

## First Place

*Roses on the River* by Cara Reeder

If you are reading this, dear Theoden, then I have truly gone mad. Because, you see, you are dead. People say you are mad when you talk to yourself. But I am clearly not mad, because I am not talking to myself...I'm talking to *you*, Theoden. However, I do know that you can't be reading this. Because you're dead. And that's a fact.

That's a fact. Fact. Fact. Fact.

I don't like facts. They're so tasteless, so bitter. People spit them around like they're a religion. Or perhaps a particular curse word to dwell on, contemplate, feel in one's soul, then spit out at the right moment to attack one unexpectedly. But facts are blind. They only see things on the surface level. They trick you into having a sense of control. But I do not fall for these tricks so easily. I've always had this gift, to see things beneath the surface, to see all the grays that make people so uncomfortable. But you know this, Theoden. Because I have already told you.

Can you see me, Theoden? Do you remember what I look like? Perhaps you don't remember...it has been a long time since you've seen me, so I'll tell you. You see, I am little, and I always have been. I haven't grown since you saw me last, though I wish I had. You used to call me the most beautiful dwarf of all time. I have the same long, silvery white hair. You said I looked like an angel. And of course, my golden brown eyes are the same as yours, dear Theoden, so I needn't explain that to you. Can you see me here, huddled in the cold, old shack, a rose in my hand and Daisy in the other.

Do you remember when you gave Daisy to me?

"You need to have friends. Even if the friend is just a stuffed bear."

But I had you, Theoden. I've always had you as my friend.

I've always liked roses. They have such a romantic look to them. When I told you this, you laughed at me. But I wasn't upset at you. I knew you liked that I was such a helpless romantic.

When are you coming back to me, Theoden? You disappeared so suddenly, with no explanation, and we could find no sign of you for days. I miss you. So does mother. She's gone searching for you. She's gone searching for you because she cares about you and knows I am always just fine. I am just fine, even now, brother alone in our house. And I am fine, happy even, knowing she will return, and we will all be together. She's left little Morana under my careful care. How gently I stroke her little face, try to make her comfortable as the fever rises and as she coughs. But she will recover. And so will you. You were always the strong one.

Morana, only a few weeks old. And lying still, so eerily still. The coughing is finished, and it is wonderful to have peace and quiet in the house. This is what I am thinking as I lay my head back and I can almost see little Morana lying still and quiet on the ground. She's finally asleep. She's just sleeping. Sleeping. But I can't find her anywhere, and when I open my eyes, she disappears.

I stand up, and make my way to the door. It's cold outside, but I don't mind. You always told me that nothing mattered unless you let it bother you. I smile at the thought, my bare feet leaving deep trails in the snow. Dead leaves crunch underneath my feet, and I smile at the pleasantness. But I don't let it distract me. I finish the path to the river, and smile at the sight of it. Its water is blue and clear, even in the winter. I sit down along the bank, my pale nightgown sliding along the ice. But I like it, I am thinking as I drop my feet into the chilled waves and wiggle them back and forth. Like a child, you would have said, Theoden.

When I look down, all I see is the snow, my pale skin, moon-like hair falling down in waves, and my nightgown, a perfect silver sheen.

I love the color white. It's so beautiful, so simple, so overpowering. It is clean, it is new. Always new, and can turn even the darkest colors away. It gives a tranquil feeling of rest.

I'm sorry, dear Theoden. Do I bore you with my talk? Yes, I can sense your annoyance, Theo. You always know me to get distracted by the beauty around me. You used to say it was one of the things you liked most about me, even though it drove you crazy.

I set Daisy down on my lap, and her fur is faded almost to a white too. But the rose I pull out is not. It is bright red. Like a sweetheart's lips, the kind of red that no one can ignore. It is irreversible, forever there. You could burn the petals in a flame, and it will still remain, marking your mind like a scar. It is a taste, strong and bitter. The feeling of panic, the color of blood. Irreversible and forever.

Irreversible and forever. Just like our friendship. Do you remember when you told me that, Theoden?

I rip the petals off of the rose, careful to avoid the thorns. I must not let them hurt me. You always told me that nothing mattered unless you let it bother you, so I am careful not to let them hurt me. They can't hurt me. They're nothing but flowers. They don't matter. So I rip off the petals, one by one, and watch as they fall in the river, carried away down the river and out of sight.

