POWERFUL: Responses to Gay Tragedy In and Through Pop Culture

By Emmett Adams.
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Acknowledgements.

I owe so much to so many people that it’s difficult to know where to begin or end, with this section. I am here-- alive, writing, graduating-- because of the assistance and generosity of a lot of people in my life. I could write an entire paper just about the people who have made this possible. Listing the ways in which people have helped me feels inadequate; there is so much that so many people have done, that shortening any of it feels like doing them a disservice. Still, I have to thank them; for being my friends, for making me smarter, for making me a better person, for helping me to get to college at all, for keeping me alive, for giving me a roof over my head, for supporting me and believing in me, for getting me groceries and washing my dishes, for standing by me through a truly absurd number of heinous life events, for helping me to grow and learn, for reminding me why I write, for everything.

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I also, of course, have to profusely thank my truly excellent committee. I don’t think there’s anyone who knows me who hasn’t heard me enthuse at length about Professor Loza and Viveca Greene, but for future readers if you’re out there - they are wonderful, supportive, generous, kind, intelligent, fierce... I could go on forever. They are the best committee I could possibly have hoped for.

Thank you all so much.
I was a bookish child. I was always drawn to science fiction and fantasy, particularly fantasy. I went through a few phases of focused interest, as many children do: unicorns and fairies first, then dragons, and of course Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings. I went to the midnight release of the fifth Harry Potter book with my family, and I had shelves full of children’s and young adult fantasy novels, most of them centering around teenagers going on magical quests.

I was homeschooled, from the age of nine until I applied to college; almost all of my friends, I met through a homeschooling coop. I had-- and have, to this day-- only one straight friend. My homeschooled friends and I were living in a bubble, sort of, where this was possible and okay; none of us ever felt much pressure to stay in the closet about our orientations. (Gender was another, messier, matter.)

However, despite the openness of my social circle, I was still growing up largely without media about LGBT+ people. There were no gay people in the books I read. The more we became aware of who we were, the more my friends and I wanted to see ourselves reflected in the books we read, the movies and TV we watched. The more we wanted this, the more frustrated we became at how difficult it was to find anything like what we were looking for. The array of options available to us was dismal; limited in quantity, inappropriate for our age group, and generally speaking not very good. We had the films RENT and Brokeback Mountain; both were released in 2005, when I was 10 years old. We had the occasional high school drama teen novel about coming out, like Rainbow Boys and its sequels. We had online independently published
webcomics, many of which were, frankly, quite bad. Mostly, we found, we had porn. The stories with the most variety and quantity and creativity were porn: adult novels, yaoi and fanfiction. There was no gay version of *Harry Potter*, or *Lord of the Rings*, or any of the other fantasy novels I loved. Gay people didn’t get to go on magical adventures. There were no gay wizards.

As my friends and I went from preteens to teenagers, I found it more and more difficult and more and more necessary to retreat into fiction. My father died when I was 11. In the years after that, my mental health problems-- and my friends’-- got progressively worse. I was fifteen when, in 2010, the issue of suicide in the LGBT+ community was thrust into the national spotlight and it started being publicly discussed as an “epidemic.” The problem-solving discussions, the ‘It Gets Better’ project, and all the other anti-suicide PSAs (comics, videos, advertisements, on and on and on) were directed at precisely my demographic: severely mentally ill queer teenagers. Stories about gay people were saturated with death: suicide, hate crimes, AIDS. Being gay and dying were seemingly synonymous. There was nowhere to retreat to for us; reality was miserable, and fiction was equally miserable. We could be dead, or we could not exist.

More and more, I felt like fiction had betrayed me; it had *lied* to me. In the books, when very terrible things happened to very young people, they got something in return. It made them stronger, usually; tragedy was something that ultimately was for the best. Something terrible happened, but the protagonist got to go on a magical adventure. This, needless to say, is not the case in reality. YA fiction, and fantasy in particular, loves tragedy. Everyone has to have a tragic backstory, and dead parents are a favorite; protagonists are often *sad* about the terrible things that
have happened to them, but the long-term effects of trauma are never addressed. After my father died, I thought I would be more like a YA protagonist than ever; in truth, I was further from it.

This is a lot of personal narrative, which I was initially very resistant to including in this project. However, an author’s work cannot be separated from its author. Who I am, my personal background, and my reasons for doing the work that I have done, are all important (if not immediately apparent) elements of the work itself. My veritable alphabet soup of psychological issues (OCD, PTSD, ASD, EDNOS, anxiety, depression), my family, my educational experience, my transness and whiteness and gayness and asexuality-- these are all a part of my Division III. They have shaped my worldview, the approach I take to my work, and the things I choose to read and write and study. Both components of my Division III project involve me in a very direct way and are particularly tightly tied to me: my being, my history, my physical presence.

My academic background according to my transcript is broad and seemingly scattered; many of the classes I’ve taken over the course of my four years at college might seem unrelated. This couldn't be further from the truth; one important and fascinating thing about pop culture and media studies is that everything is related to it. When people ask me what I mean when I say “media studies,” it’s difficult to succinctly summarize what I mean. Psychology, history, literature, political and social theory including gender theory, race theory, and disability studies are all related to my study and analysis of pop culture. Everything is interconnected. A lot of the coursework I've done in classes that seemed to other people to be completely unrelated assigned the same readings, dealt with the same key terms, and directly connected to my other courses in ways that were valuable and interesting. Courses I took as a freshman at Marlboro College about history and nation-building in East and Southeast Asia gave me an invaluable theoretical
background. I read writing from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* for the first time there, as well as numerous excerpts from Foucault; many of those same excerpts have been assigned and discussed in a broad range of my classes over the years at Hampshire. My work across disciplines has always had a common steady core of social and political theory, with a strong aim towards broadening and deepening my understanding of social and political injustices.

The first component of this project is an audience research study I conducted in the fall of 2016, which examines audience responses to the short film *Love Is All You Need?* The film is set in a world where “straightness” and “gayness” trade places; heterosexuals are an oppressed minority, shunned by their gay religious leaders and their gay families. *Love Is All You Need?* follows the tragic life of Ashley, a preteen girl who is bullied mercilessly by her peers for her heterosexuality. At the end of the film, she kills herself. As I discuss in the paper, *Love Is All You Need?* was created in response to the 2010 “gay suicide epidemic.” It was supposed to help; it is billed as an “anti-bullying” film and has been shown in schools across the country in an attempt to educate people.

I chose this film to analyze because in its attempt to help, it continues the media trend of equating gayness with suffering and death. The film is short-- less than half an hour long-- but juggles an impressive number of ideological statements. The film, I argue, is more harmful than helpful to the people it claims to be made on the behalf of. (People like me.) As a suicidal gay teenager, it was not helpful for me to be shown representations of people like me dying over and over again. It wasn’t helpful to be told how likely it was that I would be hated and beaten and screamed at, or how likely it was that I would die young. Films like this one-- like *RENT*, like
Brokeback Mountain— that want to bring sympathy and attention to the tragic plight of the gays worked together to weave a media landscape in which a gay person’s story could only be gritty and tragic and end in death. There’s nothing wrong with one story where a gay person dies; the problem is that when being gay in fiction is practically a death sentence, you’re telling people that that’s what being gay means. People, and especially young people, look to fiction to inform their understandings of the world. We use fiction like Love Is All You Need? in schools to teach children about the real world; it’s important, I think, to point out when the narratives we are teaching children are harmful.

The second component of my Division III work is the much larger part; all that I’ve currently written of my novel-in-progress, Savior Complex. I was fifteen when I started writing Savior Complex. I loved fantasy novels, but as my mental health progressively worsened through my teens and I more and more found myself desperate to retreat into fiction, I found that nothing I read was something I felt that I could retreat into. So I made something for myself. Initially it was a brief one-off parody comic, drawn in pencil on printer paper, for a literature “class” at my homeschooling coop. We were going over the structure of the hero’s journey; the teacher (my best friend’s mother) told us to write a story using it. Mine was a satirical YA fantasy about Squelch Garvinson, a girl disguised as a boy, going on her Hero’s Journey in a universe where everyone gets a magical journey when they turn sixteen. Due to a cosmic mixup, she is assigned the Hero’s Journey that was supposed to be her older brother’s, and the entire process is extraordinarily easy for her as a result. I wrote a version of Savior Complex later that year, then continued to start over and rewrite it several more times as I got older. This latest version that
I’ve put together as a component of my Division III work will certainly not be the last rewrite. I imagine I’ll be writing and rewriting it for a long time.

I became very attached to the idea of writing a larger piece set in this universe: a modern fantasy world that grew from a stereotypical medieval fantasy, in which awareness of genre tropes is built into the universe. Fantasy, especially YA fantasy, is highly formulaic; I think for a lot of people, the formulas of the genre are what give it a sense of needed familiarity that grounds the reader despite the fantastical content. However, this means that fantasy is also often predictable and trite, and in longer-running series the worldbuilding seems a bit feeble; there’s only so many world-ending crises a universe can have before it starts to seem over-the-top.

Genre fiction, especially genre fiction for young people, is not taken particularly seriously either as a social concern or as an area of study. I think-- and have always thought-- that it’s one of the most important things to study. Television shows, films, and novels are key components in how children learn to think about the world and people around them. My experience of the world came primarily from reading books, and no one like me existed in those books; I was thus forced to conclude that there is no place for someone like me in the world. Despite the fact that the vast majority of YA fiction tends to appeal to teenagers’ feelings of alienation and difference, with its protagonists who are nebulously different from everyone around them, it does not actually engage with actual issues of oppression. Consider Bella Swan from *Twilight* or Tris Prior from *Divergent*: both white, cis, able-bodied, straight, neurotypical women who are Special and Different from the people around them. They are relatable to an extent, but ultimately I can’t connect to them; at the end of the day, the flavors of our alienation are too different.
Savior Complex is about a lot of things. I think a big part of this is because of how long I’ve been working on it; it’s turned into an ever-expanding tangle of interconnected ideas. It’s about what it means to be a hero-- who gets to be a hero and what traits do we consider heroic? What does it mean to be a good person? Who are the protagonists and who are the side characters? Who is the center and who is the periphery? Examining who we say can be important and valuable and good-- who we tell children who can be important and valuable and good-- is critical to understanding how stories shape us as people.

I write, in Savior Complex, a story that is primarily for me. It’s about me. It’s catered to my tastes. It’s a story I wanted to exist, when I was a teenager; nobody else was writing want I wanted to read, so I did it myself. All three of the protagonists of Savior Complex are mentally ill, in different ways and to different degrees. None of them are straight. They are also goofily-named teen fantasy heroes, with magic swords and family legacies and magic powers and tragic backstories. In this novel, I seek to carefully examine in detail the effects of trauma, marginalization, bullying, and expectations on young people. Like many YA fantasy/sci-fi authors, I use the novel to explore not only what it’s like to be a teenager dealing with a lot of very difficult things, but also to examine systems of oppression. Like many YA fantasy novels, the villain of Savior Complex is a terrifying enormous beast that is impossible to defeat; at the risk of sounding like a tooth-grindingly stereotypical Hampshire student, the villain is society.

In a way, you could say that Savior Complex is my response, as a viewer, to Love Is All You Need? and its ilk.
“There are a lot of real fuckin’ idiot straight people out there.”

Audience Engagement With Love Is All You Need?

Introduction

In September 2010, mainstream heterosexual interest in gay suffering was piqued by a rash of suicides. Tyler Clementi, Seth Walsh, Billy Lucas, Cody Barker, and Asher Brown were all teenagers—aged 13 to 18— who killed themselves that month after enduring homophobic harassment and bullying.¹ The age of the victims, the large number of them in such a short span of time, and the extremity of the violence inflicted on them by their peers and themselves coalesced into a nationwide media spectacle. The problem of youth suicide in the LGBT community was suddenly a topic of national conversation, and it sparked a national debate about bullying and suicide prevention.

Although in some spheres it became common vernacular to refer to the issue of young LGBT suicide as a "suicide epidemic" (LGBTQ Nation, 2010; Freedman, 2010), the terminology was disputed. Writing for LiveScience.com in October of 2010, Benjamin Radford noted that "in the wake of the suicide death of Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi, the nation's attention has been focused on what many have called an epidemic of gay teen suicides" (Emphasis mine). In the article Radford writes skeptically about the suicide epidemic, claiming despite extensive evidence that there is "little evidence that gay teens have a dramatically higher rate of suicide than heterosexual teens." Not only was there debate over what to do about the suicide epidemic,

¹ Raymond Chase, aged 19, also killed himself that September, but coverage insisted he hadn’t been bullied for his sexuality at all. All of these victims except for Billy Lucas (15 years old) identified as gay; Lucas was a victim of persistent anti-gay bullying because his peers perceived him as gay, but apparently never identified as such.
but also whether there was a suicide epidemic at all.

Deeply upset by the suicides, gay writer Dan Savage created the now iconic It Gets Better Project in 2010 as a direct response. The project consists of a series of videos addressed to LGBT youth assuring them that life can and will get better for them; the videos feature a variety of famous people, both LGBT celebrities like Brittney Griner, Adam Lambert, and Ellen Degeneres as well as prominent straight allies, including Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, speaking directly to the camera and encouraging LGBT youth to not commit suicide. The project was intended to mitigate feelings of hopelessness and isolation among suicidal youth, showing us that it is possible to build positive and successful futures for ourselves. As Obama said in his contribution to the project: "There is a whole world waiting for you, filled with possibilities. There are people out there who love you and care about you just the way you are" (Obama: It Gets Better, 2010).

Although media coverage of the suicide epidemic has dwindled in recent years, it is important to note that the actual suicide rate for LGBT people has not. In the Center for Disease Control's 2015 study, "Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9–12," lesbian, gay, and bisexual students were found to be more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual students (Kann, et al). This alone is a grim statistic, but perhaps more so when considered in comparison to a similar study published in 1989, "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide," in which it was reported that "gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people" (Feinleb, 16). Despite Dan Savage's promises, it seems, things have not gotten better for gay youth: in fact, they may have gotten worse. Suicide statistics across years on transgender
people are difficult to come by, but the National Transgender Discrimination Study in 2011 revealed that 41% of trans people have attempted suicide in their lives (Grant, et al.).

This environment of (ultimately short-lived) mainstream fascination with LGBT bullying and suicide is critical for contextualizing the focus of this audience research study: audience responses to the 20-minute short film Love Is All You Need? According to the film's official website, it was in 2011 that the director and co-writer of the film, Kim Rocco Shields, was "inspired" by the stories of "school shootings and teen suicide" to create Love Is All You Need? The film was created and released in this environment and intended, like Savage's It Gets Better Project, to address the problem of bullying and teen suicide. Despite their similar aims, the way the film approaches the issue is remarkably different from the It Gets Better Project.

Love Is All You Need? depicts a world in which gay oppression and heterosexual hegemony are flipped; being gay is "the norm" and being straight is condemned by society. The film follows a preteen girl named Ashley who is violently and persistently bullied for her heterosexuality by her normative gay peers. She receives no help or sympathy from anyone, never meets another heterosexual person, and at the conclusion of the film Ashley is overwhelmed by despair and commits suicide. The suicide scene is notably graphic, including a shot of Ashley slicing her forearm open with a razor. The film concludes with Ashley's two gay mothers finding her body, too late to save her, and wailing in grief.

The film is marketed and almost universally described in promotional material, interviews, and reviews as an “anti-bullying film.” According to the film's official website, Shields' goal in creating the film "was to help mainstream viewers understand what it feels like

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2 The film has since been adapted into a feature-length film, but this feature-length version is not widely available as of this writing, hence my decision to use the short version for this study.
to be persecuted for being different." The other writer for the film, David Tillman, wrote that "if even one person is saved from self harm or from inflicting pain on another, then I believe we will have succeeded in our mission" (LIAYN Website).

The film has been screened at film festivals across the country, winning awards at several of them. It received the Audience Award for Best Female Short at the 2011 Long Island Gay and Lesbian Film festival, the LA Femme Filmmaker award for Best Short at the 2011 La Femme International Film Festival, and the Grand Jury Award for Narrative Short in the Pink Peach Competition at the 2011 Atlanta Film Festival. It was released on Youtube in 2013, where it gained the majority of its audience and attention.

Critical response to the film, where it exists, has been positive, and the film has been hailed as "powerful," "emotional," and "thought-provoking" (Huffington Post, International Business Times, AfterEllen.com). To date there have not been many reviews of the film published, in print or online. Mainstream media attention addressing the film largely appeared in connection to the 2014 controversy in which a gay Kansas schoolteacher was asked to resign after showing it to his class, as angry community members protested him showing a film with "inappropriate" content that depicted a "militant sodomite agenda" (Palatka Teacher Under Fire).

Audience response on Youtube has also been largely positive. The film has been uploaded multiple times by different users; one of the most popular uploads has garnered 18,474,622 views, with 419,319 "likes" as compared to 27,448 "dislikes" (Youtube User Hardup). Comments on the video provide a variety of responses. Many viewers express disbelief or shock at the film's representation of life for marginalized people, indicating that the film perhaps provided the viewers with new understandings of oppression:

Evelyn Cortus: It's so hard for me to imagine a world like this because I never saw such cruel
behavior. [...] Even after 3 years, this film still haunts me.

Grace Tindel: I was sobbing by the end of this. How could we be so cruel? How could we mock, discriminate and hurt against our own kind?

Jean-Luc Chessher: Are there actually people that are dicks like this to gays

Tyetoobad XD: Not everybody is homophobic. Why was every same sex couple hateful of the heterosexual couples....

Praise for the film typically emphasizes its emotional impact, as well as the "beauty" and "power" of the message. Criticism in the comments tends to fall under two broad categories: homophobic vitriol and sarcastic rejection of the film's premise.

In this study I explore the responses of LGBT and cisgender heterosexual responses to the film. Some of my primary research questions are as follows: How does response to the video on both an emotional and intellectual level differ between cisgender heterosexual audiences and LGBT audiences? What is the perceived message of the film, and how effective do viewers deem it to be? Who do viewers perceive as the intended demographic for this movie?

Decoding, Polysemy, Relevancy, and Silence

Stuart Hall theorizes three positions from which audiences "decode" or engage with media: three positions they take in relationship to a given media text. There is the dominant/hegemonic position, whereby a viewer reads a text with an uncritical acceptance of the message it presents; the oppositional, which entails a viewer rejecting the message; and the negotiated, in which the viewer's response falls somewhere between the two. Categorization of audience response into these three positions is common in audience research, although several scholars have pointed out that it is not a universally useful system and that not all audience
responses can be so neatly divided.

On the polysemy -- multiple meanings -- of television, John Fiske writes that interpretations of television are informed by subcultures that viewers belong to. As all television can be interpreted in multiple ways, Fiske argues that in order to be popular a television series must contain multiple-- sometimes contradictory-- meanings. Fiske wishes to push back against the theories that locate the meaning of a text entirely in the text itself or entirely in the audience's interpretation. Instead, Fiske proposes that authors embed their work intentionally with multiple meanings, providing a diverse audience comprised of people from many subcultures with an array of interpretations that they might choose from. Fiske argues "that the polysemy of television lies not just in the heteroglossia from which it is necessarily constructed, but in the ways that different socially located viewers will activate its meaning potential differently" (Fiske, 394). In other words, potential meanings are embedded by authors, and those potential meanings are realized when a viewer sees them.

Celeste Condit, also discussing polysemy in media and writing against Fiske, writes:

audience members are neither simply resistive nor dupes. They neither find television simply pleasurable, simply an escape, nor simply obnoxious and oppressive. The audience's variability is a consequence of the fact that humans, in their inherent character as audiences, are inevitably situated in a communication system, of which they are a part, and hence have some influence within, but by which they are also influenced. (Condit, 120)

This challenges Stuart Hall's tidy three-category system somewhat; Condit suggests that viewer responses are more nuanced than a simple dominant/negotiated/oppositional ternary allows. She also introduces here, albeit not terribly directly, the theoretical concept of "relevancy" in an audience research context.

Brenda Cooper, in an audience research study on Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing, found
that audience responses to the film were split along racial boundaries; black viewers and nonblack viewers had dramatically different readings of the film. *Do The Right Thing*'s depictions of antiblack racism did not resonate with white viewers, who sympathized more with a white man whose restaurant burns down than with a black man murdered by the police. Cooper argues that, therefore, relevancy can be key to analyzing a viewer's response to a text, as a person's particular axes of marginalization are hugely influential on how they make sense of media as well as the world around them. As Cooper puts it, "the concept of relevancy explains why texts may be read as dominant, negotiated, or oppositional" (208). Cooper argues that relevancy influences not only how people respond to a text, but what they believe they are responding to. White and black audiences have different responses to *Do The Right Thing*, and they also have different interpretations of what the film is about, who the protagonists are, what the climax of the film is, et cetera. Cooper finds what audiences say about the film as critical as what they do not say; when white audiences do not say anything about the antiblack racism, they are saying something about how they think about racism.

Michel Foucault, noted political and social theorist, writes eloquently on the subject of silence as a form of communication:

Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault, 27).
In other words, rather than being simply the absence of speech, silence *is* speech. To not discuss something is a form of expression. Foucault argues that silence is a presence and part of conversation that must be acknowledged and analyzed.

Along similar lines, on the topic of silence, Stephanie M. Wildman and Adrienne D. David write that "whatever the reason for silence, its presence means the absence of verbal criticism. What we do not say, what we do not talk about, maintains the status quo" (Wildman, 885). This is echoed in the more colloquially famous quote from Desmond Tutu: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Once again, silence is theorized here as not the absence of speech, but a form of communication in and of itself. It is important to analyze silences, both literal (for example, the lengthy uncomfortable pauses over the course of one of my interviews) and more metaphorical (subjects not discussed).

**Methodology**

For this study I examined audience responses to the 20-minute 2011 short film *Love Is All You Need?* and how those responses differed between LGBT people and cisgender heterosexual people. To do this, I conducted three small group interviews. This study takes a qualitative approach to gathering data, and specifically uses the small group interview format, for several reasons; chief among them is that I am interested in examining emotional as well as intellectual responses. As Justin Lewis writes in *The Ideological Octopus*, in large surveys "if they fall within the same category, the responses that people give are assumed to be equivalent" and "the ambiguities of language mean that it is difficult to explore the precise meaning of words or sentences without giving the respondent the opportunity to elaborate" (Lewis, 78). When
examining responses to emotionally charged polysemic material like *Love Is All You Need?*, it is important to be able to ask people what they mean when they give a particular response.

A viewer could, for example, say that found the film "offensive," but that alone does not actually give us sufficient information; are they offended because they believe it is propaganda from militant sodomites trying to destroy America with the homosexual agenda, or because they believe it trivializes suicide and harms gay youth? These readings are completely opposed to one another, but in a large questionnaire like what Lewis describes, one runs the risk of these responses being interpreted as part of the same category of response-- "offended"-- which would render analysis of the data problematic at best. If 25% of viewers found it offensive because they *are* homophobic and 25% of viewers found it offensive because they believe the *film* is homophobic, but there was no space on the questionnaire for explaining the reasoning behind particular emotional responses, then the researcher is left with simply the fact that 50% of viewers found the film offensive and are forced to either make inevitably false or incomplete assumptions of what this means. The responses are so simplified that they become functionally meaningless.

Additionally my decision to use small interview groups was informed by David Morley's discussion of how "much individually based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context" (97), and his emphasis on how decoding and interpreting media is a social act. People interpret things through many different lenses; everyone will have many thoughts, sometimes conflicting, on something they watch, informed by different identities they have and different subgroups they belong to.

In order to consolidate their thoughts into a coherent opinion or stance-- to decide how
they feel about something--people talk through their array of thoughts and reactions with other people. These everyday interactions with friends, peers, professors, family, coworkers, etc, are key elements in how we form our opinions and what language we use (and have available to us) to express those opinions. Small group interviews, therefore, offer a space in which the researcher can watch opinions form and shift as conversations unfold in a form that (vaguely and imperfectly) simulates how people develop opinions on media in their everyday lives.

My interview groups ranged in size from 2 to 4 participants, and interviews were conducted in various locations, including my own bedroom on Hampshire College campus. Interviews lasted from 17 to 45 minutes and recorded on my iPhone. Participants were asked but not required to disclose some personal information for purposes of analysis, including their race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and area of study. For the purposes of avoiding or mitigating potentially debilitating emotional reactions, potential participants were warned in advance of the viewing that the film contains graphic scenes of violent bullying and suicide, as well as reminded of this content in the consent forms they were asked to sign upon meeting the interviewer. Prior to participation they were also informed that they would be participating in a study on LGBT oppression and media representation of marginalized people.

The structure of my interviews were as follows: participants arrived and were given a few minutes to introduce themselves to each other and myself, sign the consent forms, and ask me any questions they might have about the interview. We then watched the film on my laptop together, and after the conclusion of the film I stated that the interview was beginning and began recording. I began with a series of open-ended questions intended to provoke conversation that was not directed by me, allowing participants to express their thoughts and reveal which aspects
of the film were most notable or salient for them: What are your general reactions to the film? What do you think the message of this movie is? Who do you think the intended audience for this movie is? After general discussion, I moved into asking more specific questions about the film to prompt conversation about particular themes or moments that I was interested in hearing people respond to, such as "what do you think of the way slurs were utilized in this film?" The phrasing and order of my questions varied depending on what felt most natural in each conversation.

Apart from my prepared questions, I tried to speak very little so as to allow the conversations to unfold as "naturally" as possible. I would sometimes specifically prompt particularly reticent participants to respond to the question or to the conversation(for example, "Do you guys have thoughts on that? Agree, disagree?"), I also would prompt participants to explain themselves after providing vague answers:

CONRAD: I felt pretty embarrassed, a lot of the time watching it.
EMMETT: Embarrassed?

Group A in my findings consisted of four people, three of whom are close friends of mine: Lee, a 21-year-old gay nonbinary person, who is a journalism student at UMass; Conrad, a 23-year-old straight cisgender man, who is a graduated literature/creative writing student; Elle, a 20-year-old cisgender asexual and aromantic woman (she says that she considers herself "more straight than she is gay") who is a part-time law and philosophy student; and Calliope, a 19-year-old cis woman who is unspecified "not straight" and studies archeology at Hampshire. Everyone in group A is white. The interview with Group A lasted for 45 minutes, and had the most relaxed and talkative environment out of all of the interviews, most likely because of the participants' familiarity with me (the interviewer) and the subject matter.
Group B consisted of two white cisgender heterosexual participants: Anise, a women's studies and theatre student, and Lenny, a music student. Both are white, 20 years old, and students at Hampshire College. The students had met before a few times, but were not particularly close. I had been in a class with Lenny before and spoken to him a few times, but had not seen or spoken to him in about two years. Their interview was the least talkative and the shortest, lasting 17 minutes. It was conducted in the common room of my mod.

Group C consisted of three Hampshire College students who were friends with each other, whom I didn't know. One of them is a classmate of mine who recruited two of her friends for my study. Sea, a 20-year-old who chose not to specify their gender/pronouns, major/area of study, romantic/sexual orientation, or race/ethnicity; Amina, a 19-year-old black/Korean straight woman who is a film/critical race theory student; and Anya, a 21-year-old black & African-American, queer & aromantic cisgender female. This interview lasted for 18 minutes, and was conducted in the common room of my mod.

All participants' names have been changed for the purposes of this study, and participant's identities have been reported above as they were reported to me on their demographics surveys. I, the author, conducted all the interviews myself. For reference, I am a 21-year-old white gay nonbinary person who, for lack of a better term, looks gay (meaning that many aspects of my appearance are culturally coded as queer, gay, and/or gender non-conforming). My whiteness is similarly apparent; I am distinctly unambiguously Anglo. My own demographics are important to note, as the demographics/social positioning of the interviewer always has some kind of effect on the responses the interviewer receives.

**Findings**
I've divided my findings into sections roughly by topic; each section covers all three group's responses. The first three sections discuss how the different groups responded to interview questions; I asked participants to tell me what they thought *Love Is All You Need* was about, what message they thought the film was trying to communicate, and what the target audience for the film was. In the fourth section I discuss the participants’ varying degrees of emotional engagement with *Love Is All You Need*.

**What is *Love Is All You Need* about?**

In my interviews, I asked all participants to tell me what they believed the film to be about. There were a number of possible answers; I was primarily interested to see if viewers believed this film to be about homophobia and/or the gay experience or if they believed that the film spoke to a more universal or generalized experience of bullying. *Love Is All You Need* is particularly interesting as a subject of study because it is about both; while the actual content of the film (a world in which “gayness” and “straightness” are swapped) would suggest that the film is about homophobia, the dedication at the end of the film and all of the marketing materials suggest instead that it is broadly about bullying.

I suspected that LGBT+ viewers would say that the film was about homophobia, and that heterosexual viewers would say it was about bullying; my suspicions were confirmed, although not entirely. The majority of participants in the study expressed feeling confused by the film I showed them. It seems that the multiple possible interpretations of the film came into conflict with each other and led to a muddied and perplexing movie-watching experience; I thought that
viewers would simply agree with one reading and discard the other entirely, but this was not the case.

**Group A**

At the conclusion of the film, immediately following the protagonist's suicide scene, the film fades to a plain white screen with black text on it. It shows first the title of the film, then a screen which reads, "All the events that took place in this film are true stories from victims of bullying." Following this is a third screen of text, this one reading, "This film is dedicated to any child who has ever felt such darkness due to others' hatred and misunderstanding. Always know that love is meant to be within and you should never feel wrong or alone by being who you are...Unique[.]

"After this third bit of text, the end credits roll. Every participant who discussed these end-of-film messages found them confusing. Lee (21, nonbinary) specifically mentioned the text at the beginning of Group A's interview when they explained that they felt confused and uncertain as to what the film was about.

LEE: I... couldn't tell for a lot of it-- and I sort of went back and forth on this-- uh, whether or not they were supposed to-- like, trying to comment in some way on, like, straightphobia? Or, and like, at the end when the credits rolled I was like "ok, I guess they're talking about like general bullying," but throughout I couldn't tell if they were like talking about general bullying or talking about straightphobia or trying to talk about homophobia in a way that was like, "if we look at how ridiculous is it if we think about it being straightphobia and that will show us how ridiculous homophobia is." Like, I couldn't tell what their message was for a lot of it.

For Lee, it was confusing because of the universalizing language employed and the fact that gay people are not mentioned in the end-of-film PSAs.

Despite their confusion, participants in group A ultimately agreed that the main thing that *Love Is All You Need* was "about" and, by extension, the point of it, was its premise of reversed oppression. Group A's participants specifically discussed how homophobia (and the in-universe
equivalent) was key to the narrative and engaged with that from the beginning of the interview.

**Group B**

Group B, consisting solely of Lenny and Alice (cishets both), did not struggle at all with articulating what they believed *Love Is All You Need?* to be about.

EMMETT: Okay, so if you could just sort of, generally say what like what do you think this film is about, fundamentally. Like--

ANISE: Bullying.

EMMETT: Bullying?

LENNY: Yeah, I would say it's--

SIMULTANEOUSLY:

ANISE: And its effects.

LENNY: Yeah. Bully-- yeah.

LENNY: It is... it's trying to get, like, a point-- a different point of view, for-- for bull-- or what it feels like to be bullied. Yeah.

EMMETT: Mhm.

ANISE: Right. If the roles were reversed. In-- in society and culture.

Here, Anise refers euphemistically to the swapped oppression narrative, but neither participant asserts that the film is about homophobia or homophobic bullying, or oppression in any way. Lenny refers broadly to "a different point of view" without specifying whose point of view. Similarly, Anise does not say what "the roles" are that have been reversed. In fact, at no point in the interview did either of the participants mention gay people or homophobia at all. This was particularly interesting because the participants were aware of the flipped oppression narrative of the film. They recognized that roles were being reversed, and that a different point of view was being presented to them, but they refused to acknowledge anything more specific than that and refused to name the roles or perspectives involved in the swap.

**Group C**

Group C, which had one straight participant (Amina) and two non-straight participants, drew a similar conclusion to Group A in their discussion.

EMMETT: [...] Overall, if you had to sort of guess, um like just sort of broadly speaking what
would you say the movie is about? Like, what would you-- what would you think the core theme of the movie is?
ANYA: Um... core theme... like, anti-bullying but also like... [against bullying] specifically targeted at LGB-- white LGBTQ people.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Yeah.
EMMETT: [to Sea and Amina] You'd agree?
SEA: Yep.
AMINA: You got it, yeah.

Anya notably specifies that the film is about homophobia experienced by white LGBTQ people. The main character of the film is white, as are all of the other characters; there are no characters of color with speaking roles, and only two people of color clearly visible on screen at any point throughout the film. It is an overwhelmingly white film, something which was notable and exasperating for all three participants in Group C, none of whom were white.

The other two groups, which were entirely white, did not mention race at all during their discussions. White participants’ silence on race is as notable and comes from the same place as cishet viewers’ silence on gayness.

**What is the film trying to say?**

I asked all participants what they felt the message of *Love Is All You Need*? was. I was curious what viewers saw as the main takeaway of the film, and how that belief might be influenced by their identities and social positioning.

**Group A**

Group A was particularly interested in speculating about the message of the film and the intent of the filmmakers. They focused more on the film's message than its actual content. Again they expressed confusion, finding the multiple meanings of the film in conflict with one another.
Was it trying to inspire empathy in heterosexuals for the specific struggles gay people experience, thus highlighting the difference between straight and gay people, or was it trying to erase the difference and suggest that sexual orientation does not matter? Group A struggled somewhat to decide on a definite answer to the question.

CONRAD: Um.. an anti-bullying message... um, I, and I guess like the focus especially on homophobia?
CALLIOPE: I would just... it seemed to be a very strong, like... an-- anti-homophobia message, with obviously the bullying... I felt it was more just focused on the homophobia and like a result-- the bullying was sort of like a side result?
CALLIOPE: But then at the end when it said like, this is a r-- these are stories taken from like bullies and victims I guess that kinda threw me off a bit. Cuz I was like... I thought this was mainly about homophobia? But this... like at the end, it didn't really mention any of that. It was just like, ‘bullying.’ In general... yeah.
LEE: I feel like it was mostly a like anti-xenophobia slash anti-bullying thing and that they were only using the gay narrative as like a way to talk about bullying because it was like a concrete thing that they could focus on.

Here, as Lee did earlier, Calliope refers to the post-film dedication text. For Calliope, as with Lee, the universalizing language came into conflict with her reading of the film ("I thought it was mainly about homophobia") and thus created confusion.

**Group B**

When asked about the message of the film, Anise and Lenny were again vague, using universalizing language and speaking broadly about bullying without mentioning gay people or homophobia.

ANISE: Bullying is an ongoing... issue, in the world.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: No matter who you are or what your sexual orientation is or what your gender is. Or what your views are. [barely audible] Something like that.
[pause]
LENNY: I-- I got um, the opposite? That if-- if you're the minority... that you get bullied it feels so-- it's-- it's much much worse? Than being like in the majority.
ANISE: Well, bullying happens to everybody. And that-- that's just my... personal... thought.
LENNY: I, I didn't disagree, I was just-- that's what, that's just what I thought-- thought of the film.
ANISE: Yeah, no, I'm not disagreeing, I'm just speaking up openly about my thoughts.
Although Lenny mentions "the majority" and "the minority," once again neither participant names gay people, straight people, the LGBT community, or homophobia in their analysis. Anise uses similar universalizing language as the film itself does; she accepts, rather than challenges, the film's assertion that it is dedicated to victims of bullying. For her, it seems, there is no conflict or confusion about the film's message. Lenny attempts to push back against Anise's very broad universalization in the excerpt above, but it is interesting to note that he does so with just a more specific sort of universalization. Lenny seems to argue that narrative of marginalization in *Love Is All You Need?* is an abstracted one, meant to represent *all* marginalized people. Both argue that rather than being about a specific kind of experience-- white LGBT+ youth, as Anya suggests-- it is about the universal experience of bullying.

