breathing fire all around the rock. Jaxson quickly pulled his father up with all the strength he had left. He collapsed on the rock next to his father and cut the rope with the sword. His father hugged him, tears in his eyes.

"Son, what are you doing here?" His father asked. Jaxson shrugged off his question. Now was not the time for a reunion. There was an angry fire-breathing dragon flying above them. The two smaller dragons had come to the rock and were standing on either side of Jaxson and his

father. The wind from the mother's wings was spreading the fire. He knew that she was trying to smother them.

"Where is the vial?" Jaxson screamed over the *whooshing* of wings and the crackling flames. His father pointed inside the cave. Without thinking, Jaxson climbed up the rock and jumped off the boulder, holding on to the rope. He felt himself swing back and forth over the water as he dangled near the cave. Before the dragons could clue into what was going on in Jaxson's brain, he pumped his legs back and forth until he was close enough to the opening of the cave to let go of the rope. He let go and closed his eyes, praying that he would land inside the cave and not scrape his body on the rocks as he fell to his death.

He hit hard rock and grunted. It was completely dark in the cave and Jaxson couldn't see a thing. Suddenly, a big burst of light came in and Jaxson located the box. He also felt the heat creeping up. The fire was on the walls of the cave and the dragon was hovering at the cave's entrance. The rope was engulfed in flames. There was no way out. Holding the vial, Jaxson had only one idea left.

He waited for the dragon to open her mouth once again and then he took off. He ran as fast as he could towards the mouth and opened the vial. He threw the vial, jumped, and hoped he would be safe. He landed on the top of the dragon's head, with no idea where the vial ended up. He grabbed on to the dragon's ear, trying his hardest not to fall off as she coughed up fire after fire and thrashed about in the air. She knew Jaxson was on top of her and she wanted him off.

He had tried to throw the vial into her mouth. He wasn't sure it would work since he never saw where the vial went, but he had to hope that she took the blood in. Suddenly, the violent jerking stopped and the dragon's wings stopped flapping. Jaxson was immediately thankful and believed that all was calm. But they began falling. Without the dragon's wings

keeping them in the air, they fell towards the water at an alarmingly high speed. Jaxson prepared himself for the freezing sting that would come with hitting the water, but suddenly, the two white dragons appeared. They each went under one of the blue wings and flew the dragon and Jaxson back to the cliff.

As soon as they were on solid ground, Jaxson jumped off the dragon and ran to his father. His heart was beating faster than it ever had before and he felt more fear than he knew was possible. The mother dragon began wheezing. The sounds were unnatural and dry. She was choking. There was nothing Jaxson, his father, or the two white dragons could do but watch. When Jaxson finally thought it was over, the dragon coughed once more, this time, something came out. A little glass vial. It was empty. Her eyes opened once again and she breathed out shakily. She nodded her head at Jaxson, as if to thank him. The two small dragons nuzzled into their mother, comforting her. Jaxson's father stood still, staring in disbelief until Jaxson took his arm. Jaxson hugged his father tight and didn't let go for a long time. When they separated, they stared at each other for a few moments before gathering the sword and turning their backs on the dragons.

Their journey home was full of storytelling and laughter. Jaxson learned that he was correct about his mother's intentions. His father told him that she had somehow gotten her hands on the vial and was hoping for this to happen. His father also told him how proud he was to have such a brave and strong son. Jaxson was just happy that his father was okay. He didn't even think of the King's promise to marry the Princess until he saw the castle in the distance. He told his father everything that the King had said to him before he left on his journey and his father broke into tears. He hadn't directly said it, but the poor man was concerned with how he was going to

provide for his son and what exactly would happen with his wife. Now that the King had promised his daughter to Jaxson, those worries slipped away.

The father and son appeared at the back gates to the kingdom. The guards looked pleasantly surprised to see them and immediately opened the gates. Shortly, they were led into the castle's waiting room. Henry appeared. "Welcome back, boy! And welcome home, Sir." His demeanor was much friendlier this time. Jaxson shook Henry's hand and introduced his father.

"This is my father, Robert." Robert and Henry had a short chat before a trumpet sounded and Henry scurried off to open the doors. The King and his daughter were announced.

"Son. You have done your father, and this kingdom, proud. I will stay true to my word. You have saved our kingdom from the greatest danger imaginable. For that, your reward will be appropriate. Marry my daughter. You and your father can come join us in the castle."

And so they did. And they all lived happily ever after.

Artist's Statement

When I began this project, I had no idea what I was going to write about. I thought it would be easy to write the same story in three different genres. I was wrong. This project took many months and many hours of writing and revising. Each story has its own world with its own rules. The issue of polygamy in marriage is not a concern to dystopian Rebecca. This was my first major setback. How would I transform this story into one that fit in the science-fictional world I had created in my mind? I brainstormed with my advisor, Chris Cokinos, for a long time. Eventually, we decided that instead of sticking to the exact same plot, I would write about a moral problem each time. In the first story, Jaxson is struggling with the knowledge of his mother's affair. Does he tell his father? That is his moral dilemma. In the second story, he gains the knowledge of the clone and again has to decide whether or not he needs to tell his father. In the last story, he is suspicious of his mother, but he has to decide whether or not to tell the King before he can be sure. Jaxson ultimately decides to go with the truth in each case. He was a fun character to write and I enjoyed keeping his personality and values consistent in each new universe.