Little, harmless, red flecks bobbing on the river like little boats, like little specks of blood, gently being carried away down the river. Away, far away, where I will never see it again. It can never hurt me, and I smile, and drop the stem into the water with a little *kerplop*.

Theoden, do you laugh at my little games?

The little boats are sailing far away as I make my way to my feet. I giggle, thinking of the song you used to sing to me at night, and softly murmur the words down the stream to help the little boats carry themselves down the stream, further away from me.

*Row, row, row your boat*

*Gently down the stream*

*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily*

*Life is but a dream.*

I love dreams. You can do anything with them. You can make it anything you want, rewrite your story. You can do them at night, or you can do them during the day. There are many types of dreams, and you never have to grow tired of them.

Why do you laugh at me, Theoden? I speak the truth, do I not?

I am turning back towards the house now, Theoden. Please stop laughing at me. I am walking, my feet leaving little trails of blood in the snow. I wonder if I am bleeding, Theoden, and why?

Suddenly, what I see freezes me in my tracks. I turn away towards it, though everything tells me to turn away. I am like a deer caught in its tracks, but now isn't the time for fancy words or phrases, brother.

Because there you are, your body broken and bent against the bank of the river. Red stains the snow around you, and I can see it. What frightens me the most is what lingers around you. They are there, in your blonde hair, your shut dead eyes, blending in with the blood spilling

out on the ground. But they can't disguise themselves from me. I know them too well—the sweetness, the strength of them.

The roses are everywhere, irreversible and forever, clouding my vision. They're everywhere, and all I know is I have to get away. I turn and run, checking over my shoulder, but they are following me. Every footstep they are there, lingering and shadowing my every step. They are coming for me.

Stop laughing, Theoden! Please, stop laughing—I am falling, Theoden. Help me!

But it is the weight of a river pushing me like a corpse down the current, back towards a waiting sister. But there is no one waiting for me.

I shut my eyes, but I can still see the body, it is burned into my mind, unremovable, forever there.

No. Stop. Theoden, help me. But of course you can't help me. Because you're gone. I push myself to my feet. I refused to look behind me, but I could feel the roses coming for me, following me, whispering my name in my ear.

I opened the crooked door to our hut, heavy as it was. Why couldn't you help me, Theo? I need your help. I am begging for it, and you know I do not like to beg. Please brother, come to me, help me. But all I can hear is your infuriating laughter, haunting my every move. Your laughter is light, fun, of happiness. And that's what hurts the most.

But you're stubborn. Of course, I know you have always been stubborn. I try not to let it bother me as I open the door. But what I see stops me in my tracks. Roses cover the floor, hang from the ceiling, dried out but still alive, vibrant and real.

In a mute manner, I shut the door cautiously. I lay down in the snow, and breathe gently. The snow is swallowing me whole, making me feel small and perfect. Like a little angel, a little dwarf melting farther from all that is real. I press the icy snow against my hot cheeks.

You always told me that nothing mattered unless you let it bother you. That's why your being gone doesn't bother me. Don't plague me, brother, and we can be happy together. Do you believe that? I do, I've always been able to dream. We can be happy, we can dance in our fields of grain and gardens of flowers. We can relax in the warm sun, stretched out like a sunbathing cat. We can breathe in the fresh air on the mountains, and fly high in the sky. We can live in a mansion, we can swim in the ocean.

*Row, row, row your boat*

*Gently down the stream*

*Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily*

*Life is but a dream.*

But even there, the roses plague me.

## Second Place

*Eternity's End* by Ingrid Erickson

*Once upon a time, there lived a marvelous beast. He roamed the Hercynian forests, with neither threat nor fear. Though his stature was small, his presence was anything but diminutive. The creature had a coat of glistening white, the tail of a lion, the cloven hooves of a goat, and a long, fearsome horn that spiraled far above a buck's finest rack. He was smaller than a horse, but larger than a sheep. His peaceful countenance was deceptive, though. Any living thing, be it man or beast, dared not approach this monocerous, or "unicorn," without fear of the most dire injuries. The creature would let only one breathing thing near him: a maiden, pure as the snow that his coat resembled, gentle and compassionate. Only she could tame the wild, ferocious will that the unicorn clung to with such might...*

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"Or so it was told," a man clad in chainmail slowly paced the room, half musing, half questioning what his own voice had just uttered. His armor clinked against itself; the sound of metal on metal filled the otherwise silent room. "Could it *really* be possible that such a ridiculous creature, a mere image of a madman's fancy, could exist in our own forests?" He paused, drawing out the thought, "Caesar thought so." The lone member of his audience sat perfectly still, void of reaction.