**Group C**

In Group C, Sea (who did not specify their orientation or gender) and Amina (heterosexual) were confused and couldn't identify the film's message at all.

EMMETT: [...] Given you would probably agree that it's an anti-bullying movie, do you think that's the main message of it?
SEA: I don't really know what it was about.

AMINA: I dunno. It's just weird how like they always have to do like the-- the like--
SEA: The flipped role? [laughs]
AMINA: Yeah, I don't... really... get that? Or like why... I guess it's cuz like straight people... it's a way for like... straight people to like... understand something about that? I dunno-- it was-- I dunno.

Both Sea and Amina were clearly exasperated; their exasperation and confusion about the film's premise prevented them from identifying what the film was trying to communicate to them completely.

Any, however, was able to clearly articulate the film's message, tying it directly to its
premise and to the people it was aimed at.

ANYA: Yeah, no, it's definitely anti-bullying because they try to-- when you like flip the script, that like technique that people use, it's to point out like some type of absurdity in like people when they... you know, perpetrate violence against people that aren't like them.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: So they try to like use "oh, like, that's absurd." There were a lot of moments where I was just like... like... doesn't make sense, or like they try to like... you know... I don't know.
AMINA: [snickers quietly]
ANYA: I don't know if I can explain it exactly, but they're just trying to like call people out on that.

For Anya, the specificity of the narrative meant that the message couldn't be separated from the specific audience she believed the message to be aimed at. This, conveniently, brings me to my next section.

Who is this for?

After establishing what participants believed Love Is All You Need? to be about and what it was saying, I asked participants to describe who they imagined the target audience for the film to be. This is, like the question of its message, a question with multiple answers supported by the text. While the film itself is supposedly dedicated to victims of bullies and meant on some level to help marginalized people, it is also apparently meant to change hearts and minds of the bullies themselves.

Group A

Participants in Group A, in their discussion, mentioned the audience multiple times, each time either directly asserting or implying that the intended audience was cisgender heterosexual people. For example, early on in the discussion Elle (asexual and aromantic) mentioned that the intended audience for the film was heterosexual as a matter of course; for her, it was not something that needed explicit discussion, because it seemed obvious.
ELLE: [...] the impression I got from it is that the reason they did the whole, [mocking voice] "oh, orientation swap so that gay people are nooormal" [normal voice] is based on the assumption that the straight audience will not be able to relate to a gay victim of bullying, and that they will instead have to see it happening to a [air quotes] "real person"--

CONRAD: I mean...
ELLE: -- uh, in order to understand how terrible these things are.
CONRAD: That was the kinda--
ELLE: Which is absurd. [laughs]
CONRAD: That was the conclusion that I drew, too, and I figured that that was... what they were aiming for. I just... I guess, I guess I wasn't sure about it cuz it didn't seem to make much sense in my mind.

Here the perceived message and purpose of the film is tied again inextricably to the perceived intended recipient of that message. Elle proposed and Conrad agreed that the film is geared towards a straight audience.

Participants in Group A either directly asserted or heavily implied that the intended audience for the film was cisgender and heterosexual throughout the beginning of the interview. When I asked to confirm, their response was confident and unanimous:

EMMETT: Would you all agree that it's a movie for straight people? Like, who do you think the audience for this is?
SIMULTANEOUSLY:
   CALLIOPE: Definitely... this is a movie for straight people.
   ELLE: Definitely for straight people.
   LEE: Yeah.
   CONRAD: Yeah, without a doubt.

Their lack of hesitation is especially notable when considering the uncertainty and confusion that the film generated. Participants in Group A consistently confidently asserted that the intended audience was heterosexual; they didn't hesitate or qualify it with unsteady filler words (such as maybe, probably, or "I guess"), even participants who frequently utilized them as parts of their regular speech patterns. Love Is All You Need read to this group as a movie that was obviously for straight people.

Group A also notably expressed disdain for the film's presumably straight intended
audience:

LEE: I... really hate to say this, because I hated [the film]. But there are a lot of real fuckin' idiot straight people out there, and--
[everyone laughs]
CALLIOPE: I was about to say almost the exact same thing.
LEE: I think that in your focus groups, I don't know how you should go about doing this but I think-- okay, I'm about to do a major self-drag, but like go to UMass, find some useless straight people [...] and get them to watch this, because I think you'd get a very different response than the people you have here [in this interview]. And I think that they might find it legitimately thought-provoking.

This disdain was an extension of their disdain for the film itself, which all participants in Group A agreed was bad and difficult to take seriously.

**Group B**

Following up on Anise and Lenny's assessment of the film as being "about" bullying and how bullying happens to everybody, I asked them who they felt the target demographic for the film was.

Anise, after four solid seconds of silence, said, "Preteens." She did not provide a location, gender, or sexuality for these hypothetical preteens, continuing to stick to her universalized reading of the film. Lenny's response was the first time sexuality was mentioned in the interview at all.

LENNY: Yeah, I-- I would have to say my guess would be um... young, um... heterosexual people.
EMMETT: Mhm. Heterosexual specifically?
LENNY: Heterosexual specifically, yeah.

I had hoped that he would elaborate further, but he did not. It is interesting to note that this response is not nearly as confident as the responses in group A. Conrad and Amina, who were both heterosexual respondents in majority non-heterosexual groups, were confident in their assessment of the film as being for a cishet audience, but the exclusively-heterosexual group was
far more uncertain.

When I immediately followed Lenny's assertion by asking Anise for her thoughts-- as she did not seem inclined to provide them unprompted-- she grew obviously anxious and uncomfortable.

EMMETT: [to Anise] Well, would-- do you think-- agree, disagree?
ANISE: What about what?
EMMETT: Do you think it's for like heterosexuals specifically? Do you think it's for a broader demographic?
ANISE: Oh. [gets progressively quieter with every word] Um.... yeah, I think it's for [barely audible] heterosexuals.

Anise could barely bring herself to say the word "heterosexuals." She trailed off halfway through the word, slurring together the last few syllables in a strained hiss; it was the most curious and disorienting moment I had in any of my interviews, and was not possible to capture accurately in transcript form. I mention this to emphasis that Anise was not comfortable at all with even acknowledging straightness as a concept, let alone discuss how her own straightness might be affecting how she read the film. Neither she nor Lenny referred to themselves as heterosexual in the interview transcript, as they did not seem willing to talk about sexual orientation at all in any context.

**Group C**

Participants in group C ultimately came to a similar conclusion as Group A, which was that the film was intended for "bigoted" and "anti-LGBT" straight audiences.

AMINA: Yeah, I guess, just, not people part of the LGBT. QI... A...
SEA: Plus plus.
[laughter]
ANIMA: Yeah, plus plus, community? I don't think it's really a... I don't know.
ANYA: Yeah, it's definitely like... not written for... like... it was written for straight bigoted people. Like, yeah, people who like wanna bully people for having different sexual or romantic orientation, I feel like.
Again, group C's perceptions of the film were clearly rooted in their reading of the film as being about homophobia and anti-LGBT sentiment as opposed to being a “universal” narrative.

**Emotional engagement**

The last set of findings I want to discuss is how participants emotionally engaged with the film. *Love Is All You Need?* relies heavily on emotional impact to communicate its message; viewers are supposed to be emotionally invested in Ashley's well being, and her experiences of being bullied and then committing suicide are supposed to be shocking and upsetting. The suicide scene and the violence are graphic; in one scene, group of students gather around Ashley, who lies on the ground weeping while the other children chant “smear the queer” and beat her. The suicide scene includes a zoomed-in shot of Ashley dragging a razor blade down her forearm, cutting her wrist open in the bathtub while sobbing. The shots are graphic enough to be viscerally upsetting to people who are sensitive to that kind of material (hence the content warning I gave to all participants before beginning the film), but the film is so poorly-made (in terms of lighting, camerawork, editing, acting, writing, etc) and oddly-conceived that its graphic scenes could easily fail to inspire the emotional response its filmmakers intended.

**Group A**

I asked Group A how/if they related to the film and if the film felt real or realistic to them in any way, and throughout the interview participants mentioned how the film made them feel in the absence of my prompting.

Lee (who identifies as gay and nonbinary) mentioned multiple times feeling upset or otherwise negatively emotionally affected by the film, in addition to actively disliking it and
finding it "ridiculous."

LEE: I felt... bad. A lot of the time when I was watching it. It made me feel bad. I was just like... upset that straight people have to make media like this.

Lee also expressed feeling confused, annoyed, and resentful of the film at various points in the interview. Other participants in this group largely echoed or agreed with sentiments, but Lee was the only participant who reported feeling "upset," "angry," and/or "hurt."

LEE: [...] it's this thing where you're watching it and on the one hand you're like "this is ridiculous and this isn't helping anyone" and also you're like "oh, shit." [exasperated laugh] "I feel that a little bit." And I felt similarly actually with the self-harm scenes, because I do have friends who've had like serious self-harm stuff and so-- um, related to their queerness-- and have had a series of those friendships and relationships since like early high school... um, and so... thinking about that also was like... I dunno, I resent that they're making bad art about things that are serious and important to me. And I resent that because there's like so little media about that in general that like on some level I'm still touched by it.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Like, I mostly feel like angry with the creators because they took my thing. [...] 

Lee raises an important point here about appropriation, which other study participants did not discuss. Lee felt that the story being told in Love Is All You Need was a specifically gay one, and that the filmmakers were in some way inappropriately "taking" the narrative of gayness and using it-- poorly-- for their own purposes.

Conrad (the lone cishet in group A) expressed feeling "embarrassed" and "confused" while watching the film, and found that his most intense or visceral emotional reaction to the film was the keen discomfort of secondhand embarrassment; he felt embarrassed on behalf of the filmmakers. Neither Calliope nor Elle expressed any particularly intense emotional reactions, during the film or during the interview. Calliope seemed mainly perplexed by the film, and Elle mainly amused.

Following one of Lee's comments about finding one of the scenes in the film relatable despite their disdain for it, I asked the rest of the group if they had a similar relational experience
with the film. They did not.

CONRAD: Uh-- okay, for the record, I'm also straight. Um, and, I felt completely, uh, disassociated from anything happening. Um. I-- I mean, I've never been a victim of serious or intense bullying, for one thing. Um, but in-- in addition, uh, like I think I've already said, I had-- I had some difficulty taking it seriously because of how it presented itself.

EMMETT: Mhm.
CONRAD: And-- I would say that there were no moments in it, really, that I related to.
ELLE: Uh, likewise. It's an absurd scenario, and I also have never experienced bullying in my life. Uh, so there's not much for me there.

Both of the non-LGBT respondents express having felt disconnected from the film, but are able to immediately articulate why that is. Both of them say that they have never experienced the kind of bullying depicted in the film. Conrad specified that he believed that his response likely came from the fact that he is straight. Both of them also mention that because they thought the film was bad-- "absurd" and "ridiculous" were terms used many times throughout group A's interview-- they were unable to derive emotional meaning from it.

Calliope said that while she'd been bullied as a child, she had never been cyberbullied, as she didn't have a phone or a Facebook when she was young, and that contributed to her inability to emotionally respond to the film. She brought this up in reference to the fact that throughout the film, Ashley (the protagonist) receives harassing text messages on her phone and on her Facebook page as part of the bullying she is experiencing. She also specifically mentioned that the flipped oppression narrative of the film played a part in her being unable to relate to it-- she was unable to refer to the heterosexuals-are-oppressed premise without laughing.

**Group B**

In group B, the participants were reluctant to express any kind of emotional reaction to the film on their own. This wasn’t a problem I faced in my first interview, nor was it one I anticipated having; *Love Is All You Need* and its message are so emotionally charged that it
seemed like something participants would bring up naturally in their conversations about it. This
was not the case for Group B, so I decided to ask them outright:

EMMETT: Um, this might seem a bit like inane, but like-- huhhh-- how did the movie make you
feel? Could you desc-- like a couple of words describe like emotional reaction you might have
had to the movie.
[pause]
EMMETT: If any.
[pause]
ANISE: It was hard for me to feel anything.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: Because I haven't... been... bullied in such a long time. Uh, like I can-- I can understand
how people feel, because I've felt that way, about other issues, just not... bullying.

Anise refers only very vaguely to "people" and "issues" and, seemingly euphemistically, to "bullying," rather than to gay people or homophobia specifically. It seemed, then, that Anise
perhaps experienced a similar kind of dissociation described by Conrad in group A. When she
did not elaborate further, I pressed her again in the hopes of getting a better sense of what she
meant, to see if she was confused or embarrassed or uncomfortable.

EMMETT: So you just didn't really have any emotional investment in it?
ANISE: I don't know, it just-- it was just hard because I-- again, I was trying to like figure out
"okay, what is going on" and why they're doing it the way that they're doing it and like--
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: It was like I just was-- I sort of took myself emotionally out of it and I was like okay well
this is clearly, um... an issue that they're-- y'know, representing. Um... that happens... across
the board. And...
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: A like... I dunno... it just was... like, subconsciously, was just hard for me to sort of be
there. I dunno.

Anise responded with a series of hesitant and unfinished sentences, too vague and peppered with
qualifiers to effectively communicate much of anything. Instead of explaining how she felt, she
fell back again on mentioning the universality of the narrative ("this is clearly an issue that
they're representing that happens across the board"). Given her hesitation in responding and how,

---

3 [pause] in Group B's transcript refers to at least 4 seconds of continuous silence.
when pressed, she hurriedly attempted (but failed, dissolving instead into meaningless anxious strings of filler) to provide reasons for her emotional disengagement, it seemed she was perhaps uncomfortable with her own lack of emotional response to the film.

Following the above quoted exchange there was another pause, and then Lenny chimed in with his own emotional response.

LENNY: Yeah, it definitely made me feel jarred.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: Um, by... like, making me think like "what if this was me."

It would seem that for Lenny, the film actually succeeded in accomplishing what it set out to do; this is interesting, considering that he did not identify himself as a part of the target audience for the film. After this, I asked Anise and Lenny if they'd found the film upsetting, and they were once again uncertain and slow to respond with a straightforward yes or no.

**Group C**

All three of the participants in group C felt emotionally disconnected from *Love Is All You Need?*, though unlike Anise they were actually able to explain why.

SEA: I don't know what to get out of it, really.
EMMETT: That's fair.
SEA: Like am I supposed to feel... X, Y, or Z? Because I, I'm this person who's watching it? I kinda feel like I'm intruding because it just was not meant for me. It just feels so awkward.

Like Conrad, Sea felt more awkward and uncomfortable than upset. They could identify that the film was attempting to evoke an emotional reaction from them, but they weren't entirely sure what it was. Amina (heterosexual) had a similar experience.

AMINA: I really... I was asking myself "does this make me feel upset" and it... didn't? Which is weird. Like, it was, it was graphic but I didn't feel like "wow this is really tragic." I just. I don't know.
ANYA: Cuz you knew it was gonna happen, though.
AMINA: Yeah, I did know it was gonna happen, but I also just... I don't know... it could just be like stylistically, the film didn't have... like I wasn't invested enough in her life.
Amina could tell that the film was trying to make her feel upset and that it did not succeed. When watching the film, rather than simply watching it and engaging directly with the content of the film, she was actively thinking about her reactions and lack thereof, making the film-viewing experience a self-reflective process. Unlike Anise, Amina was aware of and interested in her own lack of emotional reaction, and wanted to talk it over in the interview.

Anya interestingly echoed a similar sentiment to Conrad, in that she connected her lack of emotional engagement with the film to her identity. For Conrad, he felt that it was his straightness that prevented him from engaging; for Anya, it was her blackness.

ANYA: I just did not see me as a black queer woman, I didn't see myself in that, necessarily.
EMMETT: Yeah.
ANYA: Um... so like that was like the first thing that like took me out of whatever they were, might have been trying to do. Um, and so... yeah. It wasn't effective for me.

Anya’s response exemplifies how Love Is All You Need’s attempt at universalizing the experience of homophobic bullying fails entirely. White straight people cannot connect to the material because they are not gay; black queer people cannot connect to it because they are not white. Additionally, many viewers of varied identities suggested that they could not connect to the film because they had never been bullied; ironic, considering how the film presumably attempts to create an emotional connection specifically with people who have not been bullied.

**Conclusion**

In this study, I found that Love Is All You Need? failed to effectively communicate any kind of message and alienated the majority of my participants. I would argue that it ultimately does not succeed as an anti-homophobia text, because its narrative of flipped oppression allows room for heterosexual viewers to avoid thinking about the specificity of homophobia as a form
of oppression.

The only viewer on whom the graphic suicide and bullying scenes had the intended effect-- being viscerally upsetting-- was Lee, who is gay and nonbinary. Lee did not find their emotional engagement with *Love Is All You Need* productive, empowering, or educational; it was just hurtful and frustrating. Conrad suggested that the film's depiction of suicide was actually hurtful and that the film would be dangerous for people who might be suicidal, especially LGBT+ youth. While there was some debate on whether or not the film would be helpful as an educational tool to heterosexuals, no participants in the study thought that *Love Is All You Need?* was or could be helpful to victims of homophobia (or in the case of group B, "bullying"). It was deemed to be at best useless and at worst actively harmful to LGBT youth.

This study obviously has a number of limitations. My sample size was extremely small, and participants didn't come from a broad range of backgrounds. I would like to have done at least one more interview with an exclusively heterosexual group, and interviewed people who were not college students or recent graduates. I had never conducted any interviews for any reason before and was nervous and somewhat unclear in the interviews; I stuttered and forgot questions and wasn't able to push people for more information in a number of instances where it would have been useful.

More research ought to be done on audience response to this film and others like it. When a film like *Love Is All You Need?* has an explicit goal in mind and is, at least in theory, some form of activism, it's important to study whether or not it is achieving its goal. If this film is trying to prevent LGBT youth suicide, we ought to study whether it is actually doing so or if it is merely contributing to the problem. Is it really helpful for LGBT youth to watch a child
brutalized by her peers, helped by no one, and slit her wrists and die? Is it really responsible to present a film in which the only alternative to suffering endless violence is suicide?

Mainstream media interest in LGBT suicide has declined significantly since 2010, but it is critical to continue to study and attempt to address it. Rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide attempts in the LGBT community are high, and have shown no signs of decreasing. Things are not "getting better" for young LGBT people. Suicidal LGBT youth need compassionate allies and access to resources and supportive communities, not heterosexual voyeurism and fear-mongering narratives. Filmmakers looking to be activists have to consider carefully the messages that they're sending. Films like *Love Is All You Need?* which present narratives that end in LGBT death-- metaphorical or literal-- contribute to the real-life deaths of LGBT youth.

http://urbanlifestylechic.com/kim-rocco-shields-love-need/
http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/ecologies_of_sex_sensation_and_slow_death/
http://www.ibtimes.com/what-if-being-gay-was-norm-love-all-you-need-film-depicts-world-where-being-straight-abnormal-video
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/26/love-is-all-you-need-movie-_n_3164591.html
http://www.themovienetwork.com/interview/interview-kim-rocco-shields-love-all-you-need
Savior Complex.
A novel in progress.

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Slice Interview with Harper Garvinson

EXCLUSIVE! Harper Garvinson Opens Up About Girls, Rivalry, His Hand, and More

tags: hot dudes, slice faves, harper garvinson, heroes

Last year, Harper Garvinson burst onto the competitive fighting scene and blew our minds when he became the youngest world champion swordfighter in history. This year, he’s loaded with medals again— and he did it with only one hand! (Well, sort of. You know what we mean!)

Not only is he a fighting prodigy, he’s a nationally-ranked genius— and he’s handsome to boot. As you all well know, he’s our absolute favorite athlete in the scene right now— and he’s gaining popularity. Our favorite blond dreamboat was on the cover of Hero Weekly right after Worlds, and rumor has it more people have asked for him but got turned down.

So you’ll be delighted to know that Slice got an interview with him recently! We sure were. We sat down with the teen heartthrob on his porch at his family’s house; he lives with his dad, who you’ve probably heard of. Jenson Garvinson famously saved the world from the Demon Plague back in 3032.

Slice: So, Harper— you do prefer Harper, right?
Harper Garvinson: Yeah, Harper’s fine. I mean, I don’t really care, but everybody else thinks Squelch is really weird, and they always make faces, so I usually use Harper. [He laughs. His smile, you guys! OMG!]
Slice: Great, so, Harper— congratulations on Worlds this year. Almost a total sweep! It was really incredible to watch.
Harper: Thank you.
Slice: Now, we have to ask. Was it harder this year? It looked like you were in as fine form as ever, but it had to have been hard doing so much fighting right after losing your hand.
Harper: There was definitely an adjustment period. My right hand was my dominant hand, after all. Losing it was really… a shock. More shocking for everyone else, though— I finished my Journey right after, and I got teleported in front of my school. I totally passed out, I was bleeding all over the place…
Slice: Oh my god!
Harper: Right? But like I said, I was okay, they took me to the hospital. They attached this one [he holds up his magical hand] pretty soon after, and it works perfectly. It’s just like having a proper hand. I forget I lost the first one sometimes, honestly. Magic prosthetics are really incredible nowadays.
Slice: So there’s no difference?
Harper: Well, no… Hmm. It’s hard to describe, I can’t feel things properly with it— I have some sensation, but not a lot. Just a couple days ago, I pulled a pan out of the oven with it. Didn’t feel a thing on that hand, but I burned my face when I tried to push my hair behind my ear later. It’s probably gonna be unpleasant in winter, since it’s metal, too. So there’s that. It’s also, you know, stronger than a normal hand.
Slice: I saw you had to remove it for the hand-to-hand tournament.
Harper: Yeah. It gave me too much of an advantage, they said. That was exciting! I don’t really have any practice without the hand– removing it is problematic– so I’m not surprised I didn’t do very well.
Slice: Bronze is still pretty incredible.
Harper: Oh, of course! Yeah. I’m just disappointed, you know. I expected better of myself.
Slice: While we’re on the subject of competitions. Things looked pretty fierce between you and Blood Diamond again. You two have gotten pretty intense sometimes. What’s your relationship like at school?
Harper: Oh. Um. [He pauses for a long time.] We’re… pretty competitive.
Slice: That’s not much of a dish. Come on! You two are rivals!
Harper: [laughs] Sorry! I feel weird talking about school with reporters. It feels private. I really respect John a lot, you know, I think he’s really incredible, but we’re not friends, particularly. We have really different personalities. He’s a great guy, though. Really smart. He inspires me, actually. He’s just so kind and hardworking. Is that weird to say?
Slice: No! Not at all. I mean, I don’t know if I’ve ever heard anyone else call him kind before. He comes off pretty harsh. Is he much nicer at school?
Harper: Um…[Another long pause.]He’s just not a people person.
Slice: No trash talk? That was a pretty good opportunity to throw some shade.
Harper: I’m not really a trash-talking kind of person. Like I said, I think John is just– he’s the bee’s knees, really. I don’t have any trash to talk! I could try to trash-talk someone else. Like… my dad never washes his dishes. He just leaves them in the sink. It’s so annoying. How about that?
Slice: That was weak.
Slice: If you’re not into personal questions, you’re gonna hate the next one.
Harper: Oh boy.
Slice: Do you have a girlfriend?
Harper: That’s not as bad as I expected! No, I don’t.
Slice: Are you just saying that because you have a secret girlfriend?
Harper: If she was a secret I wouldn’t tell you, would I? That’s a silly question.
Slice: I guess you’re right. What qualities would you look for in a girlfriend?
Harper: Oh, gosh. [Yes, readers, he says “oh gosh”– so cute!] I don’t really know. I guess… someone nice, who doesn’t mind that I’m really busy. And– no, that’s it.
Slice: Nothing more specific?
Harper: Uhh… I like tall people.
Slice: That’s a bit better. And– last question– what advice do you have for people who maybe have a hard time with sports, or school?
Harper: I’d say to just hang in there. Take things at your own pace. You’ll never get better if you give up! And remember that any amount of improvement is good, even if it’s small.
Slice: Great. Thank you so much for your time! Good luck with the rest of your school year.
Harper: Thank you!

So, readers, what do you think? It’s too bad he’s too nice to dish anything juicy– what is going on with him and John? Just rivals… or maybe something more? Wink, wink! (Blood Diamond is pretty tall…!)
If you want to rewatch Harper’s stellar performance at the Hero Tournaments, they’re online now at herowatch! It’s good stuff!
Student Resources Report #3328c

Bullying/Harassment Consultation Meeting
4:10 PM 11/13/3071
CC: Nasir Markes, Asa Welwichita

Student: Blood Diamond [preferred name “John”] Johnson-Asada (ID# 2150750)

Related Incident Report(s): #3310a, #3267a, #3260a, #3259a, #3258a, #32-(too many to list here, see file)

Meeting Attendance: In attendance are John, Dean of Students Liana Shaffe, and the note-taker, East Wyatt.

Meeting Notes: John is clearly uncomfortable with these sorts of meetings. As noted elsewhere in his file, he becomes guarded and defensive, even though he is typically quite polite outside of these meetings. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and glanced frequently at the clock. He avoided eye contact. Was very tense. His tone was quite hostile but not angry or heated.

In my opinion, this is a perfectly regular response. Am encouraged however to note that his (OUTDATED) psych report indicates that he is autistic. Please see my notes attached to said report. (If we have nothing more recent than 3061 we shouldn't be using it!!!) Lack of eye contact is NOT grounds for ANY kind of diagnosis or concern.

Analysis of this meeting and others suggests that he is very self-reliant, and genuinely not bothered by the majority of the incidents reported. While it's difficult to say without access to the complete observation file, my opinion is that he should be kept on A-track. There is no evidence of emotional instability. On the contrary, John seems remarkably strong and confident. His performance has not been negatively affected in any way by any of the incidents that have been reported.

Also, please try to use students' preferred names!!!!!!

Meeting Transcript:
Due to the short duration of the meeting, the transcript is on this form in its entirety rather than attached.

DEAN SHAFFE: Hi, Blood Diamond. I hope it's okay if East takes notes. She's--
JOHN: She's the psych consult. I know, ma'am. She's always here. You don't need to introduce her every time.
SHAFFE: Well, we have to ask every time. I know it's a pain.
JOHN: I really don't care.
SHAFFE: Okay, great. Please, sit down.
JOHN: I would rather stand, ma'am.
SHAFFE: I think it makes this more personal if we're both sitting, Blood Diamond. Don't you think?
JOHN: Not really.
SHAFFE: Please sit. This really won't be that terrible.
JOHN: Fine.
SHAFFE: So, John, we called you here because we received some more reports that you're being bullied.
JOHN: I didn't report anything, ma'am.

SHAFFE: We know, and we think that's part of the problem we should be talking about. Do you have any idea what the report was about this time?

JOHN: No, ma'am.

SHAFFE: A representative of the GSA reported that your locker was vandalized with homophobic slurs. I think you probably noticed that, Blood Diamond. We wanted to check in with you, and see how you're doing around that issue.

JOHN: It doesn't bother me, ma'am.

SHAFFE: It's okay to be bothered by this kind of thing, Blood Diamond. It's very hurtful stuff.

JOHN: Not really.

SHAFFE: So, is that why you didn't report it?

JOHN: I didn't report it because I'm not a child, and I'm perfectly capable of dealing with petty bullshit on my own. I find your calling me here and wasting both my time and yours on this nonsense more insulting than anything anyone has ever written on my locker.

[He stands up.]

SHAFFE: Blood Diamond, we're not done talking.

JOHN: Actually, we are. I have work to do. Useful work.

SHAFFE: I don't appreciate your hostility, Blood Diamond.

JOHN: So give me detention. I don't give a shit.

[He leaves.]
hiya im skullduggery (yes that's my real name, yes, ok, i know, its weird, I GET IT)
im 17! i am trans, im gender neutral, my pronouns are it/its if you fuck em up i will kill you lol :))))))
im in the mage class at pendragon high (but thats kinda.... complicated.... lol...) im hella mentally ill and also i have chronic migraines.
im gay and love vodka + large fluffy dogs
  if i follow you you need to tag these or i will block & unfollow u
  • self-harm
  • anything even vaguely kink-related !!including jokes!!
  • pda & relationship talk/pictures/anything
  • sleeve tattoos
  • transphobia
  • fire gifs/video
  • cigarettes

ALSO don't follow me if ur 20+ or at least ask me first
before u ask for MORE INFO here's my faq. dont talk to me about trans stuff. DO NOT!!! im serious. if you try i will come to your house and beat you up and take your lunch money

xxxxx

FAQ!!!!!!
IS THAT REALLY UR NAME
for real everyone asks me that. yes. its my name. its dope
what gender are u REALLY
im gender neutral, really
but what about your genitals
if you ask me this you are Nasty. im literally a minor
what's it like being gender neutral at such a hardcore hero school?
awful and i dont want to talk about it!!!! i know i made posts about it before but like i cant deal w that any more pls ask someone else
what's so complicated about being in the mage track??
long story. short version: i suck
why do you post so much sad stuff? it's really depressing
its how i deal w my brain problems deal with it or leave idc
how come u want people to tag cigarettes but also you post a bunch of pics of people smoking??
i need to be able to choose when i see it....... i guess....... sometimes i cant handle it.... & i blog a lot of it because smoking is hot tbqh. sorryyyy.

DRINKING WHEN YOU'RE DEPRESSED/WHATEVER IS BAD BECAUSE BLAH BLAH BLAH
i know
you are mean/a bad person/problematic
yep!!!!!!!!!!!! im not here to make friends
Chapter 1: The Storm

Skulduggery woke up at three in the morning with a shuddering gasp, covered in a nervous cold sweat, the pillow clutched to its face wet with tears.

This was not unusual. Neither was the sharp pain in its head; it had had chronic migraines for many years, now. It rolled onto its back and threw its pillow off its bed onto the floor with unnecessary force; it landed with a loud clatter, having knocked into a small pile of unwashed dishes it had left lying around. Scowling up at its slanted ceiling, it furiously wiped the tears off its cheeks. There was something uniquely awful about waking up already having a panic attack, heart pounding, limbs trembling, ears ringing with noises that weren't real (not any more)—but that wasn't unusual, either.

What was unusual was the storm: blinding lightning flashed above its skylight, accompanied promptly by a deafening rumble-crack of thunder. The pouring rain was especially loud in its attic bedroom, slamming against the roof heavy and insistent. Storms in Hillside were rare; the large magical net over the town protected it from bad weather, and usually the powers-that-be kept things sunny and mild, raining just enough to keep the idyllic suburban gardens flourishing. The net deflected storms, nudged them off course and spared Hillside anything that could be dangerous in any way. They didn't get storms like this one, with the wind howling and the horrible firework thunder.

Exhaustion pressed down on it, a familiar heavy ache in its limbs. It closed its eyes, but knew it wouldn't be getting back to sleep again. Not with all the racket going on outside. Thunder cracked again; it sounded like the world ripping itself apart, and the sound sent an uncomfortable prickle up its spine, made it inhale sharply, sent a fresh stab of pain shooting through its head.

The exhaustion and pain would normally keep it in bed for at least a few hours, but laying there with its clothes soaked through with sweat was gross enough to convince it to get up. Without sitting up, it reached one hand up and plugged in the string lights that hung all around its room in one long chain. Soft and warm as the light was, it still felt like being stabbed in the eye when they flickered to life. Skulduggery groaned and dropped its arm over its eyes.

It lay there for another few minutes, letting the haze of just-woke-up exhaustion settle into its day-to-day exhaustion as its eyes adjusted to the light. It noted with little interest how unusual the storm was, and wondered vaguely why they had gotten such a bad storm at such an inconvenient time of day, but wasn't able to muster any actual curiosity.

As it hauled itself out of bed (which took enormous effort, and felt rather like trying to run underwater), it grabbed the bottle of vodka off its nightstand with one hand and its cellphone with the other. The bottle was already open, having been left open since last night, when it lost the cap— or was it the night before? two nights ago? three?— and Skulduggery took a drink from it as it stumbled its way across the floor to its dresser. It screwed its face up and shuddered (drinking lukewarm cheap vodka straight-up was sort of like being punched in the throat) before taking another gulp.

Skulduggery's bedroom floor was a mess, just like everything else about its room. Piles of clothes, dirty dishes, books, papers, chalk, blankets, and other knickknacks covered every surface quite thoroughly; it had a desk that had been unusable for as long as it could remember, being always piled high with layers of shit it never bothered to sort through. Its walls were
cluttered with photographs and postcards and half-covered scorchmarks. The tidiest spot of the room was the corner where the carpet had been ripped up and the floor replaced with smooth chalkboard, but even that was surrounded with candles and bits of chalk and books stuffed with papers.

It kicked aside one of its several laundry baskets-- this one, it was pretty sure, contained dirty clothes-- and tugged open the bottom drawer of its dresser with its toes. There was exactly one thing in it, a pair of horrible floral pajama pants that one of its older sisters had given to it ages ago. It grimaced, but set the bottle of vodka down and picked up the pajama pants anyway.

While it stripped off the sweat-soaked shorts, underwear, and shirt that it had worn to sleep, it called, "Phone, call Kel," in the general direction of its nightstand.

Its phone chimed and buzzed softly, barely audible over the storm, then started ringing. Its best friend was a far more functional person than it was, and thus was not likely awake at three in the morning, but it couldn't imagine anyone was sleeping peacefully through the night with this storm.

Indeed, Kel answered when it was pulling a sweater over its head-- the phone clicked, and then it heard a slurred mumbling, "Hey, Skullduggery."

"Morning, bitch," it said.

"It's barely morning," she muttered. There was something sort of satisfying in how tired she was; Kel was always a morning person, and generally very energetic (at least around other people), so hearing her grumbly and exhausted was rare.

"I bet you anything Blood Diamond was already awake," It peered at its reflection, squinting and twisting to the side to see how the sweater looked. "I don't suppose you know what's going on with the storm?"

"Not right this second, but I'll check my notifications," She paused, humming softly to herself, and then sighed. "Apparently it's a state of emergency. I should head to the school, John's expected to help out with something over there but if it's a magic thing he's gonna be a mess."

"Did he ask for your help? If he didn't ask, he'll be pissed if you just show up," Skullduggery paused, considering this for a moment. It never liked anyone treating Kel badly, especially not Blood Diamond of all people-- it hated him more than it hated almost anyone else in the world-- but on the other hand, he'd be an absolute wreck tonight. (Ol' BD, being some kind of freak, was allergic to magic.) "Actually, never mind, that'll be hilarious. Can I come?"

"Of course he didn't ask for my help, it's not the apocalypse," Kel said dryly. She was only capable of sounding that dry when she was absolutely exhausted. "But he'll need it. I think you could come if you wanted, but like, it's probably a top security clearance kind of thing."

"Babe, I definitely have more top security clearance than you do," It combed its hands through its hair to tug out some of the tangles that had accumulated overnight with all its thrashing. Its hands came away with little bits of hair that had fallen out; its hair had been bleached and dyed (green, of course, always green) too many times to ever really recover without putting a lot of magic bullshit in it. It grimaced and shook its hair off its hands. "I'll just offer to help, they'll love it."