The man stopped his pacing to stand in front of her, watching. "Even *you*, a woman, must find this vaguely interesting." His distaste was painfully clear as he sneered down at her from his superior height.

She remained silent.

"But, as I've already informed you: whether it interests you or not, you *will* accompany the king's men on this hunt." He smiled, a queer, contorted expression that his cold countenance

had no natural inclination to make. “It is, of course, a great contribution to your country. You should be honored.”

When the girl still gave him no acknowledgement, he turned on his heel and left the room, the chill his presence had brought lingering in the stone. The cold rock walls were like the bars of a wrought iron cage that keeps a bright canary enclosed against its fragile will. This canary, though, refused to beat her wings against the bars, lest they should break after contesting a force that was far stronger than her own.

As the door shut heavily behind her captor, Margaret folded her shaking hands, slowly breathing out. She relaxed slightly in the lap of her chair, leaning back and allowing it to hold her weight. Her mind wandered even as she bade it to stay with her, bringing her back to days that darted out of her reach as quickly as a fox or stag might evade the hunt. Margaret closed her eyes, trying to imagine what the hunted creature, the unicorn, would look like. Was it really out there, roaming the forest? Or was it, as the Hunter had mused, a “mere image of a madman’s fancy?” Margaret slept, pictures of one-horned beasts, insanity, and the hunt all flashing behind her closed eyes.

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*The unicorn lived. He breathed the cold, harsh forest air; the kind of air that grates in your throat as it goes down, as if it is begrudgingly bestowing a favor upon you. It allows you to live, but it is not pleasant. Despite this, the unicorn enjoyed it. He was, in a way, the wind. This wild creature, this self-appointed ruler of wind, sky, and water, thrived on his current reign of terror. He paced the boundaries of the forest, intimidating the very ground under his sharp, cloven hooves. He knew neither the calmness nor the tameness that his ancestors felt at the sight and touch of a maiden’s hand — only the savage delight that came with striking fear into the*



*minds and hearts of his fellow creatures. Despite his majestic, pure exterior, the unicorn lived as a foolish beast; he was a mere predator that existed not for the hunt, but destruction itself.*

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A cold, foggy morning dawned. The sun tried to push through the day's early drudgery, but its attempts proved to be painfully slow. The gray fortress's inhabitants were roused by a cockerel's raucous song, which proved to be an unpleasant awakening. Preparations were made in a haze, as foggy as the morning itself. The high-strung coursers were saddled with all the solemnity that was present during the composition of a war party heading into battle – which, in a way, any hunt was. The outcome could be divined by no mortal, nor could the eternal beast find the future that lay before it and its destructive ways.

The reins of an old nag were rudely pushed into Margaret's hands by one of the king's men, which she took in silence. She pulled the hood of her tattered cloak closer around her shivering shoulders, trying to hide in the fabric as a turtle might duck into his shell. Her horse lowered its neck, blowing gently on her face as if to speak words of comfort and encouragement that can only be given by the silent. Its ears flicked forward and backward, trying to catch all the sounds of the hunt that dawned as the day did. Margaret stole a glance around her, a hand resting on her horse's stable neck.

Only the black silhouettes of the hunters could be seen. The fog cast an imposing, ghostly film over the courtyard, turning men and horses alike into hazy, gray beasts moving with slow, solemn motions. Margaret leaned back on her horse, exhaling slowly, watching her own breath rise in a cold, white mist.

“The morning is short; let us go forth! Search for none other than the unicorn – all other quarry is naught!”

The horn was blown, and the hunt began. Margaret hastily mounted the old packhorse, whispering an apology as she carefully lowered her weight onto its swayed back. The nag plodded on after the spritely hound and chargers, strikingly different from the young, bright creatures that lived for the hunt.

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*The unicorn could feel the tension that had settled into the morning before the sun began to rise. Something was about to happen. He could not tell if the **thing** would be good or bad, but it was there, resting comfortably on the scales of chance; it was completely indifferent to whatever way they tipped, yet was simultaneously engrossed in what the outcome might be. Beneath the electrified atmosphere, there lay a source of quiet energy that held a dignity and mystery unknown to the unicorn. He began to pace the familiar forests, trying to force his primitive, animalistic mind to wonder at the unknown.*

*He failed.*

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Though the mist began to clear as the sun fought its way back into its central position, the forest still looked anything but friendly. The trees towered above the horsemen and Margaret, seeming to glare down at them. The hostile sentries, though inanimate, struck fear into every heart that was present. The horses became less willing to move on, sensing the presence of some savage creature that owned the territory they were ordered to tread upon. The men urged the beasts on despite their fear, and Margaret's sorry mount followed them with a resigned security.

Somewhere, a stick was broken by a careless creature. The entire party felt fear course through them as a raging river tears through its own banks. The horses grew more tense in an instant, their ears pricked and nostrils flared, searching for the source of the unexpected noise. A nervous pheasant darted across the path, spooking the horses while whispering comfort and

encouragement to her brood. One of the mounted men raised his gun and aimed at the hen but was quickly reprimanded with a sharp look from his superior.

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*He froze. Birds shot up from the trees around him, inspired by fear, but the unicorn felt none of the pleasure that would usually come to him from causing it. For the first time in his life, the unicorn was a vessel of fear. He craned his ivory neck downwards, touching his nose to the broken stick. Leaves rustled in the trees, and his head shot back up, every muscle strained as he tried to take in the world through two eyes, two ears...*

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Margaret could feel it. She could reach out to it and touch its fear. Despite her mistrust of the hunt, she was drawn to what they had called a “unicorn.” She could run her hand along the wall of its iron will, searching for the overgrown doorway that would allow her into the courtyards within the creature’s mind. Margaret allowed her mind to wander, certain that her horse would be content with following its newly adopted herd. The wind blew through the trees, tossing their branches around carelessly. The forest’s sentinels shook their brown, dried leaves at the cold gusts that swept through them, reprimanding it solemnly.

Her horse, at this, threw up his head and bolted. Margaret, taken by surprise, snatched at the old creature's wispy mane, taking up fistfuls of the coarse hair. She bent forward, ducking closer to the animal’s neck to avoid the worst of the branches that futilely and feebly forbade them from going any further.

The horse came to a sudden stop and whipped around with more vigor than would have been expected from a worn-out carthorse—a sure sign of the overpowering seed of terror that had planted itself in the horse’s small mind. Margaret fell. She hit the ground hard, a small, unsuspecting bird that plummeted out of her nest. The chick dusted off her feathers, unaware of

the dangers that lay in wait for fallen travelers. She grimaced, quickly trying to suck the air that had been knocked out back into her lungs in a state of panic.

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*He felt her fall. The quiet presence had grown as it drew nearer to the unicorn's location. When she hit the ground, the presence flickered. Something within the unicorn tugged at him, pulling him forcibly nearer to where the flickering flame lay. The fear that had suddenly struck him just a few moments before was pushed to the back of his conscience, now easily ignored. The unicorn's curiosity grew, and he let himself be pulled forward by his mind.*

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Margaret was aware of the beast's presence as soon as it stepped into the clearing. She drew into herself, refusing to see the peril that drew ever-nearer. Even if what the Huntsman had said was true, surely such a terrible beast would never spare her. When she felt no sharp horn in her side, she risked a glance. The fearful glimpse turned into a lingering gaze as she tried to take in the splendor of what had just stepped out from the shadowy trees. His mere appearance enchanted her. His glistening coat was as pure as white and seemed to have the softness of a dove's fine, ivory feathers. His hooves were cloven, as had been told. The wind played with his mane carefully, as if afraid of hurting a creature that looked as perfect and delicate as porcelain.

His horn was a more dignified crown than had ever sat on a king's head, spiraling upwards as if to touch the sky. He looked as though he feared nothing and was capable of protecting anything. Margaret's fear melted away at the mere sight of him, and she relaxed as if in the company of an old and trusted friend.