Kel was quiet for a very long time, in the way she got where she was concerned but not sure what to say, exactly. Skullduggery started rummaging on the floor for clothing a little bit cuter than its ratty-ass pajamas. If it was going to go laugh at someone, it had to look good doing it.

Eventually, she said, carefully, "Are you going to be okay if they take you up on it?"
"I'm always okay," it said dismissively, even though they both knew it wasn't true. In any context, actually, *I'm always okay* was probably the least true thing Skulduggery could possibly say. Kel didn't say that, and she didn't really make a noise, but it could tell exactly what face she was probably making at her phone. "Dude, it'll be fine. The most they'd want me to do is move some fuckin' clouds, which is easy as shit. You may have heard, but clouds aren't heavy."

"If you say so," Kel said.

It couldn't find an umbrella, but it did find an umbrella charm-- a little magic shield only strong enough to keep off the rain. The charm failed at the end of its street ("Typical.") and it was immediately completely drenched. The lightning flashing in the sky was just a little bit purple, and the sky was completely covered with thick roiling black clouds-- every time the lightning ripped through the sky, accompanied by that horrible thunder, Skulduggery's head hurt more. By the time it got to school, out of breath, soaking wet, and shivering, it looked even worse than it had when it woke up and could barely walk straight.

Kel was waiting for it at the school gates, holding a rather boring black umbrella and looking about as soggy as Skulduggery anyway. The wind rendered umbrellas pretty much useless. Despite being extremely soggy, she still looked good, like she always did. While Skulduggery was sure it looked like the corpse of a dead rat, Kel looked like a dashingly tousled lead in a romantic drama. (She always looked like a dashingly tousled lead in a romantic drama, honestly.) She said something, but it couldn't hear her over the storm. It shook its head and jogged to meet her, even though jogging made it feel like it was about to barf.

It ducked under her umbrella, shivering, and said, "What were you saying? Can't hear shit."

"*I said*, why didn't you bring an umbrella," Kel said, hugging it close with her free arm. As ever, Kel radiated a pleasant comfortable warmth. She rested her chin on top of its head and sighed. The rain hitting the umbrella was loud and intrusive, which kind of spoiled the moment.

Kel held it away from her and looked it over, tilting the umbrella so it covered more of it and less of her. After giving it a once-over, she concluded, "You should have stayed home. You're really pale."

"My delicate porcelain skin is part of my appeal," it said, shrugging her hand off its shoulder. "Come on, let's go inside before you suffocate." With the rain sticking her clothes to her body, she couldn't get away with not wearing a binder to flatten her chest-- but that meant the binder would be soaked through as well, which (it knew from experience) was not pleasant.

"I'm fine," she said, and anybody else would have believed her. Kel didn't slouch, she didn't yawn, didn't complain, didn't wobble on her feet. (She never did, and she probably never would.) But Skulduggery knew her better than anybody else, and it knew all her tells. Her voice was ever so slightly hoarse, her eyes ever so slightly unfocused, her hair a little more messy than artfully tousled-- all little things, but still there. She was exhausted and not in the mood for this at all, but she'd dragged herself out of bed and up the hill to school in the middle of the night anyway. Because that's what Kel always did. She was the real deal.

It grabbed her hand and dragged her towards the front door of the main school building. "Come on, dumbass," it said.

The Uther Pendragon Institute for Gifted and Talented Youth was built in the year 1111, because it was lucky. They didn't finish it that year-- in fact it took them about two hundred years
to finish it-- but they decided they'd gotten the luck advantage all the same. Of course, the actual site was not two thousand years old. It had burned down dozens of times, destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed again over and over and over. It had never really stayed in the same place, either; it was in the mountains, the first time, in the westernmost regions of Óirtir. The second time it was in the capital city, both to keep it safe from the dragons that destroyed it the first time and to emphasize its central importance to the nation.

It moved, and changed, and really the Uther Pendragon Institute for Gifted and Talented Youth in 3072 had no business claiming any kind of continuity with the Magyck Academie from 1111, but it did anyway.

This iteration was perched on a tall hill right where the town of Hillside met the Sabrine Forest. The whole campus was surrounded by a high brick wall topped with ornate iron spikes. The main gate was a towering black wrought-iron thing that struck a careful balance between imposing and beautiful.

The Institute had six buildings, stately brick things with evergreen ivy climbing the walls; the main building, the library, the magic wing, two dorms, and the sports center. The large grounds were peppered with trees and bushes and flowerbeds all carefully manicured to look perfectly picturesque. Everything about the Institute's campus was painstakingly designed to look picturesque and perfect, which gave everything a strange artificial air to it. This strange disconnect was only pushed further by how actually ordinary the inside of the school looked; indoors, the school was not so different from any other high school.

UPI was widely considered the best school for heroes in the entire world, with a long and impressive list of notable alumni. No one who mattered went anywhere else, really, and a graduation from UPI practically guaranteed you success for the rest of your life. No college would reject a UPI student. The student body came from all over the world, a large collection of geniuses, elite athletes, and the most powerful magic-users of their generation. (As one would expect, all this meant the school had three key things: a lot of money, a very low acceptance rate, and one of the most high-pressure environments imaginable.)

The drying spell hit them with its usual uncomfortable suddenness; as soon as they stepped through the door into the lobby they were abruptly completely dry. Kel inhaled sharply and Skulduggery shuddered. It could feel the magic on its skin, like pins and needles all over but only for a few seconds. It wasn't pleasant.

"I think they're in the gym," Kel said, folding her umbrella and tucking it into the umbrella stand by the door. Being a plain black umbrella, it was completely indistinguishable from the other handful of umbrellas already in the thing. With both her hands free, she started fidgeting with her suddenly-dry hair, combing her fingers through it as she walked. Skulduggery paused to inspect its reflection in the reception desk's glass pane; it looked less terrible than it thought, and its hair only needed a little bit of arranging to look presentable.

When it jogged to catch up with her-- Kel was almost a foot taller than it was and had notably long legs on top of generally being fast-- she said, "Apparently they've brought in some professionals. John was kind of unclear, but I think they might be bringing in someone from the Ascended. Wouldn't that be neat?"

She smiled down at it, clearly actually excited about this prospect. It didn't really care, and tended to lean more on the side of not wanting to interact with authority figures at three in
the goddamn morning, but whatever. "Why's it such a big deal, do you think? It doesn't seem very apocalyptic."

"I mean, it can't be just a storm," Kel shrugged. "They probably want to be extra careful with anything this close to a Rift. Could be we're under attack."

The thought of someone trying to attack Hillside of all places was somewhat ridiculous. The school and the Rift meant it was one of the most securely defended places in the country outside of the capital-- and even if it weren't, there wasn't anything interesting enough to attack in Hillside. Sure, there was the Rift, but their Rift wasn't anything special. There were bigger ones elsewhere.

"I think it's probably just a test," it said. For Kel or BD or the whole school or something. Some kind of apocalypse-scenario thing where they see how they react, see how well they can follow protocol or whatever. Kel looked thoughtful.

"Yeah, I can see that. I wish they'd done it during the day," She yawned and stretched her arms over her head. "They never do get sick of testing us, do they?"

It sighed. "Nope."

The hallway to the gym was lined with trophy cabinets and smiling photos of the students who won the trophies. Skullduggery always glanced at the pictures of Kel when it passed them. She outshone everyone else, taller and more handsome and smiling broader in every picture.

She rested both hands on the door and, for a moment, she paused. She took a deep breath, and it watched her slide carefully into the persona she wore around other people. She straightened her back, squared her shoulders, smoothed her face into a pleasant smile, and cleared her throat. "Okay," she said. She glanced down at Skullduggery, and it smiled up at her. "Great. Let's do this."
Chapter 2: Black Magic

The gym was bustling with people. Squelch felt Skullduggery shift slightly closer to her as soon as they stepped inside, pricking with nerves already. She rested a hand on its shoulder as she scanned the room for people she recognized. There weren't any. She also couldn't tell at all what they were doing. Mostly people were talking, but there were also a lot of people peering at glimmering projections and maps and gathered around tables.

At her side, Skullduggery's face hardened, turning a particular combination of anger and disgust that could only mean it had found John. She followed its scowl across the room and, sure enough, found him. Brown hair, brown eyes, six feet tall, all wiry muscle and hostility, scowling back at Skullduggery from the other side of the room.

His posture was stiffly formal, his back ramrod straight even now at three in the morning. Squelch waved, smiling brightly at him, and he turned his scowl on her instead. He wrinkled his nose, baring his teeth slightly in disgust, and Skullduggery muttered, "Ugh, he's just the worst."

Already bristling and obviously gearing up for a fight, John started towards them, and Squelch sighed. "You would think he'd be too tired to fight," she said. She certainly was; she'd barely slept at all, and thoroughly exhausted.

"Harper," he growled, as soon as he was close enough to be heard over the racket. He jerked his chin at Skullduggery, but didn't address it directly. "What is it doing here?"

"Good morning," she said, smiling at him.

"Mnh," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. Better than nothing.

She did her best to always be polite and friendly with him. Being hostile back certainly wasn't going to make him hate her less, which was what she was hoping for eventually. It wasn't working so far, but she was positive that eventually he'd come around. She was a very likeable person.

"I'm here to help, asshole," Skullduggery spat back. Both of them bristled like angry cats, growling at each other. She squeezed Skullduggery's shoulder, part reassurance and part warning; if it got too riled up here, with all these people around, it could get in serious trouble.

"We're here to help," she said brightly, and glanced around. "I thought you might appreciate some people-interfacing backup, considering it's so early. Seems like things are mostly in hand, though."

"I didn't ask for your help," he said stiffly. She kept smiling, though couldn't help feeling dismayed that she'd managed to offend him like she always did. Thunder cracked outside--muffled by the walls and heavy layers of magical protection in the school, but still louder than any thunder she'd ever hear before-- and he swayed ever so slightly on his feet. Now that she looked at him, he looked more than just tired; his eyes were slightly reddened and out of focus, and he was breathing shakily.

"I'm not here to help you," Skullduggery said snidely. "If that makes you feel any better."

"Make me feel great, thanks," he said to it, then looked back at Squelch. At least he didn't hate her as much as he hated Skullduggery. "There's nothing for you to help with. They just needed me to help set up the gym and give them access to the emergency notification system."

That was disappointing. She was hoping to be actually helpful, now that she was awake. Still, though, she was curious what was going on. "Did they tell you what the deal is with the storm? Seems like a lot of people for bad weather."
John snorted and his mouth twitched into a dry smile. "No one tells me anything, you know that," he said.

Skulduggery was about to say something snide, but they all stopped talking when one of the busy professional-looking adults started striding purposefully towards them. He was enormous; probably seven feet tall, at least. She didn't recognize him, but when he reached them he clapped his hands together and beamed at all three of them. "Skulduggery, Harper, Blood Diamond," he said. "If it isn't the three up-and-coming geniuses. Genii? Whatever. It's great to see you three here. Glad you've got that sense of civic duty even at three in the morning."

"Thanks," Squelch said, and glanced at the other two. They both shrugged. John looked deeply uncomfortable. "Do I know you?"

"Oh, no," the man said. "We've never met. I'm Marco Saverin, I work for the ORB."

The Observation and Recruitment Bureau. Skulduggery and John visibly tensed. The ORB governed who actually got to be a hero. They were the ones who tested kids for their magic potential, they were in charge of all standardized testing, they were in charge of the Journeys. They were Very Important People. Not the kind of people anyone really wanted to see in the middle of the night, not when you weren't at your best.

Skulduggery shifted back, ducking its head so its hair fell in its face, trying to shrink into itself so as to be less conspicuous. Given that it was tiny and unusually pale and had bright green hair, it was sort of difficult for it to be inconspicuous, but it tried nonetheless. Skulduggery was pretty much never at its best, and it had never been comfortable with any kind of test. It didn't do well in any kind of test, and on paper it was sort of a disaster. She shifted in front of it slightly, even though it wasn't like that was actually helpful in any way.

He grinned toothily down at it and said, loudly, "This is perfect, actually. Skulduggery, why don't you give us a hand?"

John raised his eyebrows and he didn't quite smirk, but he got very close to smirking. Skulduggery, luckily, didn't notice. Squelch shot him a look, annoyed that he could be petty and glib at a time like this. The ORB was serious business.

"Skulduggery's not feeling well right now," Squelch said.

"I have a migraine," it elaborated, wrapping its thin fingers around her arm and hugging close to her side nervously. "I, um. I won't be much use."

Marco Saverin snapped his fingers and Skulduggery inhaled sharply. "There you go," he said. "Feeling better?"


It was not very good at hiding its sarcasm. Squelch assumed he must have cast a spell of some kind to fix its headache-- this was a remarkably nasty thing to do, considering it was also a nice thing to do. Now it had to help. She knew it was a bad idea for it to come here.

John was no longer able to stop himself from smirking.

"Excellent!" Saverin clapped again, looking weirdly pleased with himself. "How about you move the storm for us? You haven't been formally reevaluated since-- well, you know, it's been a while now. This will do nicely."

Skulduggery combed a hand through its hair and sighed, shoulders slumped. "Fine," it said wearily.

Squelch wanted very badly to do something, to help it somehow. But it didn't look at her for help. It was resigned. They both knew there was nothing they could do. Nothing that wouldn't be Bad with a capital B. Making a fuss could affect her evaluations. Refusing to be evaluated
was one of the worst things you could do; it was an automatic failure, and with Skulduggery's position being as tenuous as it was, it couldn't afford a failure.

"The storm is causing so much magical interference, we're having a difficult time investigating it. We're pretty sure it's done something to the defenses surrounding the town, but it's impossible to tell until we get rid of it," Saverin said, shouting over the noise of the storm.

Out in the storm, John wasn't doing so well. He was clearly trying really hard to keep it together, but his breathing was ragged and his nose started bleeding profusely after about a minute of being outside. Squelch didn't say anything, but she did fish out a handkerchief from her pocket and hand it to him, and stand close enough that she'd be able to catch him if he fell.

He took the handkerchief and didn't thank her, just pressed it against his nose and scowled.

Skulduggery stood in the middle of the soccer field, chewing on its lower lip and staring up at the sky. For a moment, it just stood there, staring, uncertain. It looked especially small out there by itself, soaked to the bone. It looked frail. Delicate. Breakable. She wished very much that there was something she could do, but she couldn't think of anything. She couldn't stop them, not without giving them a reason.

All she could do now was have faith in it. Be confident that Skulduggery really could do this and not hurt itself too badly. She told herself that the ORB wouldn't let it get too badly hurt on their watch, but she wasn't sure she believed it. They pushed people to their limits and further, especially the mage-track kids.

Skulduggery reached into its right boot and tugged out a long thin knife. She felt her heart sink; she'd hoped maybe it hadn't brought that with it, and they would be forced to cancel this stupid evaluation. But of course it had brought it, because she told it that they were going to ask it for help and it had to come prepared.

Saverin had pulled out a notepad and was hovering his hand over it. Notes appeared on the paper, too tiny to read, as he stared intently at Skulduggery. What was he writing? What was there to evaluate? It hadn't done anything yet.

"This is a terrible idea," John muttered, low enough that only Squelch could hear him. She glanced at him and he was also staring at Skulduggery with that peculiar face he got sometimes when he looked at it. Far away and pissed off and concerned and fixated all at once. "It hasn't done magic at all in about a year."

She quickly wracked her brain to try to think of a correction-- that sounded wrong, too long, but she couldn't think of a single time in the past year that Skulduggery had done anything magical. It had tried a couple times, but hadn't accomplished anything. This was the first time. That was bad.

Skulduggery pressed the tip of the knife against its palm. Squelch caught just a brief glimpse of red against its skin before the wound knit itself back together and the blood vanished. John shivered.

Skulduggery reached its hands towards the sky, frowning, then shook its head.

"That's not gonna be enough, yeah," John said, taking his eyes off Skulduggery to check on his nosebleed. He lifted the handkerchief away from his face, gingerly, and it was soaked with blood. His nose was still bleeding, too. She fished a pack of slightly soggy tissues from her pocket and handed it to him wordlessly. He looked at it, then at her face, and she thought for a moment he was going to refuse to take them on principle.
"Hang in there," she said, which only made him more pissed off. Wrong thing: she made a mental note not to tell him to hang in there again, and wondered if there was any form of encouragement that he didn't respond poorly to. So far, no. He snatched the tissues and pressed one against his nose, obviously deeply unhappy with accepting help from her.

Skullduggery pressed the blade of the knife against his wrist and screwed up its face, squeezing its eyes shut and wrinkling its nose, looking reluctant and uncomfortable. This was the worst part, except for all the parts after it. She hated when she had to watch it do this.

Skullduggery sliced a long line down its forearm, wrist to elbow, cutting deep into its already-scarred skin. Squelch flinched, like she always did, still not quite able to watch it hurt itself like that. She knew it would heal itself almost immediately, but it still made her feel sick.

As blood started to flow from the wound, wind whipped around the field, too low and cold to be part of the storm. John suddenly grabbed onto her arm hard for support; he almost fell anyway, but she hooked her arm around his waist and tugged him close to her side just in time.

She had no magic sense whatsoever, and she never had. She couldn't sense an enchantment if it was right under her nose. This was one of the few things she just couldn't do--not for a lack of trying. In the end, it was something you had to be born with and she just wasn't. John's thing was weirder: he couldn't use magic at all, but he was really sensitive to it and its presence gave him all manner of unpleasant physical symptoms. She'd never met anyone else like that.

A coal-black stain crept up Skullduggery's arm, spreading out from where it cut itself as the blood on its arm disappeared. Slowly it lifted up off the ground, with wind blowing through its hair and whipping around its body. Its eyes went wide, glowing bright white, and white energy crackled over its entire body. John wheezed, leaning heavily on her and gripping her arm hard enough to bruise. She tore her gaze away from Skullduggery to look at him; he looked like he was going to puke, but was staying relatively upright and conscious.

"Don't barf on me, please," she said lightly. He gave her the most vicious look he could muster, which wasn't that vicious because he looked so sick and he couldn't breathe. "Do you want me to take you home?"

"Absolutely not," he rasped. "If Creed's going to get struck by lightning and die, I'm gonna be here to watch and possibly spit on its corpse."

"You're really mean," she muttered, and looked quickly back at Skullduggery. The wind was dying down, and its blackened fingers were changed slightly, longer and curled at strange angles and tipped with claws. The black stain covered its entire right arm, now, and was starting to creep over its neck.

"I'm told it's part of my charm," John said dryly. She didn't take her eyes off Skullduggery; anxiety seized her chest as she watched it. The wound didn't heal itself, just stopped bleeding. That was always bad, when that happened.

"You were told wrong," she said under her breath, not intending for him to hear her, but he was standing so close he heard her anyway, and snorted. Then he coughed and gagged, presumably because he'd snorted blood. She ignored him and kept her eyes on Skullduggery.

It rose up a little higher off the ground and reached its blackened clawed arm towards the sky. Crackling magic gathered around its hand and then shot straight up into the clouds. Then it was struck by bright purple lightning and its entire body contorted. It screamed, and Squelch jerked forward instinctively-- John grabbed her, stopping her short.

"You can't," he said.
She didn't look at him. She couldn't look at anything but Skulduggery, twisting and screaming, purple magic crackling over its skin. "I have to help," she said. His grip on her arm tightened.

"What're you going to do, punch the lightning?" He yanked her back. "You're useless right now."

She knew he was right, but still-- she couldn't just do nothing. It was in pain. She had to help. She looked around helplessly, trying to think of something she could do, but there wasn't anything. This was a magic problem.

Skulduggery's scream suddenly turned into a much louder and more horrible noise, one that felt viscerally physically uncomfortable to hear. Its skin suddenly went unnatural ash-black, twisting like smoke, and a pair of enormous black wings erupted from its back, ripping through its shirt at the same time as two twisting black horns sprouted from its forehead. Its eyes turned yellow. Both hands twisted, growing claws, and it stopped thrashing.

Dread twisted in her stomach as the temperature dropped several degrees. That wasn't Skulduggery any more. John's grip on her arm slackened, then disappeared entirely as he crumpled to the ground unconscious.

"Well," Saverin said. "That's not supposed to happen."

Not-Skullduggery brushed the remaining purple sparks off its arms with an irritated gesture. It turned to face them, straightening up, and scowled at Saverin. It didn't say anything to him, just gave him a hard hostile look and then looked at Squelch. There was nothing of Skulduggery left, there-- its eyes were yellow and black, its teeth pointed like a shark's.

The demon wrinkled its nose at her and said, "Fat lot of help you are."

Before she could say anything, it jumped and flew up into the air with a flap of its enormous wings.

Not too long after, the storm cleared, and Skulduggery's limp body hurtled back down towards the ground. Nothing else mattered, then; she lunged forward to catch it, leaving John on the ground and Saverin shouting something she didn't bother to listen to. She caught it-- its skin burned her good hand, and her knees hit the ground hard, but she didn't care. All she cared about was that it was still breathing, barely, and the wings and horns and shark teeth were gone, its skin a sickly grey instead of charred black, its wrist healed.
3/11/3067 ORB meeting

**Interview subject: Skullduggery Creed (ID# 2150777)**

NOTE: Subj. 2150777 has a severe stutter, which has been largely edited out of this transcript for the sake of clarity.

---BEGIN AUDIO TRANSCRIPT---

HOLSTER: Hey. Go ahead and sit down. I’m Agent Holster, with the ORB. We’ve met before.
CREED: I remember you.
HOLSTER: How are you doing?
CREED: Fine.
HOLSTER: Well, kiddo, I think we both know that’s a lie.
CREED: [inaudible]
HOLSTER: You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. Just, you know. I know you’re not fine. It’s pretty clear from what happened yesterday that you’re not fine.
CREED: I guess.
HOLSTER: So, as you can imagine, we’re here to talk about the incident yesterday.
CREED: It’s none of your business.
HOLSTER: Actually, it’s, uh, very much our business, and it’s... well, honestly, Skullduggery, this is a big mess for us. We’re going to need to get the details on record here, then you’ll have to be completely re-evaluated on every level. You’re going to have to have a lot of these meetings. It’ll all go much more smoothly for us if you cooperate.
CREED: What are you gonna do if I don’t, arrest me?
HOLSTER: Honestly, kid, we might have to. This is pretty serious stuff.
CREED: Oh... okay.
HOLSTER: So, let’s get started?
CREED: I guess.
HOLSTER: So. Tell me what happened.
CREED: I... I guess-- it-- I-- I don’t know, it-- it just--
HOLSTER: Deep breaths.
CREED: Fuck you, I’m fine. I’m fine. I was sick of not being able to do anything.
HOLSTER: How about we stick to what happened and then we can get into why.
CREED: But you know--
HOLSTER: We need it on record.
CREED: That’s st-- it’s-- that’s stupid.
HOLSTER: I know. Just, please, give us as complete a description of what happened as you can manage.
CREED: I... okay. From... how much from the beginning do you want? I can’t-- there’s-- it’s a lot.
HOLSTER: Just start wherever makes the most sense to you.

---END OF TRANSCRIPT---
CREED: Okay. Um. So, ever since the fire, I haven’t been able to… I haven’t been able to use magic at all.
HOLSTER: The fire being…?
CREED: Do I really have to… to… I don’t know if I…
HOLSTER: For the record. I’m sorry.
CREED: Right… okay. Um. My sister-- I-- about six months ago, um, I was home with my older sister, Effy. Efferent. And my younger siblings, Palaven and Ataraxy. I tried to cook. I tried to cook something, and it caught fire, and I freaked out, and the… the whole house-- um-- it-- caught fire. I guess. And the house burned down and my sister, she. Um. Died.
HOLSTER: I’m sorry you keep having to repeat that story.
CREED: It was my fault. It-- I-- it was my fault. I shouldn’t have… I killed my sister.
HOLSTER: It was an accident.
CREED: Yeah. Um. Sorry. Anyway, I-- ever since that happened, I haven’t been able to do any magic at all. Not even… not even anything small, I can’t do anything.
HOLSTER: As we said, Skulduggery, it’s normal for there to be some difficulty. It’s part of the grieving process. Especially since you’re so young, it’s… it’s hard.
CREED: It’s not supposed to be like this, though! It’s-- there’s something wrong with me! I was supposed to be better after a month, maybe two at most, that’s what-- that’s what everyone said! It’s-- the-- it’s supposed to settle down, and it’s supposed to be fixed!
HOLSTER: Skulduggery…
CREED: Sorry, I didn’t-- I didn’t-- I shouldn’t have yelled. I’m sorry. I don’t-- I-- it’s-- I didn’t mean to-- to shout.
HOLSTER: It’s okay. Do you think you can keep going?
CREED: Um. Yeah. Sorry. I… so… My parents made me go to a shrink. Because I was, um. Crying all the time, and, um. My grades started getting really bad. And… yeah. Everything sucked. And she said I have-- she diagnosed me with. Some stuff.
HOLSTER: [papers shuffling] It says here she diagnosed you with major depressive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.
CREED: How-- wh-what-- how did you get that? Isn’t that illegal?
HOLSTER: That’s not important right now.
CREED: But--
HOLSTER: Skulduggery, please continue with your story.
CREED: I-- sorry. Okay. Um. She said because, of the brain stuff, it’s… I can’t… my magic is, um. It’s connected to my emotions? It’s that type. But since… Um. The brain stuff is too, it’s too broken. I can’t feel things the way I’m supposed to, so I can’t use my magic the way I’m supposed to. Um. And she said… I mean, everyone says, that medication, it. Makes that worse. Makes it more difficult to use magic.
HOLSTER: So you decided not to go on medication.
CREED: I thought-- I sort of-- I thought maybe I would just get better. If I waited. The meds would have… all medication comes with magic suppressants, so you don’t hurt anybody by accident, and I-- I didn’t-- they would have kicked me off the mage track, and that would… it would ruin everything.
HOLSTER: What happened next?
CREED: Nothing, I guess. I mean, I didn’t get better. I kept fucking up, and I couldn’t do anything right, and my magic… I can’t even feel it any more. It’s like it’s all gone. I know it isn’t, but it’s… it’s like it’s not even mine.

HOLSTER: Mm-hmm.

CREED: So I-- I was researching ways of, um-- you know, other ways of practicing magic. People who learn it, or, um... people who trade for it.

HOLSTER: I see.

CREED: You have to understand, please, it-- not being able to use magic felt so terrible, I couldn’t… I couldn’t deal with it any more. It feels like dying, like-- like I’m broken in a way that can’t be fixed, and it was really… it was really scary.

HOLSTER: Scarier than summoning a demon?

CREED: I… yes.


CREED: I found out online that there’s a lot of people who have deals with spirits to use the spirits’ magic. Like, you just, trade, and then you can use their magic like it’s yours. And I-- I didn’t do it, at first, I tried to do what I was supposed to do and just keep waiting, but I couldn’t do it any more. I mean, come on, I’m flunking out of middle school!

HOLSTER: So, yesterday.

CREED: I got fed up. I couldn’t… I had to do something. So I followed the summoning instructions I found in one of my brother’s old textbooks, and I… yeah. Summoned a spirit.

HOLSTER: Kythir is considered a demon, Skullduggery. Surely you knew that when you summoned it.

CREED: He’s not that bad.

HOLSTER: So you knew?

CREED: I mean, yeah, I just… I knew, but, he seemed nice.

HOLSTER: He seemed nice.

CREED: Yeah.

HOLSTER: He’s a ten-foot-tall monster made of smoke.

CREED: Yeah.

HOLSTER: He’s-- with the horns and claws and pointed teeth and everything. He eats souls.

CREED: I know.

HOLSTER: Okay. He seemed nice. What deal did you make with him?

CREED: Do I have to tell you that?

HOLSTER: Skullduggery.

CREED: Okay, okay, I just-- please don’t yell at me?

HOLSTER: This is not exactly inspiring confidence, kiddo.

CREED: Don’t call me-- whatever. Fine. It-- I sort of-- I traded my soul, I promised him he could have it, in exchange for as much of his magic I want, whenever I want, while I’m alive.

HOLSTER: You fucking-- mm. Okay. You really shouldn’t have done that, Skullduggery. That was a very, very, very bad idea.

CREED: I feel pretty okay about it.
HOLSTER: You can’t undo this, Skullduggery. You can’t break this kind of contract.
CREED: I know.
HOLSTER: You’re just a kid! You can’t-- ugh! You can’t do this kind of thing!
CREED: Well, I did, so clearly I can. Just because I’m a kid doesn’t mean I can’t make my own decisions.
HOLSTER: Actually, that’s exactly what it means, and this kind of disaster is exactly why.
CREED: I can do shit again, though. That’s-- whatever. I don’t care what people think. This helps me, it doesn’t-- it doesn’t matter what happens to my soul when I die or whatever. I don’t care. I just want to be able to do things again.
HOLSTER: Skullduggery, he’ll kill you.
CREED: I’m not stupid, I made sure he wouldn’t do that.
HOLSTER: You’re thirteen. He’s an ageless malevolent spirit who has been tricking people for thousands of years, you really think you--
CREED: Yes. Fuck you.
HOLSTER: You have to know this can only end badly.
CREED: Nothing I do is ever gonna be good enough, is it? I-- my only other option was to give up on magic forever, which no one was gonna let me do! Fuck you. Fuck everyone. This is all such bullshit.
HOLSTER: Skullduggery, please sit down.
CREED: I’m going home, I don’t want to-- to sit here and get lectured. It’s pointless. I have stuff to do.
HOLSTER: Skullduggery--
CREED: I’ll see you at the evals or whatever.

---END TRANSCRIPT---
Chapter 3: Recovery

特報 (2)
日々 新聞
Ember Rockton (age 34), the first known case of "Escaran Plague" in Óirtír, is dead.

NATIONAL HERALD
Pantheon of the Ascended issues statement on Escaran Plague: "There's nothing to panic about yet"

John tossed his phone back onto his bed and stretched his arms over his head, yawning. Even days later, his head still hurt more than it ought to following the nonsense with Skullduggery and the storm. He was pretty sure the storm had left some lingering magics in the air, but nobody else seemed to think so.

While he stretched, Cadfael picked up his phone in his long elegant fingers and started fiddling with it. "I wish you would turn off your stupid five in the morning alarm. You don't even need it," he complained, voice thick with sleepy indignation. He flopped onto his back, taking up a remarkable amount of space for such a slender person, and held John's phone up close to his face, squinting. After about a minute of perplexed squinting, he rubbed his eyes and said, "It's too early for this, I'm changing your language settings back to Common."

John rolled his eyes and dropped to the floor to start doing pushups. Cadfael very well knew John wasn't going to turn off his alarm. It was important to have it on; he almost always woke up before it went off, but not quite always. He needed it to make sure he stuck with his routine, to make sure everything went okay. Wake up, stretch, exercise, shower, breakfast, run, shower, bike to school. Every morning was the same.

"Check my email for me, while you're screwing around with my phone," he said.

It was important that every morning be the same, or as much the same as possible. Some variation was okay, but there were some things that he couldn't change. He had to wake up at the same time every day. That was set in stone, non-negotiable. Cadfael had tried, for a while, to wheedle him into sleeping later-- you'll feel better, you won't feel so awful all the time, blah blah blah-- but it hadn't worked. A mixture of habit and anxiety made sure that he always woke up at or around five-thirty AM during the school year. The only times he really slept in were when he was at Cadfael's place. There, the routines didn't matter so much.

"You got a 20% off coupon for that nice bubble tea place," Cadfael said. "Can I have it, since you said you're not going to make it to Atlaras at all for a couple weeks?"

Thinking about how he wasn't going to be able to visit Cadfael for a while was depressing, so he didn't allow himself to dwell on it. He made a vague affirmative noise, as he did not have the energy to speak and do pushups at the same time.

"Nice. Forwarding that to myself. You also got an email from Harper." John heard Cadfael shift on the bed; he glanced up to see him sitting up, leaning his back against the wall. Cadfael looked elegant and picturesque, like he always did, with his long legs and his borrowed too-big t-shirt. He had mastered the art of being perpetually camera-ready, so much so that it was second nature to him. For a moment, John just looked at him, gaze lingering.

Cadfael gestured with the phone and added, "Subject line is 'Skullduggery is awake' in all caps, with about five exclamation points."
"Not important. Delete it." John's voice sounded just a little bit strained, as his arms had started to tremble slightly. He cleared his throat and sat up, taking a moment to breathe. Everything got very blurry for a moment, like it sometimes did, so he closed his eyes. Focus. Breathe.

"Deleting, and don't think I didn't notice you doing way less pushups than usual," Cadfael said archly. John kept his eyes shut, but he could easily imagine the sharp knowing eyebrows-raised look Cadfael was giving him. "Are you still fucked up from the storm thing?"

There were, he mused, some downsides to Cadfael knowing him better than anyone else. Cadfael knew absolutely everything about him, and honestly probably knew him better than he knew himself. They were best friends, but John could never quite match the precise and comprehensive understanding that Cadfael had of him. It was impossible to hide anything from him, and impossible to pretend to be fine when he wasn’t. That didn’t stop him from trying anyway. He opened his eyes; everything was still blurry for a moment before shifting into focus. He gave Cadfael a look which Cadfael pretended not to see, his attention entirely on John’s phone.

"I'm fine," John said. "I'm just tired."

Cadfael, as usual, was obviously unconvinced. "Mm, that's what you always say when you're about to pass out. You should stay home from school," Cadfael said, but in the tone of voice that meant he knew John wasn't going to stay home from school. There were arguments that Cadfael always won; you should stay home from school was not one of them. John had not missed a single day of school in his life. No weather, injury, or illness had ever prevented him from going to school, no matter how difficult it was or how unpleasant it felt or how much Cadfael harangued him. His attendance record was absolutely perfect, and he intended to keep it that way until he graduated.

He stood up, grimacing at the sensation of sweat trickling over his skin (disgusting), and said, "I'm going to shower. Are you going to go back to sleep or what?"

"Ugh, no, I'm up now," Cadfael put down John's phone and started combing his hands through his hair, pulling it back into a messy ponytail. "You want me to make breakfast?"

His instinct was to refuse, but at Cadfael's insistence he was trying to get better at accepting Cadfael's help with things sometimes. It felt intolerably rude to make a guest cook for him and his parents, but also Cadfael wasn't really a guest. They were too close to need to be polite. Help would be nice, especially on one of these days. (A faint tremor in his hands, his skin crawling, his vision blurring at the edges again.)

As was typical, his overpowering ingrained desire to be polite won out. "No, I've got it," he said.

"I'll take care of the dog, then," Cadfael declared, as though they had been discussing which chore he should do instead of whether he should do any at all. John glared at him, exasperated, but Cadfael just smiled back at him which made it impossible to feel much more than mild annoyance. He kissed John on the cheek on his way out the door, and John was left feeling only somewhat indignant.

Exercises, then shower number one. Every day.

John had exactly one friend. This was often a very lonely way to exist in the world, but there was no other way he had ever been. He knew a lot of people, and he couldn't imagine having the time or energy to be friends with them all. An existence like Harper's was completely baffling to him; how could one person handle having so many friends? There was once a time,
when he was quite small, when he wanted more friends, but it didn't last long. He had always been generally disliked, pretty much everywhere he went from day one. He was not, as they would say, a people person.