He stepped closer to her, radiating heat and safety. Margaret rested a hand on his neck, feeling the warm lifeblood coursing through his veins as she slowly stood up. The unicorn was

smaller than she had expected, with the top of his head only coming up to her chest. His height took nothing away from his kingly appearance, though.

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*Something intangible had overcome the unicorn. His sole purpose was to please and protect the frail, bird-like creature that stood beside him. He was no longer a savage king that gleaned fear from his forcefully appointed subjects, but instead was a gracious lord that came on bended knee to the gentle, compassionate presence that had entered his forest. All of the fear that came with the morning quietly pulsed in the back of his mind, submerged by the peaceful setting and the company that was provided.*

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A branch rustled its leaves in warning.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog bayed.

The unicorn's head shot up, immediately alert again.

Shock and remembrance shot through Margaret. The unicorn felt it. He turned his head to her, a question in his somber, luminous eyes. He was met only by overpowering fear raging through the girl's mind as the sounds of horses, hounds, and men drew nearer.

A stern wind swept through the forest, grasping at both Margaret and the unicorn, as if scolding them for being present at the wrong time. The trees shook, unable to flee from the impending tragedy. As the hunting party thundered nearer, Margaret turned and ran, her hand still on the unicorn's neck.

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*The unicorn experienced what he had never had contact with before:*

*Confusion at the violent disruption of peace.*

*Fear he shared with his fellow grounded creature.*

*A fierce protectiveness as he tried to chase away the terror in his companion.*

*Shock and betrayal when the hunters made themselves known.*

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The unicorn seemed to be rooted to the ground like a statue once he had seen the terrible party emerge from the trees of what he had once called his refuge. Margaret spoke to him urgently, pulling at his head, begging him to move — to escape with her.

A loud noise boomed through the forest, shaking the trees to their very roots.

The unicorn fell.

A cry wrenched its way out of the girl who still stood, staring at the majestic creature that lay on the ground; the creature that had been standing just a few moments ago. A slow, red stream meandered down the unicorn's face, marring the pure whiteness of his smooth coat.

The men dismounted, coming to the ruler they had called a beast. They pushed Margaret aside, who stumbled backwards. They took only what they came for: the trophy. Then, they left. The girl rushed to the creature's side, horrified by the scene that had just taken place.

Margaret sank to her knees, the unicorn's perfect head cradled in her arms. She ran a hand over his face and down his neck, desperately wishing for him to rise again. The maiden bent over his fallen body, allowing her tears to come.

There, on the forest floor, lay the fallen king.

He was dead, and they had taken his crown.

### Third Place

*Meaning of a Rabbit from an Outside Perspective* by Trent Jerolamon

The flames flicker and fracture around the vibrant green trees, the red and orange hues lapping at my anti-burn suit and reflecting off my visor. The putrid emerald green turns into an elegant charred black as the heat envelops it, the fire reaching high into the sky. White smoke billows up in waves, signaling our work for miles: Karson cheers beside me, his white reflective anti-burn suit mirroring the flames. “That’s what, 50%?” He holds his flamethrower in his hands, sunset backdropping us.

I take a few steps back. “I would meander it so.” The burning forest stretches out before me.

“Great,” he says, slinging his flamethrower over his shoulder and turning to walk back to the truck. “Come on, we can complete this tomorrow. I want to get home.”

It’s better not to burn when tired. "Sure."

I turn away from the fire and follow behind Karson. “Do you know when Angela is coming back? She’s been ‘lost to circumstances’ for weeks.” With us two being the only remaining members of Conservation Unit 141, things have been hard.

We walk across the gravel and dirt, the cleansed landscape outside our target. “No clue,” he responds. “You haven’t been re-designated yet so I don’t think she’s fired.”

“That’s true.” I’m still marked as CU141-A3, not A2.

We finally reach the van, the company’s name plastered across the side: BURCO Environmental Control. “Where do you think she went?”

Karson unlocks the door. “No idea. Maybe she joined the eco-activists and no one’s picked up on it yet. Oh, and by the way, I heard the Television Corporation is airing a new

advertisement tonight if you want to watch it." He pulls off his helmet, and ducks into the driver's seat.