Not like Cadfael. He and Cadfael were very different; people were often surprised and baffled by their friendship, and not just because John was incredibly unpopular and everyone thought he had absolutely no friends whatsoever. Cadfael was outgoing and upbeat, always delighted to chat with new people, picking up friends everywhere he went. Cadfael sort of sparkled, always glittering and beautiful and drawing people to him like he was a star with his own gravity. He was bright. Happy. John was not any of those things. John was not beautiful or sparkly or happy.

Exercise, shower, prepare breakfast, go on a run. Every day it was more or less the same. The same laundry basket he tossed his towel into, the same outfit for running he tugged on, the same earbuds he put into his ears. Checked the time-- 5:24-- and then checked it again two minutes later before leaving.

The early morning light cast a strange paleness over everything, always especially strange in John’s house. There was a lot of dark wood and old furniture, so in the pale light it felt like walking through a historical photograph.

Cadfael was busily whisking something when John came downstairs, preparing breakfast. His mother’s enormous dog Pochi was flopped on the floor in the corner, eating his dog-breakfast.

Pochi bounded over to him as soon as he stepped off the staircase into the hallway, drooling and smelling distinctly like a dog. He wrinkled his nose and shoved him aside with his leg. John hated that thing; Cadfael didn’t mind it, and his mothers loved it, but he could not stand the beast. "I see you’re making breakfast like I told you not to," he said as he walked towards Cadfael, ignoring Pochi’s cheerful attempts at wheedling attention out of him. "Yep," Cadfael said. His messy ponytail was already starting to fall apart, and his sleep shirt was falling off one shoulder. He smiled at John over his shoulder and kept whisking whatever he was whisking. "Only because you’re so sickly and frail."

John snorted. He didn’t take the bowl from him, though, when he walked over. That would risk making a mess when Cadfael fought him over it. Instead, he leaned against the kitchen island behind him and tugged the elastic out of Cadfael’s hair and started combing the tangles out with his fingers. "I really am fine," he said. And he was; as fine as he ever really got during the school year, anyway. Everything was always easier with Cadfael around. His mind was quieter. He slept easier. He had certainly felt worse. He’d felt worse, he’d been in more pain, he’d been more tired. He was fine.

"You are not," Cadfael said, aggravation starting to creep into his voice. An instinctive jolt of anxiety made John’s fingers twitch but he blinked and kept his movements steady, braiding Cadfael’s hair so it wouldn’t fall into his face. Cadfael was overly fond of a trendy sort of messiness, but whenever John saw him with hair in his face he felt a powerful urge to cut it off. It was aggravating.

"I am so," he said quietly. "Do you want to see me do a cartwheel to prove how fine I am? Do the alphabet backwards?"
"You recite the alphabet, you don’t do the alphabet," Cadfael said, snottily. John clicked his tongue and tugged on his hair, gently, and Cadfael laughed. "I’m just saying, you better get your act together before school or else your various nemeses will get on your case."

He didn’t want to think about Skullduggery being back at school. The last few days had been a blissful respite from its nightmarish presence. He had hoped, a little bit, that Skullduggery would stay in its coma forever. But of course it was okay. It was always okay, somehow, miraculously, annoyingly. He kept braiding; the repetitive motion was soothing, as was the soft silky texture of Cadfael’s carefully maintained hair. Over, across, over, across. The back of Cadfael’s head started to get blurry. He should have slept longer. Should have gone to bed earlier.

Over, across, over, across. He blinked a few times to try to focus his vision again. It didn’t really work. It wasn’t a huge problem-- it was just sort of like what he imagine it felt like to need glasses. Everything was just a bit fuzzy and vague around the edges. Over, across, over, across. The never-fading exhaustion that had taken up residence in his bones when he turned fifteen was always heavy, but it felt more pronounced if he felt at all under the weather. Today wasn’t going to be an easy one. As time passed, fewer and fewer days were easy. Things always arranged themselves to be inconvenient to him; Skullduggery was unconscious, so he had to spend those few days fighting off one of the worst allergic reactions he’d ever had. To balance it out.

Now that he was starting to recover, Skullduggery was awake. "Creed wouldn’t make fun of my poor word choices. It’s very attached to the…" He wrinkled his nose. "The gay thing."

The word tasted sour in his mouth. It always did.
"It’s so ridiculous that it hasn’t gotten in trouble for that shit," Cadfael said. He started to tense, whisking more angrily. "Ugh. It’s going to be especially nasty since it just woke up, I bet. I know I always ask you this but are you sure you don’t want to skip school today?"

Guilt nagged at him. He had ruined Cadfael’s good mood, like he usually did, souring it with worry and irritation. Over, across, over, across. There was only so much hair to braid. He had to stop, but the top looked too uneven. It wasn’t balanced, it wasn’t consistent, it looked bad. He unbraided Cadfael’s hair and started again. "You know I can’t do that," he said tersely. "It doesn’t matter if I want to."

"You don’t have to have a perfect attendance record," Cadfael said. "You don’t have to deal with it today if you don’t want to."

"Yes, I do," John snapped.

Cadfael didn’t understand. John couldn’t just avoid it. He had no good reason to skip school. He wasn’t a child any more. He had a reputation to uphold. He couldn’t just skip school whenever he felt under the weather. If he did that, he’d never go to school.

Cadfael sighed and shook his head, pulling his hair from John’s hands. "You’re so stubborn," he murmured. With his hands now free of anything to fidget with, John pressed his fingers into his palms and ducked towards the fridge for his water bottle. Morning run. He had to get going. He was wasting time.

"Hey," Cadfael said, ruffling the hair at the back of his head as he leaned over the fridge. Prickles shot up his spine at the touch, but he didn’t react beyond the involuntary twitch of his shoulders. "Are you gonna eat?"

He thought about it, but at the thought of food his stomach churned and he felt quite confident that if he put anything in his mouth besides water he would puke. "Not hungry," he said. "Thanks, though."
"You should really eat," Cadfael said, voice heavy with concern. John straightened, water bottle in hand, and he tugged Cadfael’s shirt back onto his shoulder. Let his fingers brush over his skin, slightly-- so slightly he wasn’t sure Cadfael even felt it-- and leaned just a bit closer than he maybe should have.

"I’ll eat later," he said quietly. Warmth radiated off Cadfael’s skin, inviting him closer, but he had to keep a few inches between them. Cadfael looked at him, hitting him full force with the effect of his beauty. John’s heart jumped into his throat and he looked back, frozen. Cadfael looked exasperated, but fond, as he often did.

"Fine. But you have to actually make sure you do eat later. I’ll beat you up if you don’t," Cadfael said, and patted his cheek. "Promise?"

John leaned into his hand-- warm and comfortably solid-- you broke up with him, you broke up with him-- and said, "I promise."

His phone buzzed in his pocket, reminding him to leave on his run-- breakfast run shower clothes bike to school-- and he stepped backwards towards the door. He felt a blush creeping up his neck and tried to will it away, but that was never much use. "I have to go," he said.

"Text me if you feel like you’re gonna faint," Cadfael called as John headed out.

"I’m not gonna faint," he said, but he knocked on the side of the doorframe for luck just in case.
Chapter 4: Panic

"I mean, it has to have something to do with what happened, right?" Kel said.

Skullduggery glanced at her, a little bit startled, and clicked its pen distractedly. "Uh, yeah, sure," it said. It hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation at all. It was difficult to focus in a crowded cafeteria. There were so many people talking at once, drifting in and out of earshot. There was too much going on. Too much to think about.

Since it got out of the hospital, its headache hadn’t gone away, and it was pretty sure there were still some strange lingering effects from being struck by lightning. It kept getting this peculiar prickling sensation, like it did when there was magic going on, even when there was nothing happening. It was very annoying.

Kel rolled her eyes and sighed in mock annoyance. "Skullduggery, you’re spacing out," she said. A couple other people giggled. "Have the ORB people talked to you again? Or anybody else? Since you got out of the hospital?"

Everyone leaned forward, listening eagerly. It combed its hand through its hair and shrugged. "Nope. Nothing. I know as much as you do," it said. It wished it had more gossip to spread, but it had woken up in the hospital with Kel and its parents hovering anxiously over it and no government types to be seen. They hadn’t even said if it passed the evaluation, although at this point it was pretty sure the answer to that had to be fuck no.

"I think it’s just a coincidence. The storm was just around here, wasn’t it? The plague is all over," Sidney said, and popped a baby carrot into his mouth. Skullduggery propped its chin up on its hand and its eyes slid away from the eagerly chatting good-looking sports bros. Good-looking though they might be, they failed to hold its attention when there were more pressing matters at hand. Like the fact that it had probably caused some kind of apocalypse scenario.

No one had told it so, but it knew that this was its fault.

The lightning wasn’t just lightning. It was difficult to remember much, because of how much it hurt, but that lightning had yanked magic out of it. It didn’t know that was possible, but apparently it was. The lightning hit it and pulled its magic out of its body by force, and probably whoever made the storm used that to let loose the plague. Skullduggery was pretty sure that was what had happened. It had no idea if anyone else had figured it out. Surely the government had, it thought-- but also, if they had, wouldn’t they have sent someone to talk to it by now? It had been four days since it woke up.

Skullduggery chewed on its lip anxiously. Only one person had died so far, but the number was definitely going to go up. People were gonna die, maybe a whole lot of them-- the plague was spreading, and no one seemed to know what to do about it. It wasn’t sure it could live with that much blood on its hands, but it also knew that it couldn’t help. It never learned any healing magic, and it was pretty sure Kythir’s couldn’t be used to heal anything. He always complained when it tried to fix things, anyway, and it was pretty sure it was the same principle.

It picked at the muffin Kel had forced it to grab for lunch, pinching off pieces and rubbing them between its fingertips until they crumbled away. It had no appetite. Hadn’t since it woke up; it felt queasy and wobbly instead. It felt uniquely terrible, in the way it only did when it had taken in too much of Kythir’s magic. Demon magic wasn’t meant to be channeled through human bodies in high quantities.
Everyone’s phone buzzed at the same time; it jumped and fumbled with its phone like everyone else. A news alert. Another two deaths. Skullduggery couldn’t look at who had died, couldn’t think about how it had killed them. It put its phone back down on the table and rubbed its neck, staring at the tiled cafeteria floor. The day had barely started and it was already exhausted. The rest of the table dropped to a concerned murmur for a moment-- the whole room did-- but it picked up again soon after as people shrugged it off one by one.

If this was its fault, why weren’t there any cases in town? So far everyone who was sick was in the capital, about a billion miles away from their shitty suburb. If it was right and this was its fault-- and it was quite sure that it was right-- then it had to be that someone was controlling the plague. Someone had focused its spread in the capital intentionally.

If the plague was targeted, who was it targeting? It picked up its phone again hurriedly, opened the internet to check who was dying. They had to have something in common, right?

BANG.

"Agh!"

Someone kicked the underside of the table hard, making all the trays and food and silverware jump up for a moment and smack down again. A couple people at the table yelped in surprise. Skullduggery dropped its phone on the table with a loud clatter. Sudden panic seized its chest and it looked up, heart pounding-- but of course there was only one person who was that much of a douchebag.

"Creed," Blood Diamond, hands tucked into his uniform pants pockets, leaning over and looking creepy. "Mobile phones are still against the rules. I’m going to have to confiscate that."

And he held out his hand, palm up, like there was any chance it was actually going to give him its phone. Which there wasn’t. Its eyes flicked from his hand to his face and it raised its eyebrows at him. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Yep," he said. He looked serious. Flicked his fingers. "Hand it over."

Righteous indignation rose up in its chest, heating its face. This was absolute bullshit. "Uh, no, and fuck you," it snapped. No phones was the least enforced rule imaginable, no one really cared, it was basically fine. Literally everyone had their phones with them, and everyone used them at lunch. He was just being a contrary bitch to it in particular, like he always was. "Go away, dickhead."

"Skullduggery, maybe you should just give him your phone?" Kel said. It scowled at her, and she just shrugged. "You are technically breaking the rules."

Traitor. It raised its voice and half-shouted, at her and at Blood Diamond, "Everyone breaks this rule and y’all never enforce it!"

"I mean, you can go ahead and refuse, and I’m more than happy to have you suspended," Blood Diamond said, all casual and half-smiling. He was downright cheerful, which made this whole thing even more aggravating. "You’re on probation, remember? Too many detentions?"

It did not respond well to being taunted. It ground its teeth and stood up, slamming its hands on the table and giving him the nastiest scowl it could muster. He just kept smirking down at it, and tucked his hands back into his pockets so he could look like even more of a smug weaselfaced fuckbucket. Now that it was looking at him, it had to look at his awful face, the red-brown of his eyes, the set of his jaw, the slope of his shoulders, all too familiar. Tension tightened around its spine, anger and disgust and anxiety curled through its veins.

"Skullduggery," Kel said warningly, trying to tell it to calm down and shut up at the same time. It ignored her.
"You sure you want to pick a fight with me, faggot?" it said, loudly enough that its voice carried to the surrounding tables. Kel winced a little bit in its peripheral vision-- she always did-- but John didn’t even blink. He just looked amused, which was also too much, and its temper flared even hotter. "You think I won’t kick your ass?"

"Oh, I think you’d try," He cocked his head to the side and his nasty smile widened. For just a moment its vision unfocused and he had three earrings in one ear, a tattoo creeping up his neck, but just for a moment. He made its skin crawl, he really did. "You’re sort of feeble, though, so you wouldn’t really accomplish much."

It ground its teeth and felt its hands shaking in time with its too-fast heartbeat. Its entire body shook. He just kept smirking-- it was crying and thrashing under him and he just kept smirking, wouldn’t stop, hands on its thin wrists gripping hard enough to bruise and he wouldn’t stop-- its ears started ringing and it pressed its weight into its heels to try to feel the floor under it.

Then he leaned over and picked up its phone off the table. This involved him brushing past it way too close, and it moved before it had a chance to actually process what was happening. One moment it was managing, then he was too close and it had to get him away, now, fast.

It punched him in the face.

He jerked back one step with a surprised noise, phone in hand.

"Skullduggery!" Kel was upset, but it could barely hear her; all the noise seemed distant, the floor underneath it immaterial, everything sort of transparent and vague. It knew that everything had gotten quieter, but it wasn’t sure if that was its hearing or the cafeteria.

The punch was apparently more surprising to him than actually painful, and it seemed like the only damage it had done was causing him to bite down hard on his lower lip. It had done more damage to its own hand, probably-- the knuckles of its hand were smarting. It was like punching a brick wall.

He put its phone in its bookbag, regarding it with interest as he ran his tongue over his lip where he’d bitten it. "Well," he said. His voice was like nails on a chalkboard-- it clenched both hands into fists, long fingernails digging hard into its palms. He lifted its bookbag off his shoulder and dropped it onto the floor, then cracked its knuckles and drawled, "You probably shouldn’t have done that."

Because that was a challenge, and it was the one who issued it, and he wasn’t going to refuse. Skullduggery stepped away from the table and Kel jumped to her feet to stand between them. "Both of you, stop it," she said, pressing her hand against Blood Diamond’s chest. "This is stupid."

"Don’t touch me, Harper," Blood Diamond said sharply. She gave him a hard look and did not move. He took a step forward, staring her down. "I’m not going to just walk away. That’s not how this works."

"Kel, back off," it snapped. She looked at it, stern and worried, and held out her other hand to stop it from stepping forward.

"Step aside," Blood Diamond said.

It tugged its knife out of the sheath strapped to its wrist under the sleeve of its sweater. Kel grabbed its wrist. Her metal hand was strangely cool and gripped too hard. Panic wrapped around its throat, stopped its breath. "Stop it," she said again, obviously starting to get upset. She looked back at Blood Diamond. "John, walk away. You have the phone."
"It punched me," he said, still looking at it and not at her. His eyes were too dark, too focused. It swallowed around a painful lump in its throat and tried to tug its wrist out of Kel’s grip. It couldn’t. It could hear sirens in the distance. Getting closer. It could feel breath on its skin, too hot, and it shuddered. Not real. It wasn’t real. Neither Kel nor Blood Diamond seemed to notice.

"Oh, please, you’re not even bruised," Kel snapped. She pushed at Blood Diamond’s chest, nudging him a step back. "Walk away or I’m stepping in on its behalf."

"No, you’re not," Skullduggery snapped, yanking its hand again to try to get her to let go. Her holding onto it like that wasn’t helping with the panic.

"Skullduggery, you just got out of the hospital. Both of you are still recovering, you’re hardly in any condition to--"

"I’m fine," Blood Diamond said, cutting her off. "Let’s go."

"No! Both of you, no!" She kept standing between them, looking increasingly exasperated. Blood Diamond moved to brush past her, so she let go of Skullduggery’s wrist and turned to face him dead-on, holding her arms out to other side to block him. "Skullduggery, put the knife away."

It ignored her and instead slashed open the palm of its left hand. Magic slid up its arm under its skin, thick and slow and heavy. A swell of power where there was usually an uncomfortable emptiness. "Get out of the way," it said.

Fighting him wasn’t a good idea, but it wasn’t really thinking about that. It was thinking about how best to make him stop looking at it, how to hit him until it stopped wanting to puke, until it stopped hearing the sirens it knew weren’t really there, until its brain stopped making it think about the thing, until its skin stopped crawling, until everything stopped. It was his fault. It was always his fault.

It put its knife away, then flicked its fingers at his legs. Hit him hard in the back of his knees, where it would hurt, make his legs buckle. He fell, like it wanted him to, with a cut-off noise in the back of his throat. His knees hit the floor hard and his head snapped up so he could scowl at it. "You--"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by an earthquake. The entire building shook, suddenly, and a loud clamor filled the air as plates and trays and cups hit the floor and people yelped in surprise.

But of course it couldn’t be an earthquake, because they had never had an earthquake in Hillside. They didn’t get earthquakes.

Everything went still for a moment, and then the next tremor was accompanied by a massive surge of magic energy--a shockwave that knocked all the air out of its lungs along with half the people in the room. Kel couldn’t feel it, but Skullduggery staggered and Blood Diamond collapsed. The magic lingered in the air, old and strange and unfamiliar. It left it feeling sort of numb, like its mouth was full of cotton. It flexed its fingers, chasing off pins and needles. The magic in the air felt broken, like a thousand tiny shards of glass hanging in the air.

When this tremor ended it heard fifty variations on "What was that?" ripple through the room. Swearing. It was all still distant. It moved its hand through the air and it felt like sifting through a thousand tiny pieces of something solid. Curious, it spread out its fingers and reached out, magic curling around its hand, and gathered some of the magic into its palm. It was warm, shimmering, strangely solid. As it gathered more pieces, knitting themselves together into a
larger fragment, it could feel the outline of what they maybe used to be a part of. A barrier. A big one.

"Kel, that was the rift," it said, turning its attention back to reality, away from the broken spell-bits. "We should go check it out, see--"

But she wasn’t listening; she was on the floor, kneeling next to Blood Diamond. Everyone else was moving around them; no one else was paying him any attention. Just her. She rolled him onto his back; there was blood trickling from his nose and mouth, and he looked unconscious. "John, buddy, you gotta wake up or I’m gonna have to carry you to the medical wing and you’re not going to like that," she murmured, whipping a handkerchief out of her pocket to clean his blood off his face, looking at him all concerned and shit.

She looked at him like he was a person worth caring about. Like he wasn’t a piece of garbage who’d leave her bleeding on the ground without a second thought. If she ever passed out, he’d probably kick her while she was down. Everyone knew that. No one else would help him; he’d just wake up in a minute, pissed off and spitting venom at anyone in a ten-foot radius, totally fine. He was always fine. Like a cockroach.

It stared at him for a minute, trying to see what she saw in him. Trying to muster up the will to give a fuck about him on any level. He looked less like a dickhead when he was passed out, not frowning or smirking, but it was still him. All it could see was the most insufferably annoying person it had ever met. He didn’t even look like a person, just a collection of unpleasant personality traits with a tie on. It didn’t feel even an ounce of concern for his wellbeing. It looked at him and it just felt pissed off that he existed. It just felt its skin start to crawl again. His reddish-brown hair and his cheekbones and his jaw, all too much, too familiar. Sirens, in the distance.

It shuddered and looked away. It couldn’t look at him for too long. "I’m gonna go check it out by myself, then," it said, but it was pretty sure she didn’t hear it. The room was too noisy. It turned on its heel and left, buzzing with uncomfortable jittery energy.

It didn’t get very far. Only to the gate in the fence that separated the conservation area from the rest of the forest, where there were two people in black hooded cloaks standing in its way. "Go back to school, kid," one of them said as it approached. The other one leaned over and maybe said something. The first one tilted their cloaked head. "Skulduggery Creed, huh?"

"That’s me," it said, trying to project confidence even though it could feel its hands shaking. "I heard something is up with the rift, I thought I could maybe help."

"Like you helped with the storm?" said the second cloaked figure dryly. It flinched, and both the figures laughed. "I think we got it covered, kid."

It thought about trying to push past them, hop the fence and make a run for it, but there would be more. The rift was deep in the forest, deep in a cave in the forest, and if someone was already taking care of it there wasn’t much point.

"Well, if you’ve got it covered," it said.

"We do. Skedaddle," The hooded figure made a shooing motion with their hand. "Go do high school. Forget about this."

It trudged back through the forest towards school, feeling stupid and tired. It didn’t want to go back to school; it was done for the day, really. When it got back, Blood Diamond would be up. He was never down for more than about five minutes. It had to do the second half of the day, which meant heading to its mage track classes, which meant either sitting back and doing
nothing or bleeding until it was woozy. It meant feeling like absolute trash for a couple hours while people with way less magic ability than it outpaced it by leaps and bounds.

Maybe it would just skip out and go home.

It stopped, sagged against a tree, trying to catch its breath. The bark snagged on its sweater a little bit. It was quiet out in the forest. Nobody looked at it. It pressed its hands over its eyes and sighed, suddenly exhausted. The jittery adrenaline from earlier was still pounding through its veins, but that just meant that it was shaking and tired.

It shouldn’t have tried to fight Blood Diamond. That was stupid. It had to stop doing that kind of stupid shit. Like-- it still wanted to fight him, but it was a terrible idea. He would have kicked its ass. Really badly. He probably would have landed it right back in the hospital with about a million broken bones like the last kid he got in a duel with. It would have had a full-on panic attack. It would have been bad all around.

Kel was right. She was always right. It would have to apologize to her later.

Somewhere nearby, something rustled. Leaves crunched. It jerked its hands away from its face and looked around, but saw no one.

Some people said the forest was haunted. The ghosts of UPI students who’d killed themselves supposedly hung around, drifting in the forest because the protective barriers around the school kept them out. Skullduggery had never been a big believer in urban legends, but its anxiety kept it worried about ghosts anyway. It pushed away from the tree and peered around behind it; still nothing. It could have been an animal, but it had seen too many horror movies to feel comfortable dismissing ominous forest noises as probably nothing.

"If that’s a ghost, please don’t do anything spooky," it called. "Uh, I’ll be out of your ghost-hair soon."

There was no response. It still felt tense. Now it felt like it was being watched. By ghosts? Ugh. It tried to roll its shoulders back and shrug the tension off, but it didn’t work. It was tense, now, and it wanted to go someplace less quiet and empty. The pressure of its knife at its wrist was not much of a comfort--sometimes it could be, but other times all it could think about was how easily someone could take it from it, and how then they would have a knife.

Sirens.

It shuddered and pressed its hand over the sheath strapped tight to its wrist, like a ghost was going to flutter in invisible and take the knife. That’s not what a ghost would do. Probably. It started trudging back towards the road, now too anxious to possibly stay in the forest. "Bye, ghosts, I’m leaving now," it muttered, just in case.

The sirens followed it, always distant and getting close, always muffled. Ghosts trailing after it in the woods. It walked fast, but the anxiety still kept getting worse. It wrapped around its lungs and throat, crawled up its spine. It couldn’t walk fast enough to shake off the sirens, but it just wanted to get home before its brain did the thing.

BANG.

It staggered to a stop, wheezing and clutching its chest. "Fuck." It leaned heavily against a tree, trying to catch its breath. It couldn’t. It tasted smoke in the back of its throat. There wasn’t any good reason, there was only a good reason about half the time this happened, sometimes it just happened.

Stupid fucking haunted forest. It dug its fingers into the bark, tried to focus on the texture. "It’s April," it said out loud. Its voice was raspy. Breathless. What day was it? April. Friday? No. "It’s Monday. April seventh."
BANG.

It flinched, combed its trembling fingers through its hair. "Not real. Not real," it whispered. Its own voice was real. The forest was too quiet, though, and there wasn’t enough noise to ground it. "Monday April seventh."

Its voice sounded real, more than the sirens, the hammering on the door, but it couldn’t think of what to say. "It’s Monday," it said again. "I’m in the forest outside school, I’m seventeen, it’s Monday, it’s thirty-seven-two, it’s not Friday."

BANG.

It tried very hard not to think about the thing, but trying not to think about it was the same as thinking about it. It shuddered in a breath. Forest. April. Smoke. It squeezed its eyes shut as everything blurred.

"I’m gonna kill you this time, I swear to God--"

"Monday," it said loudly. The texture of the bark wasn’t enough. It sank to the ground, partly because its legs were shaking too hard to hold it up any more and partly to have more contact with real life. There were damp gross leaves and gnarled roots all over the ground where it sat, but it still felt woozy. It still couldn’t breathe, it was hyperventilating worse every second as his hands closed around its throat--

"April, April, thirty-seven-two," it gasped, pressing up against the tree. "Fuck."

It fumbled at its jean pockets, but it didn’t have its phone. Blood Diamond still had it. No rescue from Kel this time. It hit the tree and snarled, "Fuck," again.

"No one’s coming to save you."

"April," it hissed again.

The world shifted, blurred. Hands on its throat, its waist, its thigh-- "No, no, no," It twisted its hands in its hair. Sensation. April. "Don’t think about it, think about-- fucking-- anything else, anything else, just--"

But, like it so often did, its brain refused to cooperate. Magic sparked over its skin as it curled into as tight a ball as it could get, burying its face in its arms. A thousand visceral memories piled on top of each other, chaotic but not so much that it was spared remembering every single one of them. Breath hot on its skin, warm hands on its waist-- the only thing keeping it present was its own voice whispering, "No no no no no no no."

Then someone else's voice cut through the fog. An unfamiliar voice. Accented and deep, with a strange raspiness to it that sounded not quite human. "Go without me. I'll just be a minute."

Then another voice, this one crisp and clear and annoyed. "What? Don't be stupid. We have to get out of here now."

"Just a minute."

"What, like there's not enough heroes here? Get over here, someone else can deal with that."

The voices were faint; it struggled to parse them through the haze. The shouting. The sirens. It wheezed as his hands tightened around its throat. It couldn't breathe. This was it. The footsteps outside, the hammering on the door, they were too late, it could feel it. He leaned in and what little air it got into its lungs was just smoke and it tried to cough but it could only make choked gargling noises.
It all kept happening at once, not in order. Its phone screen shattering against the floor, skidding away. His fist hitting the wall next to its head. The knife cutting into its back. His hands on its skin its waist its legs its--

Everything stopped, abruptly. A cool hand touched its arm and the pressure at its throat vanished, its mind suddenly shut the fuck up, everything went quiet and still. Air filled its lungs. It gasped for air and nearly collapsed, but someone held it up and propped it up against the tree instead. Its vision took a moment to clear and focus. It was still in the forest. Still okay. Breathing. And there was a person kneeling on the ground in front of it that it had never seen before.

It stared at him, frozen again.

His eyes were black, like they were all pupil with no iris, and his hair was black as well. Long, and pulled back into a thick braid. His skin was gray, peppered with crisp black geometric tattoos-- thick lines on his cheeks, rings around his arms, some kind of complex many-dimensional shape at the hollow of his throat-- and his ears were pointed at the tips. Well, one of them, anyway. His left ear had been cut nearly in half; it had clearly healed a long time ago, but it was still half an ear. It couldn't quite tell how old he looked; its age? Early thirties? He looked ambiguously young in the way that elves tended to.

A Shade Elf. A stranger. He wasn't a student at UPI. There were no non-human students at UPI, nor were there any non-humans living in Hillside. He wasn't from around here. What was he doing here? Was he following it? If he was with the cloaked government goons, why wasn't he with them? His clothes were dark and nondescript: a short-sleeved shirt and knee pants. Not cloaked like the government goons guarding the fence.

He kept his hand on its skin, strangely cool and soft, and gazed steadily at it with his depthless black eyes as its freshly-dispelled panic started rising in its chest again. "Breathe," he said gently, and its heartrate slowed, its breathing evened out. The tense ball of anxiety that was almost ever-present in its chest unwound and vanished and it felt, perplexingly, totally calm.

Here was a stranger: that was fine. Sometimes people visited other towns. Sometimes people went on walks in the woods. It was weird, but it wasn't frightening. It was a little rude to cast spells on people without their permission, though. It was weird-- his magic was so unobtrusive it could hardly feel it. This calm was definitely magically induced, but it was so subtle-- it took a deep breath and let itself settle into itself. He kept his hand on its arm, presumably because it wasn't one spell so much as a constant magic pressure, so it focused on that contact point. But it couldn't feel him, couldn't get any kind of read on what he was doing.

This was annoying. It knew he was doing something. How could it not feel what it was that he was doing? How was it not able to identify his magic?

"Who are you?" Skullduggery rasped.

"I'm Morris," he said. It frowned at him, mouth flattening into a hard line. They both know it wasn't asking for his name. He laughed a little bit and shrugged, still not taking his hand off its arm. The longer he held its arm, the better it felt. Like all the broken pieces inside of it were sliding back into place.

He didn't offer anything else, so it pressed. "I mean, like, what are you doing out here? You don't go to UPI."

"Just out for a stroll," he said. "I used to go to school here."
This seemed to Skullduggery like a baldfaced lie, which was suspicious. It narrowed its eyes at him, but then felt a sudden warmth in the pit of its stomach, blooming through its chest, flowing through its veins.

It gasped, eyes going very wide. Where there was usually an empty pit, an uncomfortable nothingness, suddenly there was something again. Magic-- not the uncomfortable prickle of someone else's, but the warm comfort of its own.

It couldn't help grinning, laughing breathlessly and flexing its fingers. "Holy shit, this is-- are you doing this?"

"Yes," Morris said, staring at it with a kind of strange fascination.

It had been four years since it had felt like this. Four years without any access to its magic whatsoever. It felt good-- it felt incredible. Powerful. Like it could do anything.

Distant shouting echoed in the forest and Morris snapped his head up. "I have to leave," he said. "I'm sorry, Skullduggery."

He stood up-- he was extremely tall, it realized now that he was on his feet-- and as soon as his hand left its skin it felt itself getting cold. It scrambled to its feet, too, anxiety coming back with a vengeance. "Wait--" It blinked, looking him up and down. "How do you know my name?"

The air around them tasted suddenly of magic. Magic with an ancient weight to it. Morris gazed into the forest and his eyes turned white. He looked, suddenly, like an ancient statue; still and monochrome, angular and ageless.

"Take care of yourself," he said, giving a last long look, and then snapped his fingers and vanished. A seamless teleportation spell, without even a puff of smoke. The warmth of its magic slipped away quickly as anxiety shot back through its veins; it tried desperately to hold onto the feeling, but it was no use. It was gone, and left with just the emptiness it thought it was used to. The sensation was extremely unpleasant and abrupt; its stomach lurched.

Moments later, two cloaked figures ran over.

"I thought he went this way," one of them said. The other one looked at Skullduggery, face completely hidden by the shadows of the cloak. They didn't ask it anything, just stuck out their hand and clenched it into a fist. Skullduggery's stomach lurched and its entire body stiffened. The spell was jagged and uncomfortable, yanking the memory of the last couple minutes out of its head.

It choked, unable to move or make any noise, vision blurring.

"He's gone," the cloaked figure said, dropping their hand and leaving it gasping for breath. They didn't give it a second look, like it was completely inconsequential; the two cloaked figures muttered to each other, gesturing and generally acting like it wasn't even there. They didn't even look when it bent over double and puked on the ground, head spinning. They just strode off, still muttering to each other, leaving it alone and trembling and nauseous in the middle of the woods.
The Institute Inquirer

Interview Audio Transcript -- Addison Harper interviewing Morris Kkierhan, 2/17/2867, for issue 448 of the Inquirer. [INTERVIEW WRITEUP CUT FROM ISSUE 448]

A: Thanks for agreeing to meet with me.
M: Sure. You think they'll actually publish this?
A: I mean... yeah? You think they won't?
M: Not a chance.
A: Why'd you agree to meet me, then?
M: Foolish optimism, I guess.
A: (laughs)
M: And, you know, I like talking to people.
A: That's nice. A lot of people think you... uh... don’t.
M: People think I hate everyone.
A: Yeah.
M: I don't. In case that was gonna be a question.
A: I'll cross that one off real quick, then-- (laughs)
M: (laughs) I like people. That's kind of the whole point of what I do, is helping people, because I like them and want them to be okay.
A: Yeah. So. Getting started. You've been spearheading a campaign to, uh, shut down UPI, for the last year or so-- an issue-- or uh, a question, a lot of people have with that, is-- why shut it down instead of. Uh. Why not campaign for reform, instead?
M: Well, it's not just UPI. I'm saying -- we're saying-- the whole hero production system needs to go.
A: Right.
M: Were you trying to make me sound less extreme?
A: I mean-- I-- kind of?
M: Don't do that.
A: Sorry.
M: No worries. I'm used to it. Uh, why not reform? Because I think the fundamental nature of the whole complex is morally wrong. It's not a problem of implementing a good idea better, it's just a bad idea. You can't reform a system created to produce armies of nationalistic brainwashed child soldiers so it no longer does that. It's what it was built for.
M: I know a lot of people are uncomfortable with my position.
A: Uncomfortable is a... mild word. You were recently attacked here on campus during a protest, right?
M: I’ve been attacked many times on this campus. I wasn’t really bothered by the protest thing, honestly. I expected it. Plus, it’s-- like-- I’ve had worse. (laughs) Like when kids would pin me down and try to dock my ears.
A: People really did that to you?
M: (sarcastically) You think I did this to myself?
A: I-- no, of course not, I just--
M: Happened a couple times. They never managed to get both ears, though.
A: I’m so sorry. That was students here who did that to you?
M: Yeah. Teachers told me I ought to get them docked, too, though. And health services.
A: Health services? Holy shit.
M: They said it would improve my hearing. Like a dog.
A: Holy shit.
M: You seem surprised.
A: I like to think UPI's not the kind of place where that kind of thing happens to people.
M: They don't consider me a person.
A: I don't know about that.
M: You disagree?
A: Well, I-- I guess not, it's just difficult to think of people being so prejudiced. You know? I've always found the people here really nice. So it's shocking to me.
M: Hmm.
A: That's why I wanted to report on it.
A: It’s still, um. It’s still worth talking about. Important, to talk about, I mean-- if you’re comfortable--
M: Sure.
A: Okay. If you could just describe what happened, from your perspective?
M: From the beginning?
A: If you don’t mind.
M: Sure. I organized a walkout to protest the conditions that led to Adrian Carter’s suicide. I was standing outside talking to one of my friends--
A: That would be Hiiro Eirahan?
M: Yes. She’s brilliant, one of the best writers alive. Really incredible.
A: She’s not a student here.
M: Nope. I’m still the only elf here. Don’t worry, no one’s slipped in under your nose.
A: Yeah.
M: (laughs)
A: You like bringing that up because it makes people uncomfortable, don’t you?
M: I mean… It comes up even if I don’t say anything. My freshman year I wanted to keep my head down, so I didn’t like-- I didn’t engage with it at all. But other people brought it up.
A: Right. Um, so, the protest?
M: Oh, yeah. I was talking to Hiiro, and someone came up to me and said we should leave. We said we weren’t going to do that, they got angry, punched me in the gut. Called me a few names.
A: That’s pretty brief.
M: I don’t really like giving long dramatic descriptions of violence I experience. Feels weird.
A: Oh. Okay. Well, did you, uh, recognize the attacker?
M: Yeah.
A: If I promise not to keep in the name in the article, can I ask out of curiosity who it was?
M: Marcus Bendt.
A: Wait, seriously?
M: Mmm.
A: There’s only one Marcus Bendt at this school, right? The student council president?
M: You seem surprised.
A: He always seemed nice to me.
M: Well. I can think of a few reasons why that might be the case.
A: Huh?
M: You’re human.
A: Ah. Right. Sorry.
(long pause. someone clears their throat.)
A: He just didn't seem like the type.
M: People will surprise you. You should probably ask me a couple more questions, right?
A: Yeah-- of course. Um, so, you believe that the hero system is fundamentally flawed, but you have rarely spoken about all the good heroes do. Heroes are-- I mean, they’re heroes. Many people have difficulty taking you seriously when you say that a system set up to train heroes is bad.
M: Yeah. I feel that. The thing is, is that-- this system makes a very particular kind of hero, doesn’t it? Only some people get to rise to the top, only some people really get the opportunity to shine. Everyone else is pushed out, discouraged from pursuing this career, relegated to being a sidekick.
A: That’s not the worst that could happen.
M: This system kills people. It tortures children. Adrian is-- Adrian was gay, and when he was outed-- against his will, I might add-- he knew that it ended any chance he had at fitting the model of a perfect hero. People in administration pressured him to drop out.
A: So, again, going back to reform-- wouldn’t it make more sense to push for greater acceptance of minorities in hero work?
M: The need for heroes is completely artificially created. The government creates disasters, then creates heroes to solve them. It’s pointless, and it kills people. There’s no value in continuing this system.
A: But in the meantime--
M: Ideally, there won’t be much meantime.
A: I think a lot of people have a problem with… you’re not very realistic.
M: I think I’m realistic. I’m going to change the world. Unless I get assassinated, which honestly might be more likely.
A: You think you’re going to be assassinated?
M: People like me usually are.
A: You know that sounds crazy, right?