I pull off my own helmet and sit shotgun next to him. "Sure."

We drive back to company headquarters and report our work, then start the drive home. By the time we make our way into the cramped apartment, our parents are asleep. We set aside our stuff and breathe a sigh of relief, done until work and school tomorrow.

Hungry, we get dinner out of the fridge and decide to turn on the TV, turning it down to low volume, waiting for the Television Company's new ad.

The light from the TV lights up the room. Karson speaks. "You know, there used to be like, hour-long ads on here."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and they weren't even sponsored by any corporation. They were just for fun, you know? I'd love to watch one but the Television Company banned most of them when they took control like a decade ago."

"Sounds interesting. What were they called?"

"Movies."

"Never heard of them."

"Yeah, well, you should've," Karson says, yawning. He checks the clock on his phone then looks expectantly at the TV. "The broadcast should be changing just about now." Sure enough, the scene changes, depicting one of a burning putrid forest. "Hey, I think this is for BURCO."

"When was the last time they ran one?"



"When we joined, I think." Soon enough, the company's name comes up on screen:

*BURCO Environmental Control.*

"It's like we can't escape them," I say, chuckling.

"Maybe not, but we work for them, so who cares?" Karson answers.

"I guess. Now shut up, let's watch."

The rest of the ad is, disappointingly, mostly mundane. Actually, it shows the destruction of the Indian Hill anti-conservation zone, which is a little strange. The ad says it's already done, despite the fact me and Karson have been actively working on it, and have for two weeks, and can confirm it *isn't* done. In the ad, however, everything is already burned: The trees, brush, and flowers, all exterminated to save humanity from dangerous allergies we're told about.

Clearly, something is wrong with it. Karson seems to take notice too. "It must be a regional advertisement," he mutters. "They probably auto-fill in the names of nearby places. I guess we must be way behind schedule with just the two of us and whoever made this didn't realize." He chuckles. "That's strange."

I scoff. "That's *weird*. Why not just use the actual places for everywhere?"

Karson shrugs. "They've got billions to broadcast to, I guess. There's not enough time to do that for everyone. I bet the footage just changes to whatever biome your region is."

"Yeah, and that's lying. It's immoral."

"It's natural. And who cares? When a few of the Newspaper Company's rivals revealed that they weren't telling the truth in a couple reports, no one batted an eye. Greed like that is human nature."

I scratch my chin. "I don't know," I say. "I don't know. At least the eco-activists don't lie about what they want."

Karson raises an eyebrow. "Have you heard the things they do?"

I sigh. "What if the Newspaper Company is lying about them? I know companies like BURCO pay them all the time. As you just said, they've lied before."

He blinks. "I don't know, man. I think you're just crazy."

"I'm just thinking."

Karson rolls his eyes. "Whatever."

This is too much. I want to sleep.

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The problem eats at me as I lay in bed, tossing and turning. Cases I've actually seen like the deadly allergies I'd heard about from the news, are, well, zero -- Which many take to mean companies like BURCO are doing a good job, but who knows? I don't know. They say our burn-suits also protect us from nature and I've never dared to test it out, so who am I to say? Maybe Karson is just being apathetic about this, maybe he's right. He's probably right. And he's my brother; I can't turn against him like this. I just hate that everyone but me seems so sure about everything.

I groan, close my eyes for real this time, and go to sleep.

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I point the flamethrower at the trees and pull the trigger. A blistering ray of consuming heat shoots out, sticking to the trees and setting them on fire. The bark begins to smoke as the flames spread. I walk along the side of the Indian Hill forest -- Or what's left of it -- and light it ablaze, Karson somewhere over on the other side doing the same. The heat licks at me as the forest lights up, burning trees, bushes, and vines alike.

Once my side is done I take a few steps back and watch. It spreads and spreads, until all the vile green I can see is replaced by black and blazing orange.

I stand there, safe by just a few inches. It's a strange feeling, to watch an anti-conservation zone clean itself. It's an honorable duty, though, and the risk makes it pay a little better than other low-level jobs.

I wait for hours, sometimes leaning against yesterday's charred & leafless trees, sometimes sitting on the bare dirt floor.

Eventually, Karson turns the corner to come stand next to me, the forest blazing brightly behind him.