[REST OF TRANSCRIPT MISSING]

ADDISON H MISSING 4/4/2867
MORRIS K ASSASSINATED 5/19/2871
Chapter 5: Boredom

John was heavier than Squelch expected him to be.

She had carried people before, but mostly girls and Skullduggery-- nobody who had as much muscle mass, and nobody nearly as tall. She could still carry him, of course, it just wasn't as easy as she thought it would be. She hauled him up off the cafeteria floor and into her arms, gave stern looks to the people who looked like they were trying to take pictures, and carried him out of the room. She wasn't really sure what to do after that. He usually refused to go to the school nurse when he had any kind of problem, but she didn't really know why. It just seemed to make him angry for no reason, like most things. She thought it would probably be good for him to go to the nurse, but without knowing why he was so skittish about it she couldn't say for sure that it was a good idea.

So, with John ragdoll-limp and actively bleeding from the nose and mouth, she strode off towards the student council meeting room instead. People stared at her, and him, as she passed by, and she tried her best to look confident and not awkward. Having him this close was uncomfortable. With his arm resting against her chest he would be able to feel her chest, the binder under her uniform, and that would be a disaster. But, she reasoned, he would be too pissed off at her for picking him up in the first place to notice. If he did notice she could probably tell him he imagined it, since he'd be woozy and a little disoriented. Yeah. She would just do that, and then redirect by making him annoyed about something else. That was pretty easy. She couldn't ever really do anything but make him annoyed.

Since it was the middle of the day, the student council room was empty as expected. Squelch set John down on one of the three folding tables they had pushed together for their meetings. It was either that or his desk, and his desk was covered in stuff that he shouted at people for touching, so. Table. His head lolled to the side when she put him down, and while she was rubbing her shoulders a small pool of blood accumulated around his face.

"Oh, gross," she said, and pulled out her enchanted handkerchief from her back pocket. It wasn't really her handkerchief-- she never used it for herself, just for helping other people clean up spills and blood and whatnot.

But she hesitated. Cleaning up this blood would involve touching him in the face-area. Carrying him was okay, because that was arms and legs, but touching him on the face was going into entirely different territory. There was no way to gently touch a person's face without it being a level of familiarity John never had with anybody.

The blood kept accumulating, though, and she had to do something, so she nudged his face up to face the ceiling and wiped up the blood on the table. The handkerchief was super-absorbent and self-cleaning, so she didn't have to go get a bucket of water to wring out the blood in when stuff like this happened. With the table cleaned, she had to stop avoiding the obvious and actually clean off his face.

"Now would be a great time for you to wake up and do this yourself," she said to him. He did not respond in any way. His eyes did not move under his eyelids. His breathing didn't hitch. Nothing. She had to do this.

He didn't wake up when she pressed the balled-up handkerchief against his chin. This was definitely for the best. He wouldn't take kindly to her touching his face. He barely tolerated shaking hands with her sometimes. She tried her best to touch him as little as possible, using
only the tips of her fingers to tilt his head to the side and angling her hand so that only the handkerchief touched his skin and not any part of her hand.

The blood had gotten onto his ear and neck and stained the white collar of his uniform shirt; she hesitated, decidedly sure that he would absolutely not want her touching his neck or his ear. That would get her punched for sure. That was going several steps even further into weird intimacy territory, crossing a couple more lines that she wasn't really interested in crossing. But she couldn't just leave the blood there-- he wouldn't like that, either, and it seemed discourteous to just clean the blood off his face. She nudged his head to the side and dabbed at his ear and was seized with sudden nerves. She drew back and stared at his face, to check and make sure he was still super unconscious.

Yep. He was. Apart from the rise and fall of his chest, he looked half-dead. She said, loudly, "John?" sort of hoping he would wake up, but no. Nothing.

Moving slowly and carefully, she hooked her fingers in his tie and pulled it loose, just enough to undo two buttons of his shirt and peel his blood-soaked collar away from his skin. John was a very buttoned-up person; his tie was never loose, and his shirt was never unbuttoned. The closest to casual he ever got was his sleeves rolled up around his elbows. It felt very scandalous to be loosening his tie.

Now she could see his pulse beating steady under his skin, which was reassuring. Still alive. Not having any kind of heart attack. He was going to be fine, probably. He wasn't going to die, at least, and anything less than death wasn't going to keep John knocked out for long. He was tough like that.

As she wiped the blood off his neck, she also noted what appeared to be a large hickey strategically located just under his collar. This was very curious; John hated everyone, and particularly hated it when people touched him. He wasn't close with anyone at school. It was difficult to imagine him interested in someone enough that he would let them give him a hickey. (It was difficult for her to imagine anyone being interested in anyone enough that they would do that, honestly. The concept was very foreign to her.)

She paused for a moment, looking at it, wondering if it could possibly just be a bruise. But it wasn't. It was a hickey. Maybe he really was gay-- if he was making out with someone secret, that was very closeted of him. He probably wouldn't be hiding a girlfriend, because if he had a girlfriend he could easily dispel all the rumors about him being gay.

It was none of her business, of course, but she couldn't help feeling curious. Nobody really knew that much about him, because he was so hostile.

Still as slow and gentle and careful as she could manage, she slid her hand around to the nape of his neck and lifted his head and shoulders up off the table slightly. At this, he finally reacted. He made a quiet noise, a vague sleepy sort of grumble. Like, "hmmuh." And he shifted a little bit, half-shrugging and bending his legs a little. It was a very sleepy reaction, really. Squelch froze, heart jumping into her throat, thinking he was waking up-- he would be so pissed-- but his eyes remained shut. He sighed, and then his shoulders dropped, and he was limp and motionless again.

The nosebleed had stopped, at least, and he wasn't dribbling blood from his mouth any more. She set him back down on the table and shoved her handkerchief back into her pocket, then took a step back and flopped into a chair, legs sprawled out in front of her.

Now what? Lunch would be over soon. They both had classes they ought to attend. Afternoon classes at UPI were assigned based on your ability track; magic kids went to their
magic classes, physical kids went to fighting classes, performing arts kids went to music and
dance. Squelch and John were both warrior track students, so they had afternoon classes together
even though they were in different years. Skullduggery was mage track-- still, even though it
couldn't really do anything magical at all-- so it didn't have any classes in common with them in
the afternoon. (She didn't have any classes in common at all with Skullduggery, because it was in
the year above her and they were on different tracks.)

Squelch didn't really have to go to her afternoon classes. Since she was winning
everything all the time, now, they basically let her do whatever she wanted-- she was UPI's
golden boy, after all, the poster child for heroism. She could get away with stuff no one else
could. In theory, anyway-- she was still expected to be a good student, diligent and hardworking,
so she had to go to class even though she didn't have to.

With John unconscious and no one around, she let herself relax. She slouched down in
the chair and stared up at the ceiling, letting her face take a break from the constantly
plastered-on smile. John's fainting was a pretty good excuse to skip class, she thought. If he
woke up in the next few minutes, then she would go. If not, she'd skip. Afternoon classes without
John would be unbearably boring; she didn't think she would be able to focus at all if he wasn't
there. She told herself that it was the right thing, to skip if she knew she would be unfocused.
She might hurt someone by accident if she zoned out.

She sighed and closed her eyes. Not that skipping class was particularly interesting. Her
homework was done already. Homework didn't take long, for her; she read quickly, wrote
quickly, absorbed information quickly. Supposedly she was in the most advanced classes she
could be in, but they had only been challenging for about two weeks before she got used to the
workload.

Nothing had been difficult for Squelch for a very long time. Things were difficult for her,
once, like a normal person. As a small child, she'd taken violin and singing lessons, and those
were difficult. After her father made her drop that, math was difficult for a while. But she'd
worked harder at it to compensate, and then she stopped being bad at it. Now there was nothing.

Pretending to be a boy was difficult, for a while, too. But not any more. It was second
nature to her, now. How to stand, how to talk, how to walk, how to dress, how to style her hair.
The angle of her shoulders, the bend of her knees, her gestures and vocal mannerisms and facial
expressions had been perfected in the eight years she'd been doing this. She was thoroughly
immersed in the lie, so thoroughly that sometimes she wondered if it even was a lie any more.
There wasn't anything under the illusion, after all; it enveloped everything about her. There
wasn't a real way of behaving, standing, dressing, speaking that she had to repress-- there used to
be, but she'd gotten too good at repressing it and now it was gone. In private, she was only
slightly different-- so slightly that on the rare occasion someone besides Skullduggery caught her
in an off moment they didn't even notice.

Fighting in the World Hand-to-Hand Combat Championships with only one hand had
been a little bit difficult, but only because she wasn't used to fighting with only one hand. It
wasn't difficult so much as disorienting, and she still ended up on the podium. Bronze, but still
on the podium. She was starting to wonder if there was anything in the world that could keep her
off the podium. It didn't really matter if she tried hard or not, if she was hurt or tired or bored--
victory came as naturally to her as breathing.

She kept herself sane by overloading herself with work. None of it was difficult
individually, but she made herself so busy that there was always something to do. Balancing
school, competitions, student council, pretending to be a boy, and being friends with everyone took up all her time. It was exhausting, but it wasn't interesting. Most of the people she had to maintain friendships with weren't very interesting. Often she wished that she could force herself to be more of an extrovert, so that the popular-boy thing would at least be pleasant, but she couldn't. Being popular was exhausting and boring; most people didn't really hold her interest at all, and she had to remember their names and faces anyway even when they were super boring.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, like it often did. There was always someone trying to talk to her. She tugged her phone out of her pocket and flicked through her notifications. John would be annoyed if he woke up and saw her on her phone, but he wouldn't do anything about it. He only pulled the stunt with Skullduggery to be contrary.

She had a couple messages on Friendlink-- a lot of the usual.

**Maggie Hartlock:** Um Hi! You probably get a lot of these kinds of messages... I just wanted to say I really look up to you, I'm a huge fan, you're so talented and amazing and cheerful! You inspire me and...

She speed-read some of those, shot off a couple quick thank yous peppered with smiley faces and just enough personalization each that it seemed like she'd genuinely read and appreciated the note. She didn't really get why people were so invested in getting responses that may as well have come from a friendly-message-producing robot, but they got very excited about it so she had to keep doing it. She'd thought about trying to get someone to program a thing to respond to messages for her, but that would require telling someone she didn't want to respond to messages herself and that would ruin her image.

Having an image was very tiresome.

**Rowan Glass:** It's my mom's birthday tomorrow & you're invited to the family dinner. Are you free? I'm cooking so if you come you have to help in the kitchen. You can cook, right?

She bit the inside of her cheek and hesitated for a moment, mentally going over her schedule before responding. Dinner wouldn't take too much time, so she could still get her homework done. The student council meeting would be done at about four. She should be set.

**Harper Garvinson:** Yeah, I'm free. Should I bring a present?
**Rowan Glass:** She said no presents, but if you want to be a good boyfriend you ought to bring flowers and a card :)  
**Harper Garvinson:** Kk. She likes orange, right?  
**Rowan Glass:** Got it in one. I gtg, I'm walking into class rn.  
**Harper Garvinson:** Have fun learning :*
**Rowan Glass:** Haha as if anyone ever learns anything from this propagandafest. Ttyl boyfriend  
**Harper Garvinson:** ttyl girlfriend

As the most popular boy in school, it would be strange for her to not have a girlfriend. She'd gotten away with it in middle school because it was middle school, and middle schoolers didn't have to date anybody, but now that she was in high school it was basically mandatory. If
she didn't date anyone, people would assume she was gay, and that was a difficult thing to shake once it stuck. She thought about trying to say she was waiting for the one, but waiting for the one was not only uncool but also unusual.

Having a girlfriend was just a matter of picking someone. This was more complicated than it might seem; she had to find someone perfect. She had to find someone pretty, but not too pretty (otherwise she would seem shallow). Someone with a flawless reputation, as gender-conforming and normal as possible, otherwise she would be weird by association. On top of all that, it had to be someone who she didn't mind spending time with who she could either trust not to find out The Thing or trust to never ever tell anyone about The Thing.

This narrowed down the list of possibilities considerably, but luckily for her it didn't narrow them to zero possibilities. Also luckily for her, Rowan was actually really cool. The best fake girlfriend a girl disguised as a boy could ask for. She was gorgeous and smart and nice and funny and if Squelch were a person who had any interest in actually dating people she would want to date Rowan for sure.

Their arrangement was like this: Rowan was gay, and no one could ever know about it. Squelch was a girl, and no one could ever know about that. They pretended to be a happy straight couple all the time, except when they were alone, and then they just hung out. Squelch didn't talk about her in interviews, even though people were constantly asking her if she had a girlfriend-- Rowan didn't need that kind of public hassle-- but everyone knew they were dating. So far, it was going well. People seemed convinced. Rowan sometimes said it felt weird, having to keep up the constant pretense, but it wasn't particularly weird for Squelch. She was used to constant pretense. This was just another part of it.

The bell for afternoon classes rang, piercing and rattling through the hallways, and still John didn't wake up. Usually she didn't get any kind of break at school; there was always someone around, and she had to be on all the time. It wasn't actually that great, being left to her own devices. When she wasn't on, smiling and chatting and being productive and perfect-- when she just sat and existed, without trying to please anybody-- she had to just sit and feel bored.

Despite pretty much always being a little bit bored, she rarely let herself actually sit and feel and think about that. It was uncomfortable to think about how thoroughly uninteresting everyone and everything was, because she would get annoyed, and feeling annoyed was bad for her. Annoyance was quickly followed by resentment, bitterness, anger, and those were things she wasn't allowed to feel. Boredom was bad enough. Heroes weren't bitter or angry or resentful. Those were feelings that led a person down the wrong path.

Boredom was like an itch she couldn't scratch. There was nothing to do. Squelch drummed her fingers on her leg and tipped her chair back to stare at the ceiling. She couldn't even text Skulduggery, because its phone was in John's bag and it was probably in class.

Part of her hoped there would be another earthquake. That would be exciting, and maybe she could do something about it. Maybe there was something adventurous going on with the earthquakes. It seemed likely that they were related in some way to the storm. They were clearly magical, since John was half-dead. Too bad Skulduggery had wandered off. It would probably be able to help her investigate what happened.

Most likely, though, she wouldn't be allowed to investigate. It would be like with the storm-- there were probably already people investigating, and they wouldn't want her poking her nose into it.
John woke up about halfway through the first class period of the afternoon. First, he groaned. Then he pressed his hands to his face and slurred something she couldn't parse at all. Like he was speaking a different language. Squelch just sat and watched him for a moment as he rubbed his eyes and slowly, struggling, sat up. It looked painful and difficult for him, but the only complaint he allowed himself was a small sharp exhale and an accompanying wince.

"I'm glad you're not dead," she said. He glanced around the room briefly, brow furrowed, before fixing her with a perplexed stare. She straightened out of her slouch and smiled. Break over. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he said curtly. He touched the tips of his fingers to his collar, then his nose, and the look he was giving her turned wary. "What did you do?"

"You bled all over your neck and face, so I wiped it off," she said. John looked uncomfortable, but he didn't say anything, just made a *huh* noise and buttoned his collar back up. She hesitated, but it was difficult to resist the burning curiosity-- it was none of her business, and he probably wasn't going to tell her anything, but she had to say *something*. She nodded at him and tried to look friendly and not interrogative and said, "You have a hickey on your neck."

With his shirt buttoned up, the hickey was completely covered. John adjusted his tie and, to her surprise, looked completely unembarrassed. She'd expected him to be flustered. Instead, he shrugged and combed his hands through his hair and said, "Yeah, I know."

This wasn't particularly illuminating, so she grinned at him and pressed, "Got a girlfriend I don't know about?"

He hopped off the table and adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. "Drop the friendly bit, Harper, it makes me feel nauseous," he said. He said this with a tone of flat boredom and without looking at her; he looked at his watch instead, frowning, his jaw set. "We're late for class."

They were late for class, but she wasn't sure he ought to go at all. He was still pale, and she could see his fingers trembling a little bit. "Maybe you should sit down for another minute," she said. The look he gave her in response to that was pure unfiltered disdain, like how *dare* she suggest he need to sit down.

"You just want to use me as an excuse to skip practice," he said. She winced; he was spot-on, but it sounded bad when he said it like that.

"For the record, I'm also worried about you," she said. "You look shaky, still."

"You ought to be worried about how I'm going to kick your ass for being a lazy dick," he said, and strode towards the door. Without looking back over his shoulder, he added, "If you don't come to class I won't cover for you."

She stood up and followed him out of the room, smiling at his back. He didn't let her get away with anything; it was actually really refreshing. He was the only person she had ever met who disliked her. Or, at least, the only one who disliked her enough that it showed. "You're not going to thank me for heroically rescuing you and not taking you to the nurse?" She tugged her hands in her pockets and jogged to walk next to him instead of trailing after him. He'd never thanked her for anything, as far as she could remember, so she was just teasing.

He gave her a sharp look out of the corner of his eye, unamused. "You're not going to apologize for that shit you pulled earlier, so, uh, no."

"Which thing I pulled earlier? The thing where I stopped you from beating up on Skulduggery?" She snorted and he continued to look unamused. "I'm not gonna apologize for that. It could have been seriously hurt."
This time when he spoke, he stared straight ahead. "It called me a faggot and you didn't say anything," he said. "Again."
"Oh," she said. "That."
"That," he said.

Guilt twisted in her stomach, and was immediately followed by defensiveness. "It's not--I mean, what do you want me to do about that? I could apologize on its behalf, but that wouldn't do anything, and I know it wouldn't make you feel any better."

John tensed, digging his nails into his palms and bristling. "You--" He bit back whatever he was about to say, exhaled, and then seemed to force himself to relax. "Whatever. I don't know why I ever expect anything of you, you're just awful."

This was just frustrating to her. He was acting like she knew what the problem was and was choosing to ignore it, which was not the case at all. "I'm not awful! If you would just tell me what you want from me--"

He started walking faster, shoulders up, like he was trying to run away from the conversation, so she stopped and grabbed his wrist, yanking him to an abrupt halt. "John!" He rounded on her and tried to yank his arm out of her grip, but couldn't.

He scowled at her, and she stared stubbornly back at him. "Let go," he said, voice low and dangerous. "Now."

He was trying to be scary, but she was the one person that never worked on. She wasn't scared of anyone, and if he wanted to fight her in this hallway, she would fight him in this hallway and she would win. She held his gaze without flinching. "I'm not gonna let go until you actually talk to me and tell me why you're mad at me," she said firmly. "If you explain, I can fix it."

"You want to do this right now? Fine," he spat, and exhaled a bitter laugh, combing his free hand through his hair and looking away. "Fine! Let's get into it! You're an arrogant prick who thinks he's better than everyone else because you pretend to be nice, even though you don't actually care about anybody besides yourself--"

"Hey," Squelch said. Despite her best efforts, she could feel indignation-- anger-- heating her face, stiffening her shoulders, gritting her teeth. She wasn't asking him to insult her-- acting like she was just a bad person, which she wasn't-- she knew distantly that she shouldn't let herself get flustered, but it was too late.

"Shut the fuck up, I'm not done," he said, and continued: "You're lazy, you're undisciplined, you're spoiled, you're so obsessed with your image that you don't care what a scumbag you have to be as long as you seem nice to as many people as possible!"

"I am not! I've never been anything but nice to you, you fucking--" she snapped, and then immediately jerked back like she'd been burned. Her heart was pounding in her ears-- she never lost her temper, she never swore, she wasn't even supposed to have a temper, but what John was saying stung the truth in a way she didn't at all like.

She wasn't like that.
She couldn't be like that.
She refused to believe that she was like that.

John looked surprised at the outburst for a second, then his mouth twisted into a bitter smug half-smile. "You were about to call me a faggot, weren't you?" he drawled, bristling snappish anger cooled into venomous contempt.

"No."
(But she was going to call him something, and it wasn't going to be anything nice, and she knew that probably somewhere in her was the possibility of something like that slipping out-- this just made her more flustered and indignant and upset.)

"Sure you weren't," he said dryly, then shoved his hands in his pockets and turned sharply on his heel. "We have class."

She stared after him for a second before she followed, stewing in frustration and struggling to calm herself down. John was wrong, and completely convinced that he was right, and she didn't know if she would ever be able to convince him that she wasn't a completely garbage human being.

But she couldn't show up to class scowling. As she walked, she took deep breaths, shoved down the frustration (and the stinging pain of how right he was that she refused to acknowledge) and smoothed over her facial expression to her more usual bland smile. It wasn't like her to lose her temper. She would make sure it never happened again. A few more deep breaths and she flexed her fingers until the urge to clench them into fists faded, forcibly relaxed her shoulders so she didn't look defensive and angry.

When they got to class it was nearly over-- John stalked off to change into the P.E uniform while she smiled sheepishly at the teacher and told everyone they were "dealing with a student council thing."

They all believed her, and she slipped easily into the group, smiling and chatting like nothing had happened. She decided not to think about how she was even getting good at lying, now.
Chapter 6: Discipline

"Before I begin, I want to thank Liana Shaffe for inviting me here to speak today, and UPI in general for having me. This school has always been very close to my heart, and every time I'm asked to come back here it delights me to accept."

Thistle Rockwood beamed out at them from behind the podium. The bright stage lights hurt John's eyes; he squinted down at the auditorium stage, arms crossed over his chest. UPI had usually one of these speakers every semester, an adult to come and remind them of how important and amazing and wonderful it was to be a bigshot hero, and how grateful they should all be for the opportunity to attend such a prestigious institution.

He had seen Thistle Rockwood speak four times; this was the fifth. Thistle was one of those alums the school liked to brag about almost constantly. Thistle was the archetype; he embodied the ideal they all strove for. Tall and broad-shouldered and muscular, with short black hair. Handsome in the most generic way, light-skinned and square-jawed and always smiling with teeth. Scars peppered his exposed skin, everywhere but his face, and his clothes were simple and practical. The sword at his hip radiated magic energy that John could feel even as far away as he was; it was contributing significantly to his headache.

They'd all had to hear Thistle's full biography more times than he cared to count; it was completely interchangeable with thousands of others. A poor farm boy, thrust into a world he didn't quite understand, a challenge he wasn't quite prepared for, with a magic sword and an assortment of sidekicks no one ever wanted to talk to. Sometimes he liked to harp on for a while about how when he came to UPI it changed his life, how he learned so much, how he was so happy that these institutions existed because without this kind of training so many people would be lost, etc etc. John hoped he wouldn't do that this time. He'd heard it enough.

Talks like this one were all mandatory, even though they were often repetitive. That was sort of the point, John supposed; they had to make sure the message really got drilled into their heads. If there was any chance of forgetting fire safety or the value of tradition, they wanted to eliminate it.

As usual, the student council had been tasked with rounding up stragglers and directing everyone into their seats. They were the ones who ended up hearing most of the complaints people had about the talks; most of these complaints consisted of whining about how they were "fucking bullshit" and John ignored all of them. It was their own faults, really. The school wouldn't have to have this many talks if people would just behave themselves properly. Nobody wanted to go to these. Nobody enjoyed them. You weren't supposed to enjoy them.

For his part, John felt the tiniest bit bitter that he had to hang around after school for the speech on his birthday, but unlike most of the other students at UPI he wasn't raised in a goddamn barn, so he didn't complain.

The crowd was just a little bit too much; there were too many things going on at once, and it was difficult to focus on the stage. The lights, the noise, a thousand people all muttering and scraping their chairs and breathing and shuffling at once-- he pressed his fingers against his temples and leaned his elbows on his knees and tried not to look at anything besides the stage. The stage lights hurt his eyes, but if he pretended there was just one thing going on he might not get so overwhelmed.
"UPI has a long and storied history as an institution dedicated to helping the best and brightest students from across the world fulfill their destinies. The mission of this school, put as simply is possible, is just that: to help each and every one of you achieve the greatness you're capable of. Hero work is a proud tradition that we have carried throughout all of history. Let's all remember the fundamental truths..."

Here, everyone was strongly encouraged to follow along. A bored chorus spoke as Thistle did, reciting out of obligation the same thing they'd all heard a thousand times. John's lips moved along, his voice lost in the murmur.

"There has always been evil in this world, and thus there has always been good. It is the fate of the good to vanquish evil, and the fate of the evil to be vanquished. Wherever a shadow is cast, there is necessarily light. So it has always been, so it shall always be."

They went quiet and Thistle continued to speak.

"Yes. We've always had heroes. We've always needed heroes. All of you have come to bear the burden of being a hero from a different path. Some of you come from a long line of champions. Some of you come from simple beginnings, like me. Some of you came here from another world, and you're still figuring out how this all works. Regardless, all of us here carry the same weight. The weight of billions of lives depending on us. The weight of thousands of years of tradition. The weight of destiny."

Thistle took a deep breath and looked out at the assembled students, still smiling incessantly. He and Harper were just alike, all forced grins and bland platitudes and perfect hair. Looking at him made John feel sick.

"Every one of you is destined for something. Each of you is a crucial element in the formula that keeps all of us-- heroes and ordinary people alike-- safe. I know that weight can sometimes feel constricting. I know that we all have in us a temptation to rebel against our destinies. But try, instead, to fulfill your destiny to the best of your ability. When you accept your role that destiny has granted you, then you can truly excel."

That was the way things had to be. Everything in its proper place. John glanced around the auditorium and saw some of the new kids murmuring to each other, brows furrowed. They'd get over that, in time. That, too, was part of the process. The rejection of the call. One way or another, fate caught up to you. It couldn't be changed or avoided-- or at least, not without great difficulty.

Thistle kept talking, and John's headache kept getting worse. It was too crowded; he couldn't breathe. There were too many people. Too many. All of them breathing and coughing and grossdisgustinghorrible. John dug his nails into his arm and hissed in a breath as normally as he could manage. It didn't help much. Too many people. The walls were starting to close in around him and he didn't have anything to do with his hands to distract himself. The textures, the air, the noises, were all bad.

The person sitting next to him shifted and accidentally nudged his leg and he bit down hard on his lip as the touch sent an uncomfortable anxious shudder up his spine. He was going to pass out if he had to stay sitting there surrounded by all these people. Fainting again was something he wanted to avoid at all costs-- he was pretty sure Harper would materialize out of thin air just to concern-troll him-- so he couldn't stay. He stood up, as unobtrusively as he could manage, and strode towards the door trying to look like he was on some sort of official business and not like he couldn't see straight. Once he was out in the hallway, he braced himself against the wall and exhaled a shaky breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The fluorescent lights
buzzing in the hallway felt especially awful. He leaned heavily against the right wall and stumbled out the back door.

...Directly into a cloud of weed smoke, which he choked on.

While he was coughing and hacking and squinting, Skullduggery's low drawl cut through the noise, unfortunately crystal clear. "Oh, great, the fun police."

A heavily sarcastic oh, great about summed up how he felt about this, too. Going straight from sensory overload panic into inhaling smoke while getting harrassed was less than ideal.

With his hand pressed over his mouth to try to filter out the smoke, John heaved in a breath and straightened up to see Skullduggery leaning against the wall, cigarette between its teeth, looking as hostile and pale as ever. Its large piercing green eyes flicked over him briefly before it settled on scowling into the air to its left. It was even more difficult to breathe out there than it was inside, but he kept his back straight and tried not to break into any more coughing fits.

"Creed," he said hoarsely. He sounded like a dead person. He cleared his throat and tried again, more professional and less dying this time: "Creed. Couldn't even be bothered to hide behind a bush or something?"

Skullduggery rolled its eyes and took the cigarette out of its mouth. "Nope," it said, and ran its tongue over its teeth. John's breath hitched in his throat; he bit the inside of his cheek as punishment for being stupid. (The current level of negative reinforcement he already got from Skullduggery clearly wasn't cutting it.) Skullduggery tapped a bit of ash onto the ground. "You love mandatory shit, so I know you're not ditching. So, what, you get genetically modified to have some kind of bloodhound nose specifically for the purpose of detecting high school troublemakers? You psychic now? Got some kind of Skullduggery-misbehaving radar?"

"I needed some air," he said shortly. It arched its eyebrows, looking skeptical and unimpressed. "I see now that it was foolish of me to think that outdoors was the place to go for that."

"You needed some air," Skullduggery echoed. It scoffed and looked away, fiddling with the cigarette. "What are you, a soap opera teen girl who just got broken up with at a high-society event?"

He wasn't even sure how to respond to that, so he just gave it a hard unfriendly look and said, "Toss the drugs, Creed."

"Or what, you'll beat me up? You're basically one of those fainting goats, I could put you in the hospital without even moving," it said, but it sounded sort of tired. It also hadn't said anything aggressively homophobic yet, which was a pretty good indicator that it was more tired-angry than angry-angry. Tired-angry he could deal with; mostly it just grumbled and avoided him when it was tired.

"You're still on probation," he said. It was too tired to fight him, and he was definitely too tired to fight it. He felt tired in his bones.

It rolled its eyes and took another drag off the cigarette before grinding it out against the wall behind it and then dropping it into the grass. It held up both its hands, palms out, and said, "Fine. It's gone. You gonna give me a just-say-no lecture now?"

He considered it for a second, but he didn't really have the energy to. Normally he would have probably given it more shit, but he'd decided first thing in the morning that he was going to interact with Skullduggery as infrequently as possible as a gift to himself. So he was going to try to stick with that, and spare himself the wasted time and energy.
"No," he said, and leaned against the wall next to the door so he was not quite opposite it and far enough away that it couldn't reach him if it suddenly decided to try to fight him or something. He decided to pretend it wasn't there, and closed his eyes so that he could actually do that. If his eyes were open, he would be looking at Skullduggery. That was just how it was; Skullduggery was magnetic, and it was difficult to look at anyone else when it was around.

He took deep breaths and focused on the texture of the bricks under his palms. The sun on his eyelids. It was quiet out there, because everyone was supposed to be in the auditorium. He could hear the rustle of the wind in the forest, the distant sound of birds, and hardly anything else.

"Okay, well, now I'm suspicious," Skullduggery never could stay quiet or still for longer than about a minute. It had this irritating compulsion to fidget and chatter that made it impossible to ignore. John determinedly kept his eyes closed and determinedly kept breathing steady and even. Skullduggery made an annoyed noise in its throat. "What's with you? Too worn out from fainting fifteen times today to even try to fight me?"

It was never happy, really. If he looked at it, it got pissed because it wasn't the center of attention. "Careful, Creed, someone might hear you and think you're worried about me," he said dryly.

"Don't be a smartass," it said, like it wasn't a smartass itself. "It's not like you to walk away from an opportunity to after-school-special at me. You get the plague or something?"

"The school day is technically over and it's my birthday, so I'm well within my rights to pass on the whole 'getting called a useless faggot for trying to do the full-time job I don't get paid for' thing this time." He sounded as exhausted as he felt, which he didn't like much. Skullduggery always picked up on these things. It had a knack for observing people that it used exclusively for zeroing in on weaknesses it could exploit.

Skullduggery said, "Oh."

And then, sounding deeply awkward and uncomfortable: "Uhh. Happy birthday. I guess."

He opened his eyes so that he could stare at it. Skullduggery hadn't wished him a happy birthday since elementary school. If he didn't know better, he'd think it looked embarrassed; shoulders up, arms crossed stubbornly over its chest, glaring determinedly at anything but his face. "Excuse me?"

"I said, happy birthday I guess,' dickweed," Skullduggery muttered, still not looking at him. It was definitely embarrassed. "Don't get gay about it."

"I'll try not to get too excited," he said dryly. It was pretty telling that Skullduggery thought that happy birthday I guess was an embarrassing display of sentiment. He would never be able to see what possessed Harper to insist that it was nice. It was physically incapable of being nice.

It grumbled something he couldn't hear and pressed as far up against the wall as physically possible.

Even when it was scowling like that, it was still pretty. Soft features, long eyelashes, a sprinkling of faded freckles on its eerily pale nose and cheeks. The kind of face that always looked good in photographs, no matter what unflattering angle they were taken at. The kind of face that let it get away with murder.

It was always trying to avoid spending too much time in the sunlight because of its freckles; if it stayed out of the sun for the most part, the freckles faded until they were almost
invisible, like now. You could really only see them if you were looking. When it spent time out in the sun, though, the freckles came out in full force. Skullduggery was one of those people with extreme freckles— all over its face and neck and arms. John had always thought freckles were cute, but Skullduggery reportedly hated its freckles. It took pains not to go out in the sun much, and spent most of the summer indoors or slouching under awnings and hiding under long sleeves and baseball caps.

When they were kids, it didn't seem to mind its freckles. Maybe it started disliking the freckles when it started dyeing its hair green— freckles looked a lot sillier with bright green hair than with its natural orange-red.

"Quit staring at me," Skullduggery said, shooting him a nasty look. He tilted his head back and stared at the sky instead. The protective magic was back in place over the school; he could see the telltale shimmer of the shielding, a little bit of iridescence on top of the clear blue.

This version of Skullduggery had little in common with its sunburned freckled rough-and-tumble elementary school self. It used to be so nice...

John and Skullduggery were in the same homeroom class from first to fifth grade. It was different, then.

John didn't go to school at all until first grade. He didn't go out much at all. For most of his early childhood he was absolutely impossible in public, tantrum-prone and oversensitive. He got overwhelmed in public places; the noise, the lights, the colors, the people, the magic— it was all too much. If his mothers tried to take him anywhere, it was only a matter of time before he dissolved into screaming and crying and wouldn't be able to explain why. It was stressful and humiliating for everyone involved; people thought his mothers were bad parents, because they couldn't calm him down, because he couldn't be calmed down when he was like that. After a while, they sort of gave up on taking him anywhere, and instead he stayed home in their quiet house in the woods.

Preschool and kindergarten were unnecessary, his mothers decided, and actually actively detrimental to his education. Discipline and a strong work ethic had to be established early, so that it really stuck. "Öïtir children are coddled and lazy," she was always saying. Small children weren't taught a sense of duty and respect, not until they were older and it was deemed "appropriate."

They taught him at home. When he finally went to school, he was ahead of everyone his age in every subject, but he didn't speak Common. Miya only spoke Tsurin at home; he was raised bilingual, but since they only spoke the one language in conversation at home, he hadn't had much practice. He was awkward, anxious, had a thick accent, and he still got overwhelmed. There were so many people in his first grade class— more people than he'd ever met in his life— and the textures were all wrong, the lights too bright, the classroom full of enchanted objects and excited mage kids.

He didn't like school. It gave him headaches, and he didn't know how to talk to people, and when he tried they would laugh at him.

Except for Skullduggery. Skullduggery was aggressively cheerful, bright and enthusiastic and extremely outrageous. His first day at school, he curled himself into a corner at lunchtime and buried his nose in a book, hoping no one would talk to him.

Skullduggery leaned over, hands planted on its hips, grinning broadly. "Whatcha readin'"
He held up the book without saying anything, shoulders up around his ears. It stared at the cover for a minute, squinting, before declaring, "I don't know what that says! What language is that? It's cool!"

"It's Tsurin," he said.
"Neat!" It crouched in front of him, fiddling with its hair and beaming at him. It stuck out its hand. "I'm Skulduggery Creed, I'm not a boy or a girl, my favorite color is green. Is your name Blood Diamond or Takashi?"
"Both..."
"Which one do you like better?" it asked. He shrugged, because he didn't have an answer, and it kept smiling at him. "I'll call you Takashi, then, and if you don't like it I'll switch. Did you just move here?"

It insisted on talking to him every day, chatting away. It taught him how to do cartwheels, because its favorite thing in the world was gymnastics and it did a lot of tumbling and jumping. It wasn't very good, and its knees and elbows were always scraped up, but it never seemed to mind. If it fell, it would bounce back to its feet, laughing delightedly. It was nice to him. No one else was particularly nice to him, but Skulduggery was.

They were friends, once. Then it moved in fifth grade and he didn't hear from it until it moved back, two years ago. But it wasn't the same. Not just the green hair and the pale skin and the scars up its arms and the dark circles under its eyes-- it was mean, and tired, and it didn't have any memory of him whatsoever.

He wasn't sure he was ever going to find out what happened to it in between fifth grade and high school. Not that it was any of his business any more. He really needed to work on not caring.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and sighed quietly as he started texting Cadfael. He needed to do something besides stare at Skulduggery. He'd promised himself, after all.

**To: Cadya**
Speech is a nightmare as usual. Nearly had a meltdown inside. Had to step out. OFC SD is out here.

**Cadya**
yikesss. what's it done this time?? it shouldnrt mess w u on yru birthday!!! ill come over there and fight it ! (O HO)9 9

**To: Cadya**
It didn't really do anything. It was smoking weed but I don't have the energy to make a fuss about it rn. It's being weirdly less-horrible? Probably bc of the weed.

**Cadya**
smoking on campus? ughh I hate it when people do that

**To: Cadya**
Right outside the door too. I inhaled a bunch of smoke and now my uniforms gonna smell for five thousand years

**Cadya**
what the hell!!!!!! you guys have rules about distance from buildings for a reason!!! are you ok? was it a magic strain???

**To: Cadya**
I'm fine it was just surprising and unpleasant bc I was hyperventilating. It tossed the blunt and now its just angrily not looking at me.

_Cadya_

u let it get away w/ too much, dude :/// just have it suspended

_To: Cadya_

Punishing people who hate school by giving them a mini-vacation is stupid.

_Cadya_

if u say so.

_Cadya_

hey if yr staying at the thing when will you be home?

_To: Cadya_

Six-thirty to seven. I don't know yet if he's taking questions. Why do you ask?

_Cadya_

ffs is it even legal to keep yall in school for like 12 hours??

_To: Cadya_

Yes.

_Cadya_

uhhh and I ask because im at your house SURPRISE BITCH!!!

_To: Cadya_

Aren't you busy?

_Cadya_

never too busy for youuu <3

John's cheeks went very warm, half annoyed and half reluctantly pleased. He pressed a hand against his cheek and tried to will himself to not blush. This never worked, but he always had a faint hope that maybe this time it would. He'd always had a horrible blushing problem. When he was embarrassed or flustered or angry or happy or stressed-- pretty much any time he felt anything strongly, he got an embarrassingly obvious flush that turned his face and ears and neck an awful blotchy red color.

The blushing was one of the many many things that had always made him an easy target in school. On top of the language thing, the gay parents, the social awkwardness, the other five hundred "weird" things about him, he couldn't stop himself blushing when people pointed it out.

Instead of fixing the blushing problem, he'd just gotten really good at being so terrifying no one wanted to make fun of him to his face any more. No one except Skullduggery, anyway, who got some kind of sick thrill out of provoking him. Even after that time he'd snapped and punched it in the face and it froze up suddenly, looking uncharacteristically terrified. He still thought about that a lot. Skullduggery wasn't scared of anything. No one had ever seen it that frightened before or since. It hadn't stopped provoking him-- right after, it got much nastier, as if to prove to itself that it wasn't scared of him.

He glanced over at Skullduggery, hoping it hadn't noticed the blushing.

It was watching him like a hawk.

"What's with that face?" it asked, more annoyed than it had any right to be. "You texting your secret boyfriend you're always insisting you don't have?"

The heat in his cheeks intensified. "I'm not gay," he snapped.

It rolled its eyes. "Sure, dude."
His phone buzzed again.

Cadya
yr mom is watching me make cake and im SWEATING PROFUSELY lmao
Cadya
she isn't even saying anything........ what does she want........ help
To: Cadya
Depends which mom.
Cadya
miya
To: Cadya
She doesn't like cake.
Cadya
well, tough, its ur 18th birthday and ur getting a FUCKIN CAKE
To: Cadya
K well if I get my ass kicked for loading up on junk food it's your fault.
Cadya
:(((((
To: Cadya
Lol chill. Ask them if they're gonna be home & expecting dinner when I get back so I
know if I need to stop by the grocery store
Cadya
no she says they're heading out for work in like an hour
To: Cadya
Ah, alright.
Cadya
come home and bake with meeee
To: Cadya
Can't. There's crowds to wrangle. Rebellious teens to soothe. Dreams to stomp on. You
know how it is.
Cadya
ughh its yr bday u shouldn’t have to like OPPRESS URSELF on ur own bday
To: Cadya
Don't be dramatic.
Cadya
im not being dramatic its fucked up!!! im never dramatic you just hate rocking the boat!!
To: Cadya
It's not fucked up to tell shouty teenagers to stop shouting in the middle of a prestigious
guest lecture. It's not like they're helping.
Cadya
they could be if you weren't forced to kick em out :/
To: Cadya
No they couldn't & do I really have to have this argument with you rn
Cadya
you could ditch the white people bs and come argue with me in person :D
To: Cadya
Cadfael I'm white people.
Cadya
only 1/2 dude
To: Cadya
Ok whatever
Cadya
bruh
To: Cadya
I'm not going home until I'm done here. Sorry.
Cadya
ur a fuckin masochist smdh
To: Cadya
;)
Cadya
fdghfhgh
Cadya
I stg if u don't ditch this stupid talk im gonna sext you the whole time and you'll be embarrassed and mad
To: Cadya
Wow, so threatening, I'm terrified
Cadya
no good? well im sure I can think of a more appropriate punishment ;)
Cadya
how about i-

Blushing furiously, John shoved his phone back into his pocket. "I'm going back inside," he said, a little too loudly, as though if he announced it here Cadfael could hear him all the way back at his house. His phone buzzed again. He ignored it and cleared his throat loudly, combing his hands through his hair. "You should, too."

Skullduggery peeled itself away from the wall and slouched forward. It groaned, "Fine, but just because it's your birthday."

It followed him back inside, and John's phone kept buzzing insistently at his hip. Cadfael was not one prone to empty threats. Unfortunately.

"You know, it really bothers me when people frame this as an issue of conformity. It isn't about forcing everyone to be the same, it's about asking you all to put the greater good over self-interest. When you turn sixteen, when you become a hero, your story doesn't belong to just you any more. You're not just individuals. You're symbols of hope and strength and good. Symbols are uncomplicated. Your stories belong to everyone. They have to be for everyone."

This was always the part of the speech the student council had to be on edge for. This was the part where people started grumbling. Thistle's demeanor and smile didn't shift, but the energy in the crowd did. John could see the other members of student council tensing, shifting to the edge of their seats.

"Now, every time I make this speech--"
"Why do you hate gay people?" someone called, somewhere in the auditorium, and a murmur rippled through the crowd. John stood up and leaned over the balcony. The voice sounded like Alexis Delancey-- one of those loud alternate-universe kids who'd joined the gay-straight alliance as soon as she got to UPI.

It was always a新鲜人, doing the shouting. Thistle laughed. "Like I was saying, every time I make these speeches, I get something like that. I understand where you're coming from, but as usual I have to tell you that nobody at the ORB hates gay people. We don't hate anybody. We just believe that personal business ought to remain personal, and that traditional stories should remain traditional. Our traditions are important. They can't just be cast aside in the name of diversity for diversity's sake. Fate calls who it calls."

Nia, from student council, dragged Alexis out of the room by her arm, with Harper on her heels. John sat back down and sighed. It took a while for the crowd to stop murmuring, but Thistle had a command of the stage that made him very good at redirecting these kinds of conversations.

Everyone knew the ORB was homophobic. These speeches were just how they went through the motions of being modern and inclusive. They had about three friendly faces that insisted they weren't homophobic, while the rest of the ORB were free to rant wherever they wanted about how gay heroes would corrupt the sanctity of the organization and harm children and all that nonsense.

The GSA at UPI was tiny. Anyone with any sense knew they couldn't be associated with it; it disbanded and reformed every other year, as people dropped it as soon as they realized what it meant to actually be in it. Everything they did mattered. Everything they did reflected on their character. Being a known advocate for anything outside the norm was a one-way ticket to lifelong failure.

It wasn't that there wasn't any room for out gay heroes. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that being out was a death sentence. As soon as you came out, the countdown to died tragically young started. There had been plenty of gay heroes in the past couple of decades; not one of them had lived past thirty. Most of them never made it past twenty-one.

The only gay heroes who'd ever lived to grow old were the ones who couldn't be confirmed as gay, they'd done such a good job keeping it to themselves.

He was moody and quiet as he packed up his bag. Being an adopted ハーフ was bad enough. Being neurotic and bad with people on top of that was pushing his goddamn luck. He couldn't afford to be gay. He wasn't gay. That would be too many things, too much deviation from the mold.

He stared at his phone, the long string of texts from Cadfael-- and clicked it off as he heard Harper's distinctively bouncy walk approaching from behind.

"John!"

"Ugh," He slammed his locker shut and turned to see Harper beaming at him, hands planted on his hips. "What."

"You managed to keep it to yourself last year, but the secret's out! Skullduggery told me today is your birthday!" He clapped John on the arm. "Happy birthday, dude."

The touch made his skin crawl and his shoulders tense. He shrugged off Harper's hand and scowled at him. "We're still not friends," he said flatly, and started walking away.
As usual, Harper was unperturbed. He followed him, still with that hollow-eyed too-wide smile plastered on his face, and said, "I know you don't like me, but it's your birthday. Can I get you anything? Do some student council paperwork for you?"

No power on earth could stop Harper from being a massive suckup. "You can leave me alone," John said.

"I'm serious, I could do some of your work for you and give you a bit more free time!" Harper elbowed him like they were friends. John stared determinedly straight ahead. Was Harper capable of having a conversation with him that didn't involve backhanded insults? So far, no. What a dick. I'll _so some of your work for you_, like John couldn't handle the workload, like since it was _so easy_ for Harper he could just _casually_ do some of it for him. The generous paragon of benevolence graciously offering to assist the mere mortals. _It must be so hard, being so useless you can't do your own work, you poor baby._

"I can handle my work myself," he snapped.

Harper sighed loudly. "Okay, well, let me do something nice for you. Please? To make up for all the stuff you're mad at me about?"

_Let me do something nice for you._ Now it was John's problem, all of a sudden. Fucking typical of Harper to make out like John was the one being rude for wanting to be left alone and not him for refusing to stop harassing him.

"Hey, I could take you out to dinner!" Harper said, and John's blood ran cold. He stopped in his tracks in the middle of the hallway, staring at him. Harper stopped, too, looking a bit confused and expectant.

It sounded a lot like Harper was asking him out on a date. This was definitely not the case, because Harper was the most heterosexual person who ever lived, but John couldn't even begin to imagine what he was trying to do. Dinner. _"Excuse me?"_

People moved around them, saying good-bye to Harper and casting silent sidelong looks at John as they passed. Harper got clapped on the back; John got given a wide berth.

"I just know your family's out of town a lot, and, you know, it'd be a shame for you to have to have dinner alone on your birthday," Harper said.

"Of course you assume if I'm not having dinner with my parents, I'm eating alone," John muttered, stalking towards the door to the courtyard. "I do have friends, you know."

Harper followed him again, still completely unashamed of the fact that he'd been caught in an insult again. In a carefully neutral tone of voice, he asked, "Like that guy with the white hair I see you with at competitions sometimes?"

John bristled. He didn't at all like the way this conversation was going. "Yes," he said through gritted teeth.

Of course, that was what he was after. Harper seized on the admission and seemed to perk up a bit, letting genuine curiosity creep into his fake-nice voice. "I've been meaning to ask, who is he? He's not a student here, so I--"

"He's nobody. It's none of your business," John muttered, too quickly. "I'm going home now, leave me be."
Chapter 7: Breathe

John's family's house was up on the mountain, half-hidden in the cool forest. The road up there was a shady winding packed-dirt road, flanked on either side by looming tall evergreens. The forest was thick and old and dark, the trees too tall and clustered-together to let through much sunlight onto the road. There wasn't much else on the mountain besides the Asada house, only miles of untouched forest. They didn't have neighbors, unless you counted mountain lions.

The road had no streetlights, magical or otherwise. At night, it was pitch black and dangerous. Even the moon and stars didn't help much, because of the trees blocking the sky. For safety, John had a small light clipped to the front of his bicycle. (Much to the disappointment of his parents, John didn't have good night vision at all.)

The last leg of the trip back from school was tiring, being uphill, but it was balanced out by the energizing effect of the clean quiet air. In the forest, there wasn't anyone around, and the only sounds were the wind in the trees and the distant sounds of animals; twigs cracking, owls hooting, crickets whirring. In the forest, he could finally breathe. It was like a weight was lifted off his chest. No one was looking at him, out there. No one would bother him. It was clean and empty, and he could relax. There was no reason for anyone to go up on the mountain unless they were going specifically to John's house or doing something in the forest, like hunting or research or camping. The former was extremely rare, and the latter never came anywhere near their property.

Their house wasn't just far away from town; it also wasn't much like the suburban white-picket-fence homes down there. No one else in town had anything like their rounded roof tiles and sliding shoji doors and the gravelly garden. It was built by some distant ancestor of Miya's, more than four hundred years ago. It was a large traditional-style home, built to house at least three generations of Asadas and their servants, and built to last. The family had kept it in immaculate repair, along with all the assorted heirlooms inside, and so it only showed its age in the style of the house. To the people here, it looked foreign more than it looked old.

It seemed larger than it was, most days, because John was usually there alone with his mothers' dog. Most of the house was left unused. It was John's job to maintain the house, to keep it clean and preserved; polishing the floors, dusting the heirlooms, keeping everything absolutely spotless. This had always been his job, since he was old enough to do any chores at all. It was difficult and time-consuming, but that was sort of the point. Maintenance and preservation of the family home was maintenance and preservation of the family legacy. The work was constant and it would never end, until he had someone to pass it onto.

The wall around the house was laden with old magic, the same defensive spells that had protected the house since it was built. They were sturdy things, simple and skillfully embedded in the stone. John had been exposed to that magic all his life, and so it didn't bother him any more. Instead, it was a comforting feeling. Familiar.

He got off his bike and walked it to the gate, which swung open at the gentlest touch of his fingertips. Home at last.

His skin was still crawling, and he still felt jittery and uncomfortable from the extended exposure to the huge crowd of people. It had been hours since the last time he showered, and he could feel the crowd sticking to his clothes and skin like a thin layer of grime. It pressed sharp against his throat. He would feel better after a shower.
John left his bike propped up against the wall near the main gate and entered the house through the kitchen door around back. Only his parents used the front door. It had never been something anybody said out loud, but John felt strongly that it wasn't his place to use the front door— it would be presumptuous, somehow.

Inside, it was warmly lit, the lights of the kitchen and living room all turned on. The smell of food wafted over him as he stepped into the small entryway. It was a strange mixture of smells, really-- cake and vegetables and bread and something burnt-- but the strangeness was not unpleasant. In his typical overboard fashion, Cadfael had made dinner as well as a cake. He'd probably already washed all the dishes he'd made, too.

There was no sign of anyone home besides Cadfael's shoes by the door; if his parents had still been around, their weapons would be hanging on the pegs in the kitchen entryway.

"I'm home," he called. No response; not even the sound of Pochi scrambling up from a nap. His leash wasn't by the door; his mothers must have taken him with him this time. Maybe as a sort of birthday present to him.

Something clattered loudly in the kitchen and he heard a muffled curse. "Hey! Welcome home! One second!" Cadfael said loudly.

John straightened his shoes next to Cadfael's, placing them with the toes against the wall, and combed his hands through his hair. As he leaned around the corner to look into the kitchen proper, Cadfael half-tackled him with an overenthusiastic hug that knocked the air out of John's lungs.

"Happy birthday!!"

"You're way too excited," John said. Tired and finally able to relax, away from the crowd and the school and Skullduggery, he let himself lean most of his weight on Cadfael, wrapping his arms around him to return the hug and burying his face in the crook of Cadfael's neck. Home.

Most people who saw Cadfael assumed he was delicate. He looked delicate, after all; no one was ever surprised to learn that he was royalty, if they didn't know already. With his soft features, his long slender limbs, his warm brown skin and glistening white-gold hair, he looked like a piece of art, and decidedly not strong. But he was; he was about as strong as John, and faster.

When John leaned on him, he could take it. He didn't buckle or falter; he just ruffled John's hair fondly and stayed perfectly upright. Cadfael could pick him up and carry him, if he felt like it. "It's your eighteenth birthday, and I've got to be excited enough for two people because you're so unenthusiastic," Cadfael said.

On top of the strength and the speed, Cadfael's bloodline had another particular gift-- elemental magic. Elemental magic was the rarest kind; innate and complete control over an element, and only that element. Only relatives of the Atlaran royal family had water magic, and not all of them did. The magic was the reason Cadfael was heir to the throne instead of his older sister. The strength and speed and magic were what made Cadfael's ancestors conquerors and warrior-kings. A long time ago, elemental was considered one of the most powerful kinds of magic; nowadays, people thought it was too limited. If you were a more general sorcerer, you could do just about everything an elemental mage could do, plus a lot of other stuff-- but it wasn't quite the same. John didn't know much about the mechanics of it, or what it was like to use it, but he knew that Cadfael's magic felt different from other magics. It hardly hurt at all; it felt like less of a disruption of the natural order.
"You're always excited enough for two people," John said, his voice muffled by Cadfael's neck. Cadfael smelled nice; not like other people, where if he could smell them at all he wanted to back away about fifteen feet and never breathe again.

"That's not even a little bit true," Cadfael said archly, and started walking backwards towards the kitchen table, dragging John along with him. John grumbled into his neck, but shuffled along with him. "I made you a cake, and dinner, and I got you a present. Well, a couple presents. Sort of. Mostly one actual present, and then I had some plans for things to do."


"Y'know. Things." Cadfael hooked his fingers in John's belt with one hand, and pressed the other hand against the back of his neck. He didn't dig in his fingers or anything, just rested his hand there gently, but the warm pressure was still enough to send a curl of warmth down his spine, to make his shoulders slump a little bit.

Tired and moving on instinct, John leaned closer when he shouldn't have and a sudden surge of anxiety shattered the warm calm.

The weight of tradition, of the legacy he carried, was too heavy. Suddenly all he could think about was Skulduggery's narrowed eyes and crooked smile, the jagged lines scratched into his locker, the reputation he couldn't shake off.

Faggot.

He took a step back, suddenly not sure what to do with his hands, suddenly uncomfortable, suddenly unable to actually look at Cadfael. There was a reason they broke up, and it was a very good reason, and he needed to get his shit together. "I'm sorry," Cadfael said immediately. He took a step back, too, hands up and open, trying to indicate that he wasn't going to touch him again. That didn't help much. He obviously felt rejected, and John felt immediately awful.

Cadfael said, "I didn't mean to--"

"No, it's-- I should-- I have to--" He combed his hands through his hair, skin prickling, words sticking in his throat. Selfish. Stupid. Faggot. He knew he was bright red, and he felt like he might burst into tears at any moment. He inhaled a breath through his teeth and forced words out of his mouth. "I'm going to go take a shower."

Cadfael looked guilty, and upset, and like he was going to turn this into a Conversation of some kind. That couldn't happen. If he actually talked to him about the thing, Cadfael would tell him things like you don't have to do this and you're allowed to do things that make you happy, and John would cry, and he would ruin everything again because he had basically no willpower.

Cadfael started to speak. "John--"

John cut him off before he could say whatever he was about to say. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good, and it wouldn't be something he was allowed to hear. "It's fine, I'm fine, don't freak out," he said, probably too quickly. Cadfael didn't look any less upset, or any less determined to start a Conversation. John groaned and combed both his hands through his hair. "Fuck, Cadfael, I'm not trying to-- please don't let me ruin this, I just need to..."

What?

He needed to not feel awful, to calm down, but he knew the way to do that was to give in. Cadfael calmed him down. Cadfael could fix this, like he always did, if John just let him. The foot or so of space between them felt cold and sharp and uncomfortable, and John felt the overwhelming urge to step forward.
He needed to take a step back, to remind himself why he couldn't step forward. "I need to take a shower," he said.

"I'm pretty sure what needs to happen is we need to have a conversation," Cadfael said. John winced and looked away. "John, I know you don't want to talk about it, but I keep making you uncomfortable and I think it might be better if you didn't have a panic attack every time we hang out."

"I'm not having a panic attack," John said, voice strained and just a little bit shaky. Cadfael crossed his arms over his chest and raised his eyebrows at him, because of course he could tell John's heart was pounding and his chest was constricted and he felt like he was gonna die.

More forcefully, he said, "I'm fine. Everything is fine."

"I don't want to ruin your birthday, b--" Cadfael audibly started and stopped himself from saying **babe**. Instead, he finished awkwardly with, "Dude."

That didn't really help with the panicking.

"You can't ruin anything, you're perfect," John said, before he could stop himself, and immediately felt his awful flush get about a thousand times worse. He couldn't just stop being in love with him, he couldn't just not touch him. Cadfael was perfect, and breaking up with him was a terrible idea, but he had to do it. He kept stuttering, hoarse and desperate and awkward. "Fuck, I mean-- I mean, like, it's not. You. It's my problem. Sorry. I'm sorry."

Cadfael shifted, more hugging his chest now than giving him a disapproving look. He slumped more than he ever did normally, and said, "John, please just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it."

"You know I can't do that," John said. "It's not about what I want."

He couldn't bear to see Cadfael looking so miserable. He couldn't handle feeling like it was his fault. He turned sharply on his heel and said, too quickly, "I'm going to take a shower."

Then he half-ran up the stairs before Cadfael could say anything else.

In the shower, he slumped against the wall, pressed his forehead against the smooth tiles and let the wall hold most of his weight. He should have never let this start. He should have known better. This wouldn't be so difficult if they'd never dated. If they'd never settled into a comfortable dynamic,

Everyone knew that being happy was a surefire way to get yourself killed, if you were gay. That was the only way they were ever allowed to be seen and happy-- if it was immediately followed by tragedy. Nothing invited disaster like contentment.

John pressed his hands over his face and squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't want to die. He didn't want Cadfael to die, either.

"Get it together," he mumbled into his hands.

It was the first week of school when he got called into the guidance counselor's office and there was an ORB agent there instead of Shaffe or Wyatt. "Agent Yamato," he said his name was, and gave him a thin smile.

John didn't shake his hand, and he didn't sit down.

"Am I in trouble?" he asked warily. The long pause was answer enough; yes, of course he was in trouble. The worst kind of trouble.

"We need to talk," Yamato said. He sat, stiffly, behind East Wyatt's desk, and indicated one of the ugly purple chairs on the other side. "Sit."
John shoved his hands in his pockets and squared his shoulders. Sitting in here made him feel like a child. "I prefer to stand," he said. Standing felt safer, somehow.

"Don't be childish, Takashi," Yamato's voice as so sharp-- so much like his mother's-- that John sat down before he could stop himself.

"Nobody calls me Takashi," he said. Yamato rubbed his eyes and shrugged.

"Blood Diamond, then," he said. "We need to talk about your future."

Yamato pulled a folder out of a briefcase on the floor next to him and opened it. He paused for a long moment, perhaps to build suspense, eyes fixed on the contents. "You're going to think this is very cruel, particularly given the way your peers at this school treat you," he said, "But please believe that I'm trying to spare you from real cruelty."

John thought he had a pretty good idea, by then, what this was about. He felt his throat close over as his entire body seized up in terror. Yamato didn't need to do anything more, really-- he could have let John's guilt do the work for him, could have just sat back and watched as John tore himself apart all on his own-- but he did anyway.

He took out several photographs and slid them across the desk for John to look at. A series of photographs of John and Cadfael on a date: drinking iced tea at a café in Amantal, smiling at each other, holding hands in public. The last photograph was of Cadfael leaning over and kissing him, one hand pressed against his cheek.

He looked happy in all of them, like an idiot. John stared at them, silent and unmoving. The horror that twisted his stomach into a knot began to creep through the memories, poisoning all of them. The smile on his face made him sick, as did thinking about how easily he'd believed it when Cadfael said it'll be fine, no one's looking at us, it's not a big deal.

It shouldn't have shocked him. Shouldn't have been a surprise. He should have known better. But he didn't, and knowing that he'd been so colossally stupid was painful. Hindsight made it all so obvious: he should have said no, should have insisted they stay in, should have pulled away when Cadfael touched his hand. For that matter, he should have said no the first time, in his room.

The silence dragged on for too many achingly long seconds. As they ticked past, John's clamor of guilt and horror and shock and self-hatred solidified into coherent thought again. I have ruined everything.

"You've been careless, Blood Diamond," Yamato said. As though he didn't already know that, as if he didn't already want to die. The urge to get up and go throw himself off the roof was growing rapidly, an achling itch in his back. For a moment, he hoped that Yamato had come there to kill him. "You've been careless, and as painful as it may be, you have to face the consequences of your carelessness."

Of course he knew it was coming, but that didn't make it hurt any less when Yamato said, "You can't date him. This has to end, immediately. Let me be very clear: I do not mean no one can see you. I do not mean keep it a secret. I mean you have to stop. I know that's a lot easier said than done, but it's what has to happen."

John stared silently at the desk. It occurred to him that he could argue, but it wouldn't accomplish anything. No amount of petulant childish but I don't want to would convince anyone of anything.

Yamato sighed and shifted in his seat, obviously preparing to say something else. John tensed. He was prepared for a scolding-- screaming, even. Whatever his punishment would be,
he was prepared to take it, because he knew he deserved it. He was not prepared for what Yamato actually said:

"For anyone else, this would have been the end of the line, but it doesn't have to be for you," Yamato said, not entirely unkindly.

His head snapped up, finally, and John looked at him, eyes wide. Yamato didn't smile, but he didn't seem angry. Just sort of sad-- maybe even disappointed. His voice calm and gentle, Yamato said, "Blood Diamond, you have a life ahead of you. An extraordinary life. A successful life. You're one of the best and the brightest of your generation. Your career-- your journey-- would inspire millions of people. You could be someone truly great-- revolutionary, even. You know that, right?"

He could see it, in the distance-- himself as an adult, strong and revered and important. Maybe not the best, but among the best. Valued. Applauded. The first person like him to be given the kind of attention he was given. He could be the kind of person he wanted to see growing up, but didn't. He could be a hero, a real one.

His eyes dropped once again, this time to his hands.

It wasn't easy, but it was possible. Not within his grasp, but within his reach. Close enough to grab onto. Anyone else would have been kicked off this path, but not him-- that made sense to him. It felt correct. He was better. He was smarter, faster, stronger, more dedicated than anyone. As long as he did everything he was supposed to-- if he kept working, if he kept pushing himself, if he kept pushing past the pain and the exhaustion, if he could be just enough of the person he was supposed to be-- then he could make history.

Still, he said nothing. That future version of himself, the one who was successful and important and respected, was all he'd ever wanted. It was all anyone at UPI ever wanted, when it got down to it: to be a hero. It should have been easy, but it wasn't.

"Look, I know you care about him," Yamato said. "But come on, Blood Diamond. Don't throw away your entire life for your high school boyfriend. It's-- I mean-- if this was true love, you know, if he was the one, that would be different. But he's not."

When he put it like that, it seemed so insignificant. Resentment suddenly flooded through John's veins, and his hands clenched hard into fists. It was a contrary sort of anger that finally forced words out of his mouth: "But I do love him."

"I know," Yamato said. He seemed to soften, then, and his hands twitched as though he was about to reach out and then decided abruptly against it. "I know right now you're probably feeling a sense of righteous indignation that makes it difficult to see this from a rational perspective. Work through it. I'm trying to protect you, Blood Diamond. I've been trying to protect you. This is about what's best for you."

Judging by his face, he really meant that. He looked almost desperate. John gritted his teeth and tried to banish the resentment that was pounding in his ears. It wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

"Can't I just..." He inhaled shakily. It wasn't a good idea to say anything, especially not when his voice sounded so quiet. He sounded weak, but he still needed to try to say it anyway: "I could do better. I could keep it a secret."

Yamato winced, and leaned back in his chair, and John's stomach sank. The look on his face was one he recognized, one he saw in himself all the time. Thinly veiled pain. "I-- we've known about you two since you started dating. They were going to downgrade you. I spent three
weeks fighting them on it. I convinced them you could keep it a secret. You couldn't. This is the end of the line."

That felt like a slap in the face. He'd thought no one knew-- he thought he was doing a good job keeping it to himself-- but it was never really a secret. It was stupid, he thought, that he'd ever believed this could end any other way.

But Cadfael, he knew, would fight back. Cadfael would want him to push back, to stand up for himself, to do something. So he dug his fingers into his knees and said, "This is homophobic."

It wasn't as eloquent as Cadfael would have been. It wasn't very powerful, or smart, or good. He wished he could think of something cutting and witty to say, something that would make him seem very cool and in control and confident, but he couldn't. It wasn't like he could actually refuse to do as he was told; he was going to do it, one way or another. At this point he was just complaining on principle, out of a petulant desire to wrest back some scrap of himself from the iron grip of the ORB.

It seemed to bother Yamato-- his jaw tightened and he snapped, "I'm trying to save your life."

He threw his hands up, aggravated, and continued, "This isn't something you can just-- there's consequences, Takashi! It's not just that you'll never be a real hero, it's that you'll die. It will be violent, and painful, and you'll be tragically young, and that's all you'll ever be. Just another dead gay kid for people to feel sorry for for about a month and then forget about!"

John flinched back in his chair, stung, and they sat for a long time in uncomfortable silence. As hurt and humiliated and angry as he felt, underneath all of that he still knew that Yamato was being perfectly reasonable.

"You promised to keep him safe. He's in just as much danger as you," Yamato said, softer this time.

The sudden thought of something happening to Cadfael because of him-- not even because he didn't stop it, but directly because of him-- hit him like a knife in the heart. That was the worst-case scenario. That was something that he could not ever allow. The thought of dying was frightening, but it wasn't the worst that could happen-- but Cadfael was different. Cadfael was important.

He swore an oath to keep Cadfael safe. Whatever it takes.
"I shouldn't have to do this," John said quietly. "I will, but it's not fair."
"Being a hero requires personal sacrifice for the greater good. That's how it works."

John wiped the steam off his bathroom mirror and looked himself in the eyes. "This is just how it works," he told himself firmly. He'd mostly stopped shaking, and he could mostly breathe properly, so he ruffled his damp hair and squared his shoulders. Time to go back downstairs and be a normal human being.

In his room, he threw his school uniform into his laundry basket. He pulled on one of his exceedingly soft t-shirts as he trotted down the stairs, trying to remember if he even knew how to act like a normal person any more. Cadfael was leaning against the counter in the kitchen, still looking uncomfortable, delicate face clouded with worry.

"Hey," John said, forcing himself to smile. It wasn't convincing; it looked strained and awkward, as it always did when he tried to smile. He tucked his hands into his pockets and cleared his throat. "Sorry about that. Do you still want to eat?"
Cadfael gave him a long hard look, obviously not happy with him. "You don't need to keep apologizing," he said. He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. In a defeated weary tone, he added, "Let's talk tomorrow, okay? It's your birthday, I don't want to make you miserable."

"You don't make me miserable," John said. "I keep telling you you haven't done anything wrong, it's just that I can't--"

His phone buzzed and chirped loudly in his pocket, cutting him off mid-thought.

Harper
Heya! Student council has to do an educational thing tomorrow about the plague, dyou want me to cover for you? :) We r gonna be responsible for reporting early symptoms apparently! Even though no one around here has gotten sick...

He made an aggravated noise in his throat. Of course Harper was only capable of texting at the most inopportune times.

To: Harper
I'll be there.
Harper
ok
Harper
Im guessing you don't want to go out for dinner with the rest of us after?
To: Harper
Correct.
Harper
Want any leftovers?
To: Harper
No.

The phone buzzed again, but he put it back in his pocket and returned his attention to the vastly more important matter at hand. "Look," he said. "Can things just... not be weird today?"

"Only if you stop making things weird," Cadfael said. "I don't wanna be a dick, John, but please keep in mind that you're the one flipflopping and panicking and changing your mind every other day about what's going on with us, not me."

"I know," John said. It was difficult to feel with any conviction that he wasn't supposed to be dating Cadfael when he had to be in the same room as him-- especially when he was tired, especially when he was having a bad day, especially when he kept thinking but it's my birthday, it's not fair.

"Well, as long as you know," Cadfael said, mouth tugging into a wry half-smile. "C'mere."

He sighed and closed the gap between them in a few steps, drawn inexorably back to Cadfael like he always was. Cadfael grabbed his wrists and pressed his forehead against John's. He didn't kiss him, and John felt equal parts disappointed and relieved by that.

"I don't know why I expected this to be easy," he said softly.
"You didn't, you're a huge pessimist. You just wanted it to be easy," Cadfael brushed his thumbs over the tender skin on John's wrists, and rested them on top of his pulse. "I'll be here and in your corner whatever you decide, you know that. You just need to actually make some kind of decision."