He nods to me as he approaches, standing against another charred tree nearby, making the unspoken agreement to loiter outside the flames together.

The rest of the day passes much the same. Occasionally, we'll add more flame when needed, but that's mostly it. For its importance, being a human conservation agent is mostly boring work.

Time stretches on, meandering and wrapping itself around me and Karson. The sky soon begins to darken and yawn into a sunset, prompting us two to apply one last coat of fire before heading calling it a day and heading back to company base. We turn in our suits, report our progress, and head home.

It's late again, which you'd expect from balancing work and school. After doing this since middle school, I've gotten used to being tired.

We grab dinner from the freezer once more, but this time I go straight to my room. I sit down at my desk and look out the window, the scattered city stretching out before me. Street lights illuminate long, snake-like slithering roads, catching bits and pieces of the grassless, foul-smelling dirt surrounding the town. We, unlike others, are almost fully protected from nature, thank god. And it's nice here, being away from the drought-festered west or the congested, stacked cities of the east.

I crack open the plastic packaging of my dinner and shovel the honeyed paste into my mouth. I wonder what it would be like to be closer to the forests, the birds and martens; Is it as bad as everyone says it is? I remember I was younger when the eco-activists secretly planted a flower by my school and I accidentally walked past it. My mother swore the bloody cough I got a week later was connected to it, but then why don't the eco-activist groups get sick? I've never seen one myself, but I guess I did see in an ad that they wear protective gear. That's probably what keeps the allergies out – It's like my anti-burn suit, I imagine, but without the heat protection. Who knows.

I shovel another spoonful of the commercial foodpaste into my mouth. I've got to get to sleep again.

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Time stretches on.

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We pull into the road outside the Indian Hill ACZ and turn off the van. I stretch, then push open the door and hop into the gravel and dirt just off the road, Karson doing the same. I walk to the back of the van and open the door, grabbing my anti-burn suit and slipping it on; Karson grabs his own and mimics the process. We then grab our flamethrowers and head out to the remaining forest. Our boots crunch against the land, wind blowing up dust, charred trees sprayed with pesticide surrounding the distance. However, as we make our way over the treeline, the drab, brown landscape is soon scorned by the nervous green of tree-leaves and bushes. We approach it, but I'm confused, feeling something's wrong. I blink a few times, continuing on, dodging the scorned trees, until I finally see the problem in a nearby clearing. however, when I notice something different. Down a hill, there are people: Wearing casual clothes and holding signs, they've gathered outside the uncleared forest. A few of them have fashioned iniquitous crowns out of flowers and cut-off bits of sprightly vines.

I elbow Karson, and he stops to look at them. We both watch intently. He turns his head curiously. "Woah. Look at what the signs say. *Save our Mother*. They're eco-activists."

"Yeah," I say. "And keep your voice down. They haven't seen us yet."

"Sorry," he murmurs. "And is that Angela?"

I squint, looking at them closer. "I think- I think that is."

Karson shakes his head. “So the basket case really *did* run off to that cult. I’m surprised.”

I shrug. “Weird. How are they protecting themselves, anyway?”

“Who knows. It’s not important. Come on, we better get started before they bother us. That’ll run them off.”

I’m about to turn and leave, when suddenly, there’s ruffling from the bushes and fallen leaves on the floor. I freeze and watch, until sure enough, an animal jumps from out of the green. It’s a rabbit, fur sooty and befouled by dust. It moves quickly, dashing past us, up the hill, and out across the road. The small thing hops with no mind for us, desperate to escape; but I’m not sure where it’s going.

It eventually disappears over the horizon, lost to the grime-dusted landscape.

Karson chuckles, watching it disappear as well. “Sickly thing. Come on, let’s get moving.”

I blink a few times, uncertainty welling up in my heart. I look at where the rabbit came from, to the eco-activists in the distance, then to Karson, then back to the activists.

“What are you waiting for?” He tugs at my arm.

I wonder what it would be like if I dropped my flamethrower, took off my helmet, and walked towards them. But I’m not crazy, and Karson is right. Besides, I can’t go against my family. Everyone else. What would they think of me? I can’t- I can’t do that, go off and join some public enemy.

I grip my flamethrower tighter, and turn to follow Karson.