"I know," John said.
Cadfael lifted one of his hands up and gently brushed his fingertips over one of the lingering hickeys on John's neck. "For real this time," he said firmly.
"For real this time," John agreed, and leaned in to kiss him.
INCREDIBLE KINDERGARTENER RANKED 2ND MOST POWERFUL SORCERER

While the yearly ORB rankings of magical ability and potential are always highly anticipated, nobody expected the huge twist in this year's list. The list is an exciting peek into what might be next for the magic hero scene, but the top ten most powerful sorcerers-- both in measured potential and actual ability-- haven't budged from their spots in over a hundred years. The list of the top ten most powerful sorcerers in the world includes several members of the Pantheon of the Ascended and is topped, as it has been since the lists were created, by the infamous dark sorcerer Morris Kkierhan.

That's how it was until this morning, however. The long-standing rankings have finally been shaken up-- by a seven-year-old [redacted] named Skullduggery Creed.

The ORB starts testing children with magical ability early in life, but it's extremely rare that anyone younger than 16 makes it into the top 100 of either list, let alone the top 10. Initially there was widespread speculation that there had been some kind of mistake and that Creed had been incorrectly listed. In a statement released a few hours after the rankings, however, the ORB confirmed the ranking and stated that no mistake had been made:

"Skullduggery Creed's placement at #2 in potential magical ability is correct and reflects the results of thorough and carefully monitored testing by licensed ORB evaluators."

Creed currently attends Adosia Kindergarten in Hillside. [IT] has six older siblings, three of whom are also sorcerers. It is widely speculated that Creed's power comes in part from [ITS] position in [ITS] family as the seventh child of a seventh child.

Agent Holster, an ORB agent who has worked closely with Creed and [ITS] family, had this to say about Creed's abilities:

"We really haven't seen anyone with this kind of power since Morris [Kkierhan], so naturally we're very excited, and we're taking steps to provide [IT] with the support [IT] needs to grow into its abilities. This kid is headed straight for the Pantheon. This kid is going to change the world. This kind of natural magic ability-- I mean, it's completely unheard of in humans."

Indeed, 6 of the remaining 9 people on the top ten list are non-humans, including Morris Kkierhan, who still holds the #1 spot on both the measured ability and potential lists even almost 200 years after his defeat, is arguably the most infamous and disastrous example of a Fallen Hero.

When asked what steps the ORB planned to take to prevent a similar outcome, Agent Holster said:

"Skullduggery's just a little kid right now, and [IT] hasn't tripped any alarm bells. Of course we're on the lookout for early warning signs, but [IT] really is a good kid. We have no reason to believe [IT'S] at risk of turning out like Kkierhan did. There's no history of radicalism in [ITS] family, nothing like that. As far as future planning goes, we're going to be vigilant about protecting [IT] from terrorist recruitment. That's definitely going to be a big focus. Morris Kkierhan's story is one we're determined never to repeat. The Bureau has completely changed its approach to monitoring and protecting heroes since his fall, and we can assure you that things are a lot safer for everyone these days."

According to Creed's family, [IT] is a gifted student in areas even outside of magic and [ITS] favorite thing to do right now is make new friends.
Chapter 8: Plague

The Escaran Plague spread slowly at first. At first "plague" seemed like a bit of an overdramatization; not many people were sick, and the sickness seemed confined to the capital. Initially it seemed that Skulduggery was right, and it was a targeted disease aimed at Moropolis. For a few weeks, the disease crept through Moropolis exclusively, spreading slowly and infecting very few people. Then, very suddenly, it began to spread like wildfire; first through the city and the surrounding suburbs, then through the whole country, then through the rest of the world. Quarantines were put in place, but seemed to do nothing at all; the plague seemed to be popping up spontaneously in countries halfway across the world from Óírrir.

The plague had few symptoms initially; a fever, aches and pains, general disorientation and weakness. After about three days, the person infected would be in immense pain, coughing and puking up blood. After that, it was a matter of time before they died; for some people it took a week, and others managed to stagger along for nearly a month, delirious and in pain all the while. Hospitals could do nothing. The disease absorbed any magical attempts at healing; in fact, attempting to cure the sickness with magic would instead make it advance more rapidly. The magic turned into fuel.

Skulduggery followed the news more closely than it had in a very long time. Every new person that died felt like its fault. It felt all of them building up like a physical weight on its shoulders. The plague had to be related to what had happened with the storm. It was confident. It had no doubt in its mind whatsoever that this was all its fault, that it had made this happen--but still no one came to talk to it. No one came to arrest it. No one ever floated the idea that it might be its fault.

The news, however, was packed with speculation on the source of the disease--everyone was saying it was a magical plague, a biomagical weapon created in Escara. Despite neighboring Óírrir-- to the north--Escara had been spared the same widespread infection that almost everyone else had been subjected to. Add to that the years of growing tension and escalating conflict, and they were the most obvious choice among the possible culprits. The plague, at least initially, had disproportionately affected Óírririan politicians, so a political enemy made sense.

They'd been on the brink of war for more than a year, and this was threatening to push the countries over the edge. The government of Escara was denying any involvement and refusing to let the Óírrir government send in a taskforce to investigate. Óírririan politicians were arguing that their refusal was evidence that they had something to hide.

School attendance at UPI dropped as people got sick. A lot of people tried to tough it out and keep showing up even though they were sick, and ended up infecting vast swathes of the student body. It hadn't been that long, but in less than a month Hillside became a ghost town. Skulduggery kept on trudging to school, but every day there were fewer people. Their classrooms were half-empty, their hallways quiet. Strangely, though, everyone seemed totally fine with it. No one seemed panicked like Skulduggery thought they ought to, even when people started dying.

"It's just another apocalypse scenario," someone said with a shrug, when Skulduggery asked them about it. "The death toll is artificially high, so we know they're not gonna stay dead. Someone's gonna fix it, everything will go back to normal, and they'll get a statue. I'm just mad it's not mine, you know? It's a good one, if people remember it."
Squelch said, "I'm sure everything will be okay. There's always a cure. We just have to tough it out for now."
She'd always been good at *toughing it out*. Skullduggery, not so much.
Skullduggery's younger siblings got sick first, from other kids at their school. It spread to its parents next, then its older siblings who still lived at home.

It checked itself every day for any sign that something was wrong-- half terrified and half almost looking forward to getting sick. Dying, temporarily or otherwise, didn't seem so bad compared to the overwhelming terror of having to watch everyone it knew waste away in feverish agony.

The plague had a radiant queasy warmth that Skullduggery could sense. Especially up close, it felt stifling and uncomfortable; the sickness drew it in, silently calling to it, like it was *supposed* to get sick. It didn't feel familiar, but Skullduggery still knew that its magic was in there somewhere, fueling this disease.

Predictably, the one person Skullduggery wanted to get rid of was totally fine. Fucking Blood Diamond of all people-- allergic-to-magic perpetually sleep-deprived delicate fainting *Blood Diamond*-- didn't get sick.

He stopped it at the front gate on April 30th, as usual, and pressed his hand against its forehead to check for fever. As if it hadn't done that already, as if it hadn't been obsessively checking its temperature every few hours. It was fine. Normal temperature. He made a note on his clipboard, then set that down and took its wrist in his hand to check its pulse. He pulled its sleeve up for it, offered no reaction whatsoever to the scars crisscrossing almost the entirety of its forearm, and looked at his watch.

"How come you're so fucking chipper?" it growled at him. In truth he wasn't chipper at all-- he looked as stony-faced as he always did-- but it found his unceasing commitment to the rules particularly aggravating when its entire family was dying.

"I'm not chipper," Blood Diamond said. His hand on its arm was steady; steadier than Skullduggery's hands ever were. He could be a surgeon, it thought. His hands were large and warm, though not unpleasantly so. His fingers were long-- pianist's hands, Skullduggery's mom would probably say. Not that anyone had time for playing instruments. The skin-to-skin contact sent a jolt of discomfort up its arm; it wanted very badly to jerk away. It gritted its teeth and held as still as it could, though it couldn't keep itself from flinching.

Blood Diamond seemed annoyed, but not any more so than he usually did. "My parents got sick," he added, keeping his eyes fixed on his watch. "I don't know how long ago."

"Oh," Skullduggery said. It thought of its own parents-- how sick they were getting-- and its heart sank. "Sorry."

Blood Diamond looked surprised and incredulous; it had, after all, only apologized to him maybe three or four times in the three years they'd known each other. It glared back at him, daring him to make a big deal about it. He wrinkled his nose and shrugged.

"I'm just saying," he said. "You'd have to be a sociopath to be chipper in this situation."

"Good morning, you two!" Squelch waved cheerfully at them, trotting over from the front door to the school. Blood Diamond's eyes flicked over to her, then back to Skullduggery, and he raised his eyebrows at it as if to say, *speaking of sociopaths...*

"You're fine," he announced, releasing its arm. It yanked its arm away and pulled its sleeve down again, giving him the nastiest look it could muster. Squelch clapped Blood Diamond
on the shoulder with enough force to send anyone else sprawling on the ground. It didn't knock him down, but he did visibly dig his heels in to stop himself stumbling. He glared at her.

"We've been called to the headmaster's office first thing," Skullduggery said, looking very excited about this. "There's someone from the Pantheon here to talk to us! Us!"

"All three of us?" Blood Diamond and Skullduggery asked at the same time, with almost identical tones of disbelief. This annoyed Skullduggery more than a little bit.

"Yeah!" Skullduggery beamed at him. "We're going on a quest."

Skullduggery felt sick. It knew that something like this was going to happen from the start, but it had hoped that maybe it was wrong. It was often wrong about things. It didn't want to go on a quest; it knew that it would fail, and then everyone would be viciously disappointed in it. Even more so than they already were.

"Why do they want him?" Skullduggery jerked its chin at Blood Diamond. "I mean, me and you makes sense, but what's the point of having him with us too? He's just you but shittier. You gotta have some type diversity."

Squelch gave it a somewhat exasperated must you do this right now look and said, "Probably because whatever we're doing will require more than one person who can handle a sword."

Blood Diamond snorted. "If you believe that, you're an idiot," he said, tucking his hands into his pockets. "Creed's right, they would normally send three different types if they're only sending three people."

Skullduggery had mostly been complaining for the sake of complaining and hadn't put much thought into it; hearing Blood Diamond say it was right was almost startling. Additionally so because he had that dark bitter look about him that he got when he was very genuinely upset. Agreeing with it while he was in a bad mood was unusual.

Squelch said, "Both of you are being pretty rude right now. I thought you'd be more excited about this. Especially you, John. What's your problem?"

"Oh, I don't know," Blood Diamond drawled, holding up his long hands in an exceedingly sarcastic shrug. "Maybe because the only reason they'd put me on a three-man team with you is so that I can die for your benefit."

This did seem the most likely explanation; Skullduggery thought this sounded about right, but Skullduggery looked totally shocked. "What? John, why on earth would you think that?!"

"Well," Skullduggery said, but Blood Diamond cut it off before it could continue.

"Because, Harper, I'm just a shittier version of you. I wouldn't be essential. I'm disposable, and I'm not the kind of person they want representing heroism," he said. Skullduggery looked even more shocked and horrified. "Maybe you forgot, but literally everyone hates me."

"Plus he's gay," Skullduggery added.

Blood Diamond shot it a venomous look, and Skullduggery said, "Skullduggery!" like she was offended on his behalf.

"No, I'm not," he snapped. "But they'll kill me anyway, so, thanks for that."

"You're not going to die, that's-- that would be awful!" Skullduggery looked distressed. Skullduggery was torn between feeling bad for her and feeling annoyed at how surprised and alarmed this was making her. "I can't believe you would even suggest that!"

Blood Diamond never failed to get on Skullduggery's nerves-- his stupid my life is harder than yours attitude, his stupid pathetic self-pity, how he acted like Skullduggery was the only one spreading rumors about him. It couldn't not respond to his bad attitude with further antagonizing.
He was just too annoying. It pressed its hands to its face in mock dismay. "Oh, no, how could I possibly ever understand the terrible plight of the cis gay? Someone wants you dead? What an unrelatable thing that I've definitely never experienced before! Wow! I'm sooooo sorry."

Blood Diamond bristled even more, face reddening. "What, like your life is so much more desperately gritty than mine, with your loving family and your five billion friends and your ability to get away with doing whatever the hell you want--" He was getting rapidly more upset, very obviously so. Fear and grim satisfaction sent a surge of adrenaline coursing through Skullduggery's veins. "You could kill me yourself and you'd still get a fucking magazine feature about how special and talented you are!"

"That's not true and you know it, you piece of shit--"


"Fuck you," Blood Diamond said, but he still started to calm himself down. Backing away from the edge of losing his temper, he fidgeted with the cuffs of his sleeves and hissed in a breath through his teeth. "Let's just go. Whatever it is, I'll say no and the two of you can have a fun time saving the world without me."

The three of them walked into the main school building, tension vibrating in the air around them. They were all very annoyed, now. Skullduggery elbowed Blood Diamond hard in the ribs, jabbing him with its pointy elbow, and muttered, "You know that never works."

No one could ever say no to a call. Refusing the call was standard procedure; the hero is called, the hero refuses, the hero is forced to accept the call due to some sort of personal tragedy. This was basic information, a fundamental rule of the universe; to suggest refusing an offered quest was petulant and childish, nothing more.

"It's your quest, not mine," he said to it, staring at Squelch's back as though by looking hard enough he could make her fall. "I don't have to participate."

"My quest?" Skullduggery scoffed. "It's not mine, it's Kel's. Why would you die on my quest?"

"You know why," Blood Diamond said curtly, through gritted teeth.

That deflated it quickly. It shifted away from him, putting another step of distance between the two of them, and looked away. "I thought we weren't gonna talk about it," it said--very quietly, voice barely above a whisper, so that no one else could hear it.

"We're not," he said, and nothing else.

Squelch gave Skullduggery a curious look over her shoulder; even she didn't know about the thing, the one they weren't going to talk about. There weren't a lot of things about it that Squelch didn't know, but this was one of them.

Before they walked into the headmaster's office, Squelch grabbed Skullduggery's arm. "You should really lay off him," she said softly. "His parents are dying."

"My parents are dying," Skullduggery snapped. She sighed, and smoothed her hand over the middle of its back in a vaguely soothing motion.

"Yeah. If you two could stop trying to get punched in the face, you might be able to be supportive of each other," Squelch gave it a sort of wry half-smile. "That might be a bit too optimistic, though, huh?"
"If you ever catch me being supportive of Blood Diamond, that's how you'll know I've been killed and replaced with a shapeshifter," Skulduggery muttered, and yanked its arm out of her grip and marched into the office.

It was a large office, cluttered with books and art and statues and filing cabinets. It was a mishmash of styles; it looked like it had once been a very classy office, with a lot of expensive dark wood furniture, but it had been filled over the years with so much normal school stuff that it now just looked messy. Skulduggery had been in there dozens of times, getting scolded and suspended and having meetings with its parents. It hated it. The room had an unpleasant dusty smell, because the windows were never open. The chairs in front of the desk were slightly low, and the desk and desk chair were slightly high, so that people who were getting scolded were always being looked down on by whoever was behind the desk. The windows were positioned in such a way that the sun always shone in its eyes when it sat down.

The headmaster wasn't there; only a very plain-looking woman in her late thirties, with long brown hair and a tired look about her. She had a roundish face and dark eyes, and was about average height. Shorter than both Blood Diamond and Squelch. Skulduggery could feel something under her skin, but couldn't tell what it was. She didn't feel particularly powerful, but there was something there-- something magical.

"Please, sit," she said, gesturing at the three chairs in front of the desk.

Blood Diamond leaned against the wall. "I prefer to stand," he said, because he couldn't not be a try-hard. Skulduggery rolled its eyes and flopped down into one of the chairs, picking at the dirt under its fingernails.

"Alright," said the woman.

Squelch sat down on the edge of the seat, back straight and shoulders squared. Skulduggery slid down in its chair, aggressively slouching. Maybe if it looked unprofessional and unpleasant enough, they wouldn't want it to go on this stupid quest.

"My name is Lyre Frostborn. I'm from the Pantheon of the Ascended," said the woman. She smiled halfheartedly and sat down behind the headmaster's desk. "Of course, I know all of your names. Harper, Skulduggery, Takashi."

"Nobody calls me that," Blood Diamond said stiffly.

"It's still your name," Lyre shrugged. "Simply put, I'm here on behalf of the Pantheon and the government to give the three of you a quest."

The three of them, she said, but she was looking at Skulduggery. It shifted uncomfortably in its seat, picking at a loose thread on the cushioned arm of the chair. Squelch beamed. "Whatever it is, I'm ready!" she said.

"I refuse," Blood Diamond said.

Lyre gave him a long flat look. "We thought you would say that, Takashi," she said. "But after hearing what it is, I suspect you'll change your mind."

There was an undercurrent of threat in her voice that only Skulduggery and Blood Diamond seemed to notice; Squelch seemed completely unaffected. Blood Diamond crossed his arms over his chest and gripped his arms tightly, eyes narrowed. "Why?" he asked warily.

"Let me explain," Lyre said. She placed her hands on the desk, fingers splayed out, and took a deep breath. "The plague is magical in nature. It was created by the dark sorcerer Morris. He's returned to Öirrir after decades of silence, with renewed determination. He seeks to completely destroy the world as we know it."

Skulduggery's jaw tightened. "The storm," it said. "Was that him?"
"Yes. The storm served a dual purpose. First, to sap magical energy from anyone who might try to stop it," She looked at Skulduggery with a sympathetic twist to her mouth. "He used it to create the plague. The storm was also an attempt at wearing away the barriers protecting the rift nearby. He's been trying to whittle away the defenses on rifts around the world, to try to rip them open."

So it was its fault. Skulduggery felt very ill. If this plague happened because of it, it couldn't possibly refuse to go try and fix it. Assuming that's what it was meant to do.

"As you all well know by now, the plague has been pushing the world closer and closer to outright war," Lyre continued. "Morris is trying to get us all to tear each other apart. The Pantheon and many of the best heroes in the world are working around the clock to try and keep the rifts safe, find a cure for the plague, negotiate with foreign governments, and fight Morris himself. He's been spotted in a few different places. All of our conflicts with him have ended in stalemate; it's taking all we've got to keep him at bay."

"What can we do to help?" Squelch asked eagerly.

"There are a few countries that have been carefully avoiding becoming embroiled in the conflicts thus far, maintaining diplomatic neutrality. Chief among them being Atlaras," Lyre said. In Skulduggery's peripheral vision, Blood Diamond went suddenly very still, not even breathing. "To try and provoke conflict, and likely to try and extract his magical energy as he extracted Skulduggery's, Morris has kidnapped the heir apparent to the throne of Atlaras. Prince Cadfael Illarion Aelius."

She slid a small crystal disk to the center of the desk and tapped it; in the air above it, a circular image appeared. Some guy about their age-- pretty, Skulduggery thought-- with long white hair and light brown skin and entirely too much jewelry, unconscious and handcuffed in a featureless dungeon.

"No," Blood Diamond said. Anger and panic and pain made his voice sound oddly strangulated; Skulduggery and Squelch both turned to look curiously at him. He pressed his hand over his mouth, as though he felt the need to physically restrain himself so that he wouldn't say anything else.

"We know he's alive for now, and we have a rough idea where he might be, but we don't have the resources to rescue him ourselves. This needs to happen as soon as possible. Morris planted evidence to make it look like it was someone from Öirtir who took him -- we need him to be saved and returned home before a full-scale war breaks out. We don't know what plans Morris has for him, but it's safe to say that they aren't good. He could be killed or brainwashed or... any number of awful things," Lyre said.

This was actually a relief for Skulduggery to hear; they didn't have to cure the plague or kill Morris, just rescue some guy. "Save the kidnapped princess from the evil wizard," Skulduggery said. "Standard high school-grade shit. Should be pretty easy."

"Yeah! It'll be a snap!" Squelch said brightly. "He'll be home in a jiffy."

Blood Diamond, meanwhile, looked like he'd been stabbed in the gut. He still had his hand pressed firmly over his mouth, and his eyes were wide and panicked and shiny-wet with tears. "What's your problem?" Skulduggery asked.

Blood Diamond turned his horrified stare on Lyre. Slowly, he took his hand away from his mouth, and said, numbly, "I can't refuse."

"No one's forcing you to do anything," Lyre said. "I want to make that clear."
Blood Diamond let out a hysterical noise that wasn't really a laugh. "Oh, of course not. No one's forcing me. You people are sick, you know that?"

"John, what's wrong?" Squelch asked. "Do you know him?"

"Nothing's wrong, and it's none of your business whether I know him or not!" Blood Diamond snapped, sounding like he might burst into tears. Skullduggery snickered. "Everything is absolutely fucking peachy-keen."

"That's so convincing, Blood Diamond," Skullduggery drawled. "Why, you should consider a life in the theater!"

Blood Diamond stalked up to the desk, grabbed the crystal disk, and flipped it over; the image of the prince vanished. Hoarse and severe, Blood Diamond leaned over the desk and asked, "What do we have to do?"

Lyre picked up the disk. She seemed entirely unaffected by Blood Diamond looming ominously over her, furious though he was. She turned the crystal disk over in her hands and set it down again. This time it showed them a stone building in a dark forest. "Morris has an old base in Óirtír. Deep in the Han Forest. The prince is there."

"I assume we can't just walk in," Skullduggery said.

"No. It's an old base, one he's used on and off since he was young. It's heavily protected. It can only be found if you already know where it is, and you can only get near it if you have a key. He made keys for his followers on rare occasion-- they're almost all dead now, but their keys haven't been found. You'll have to find one," Lyre said.

"Fine," Blood Diamond said. He straightened up. "We'll find a key, then."
Chapter 9: Blood

Skullduggery and Squelch walked a few paces behind Blood Diamond as he stalked through the hallway. His broad shoulders were even tenser than usual, his hands clenched into trembling fists at his sides. It was a good thing everyone was in class, Skullduggery thought; if anyone happened to walk into his line of vision, he'd probably give them detention.

"Can you believe how much of a pissbaby he's being right now?" Skullduggery muttered. "How much of a buzzkill can you be, right?"

"I mean..." Kel said, looking uncomfortable. This was how she often prefaced her disagreeing with it; saying I mean... in an awkward high-pitched voice. Skullduggery rolled its eyes. She was going to say something about how it shouldn't be making gay jokes because it hurt Blood Diamond's delicate feelings, like she usually did, because she was too nice for her own good. "It's not exactly the most appropriate time to be cracking wise."

"I wasn't cracking wise, grandma," Skullduggery said dryly.

"I'm just saying. John's just taking this really seriously, because it's serious. This guy-- the prince-- could die," she said. She didn't look terribly worried, though; she was doing that thing where she arranged her facial expression into the thing that she thought would be appropriate, but it wasn't sincere. It could tell that she was actually excited about this whole quest thing.

Skullduggery, on the other hand, was filled with dread and anxiety.

"I'm taking it seriously, too," it said.

It was, in a sense, taking it more seriously than Kel was. It could see in her casual ease that she was absolutely confident that they would breeze through this. There was no question to her whether or not they'd be able to do this, no real sense of urgency or fear for anyone's life. Everything was easy for her, especially this kind of thing.

For Skullduggery, though, being responsible for another person's safety-- another person's life-- was a daunting prospect. Usually if it screwed up, the only person who got hurt was it. But if it screwed up this time, someone could die. A lot of people could die, potentially; if it screwed up badly enough, Kel and Blood Diamond could both die, the prince could die, and international tension could explode into a full-scale world war.

It didn't trust itself with that kind of responsibility. Skullduggery knew itself well enough to know that it shouldn't be given any responsibility at all; it was too dysfunctional to be in charge of anything or help anyone.

The mission was straightforward enough that on top of everything else, it would look woefully incompetent if it fucked up. Rescuing princesses was baby stuff. Anyone could rescue a princess from a witch in a tower. If it couldn't even manage this level of heroic endeavor, then there was no way it would ever amount to anything.

It was simple enough, but the prospect of actually having to start the quest was daunting. Doing things was difficult.

"So, how are we going to actually find one of these keys?" Kel asked, loud enough for Blood Diamond to hear her. "We can find lists of known associates in the library, but there's no way to know for sure which ones had keys and which ones didn't. There's too many to investigate all of them thoroughly."

"Well," Skullduggery said, shoving its hands into the pockets of its jeans. "I figured we'd be looking into associates he had from the beginning. When he went here. Those were the ones
he trusted most. Probably all of them had keys, if they lived long enough to be around when he set up the enchantments. If we can get a list of known accomplices from that period who lived in Hillside, we can start looking in town. We might not find anything, but it'd be a start."

John walked in silence for a moment before reluctantly saying, "Precisely." He didn't look over his shoulder at it, but Skullduggery could tell he was grinding his teeth.

"That's a good idea," Kel said, giving Skullduggery an encouraging smile like she was its kindergarten teacher, "But it's still an awful lot of information to sift through."

"Yeah. That's why I figured we'd go ask the people who know everything for help," Skullduggery said. "The--"

"No," Blood Diamond snapped, slamming the door to the courtyard open with unnecessary force.

"Don't fucking interrupt me, f--" Squelech smacked Skullduggery on the shoulder, giving it a pointed look, before it could finish saying the word faggot. It gave her a mutinous scowl, but knew it probably should try to dial back the hostility a bit if they were going to have to make this questing party garbage work. It exhaled an annoyed breath and said "fucko" instead.

"Okay, guys, I think we should all agree to not antagonize each other, since we're going to have to work together," Kel said firmly. "I know we have our differences, and we don't always get along very well--" (At this, Blood Diamond and Skullduggery both snorted derisively and muttered something under their breaths.) "Case in point. I'm not gonna ask you to be nice to each other, but if we could at least make an active effort to be civil, I think this would go a lot better."

"I'm always civil," Blood Diamond said.

"Well, no, you're definitely not," Kel said. "I think it's important we set up some interaction guidelines before we get into this. For example, no namecalling, Skullduggery."

"Fine, whatever," Skullduggery muttered. "Then I think we should make it a rule that Blood Diamond's not allowed to say or ask anything about my gender."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Kel said.

"You're such a narcissist," Blood Diamond said, shooting it a disgusted look over his shoulder. "I don't talk about your gender basically ever."

Of course he had to say something stupid and snide. Skullduggery bristled, and no amount of pointed looks from Squelech were going to stop it from snapping back at him. "Are you serious? You're constantly making snarky comments about how I need to just pick a side and how it's so immature how I pretend I don't have a real gender and shit!"

All three of them stopped walking outside the door to the library. Blood Diamond turned to actually face Skullduggery. "You're going to have to grow up and learn to exist in the real world eventually, Creed. Might as well start early," he said. Anxiety sucked all the air out of Skullduggery's lungs and the ground under it seemed to suddenly shift. "You're either a boy or a girl, that's how the world works. You can't spend your whole life throwing tantrums about normal bathrooms and people thinking you're a man when you wear men's clothing."

"Fucking watch me," Skullduggery snarled. The air around them got ever so slightly colder. Sparks skittered over its skin as it dug its fingernails into its palms.

"So, this is a good example of what I was really hoping we could avoid," Kel said evenly. She very gently put her hand on the middle of Skullduggery's back, between its shoulderblades. "John, I recognize that we can't change how you think about Skullduggery's gender, but I think it would be best for all of us if you just didn't bring it up at all."
Kel's hand was large and warm and soothing; Skullduggery took a deep breath and stopped itself from threatening to rip out Blood Diamond's throat with its teeth. Kel nudged its side in a comforting sort of way and added, "Also, maybe apologize."

"I hate both of you," Blood Diamond said. Then he looked down at Skullduggery and said, rather insincerely, "I apologize."

Skullduggery nodded curtly. It didn't particularly want him to apologize-- especially not so insincerely-- but turning this into a more extended fight would be pointless and upsetting. Also, Kel wouldn't let it. She seemed very keen on keeping the peace.

"Okay. So no name-calling, no talking about Skullduggery's gender," Kel said. "John, any suggestions?"

"No. This is juvenile," Blood Diamond said, and yanked open the door to the library.

Squelch paused for a moment before following him inside, completely still. She exhaled a long shaky breath, closed her eyes, and said very quietly: "This doesn't have to be this difficult."

"They put us together because it'll be unnecessarily difficult," Skullduggery said, distaste palpable in its voice. "You know they'd never make something easy when they could make it unpleasant and difficult instead."

The library was silent and mostly empty-- there was hardly anyone there besides the librarians, since most of the school was in class. Ahead of them, Blood Diamond was trying to go upstairs; Skullduggery jogged over and grabbed his arm to stop him. It was sort of hoping to yank him backwards down the stairs so he'd fall, but of course it didn't work. He was too much stronger than it was. He just turned and glared at it. "Don't touch me," he said.

"As if I wanted to," Skullduggery said, and released his arm. "We're going to ask the Inquirer people for help. I don't care if you don't like them, they're the people to ask."

The Institute Inquirer was the UPI student newspaper; one of the oldest student newspapers in the world, running continuously for hundreds of years. The staff of the paper-- entirely students-- had access to the entire archive of every paper the Inquirer had ever published, as well as all the memos and drafts and photographs and notes that had ever been produced for the paper. The content of the paper changed with the staff, ranging from actual news reporting to abstract poetry and collage; the current version of the Inquirer was mostly gossip, op-eds, and overly long movie reviews. One thing never changed: the student staff of the Inquirer knew everything about UPI. They knew all the gossip and all the history.

The Inquirer offices were in the basement of the library; they were the only club on campus that had more than one room. Skullduggery liked the Inquirer offices-- they were kind of dark and grim and weirdly decorated and always smelled faintly like someone had smoked weed in there a week ago. They had the most school funding out of any of the clubs-- not for lack of Blood Diamond trying to get them defunded-- and always had good free food.

Skullduggery led the way downstairs; Blood Diamond trailed behind Kel looking crabby and uncomfortable. He hated the paper, but only because he was still bitter about that one or two or five times they printed unsubstantiated rumors about his sexuality. Everyone else thought it was funny; he was the only one still up in arms about it.

"The whole staff ought to be in class right now," Kel said, tucking her hands into her pockets. "The offices might be empty."

"There's always someone there," Blood Diamond said. "Even if they have to skip class. That's why they all have terrible grades."
"They don't have terrible grades, Shukriyyah and Rowan are both solidly good students," Kel said with a perplexed wrinkle of her brow. "Shukriyyah gets straight Bs, at her worst."

"He thinks a B is a bad grade," Skullduggery said.

"The only people who don't think so are lazy unambitious idiots," Blood Diamond said, rather matter-of-factly, as though this was an obvious fact of life.

"No name-calling, Blood Diamond, that's the rule," Skullduggery said, in its best imitation of a preschool teacher's assistant voice.

"Upon further reflection, I do have a suggestion for a rule: stop calling me Blood Diamond," Blood Diamond snapped. Skullduggery's mouth twitched into a smirk; there was something terribly satisfying about getting on his nerves. If it was going to have to be around him for a while, it was going to have to do something to make that time bearable.

"That sounds reasonable," Kel said, and nudged Skullduggery. "Right?"

"Sure thing, Takashi," Skullduggery drawled.

Blood Diamond made an amusing aggravated noise.

The basement was old and gray, with cobwebs dangling from the ceiling and walls. The fluorescent lights buzzed loudly overhead, all of them cracked or stained or missing their covers. About a third of the lights in the basement had been broken for years. The doors to the Inquirer's archives and offices were as old and beat-up as the rest of the basement; somewhere under the dust they were solid wood with opaque gray windows and bronze plaques that said INSTITUTE INQUIRER on them.

Blood Diamond coughed, like he was trying to make a big show of how awful it was to have to come down there. Skullduggery rolled its eyes. Squelch asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Blood Diamond said tersely. He sounded a bit like he was being strangled. "It's very dusty down here."

"Do you have your inhaler?"

Skullduggery snickered and glanced over at Blood Diamond. His eyes were watery and reddish. He looked, as he often did, like absolute garbage. "Yeah, Takashi, do you have your inhaler?"

"I'm fine," he said again, more angrily this time.

Skullduggery opened the door to the main Inquirer office and stepped inside with Kel; Blood Diamond sneezed loudly before following.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't our very own questing party," Shukriyyah said, grinning broadly at the three of them when they walked in. The office was empty, apart from her; she was sitting with her feet propped up on thin air and a laptop in her lap. The editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, Shukriyyah El-Amin, was a short roundish girl with large round glasses and a loud floral-print headscarf. She was wearing bright red lipstick, like she did every day, and rather dramatic dark eye makeup. Skullduggery liked her immensely.

"Good morning," it said.

"How did you know about that?" Blood Diamond asked, in a rather accusatory tone of voice.

Totally unruffled, Shukriyyah straightened up, set her laptop on her desk, and tapped her fingers against a large smooth white stone that was sitting on her desk. It started to glow faintly. "I have my ways," she said. "Care to comment on the nature of your quest? I hear you got a special request direct from the Pantheon. You gonna stop a war? Start a war? Are you involved in an assassination plot?"
Skullduggery dragged a chair over to her desk and sat down, grinning. "I wish," it said. "If you help us out with something, I'll tell you all about it."

"Oho! You need my help?" Shukriyyah looked over at Blood Diamond, who was scowling at the wall. "President Know-it-all can't do it all by his lonesome?"

"We don't have time," Blood Diamond said. He sounded like saying it physically pained him. "We need this information as soon as possible. Immediately."

"Sounds like a golden opportunity for me," Shukriyyah said, sounding rather smug about this. She leaned back in her chair and steepled her fingers. "You'll tell me everything I want to know?"

"Yep," Skullduggery said, at the exact same time as Blood Diamond said, "Absolutely not." They glared at each other. Typical Blood Diamond, being contrary even in a supposed emergency.

"John, if we're in a hurry..." Kel said. He ground his teeth and looked away, pressing his back against the wall. She sighed, and combed her magical hand through her hair. "I hardly think it matters much who knows about what we're doing. Any forces of evil out to thwart us will be pretty solidly dealt with by the Pantheon, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think," Blood Diamond snapped.

"Well, you're outvoted, so suck it up," Skullduggery said, and gave Shukriyyah a can you believe this awful dude look.

"Great!" she said. "Soooo...?"

"The prince of Atlaras has been kidnapped by the evil sorcerer Morris. We have to go rescue him," Kel said.

Shukriyyah raised her eyebrows and looked at Blood Diamond. "The prince?" she asked him. "Oh, dear."

Baffled, Skullduggery craned its neck to look over its shoulder at Blood Diamond. This was not particularly illuminating; he was still just scowling and fidgeting and having an allergy attack. "Yo, what the fuck is that meaningful look about? What is that?"

"He--"

The look Blood Diamond gave Shukriyyah made both her and Skullduggery recoil slightly, it was so vicious. "Do not," he said.

"Yikes," she said. "Fine."

Skullduggery scoffed. She wouldn't give up so easily if it were anyone else. Blood Diamond kept glaring at her like a murderer, and it snapped its fingers so Shukriyyah would look at it instead of at him. "Bitch, if you have deets on his personal life that I don't, you gotta tell me. Like, immediately."

"I'll remind you that I can have either of you suspended whenever I feel like it," Blood Diamond snarled. Skullduggery dug its nails hard into its arm to stop itself from flinching.

"Sorry, SD," Shukriyyah said with a helpless shrug. "So. Why d'you need my help? It sounds like a pretty standard tower-princess scenario. I mean, Harper's already done one of those, right?"

"Sure have!" Kel said, with one of her aggressively charming perfect-toothed grins. "Looking forward to babysitting these two goons?" Shukriyyah asked her.

"I'm looking forward to working with two incredibly gifted people who I hold in very high regard," Kel said in her interview voice. Skullduggery always found that voice grating; it was the most nauseatingly fake voice she had. "The prince is being held in Morris' base in the
Han Forest. We need to find one of the keys he gave out to his followers back in the day. We were hoping you could give us some names and locations to start investigating."

Skullduggery added, "You know, since you know everything."

"Oh, that's all?" Shukriyyah looked bemused. "That's easy. I mean, why even ask me? You could've gone to your girlfriend, Harper."

Skullduggery looked at Kel, not sure what Shukriyyah was talking about. Kel looked just as confused as it felt. "Sorry?"

"I'm happy to give you access to Rowan's whole project, it just seems silly that you'd ask me and not her," Shukriyyah said, standing up and tucking her glowing stone into the pocket of her floor-length uniform skirt. "It's in our spare room."

Skullduggery and Blood Diamond moved to follow her, but Kel stayed in one place, looking confused. "What project?" she asked.

"She didn't tell you? That's interesting," Shukriyyah tapped her stone again and its glow got brighter, shining brightly even through her pocket. She plucked a set of keys off a pegboard, keeping her eyes on Kel. "Rowan's been working on a special archive collection of everything relating to Morris and known associates from UPI. She's super proud of it, and it's been taking up a lot of her time here."

There was an uncomfortable silence in which Kel tried and failed to look cavalier and not bothered. "Well," she said eventually, "I suppose she just didn't think I would find it interesting."

"That's definitely not it," Shukriyyah said. "I mean-- since you're here, I guess you must know already."

Kel's eyes flicked to Shukriyyah's pocket, then back to her face. Something in her seemed to shift; she looked guarded, suddenly. "What don't I know?" she asked, somehow managing to keep her voice light and interested. If it were Skullduggery, it probably would have flipped its lid already. Blood Diamond, it suspects, would have punched Shukriyyah in the throat or something. He looked as bored as Skullduggery had ever seen him, obviously not at all interested in whatever drama was going on with Rowan and Kel.

It didn't find it terribly suspicious that Rowan would have shit she didn't tell Squelch; after all, they weren't really dating. Squelch seemed really bothered, though, and it wondered if maybe her relationship with Rowan was more complicated than she'd made it out to be. She'd never expressed any kind of romantic inclination towards anybody, but maybe it was just one of those feelings she pretended she didn't have even though she definitely did. Skullduggery made a mental note to interrogate her about that later.

Shukriyyah unlocked the door to the next room and led them inside, snapping her fingers to illuminate it with a sourceless witchlight. Blood Diamond sneezed loudly. The walls were covered in papers, and there were stacks of boxes pushed up against one wall. There were several bookshelves in the room, half-filled with folders and binders. It was all rather a mess. Shukriyyah said, "About a month after Morris dropped out-- you know, back in the day, about two hundred and five years ago-- someone from the paper dropped out, too, to follow him. She was a reporter for the news section, kinda gunning for an editorial position, before he got to her. She was the only one from the paper to fall-- I mean, the only contemporary. There were others, in the last two centuries. She was the only one who went to school at the same time as him, though. Addison Harper."

Kel blinked, actually surprised. "Harper?" she asked, sounding incredulous.
"Yeah, by my figuring she'd be your..." Shukriyyah attempted to count off on her hands: "Great-great-great-great-great-great-aunt. Give or take a great."

"But--" Kel cut herself off, like just saying that had revealed too much. She swallowed, brow wrinkling into a semblance of a frown, and she said, "You're sure it's Harper?"

"Yep," Shukriyyah walked over to one of the tables and picked up a binder, which she handed to Kel. "Definitely Harper. She never married or changed her name, as far as we know."

Blood Diamond skulked over to lean against one of the bookshelves, looking rather smug for a guy who was in the midst of having a sniffly allergy attack. Skulduggery felt the urge to kick him in the teeth rising, an uncomfortable burning compulsion that seemed to emanate from its bones. "Well, isn't that nice," he said. "I'm so excited to go on a quest with the descendant of a traitor."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Skulduggery snapped. Kel started flipping through the binder, distracted and visibly rattled. It could fight this one for her; it wasn't ever going to pass up an opportunity for a Kel-approved fight with Blood Diamond. "For one thing, she's not actually descended from her if Addison's her great-great-whatever-aunt, dipshit. For another thing, who the fuck cares?"

"Family's family," Blood Diamond said with a dismissive shrug. He cleared his throat and wiped at his watery eyes. "This kind of corruption sticks in the blood. History repeats itself."

"Ugh, shut up," Skulduggery scoffed. "You're so full of it. They're barely even related at all. Nobody knows anything about their great-great-great-great-great-aunts! It's not like this is his mom or something."

"You missed several greats," Blood Diamond said, like the awful know-it-all he always had to be. "I have four hundred years of my family tree memorized. None of them ever went crazy and joined an evil wizard cult."

"That's intense," Shukriyyah said. Blood Diamond gave her a disdainful look, like he was so much better than everyone else because he was an obsessive freak. Kel kept flipping through the binder, looking more agitated with every page she looked at.

If he was going to be a snobbish petty know-it-all, then Skulduggery was going to be one as well. "Morris is a sorcerer, not a wizard, you illiterate prick," it sneered at him.

"What happened to the no name-calling rule?"

"You started it, acting like Kel's gonna commit high treason just because some lady he's distantly related to did some dumb shit in high school!"

"I'm not saying he will, just that it's more likely," Blood Diamond said. "It doesn't matter if he knew about her or not, it just matters that they're related." He jerked his chin at Kel and asked, "Is there a picture? Does she look like you?"

For a moment, she did nothing; then Kel nodded, chewing on her lower lip. "She looks a lot like me," she said.

"I thought so," Blood Diamond said, throwing his hands up. "Now I've got to watch my back in case he decides to go rogue, as if this wasn't bad enough already. Fucking typical."

"I'm not going to hurt either of you," Kel said, abruptly snapping the binder shut. She gave Blood Diamond a steely-eyed look, hard and honest and steady. "I would never do that. Not ever."

Shukriyyah pulled her recording-stone out of her pocket and held it up. "So, Harper, did you have any idea that there was a traitor in your family tree?"

"No," she said. "None at all."
Shukriyyah raised her eyebrows, grinning, and pressed, "Why do you think that is? Why do you think no one told you?"

"She's on my mother's side," Kel said. "No one-- since-- I don't know much about my mother's side of the family."

"Why do you think your girlfriend didn't tell you when she found out about this months ago?" Shukriyyah asked.

More miserably than anybody expected, Squelch said, "I don't... I don't know."
Chapter 10: Ancestry [in progress]

To: Rowan
Hi! So this is kind of weird but I was hoping I could ask you something.
Rowan
Uh oh. As my bf or as student council vice president?
To: Rowan
Boyfriend, I think.
Rowan
kk shoot
To: Rowan
Ok first of all I'm going on a quest w/ John and SD
Rowan
Ooh congrats!
To: Rowan
...so we needed some information, and we went to ask Shukriyyah for help
To: Rowan
Uhh and she told us about your project! With the Morris associates like Addison Harper
To: Rowan
It's really cool and it seems like you've been putting a lot of work into it
To: Rowan
I just was kind of wondering why you didn't tell me about it? I'm not mad or anything
Rowan
Oh
Rowan
uh
Rowan
let's talk about it in person, ok?

Oh, uh, let's talk about it in person was not the absolute worst thing Rowan could have possibly said, but it definitely felt like one of the more ominous options. Squelch sighed and put her phone down on the table. It wasn't important, not really, but it felt strange that Rowan apparently knew more about her family than she did.

Well-- half her family. As was tradition, she'd had to study her father's family history in excruciating detail. That was supposed to be the important half, after all. That was the important half. Names and swords and destinies were passed down from fathers to sons. A mother's job was to die too tragically young; that was tradition.

Squelch combed her hands through her hair and leaned over the table, eyes fixed on Addison Harper's file. There were other files to look through, but she was still stuck on this one. Maybe it was because of the photograph-- it was faded and had been folded and unfolded more than a few times, but it was still clear. A young woman, angular and handsome. Short wavy blonde hair and light blue eyes, just like Squelch. Addison, undeniably, looked like her; less chiseled, less guarded, less tired, but similar. A softer version of Squelch, one who wasn't self-conscious at all. Her smile looked real, if a bit sheepish and awkward.
It was hardly extensive, but it was a surprisingly thorough profile given that it was entirely about someone who lived more than two hundred years ago and wasn't very important. Born in 2850, Addison Harper lived in Hillside for most of her life. She was an average UPI student--above-average for the country, but not a standout there. She was middle of the road. Good at sports but not truly exceptional. She joined the Inquirer her second year. Most of her articles were boring; the student paper was a lot more like a real paper back then, so it was mostly sports games and guest speakers and budget issues. She stayed out of trouble until her third year.

Judging from the notes that were collected in the binder, the first time she met Morris was when she interviewed him for the paper. Most of the transcript was missing, and the article was never published; administration refused to let them publish it because it was too politically biased. A month after the interview, Morris dropped out of school. A month after that, Addison vanished.

The next time anyone heard from her, she was implicated in a bombing in Moropolis. Eight people died.

Squelch brushed her fingers over the collected records, staring at the paper. What did Morris do to her? What was going on in her head in between her being a normal student and her becoming a terrorist? She'd never shown any warning signs that she might turn evil. She'd never hurt anyone before. Was it magic? Mind control? Blackmail?

From what Squelch could gather about Addison's personality, based off these papers, she just didn't seem the type to go bad like she had. She seemed nice. Inoffensive. Normal. Just like everyone at UPI, she had a strong sense of right and wrong, good and evil. She wasn't even one of Morris's friends, like other people who left with him.

There was so much information in the file, but none of it explained why this had happened.

Addison's involvement with Morris escalated rapidly after the bombing. The file made reference to her publishing essays and making speeches, but Rowan apparently hadn't found any of them. There was just a list, handwritten, of publication dates, with a few scrawled notes on the contents of the essays. Most of the scrawled notes seemed vague and uncertain: propaganda? recruitment plea? anti-government rant?

Addison's treachery peaked with a particularly daring attempt at summoning a demon; part of an evil plan of Morris's to try to usher in the apocalypse. The heroes who stopped her took her home, alive, even though they'd been told to kill her. After about a year of recovery, she made a public apology. The full text of that was available; she recanted everything she'd said in support of Morris, and said she was going to dedicate the rest of her life to making amends for what she'd done. (Still no explanation of why it had happened in the first place.) A proper redemption, or it would have been if Morris hadn't killed her a few days later.

He ripped out her heart and hung her corpse in her childhood bedroom in her parents' house.

She was only twenty-three. She never graduated high school. Her life was ruined and then she died horribly and everybody forgot about her. It wasn't a good story; Squelch could see why nobody really wanted to tell it.

It felt unfair and invasive that Rowan found all this out and didn't tell her. It wasn't her family. It wasn't her business. Squelch pressed her hands over her eyes and took a deep breath, pushing down the discomfort simmering under her skin. She told herself again that it wasn't a big
deal. Rowan probably was planning on telling her, or had some good reason not to tell her. It was probably reasonable of her to assume Squelch wouldn't care. She'd never expressed any interest whatsoever in her family history on her mom's side, after all.

But it couldn't just be that Rowan thought it wouldn't interest her. The whole project had been taking up a lot of Rowan's time. It had to be that Rowan decided not to tell her, with intent.

While Squelch was slowly poring over every page of Addison's file, Skullduggery and John were looking through other files on other associates who'd lived in the area at some point. The two of them were sitting at tables on opposite ends of the room-- as far away from each other as they could manage without leaving-- in sullen silence. John was examining every bit of information as carefully as possible, making little notes in his pocket notebook as he went, lips moving silently as he wrote. Skullduggery was flipping through the files rather quickly, pausing only occasionally to glance over a page.

"There's no point looking through them at all if you're not going to actually read any of them," John said loudly, apparently unable to resist picking fights with Skullduggery no matter how far away he sat. Skullduggery looked up at him, lip curling all hostile and disgusted in that way it only did when it looked at him.

"I'm not fucking stupid, Takashi," Skullduggery said, slapping shut the folder it had been flicking through. It tossed it back onto its table, sending it skidding over the edge and onto the floor. "How about you keep your ugly fucking mouth shut and do your own work instead of bitching at me every three minutes about how I'm reading wrong?"

"How about you stop reading wrong? You're obviously not taking this seriously. You might as well not be here at all," John said.

"Both of you, cut it out," Squelch said wearily. How much more separated could the two of them get? They couldn't even be in the same room together without getting into a fight; it was compulsive. She closed Addison's folder and set it down, then stood up. "I'm gonna talk to Rowan and then I'm gonna go home and rummage around in storage at my house to see if I can find out anything more about Addison Harper."

John gave her a hard look and said, "Alone?"

She started to say yes, because of course she was going to do it alone, but she reconsidered. John was particularly hung up on the idea of her having some innate treachery lurking under her skin. If he thought there was any chance she would stab him in the back and doom everybody, it would make sense for him to be uncomfortable with her doing vital adventure research by herself. Though she found it very difficult to empathize with his intense paranoia, she could understand how it would lead to him feeling hesitant.

"Since looking for Addison's key is probably a fool's errand, I thought it would be inefficient to have one of you come with me. If we split up, we can get more done. The two of you can check out other places around town while I'm poking around my attic," she said, trying very carefully to sound pleasant and mild and non-traitorous. It didn't seem to help much; John's facial expression remained, as it often did, unchanged. She tried a smile and added, "But if it would make you feel better to come with me, I certainly won't stop you."

"I don't appreciate your tone," John said flatly. You never appreciate my tone, she thought irritably, trying not to obviously grit her teeth. Getting annoyed was never helpful. She had to keep it together. Somebody had to. John leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. Skullduggery rolled its eyes and sighed loudly. (Squelch wished it could at least hate him
less obviously. Maybe if it didn't roll its eyes so much when he talked, he wouldn't be so grouchy all the time.) "I'm not a child, and I'm not crazy."

Skullduggery scoffed. "You take four showers a day and you think the government is trying to kill you! You're definitely crazy."

"How many showers I take is not relevant, nor is it any of your business," John hissed through gritted teeth. His face was starting to turn red, as it did whenever he got flustered in any way.

"It's relevant to how you're crazy," Skullduggery said.

"Glass houses, Creed."

Squelch cleared her throat loudly, and both of them sort of slumped and looked away, huffing out mirrored aggravated breaths.

"Come with me or don't, up to you," Squelch said.

"Just stay here," Skullduggery said. "If you can't trust Kel to do anything, we'll never get anywhere with this stupid quest."

It looked like it was physically painful for John to say, "Fine."

Loathe though she was to admit it, it was a relief to leave the two of them. Squelch shouldered her bag and went outside to meet Rowan.

Her girlfriend was sitting at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the front door of the library, with her long legs sprawled in front of her on the ground. Her bookbag was open by her side, but she was looking up at the fluffy white clouds in the sky.

She was pretty; this struck Squelch every time she saw her. One of the prettiest girls in school, for sure. Rowan was dark-skinned and round-faced and almost always smiling, with long eyelashes that framed her dark brown eyes. Today, she had glittery gold highlighter on her cheekbones; she had something gold on her face almost every day. Her thick box braids came down to the middle of her back, decorated in places with little glimmering rings.

She tilted her head back and smiled at Squelch as she came down the stairs. "Hey, boyfriend," she said.

"Hey," Squelch said. She sat down next to Rowan, close enough that their arms brushed, and stretched her legs out in front of her. "So. Why in person? Wanted to catch a last look at my dazzling visage before I strike out on my perilous journey?"

Rowan laughed. "That's definitely it," she said dryly. She nudged Squelch's side, and Squelch nudged her back. Then Rowan fixed her eyes on the ground and said, "Yeah. No, that's not why."

"Okay," Squelch said. "You know you can tell me anything, right? That's kind of our whole deal."

Rowan leaned over and pulled a small matte black cube out of her bookbag. She brushed her thumb over the side of the cube and murmured something softly under her breath. A bubble appeared around the two of them, cloudy and silvery at first but fading quickly into being almost invisible. Sparks skittered around the outside of the bubble but couldn't penetrate it.

It was, if Squelch recognized it correctly, a privacy bubble; impervious to all magic, as well as physical eavesdropping. It was a heavy-duty, too; the grade used for protecting government secrets, rather than the kind one might use for planning a surprise birthday party. It wasn't like Rowan to go overboard like this; when Rowan used magic, she was usually very
energy-efficient. She only used as much power as she needed, nothing more. Her magic was typically quite subtle.

"Uh," Squelch said, glancing around at the glittering sides of the bubble. "What's this for?"

"Privacy," Rowan said grimly. She looked deadly serious; Squelch felt a bit taken aback by this, and a small prickle of foreboding crawled up the back of her neck. This couldn't mean anything good. Rowan shifted slightly to face Squelch more head-on, then took her magichanical hand in both of hers. "I'm going to be completely honest with you."

"Okay," Squelch said. Her smile was starting to falter a bit; she tried to fix it, with middling success. "You're making me nervous."

"I didn't tell you about the project because I wasn't sure how you'd react," Rowan said. "We don't talk about politics much, but you're..."

She trailed off and cleared her throat. "You're you, you know?"

Squelch wasn't sure what Rowan meant by that, but she looked attentive and nodded anyway.

"I've been gathering data on Morris and his supporters because I'm-- I'm working on a bigger project," Rowan glanced away, looking increasingly agitated the more she spoke. "The actual history of what happened-- the entire history of Morris' life and his activism is grossly misrepresented in our--"

"Activism?" Squelch jerked back, horrified. "Rowan--"

"Just listen to me, okay?" Rowan's grip on her hand tightened. Her eyes were wide, urgent, and sincere. "The government has been making him out to be someone he's not for centuries, and I've been doing all this-- I've been doing all this so I can push back against that narrative."

Rowan was staring at her like she genuinely believed this. As though Morris-- the hero who fell the hardest and the farthest, the undying evil sorcerer-- could possibly be a good guy deep down. Squelch could hardly speak, she was so baffled, so alarmed. "He's evil!" she managed. "Rowan, you-- you know he's evil, right?"

"He isn't," Rowan said flatly. "You only think that because the government has so heavily censored what we're taught in school that it barely has anything to do with the truth any more."

"Are you listening to yourself?" Squelch hissed. "You sound-- Rowan, there's evidence! Confessions, even! What he's done to people is-- it's just evil. There's no two ways about it. Where are you getting this?"

All she could think about were the hours of school time she had spent on Morris Kkierhan; the worst villain to ever live. Pure embodied evil. Nobody ever forgot the day they learned about the Extraction Experiments; a phase Morris had gone through trying to find the secret to immortality. Stealing children orphaned by the war overseas, strapping them down, ripping their souls out of their living bodies. The pictures were gruesome; the videos were traumatizing. Every single one of the children died in indescribable pain, screaming.

Or, that decade-- 3031 to 3041-- Morris had spent slaughtering sixteen-year-olds who were setting off on their Hero's Journeys. Thousands of people died. They had a memorial wall on campus for the students from UPI who'd been killed; the sheer number of them was overwhelming.
Yet Rowan was sitting there, looking at her all steadfast and determined. Not joking. Urgently, she said, "Harper, they don't teach us the whole story. The government keeps all of Morris' writing secret, doesn't let any of us look at it--"

This was too much. One step too far. "Because he was a highly skilled wordsmith, Rowan! Because every single thing he wrote, everything he said, is woven with persuasion magic--" Squelch stopped, and stared at Rowan. "You've been reading it."

Rowan's jaw tightened. "I was worried you'd react like this," she said. "I'm not brainwashed. Don't you find it a little bit suspicious that everyone who happens to agree with Morris is accused of being brainwashed? Don't you think it's possible that he just had some good ideas?"

"Like what? Mass murder? The apocalypse?" Squelch didn't raise her voice this time. She was horrified, but in a sort of dull distant way. (Most of Squelch's feelings could best be described as dull and distant.) She was more concerned for Rowan's wellbeing and mental state than she was angry with her. To think that even someone as level-headed and sensible as Rown could be mind-controlled by texts hundreds of years old was frightening.

"Like revolution, Harper," Rowan said.

Squelch flicked her tongue out over her lips and leaned closer. "Rowan, I know you don't think you've been influenced in any way, but you should really go to the school nurse," she said.

"Harper, we're in a dispell bubble," Rowan said flatly. "I haven't been magicked. I feel like you're not listening to me."

"If his magic were that easy to get rid of, then he wouldn't be as much of a problem as he is," Squelch said patiently. "He's insidious. He gets in your head."


Before she could say anything else, two figures dressed in black hooded cloaks--government employees-- appeared and the bubble popped. One of them pulled off her hood to reveal a sort of plain-looking woman with a pleasant smile and pale blonde hair. "Rowan Glass," she said. "Come with us, please."

Rowan stared at them, and then at Squelch. "What did you do?"

Squelch was baffled; she had not, after all, done anything. "What?"

"We just want to talk to you," said the woman. "You're not in any trouble, we've just got reason to believe you might be a danger to yourself or the people around you, and we have to ask you a few questions. It's just routine. I'm sure you're fine."

"That sounds reasonable," Squelch said. Rowan stayed where she was sitting, staring at Squelch like she'd just tried to stab her. "Rowan, just go talk to them. They can make sure you're not being brainwashed."
Since *Savior Complex* is unfinished, I feel it would be useful (and, hopefully, also interesting) to explain, broadly, how the rest of the story goes after the point where I leave off. The three protagonists set out on their quest, still spending a lot of their time and energy on pointless bickering. They find their way to Squelch’s family’s hidden vault, where Addison Harper’s key is stored along with her other magical family heirlooms. In order to get to the key, Squelch and Skulduggery and John have to pass a series of three heroic trials designed to make sure that only “real heroes” can access the vault; the trial of honesty, the trial of fear, and the trial of selflessness. Through the trial of fear Skulduggery’s tragic backstory is more fully revealed; when it was fourteen years old, it was in a sexually, emotionally, and physically abusive relationship with an adult man in his twenties (Alexei). Skulduggery is forced to relive one of its most traumatic memories (Alexei attempting to murder it) in order to pass the test. Squelch is the main focus of the trial of honesty, and is forced to tell John about her gender; John is the main focus of the trial of selflessness, which is not actually very difficult for him.

With the key retrieved from the magic vault, the protagonists proceed to the evil lair where Prince Cadfael is (supposedly) being held. They discover that it turns out John was right all along, and the government *is* trying to kill him. The Oirtir government staged Cadfael’s kidnapping, beat and tortured him to make it look authentic, and then specifically selected Squelch and John and Skulduggery to go on the quest to save him with the intention of killing all four of them. They were supposed to be heroic martyrs, tragic gifted children who died too young, in order to help prop up the government’s latest anti-Morris campaign. On top of that, the
government is also responsible for the spread of the plague; Morris created it to wipe out the government, specifically targeting a number of people in the capital city. It wasn’t actually supposed to be contagious; it was a targeted assassination attempt. Instead of stopping it, sorcerers working for the government seized control of the disease and intentionally turned it into a highly infectious plague, steering it away from all of the people who held real power and directing it instead at the general population. This was all done to frame Morris as dramatically more evil than he actually is; he’s been cast by the powers that be as the ultimate villain in order to help maintain the status quo, and the government has perpetrated hundreds of gruesome violent crimes specifically so that they could pin them on him, in order to thoroughly discredit his cause and irrevocably tie anti-government sentiment (and, by extension, all non-normativeness) to moral bankruptcy.

Squelch, Skullduggery, and John were selected to die because of their heroic potential and their assorted deviations from the standard heroic model; the world can mourn the hypothetical great futures they “could have had,” that they never actually could have had because of who they are. That’s the real tragedy of the dead gay sidekick: there was never really any chance that they were going to live to the end. There is no future for a gay side character in a fantasy novel, because they were created to die.

Squelch is particularly devastated to learn about these plot twists; she dedicated her life to fitting into the ideal hero mold, and did everything that was expected of her perfectly, and none of her hard work or sacrifice was actually enough to save her life. The characters escape to safety in the royal palace in Atlaras, and that’s where the first book ends.
Savior Complex isn’t an especially uplifting story. I would go so far as to say it’s a bit bleak. As I mention in the introduction to this Division III project, I wrote this story for myself. It’s not supposed to be a PSA or an educational introduction to the gay or trans or mentally ill experience, and it’s not supposed to be a model of what the ideal “LGBT YA Novel” is. Still, I think a lot about what it actually is and what it could be. There is only so much control I have over what readers take from my book. The work, as works tend to be, polysemic. It can and will be read from as many different perspectives as it has readers. When I shared one version of the book with my family, my mother enthusiastically forwarded it to one of her acquaintances; a mother whose teenaged mentally ill child had recent come out as trans. My mother told me that she thought it would be useful to her friend, because Skullduggery is trans; she felt that I had successfully captured something about being trans that was useful for educating cis people who might be struggling to understand us. I found this extremely unnerving; this interaction actually was the first thing to make me stop working on the story altogether, which I had been immersed in without pause for many years. I felt deeply uncomfortable with the idea of Skullduggery being the lens through which someone tried to view the concept of transness or mental illness. I feel deeply uncomfortable with the idea of any of the protagonists of my novel being used as representatives of anything so broad. Skullduggery can certainly help a reader to understand one specific way of being, but it can’t help a reader to understand transness as a whole.

There are a lot of tensions I (and a lot of other marginalized creators) feel when making fiction. There aren’t trans characters out there in the world, so there’s a lot of pressure for every trans character we create to be representative, educational, positive, uplifting, and empowering. Every trans character could be the only trans character the audience has ever seen. Every trans
character could be the only trans person, *real or fictional*, that the audience has ever seen. Since that’s the case, isn’t there an obligation to educate? Is it irresponsible to write trans characters with flaws, when you know that those flaws are going to be projected onto your entire community? A lot of people argue that it is. At the same time, it’s impossible for us to change this problem or change the landscape without making more varied trans characters who are fully fleshed-out human beings. It feels like a trap that’s impossible to escape from.

This trap is not exclusively one of transness; this tension exists for every aspect of marginalization. Do you write role models, or do you write characters? Do you write for yourself, for your community, or for an imagined Average Joe? These questions can be paralyzing. There is also the fact that works created by and about people from marginalized groups tend to be put under more intense analytical screening than more mainstream works. (There’s an entire other paper to write about this phenomenon that I do not have the time or space to write here.)

Every time I have written and rewritten *Savior Complex*, I change which one of the characters dies in the end. I’ve always had a hard time deciding how the ending goes. Which death is most emotionally impactful for the reader? Which would be least expected, most interesting, most bleak? Killing each of the three main characters offers a different set of challenges, both in terms of how the remaining two characters carry on and relate to each other and in terms of how I think about the text and message I am crafting.

As a media studies student, I’ve trained myself to critically analyze every text I interact with, including the ones I create. I like to think that my impulse to analyze myself makes me a better writer; it also makes me a more uncertain writer. In my academic work, when I do
theory-engaged analysis, I try to think about what I’m analyzing from as many different angles as I can, to help me understand how other people understand the text. In my creative endeavors, when I do the same thing, I sometimes feel overwhelmed.

What am I saying to the reader when I kill off Skullduggery, a mentally ill trans character whose life has been dogged by a seemingly endless stream of brutal trauma? Am I perpetuating a narrative of hopelessness and inviting the reader to participate in gawking at the corpses of murdered trans children? Even if the point is that its death is not romantic or noble, that it was not a sacrifice for anyone’s greater good, and even if I make a critique of how transgender people-- in particular young people-- are idolized after their deaths seemingly because they died, am I still part of the problem?

What am I saying when it’s John, the only one of the three protagonists who is a person of color? By making his fears come true, am I doing exactly what I criticize other authors of doing in the text-- making him just another dead gay kid? John is also the only one of the three protagonists who is a cis man; is positioning him as a “damsel in distress” an interesting subversion of fantasy novel gender roles, or is it simply perpetuating a problematic feminization of gay and East Asian (and gay East Asian) men?

What am I saying when it’s Squelch, the only female protagonist? Am I fridging her for the benefit of the surviving characters? By killing a girl who tried her best to conform to traditional ideas of masculinity, aren’t I positioning her death as a sort of narrative punishment for her non-normative gender presentation? By making the tragic end of the novel the death of a white teenaged girl, what message am I sending about the construct of the fragile white woman
as victim? Would people be less sad if John died because he’s not a white woman? Should I thus kill him instead, to make a point about that lack of emotional response?

Does it make a difference if the dead character comes back to life? Does that imbue the death with different symbolism? Should I kill any of them? I prefer to write overwhelmingly bleak stories, and I never write about straight people, but I also feel very conscious of the phenomenon I discuss in my introduction to this Division III, in which gayness is inseparably entwined with tragedy. Is it selfish to write the stories I find most interesting, when those stories contribute to a harmful environment? Do my stories contribute to a harmful environment?

Often, I think, these kinds of questions and this kind of media analysis make people feel frozen and stressed. There is no such thing as a perfect text; everything is “problematic,” and everything can be analyzed from hundreds of different angles. I think it’s important for everyone who creates work to figure out how to strike a balance between doing our best not to cause harm and knowing that it’s impossible to avoid.

_Savior Complex_ is not an alternative to _Love Is All You Need_, but it is a response to it. They are two parts of the same conversation, two different ways of talking about bullying and gayness and homophobia and mental illness and trauma; they are not and should not be the only ways. Neither one of them is The Answer to any problem.

One of the most important things to remember when it comes to media analysis is that every text is only one piece of a much larger picture. Problems lie not just in single individual representations, but in how those individual instances are connected to every other piece of media in the giant landscape puzzle of popular culture. Every single thing that is created is created in a context, in conversation with other works of art and songs and movies and books and
news broadcasts and trends. Popular culture is an enormous cacophonous ongoing conversation, building on itself, inescapably interconnected.
**Appendix A: Audience Research Transcripts.**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT 1**

**INTERVIEW LENGTH:** 45 minutes  
**INTERVIEW DATE:** 10/14/16

EMMETT: me! 
CALLIOPE: 19, female, Hampshire student, not straight, white  
LEE: 21, nonbinary, UMass journalism & social science student, gay, white  
CONRAD: 23, cis male, finished with undergrad, literature student, straight, white  
ELLE: 20, cis female, part-time philosophy & law student, asexual & mostly aromantic, white

EMMETT: So, first thing I wanted to ask is, uh, y'know, general, like -- immediate thoughts, besides "that was wild," obviously. [Lee said that right after the movie ended, before I started recording]  
CONRAD: Um. I guess I'm curious about, um. Their like [stumbles a bit] orientation swap premise.  
EMMETT: Mhm.  
CONRAD: Because, it seems to me that they could just make a, an ordinary video about bullying and bullying towards homosexuals, and... I guess I'm... I was sort of wanting to-- hoping to see-- but aside from that, like, you know, it was... it was a sort of... believable scenarios, and I could totally believe like the crawl at the end said that they were true stories.  
EMMETT: Mhm.  
LEE: I... couldn't tell for a lot of it-- and I sort of went back and forth on this-- uh, whether or not they were supposed to-- like, trying to comment in some way on, like, straightphobia? Or, and like, at the end when the credits rolled I was like "ok, I guess they're talking about like general bullying," but throughout I couldn't tell if they were like talking about general bullying or talking about straightphobia or trying to talk about homophobia in a way that was like, "if we look at how ridiculous is it if we think about it being straightphobia and that will show us how ridiculous homophobia is." Like, I couldn't tell what their message was for a lot of it.  
CALLIOPE: I kinda thought that's what they were doing. The like, ridiculous... thing...  
LEE: Oh, the like, it's so ridiculous to like--  
CALLIOPE: Yeah.  
ELLE: Yeeeaaah, sort of the impression I got from it is that the reason they did the whole, [mocking voice] "oh, orientation swap so that gay people are noooormal" [normal voice] is based on the assumption that the straight audience will not be able to relate to a gay victim of bullying, and that they will instead have to see it happening to a [air quotes] "real person"--  
CONRAD: I mean...  
ELLE: -- uh, in order to understand how terrible these things are.  
CONRAD: That was the kinda--  
ELLE: Which is absurd. [laughs]  
CONRAD: That was the conclusion that I drew, too, and I figured that that was... what they were aiming for. I just... I guess, I guess I wasn't sure about it cuz it didn't seem to make much sense in my mind.  
LEE: I was really... like, interested in the way that they were dealing with gender.  
ELLE: Yeah, I noticed that.  
LEE: Yeah, like they wanted the daughter to be, like, stereotypically masculine?
ELLE: Mmhm.
LEE: Except that none of the adults-- which I guess we only saw the parents, and the parents' brother and his husband, and the teacher... but, uh, clearly all of them were very gender-conforming, and all of the kids at school were, like, very gender-conforming.
ELLE: Yeah, even like looking at the clothes--
LEE: Yeah! You noticed that--
ELLE: --that everyone was wearing.
LEE: --that, like, multiple girls had those preteen girl shirts with the hearts in the middle. Um, but, they were all acting as if it was expected that girls would be aggressive and boys would be fruity. But they didn't, like, portray that? And there was like, nothing that was queer-coded in the movie, which was interesting to me. They like, stripped, uh, queerness and like queer culture of all of like its meaning, because they needed to make it normal. And that was like interesting also that like she didn't have anything that was like queer-coded to make her like, straight and different. Um... yeah, that was all really interesting to me.
EMMETT: Mhm. So, since we were talking-- you guys sort of mentioned what you think, like, the m-- like, what do you think the message of this movie is? Take your best guess, I suppose.
CONRAD: Um.. an antibullying message... um, I, and I guess like the focus especially on homophobia?
CALLIOPE: I would just... it seemed to be a very strong, like... an-- anti-homophobia message, with obviously the bullying... I felt it was more just focused on the homophobia and like a result-- the bullying was sort of like a side result?
EMMETT: Mhm.
CALLIOPE: But then at the end when it said like, this is a r-- these are stories taken from like bullies and victims I guess that kinda threw me off a bit. Cuz I was like... I thought this was mainly about homophobia? But this... like at the end, it didn't really mention any of that. It was just like, "bullying." In general... yeah.
LEE: I feel like it was mostly a like anti-xenophobia slash anti-bullying thing and that they were only using the gay narrative as like a way to talk about bullying because it was like a concrete thing that they could focus on.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Um... in order to... do that. Something that really interested me, partway through, was that um when she was getting beat up, that it was the boy she kissed's older brother who came for her? Because they had been presenting it as like some kind of ostensible gender swap thing as well, um, but that like him as like an older male aggressor they like still couldn't stop themselves from using the idea of like a threatening older male, implicitly gay person. Um, and like, his presence as like the only older teenager in the movie I thought was like. Really notable.
CONRAD: Yeah, he just sorta seemed... like... if there wasn't the orientation flop, he would've not been changed at all pretty much.
LEE: Yeah, he was just like a dude who wanted to beat up a kid.
CONRAD: Yeah.
[slight pause]
LEE: I felt... bad. A lot of the time when I was watching it. It made me feel bad. I was just like... upset that straight people have to make media like this.
EMMETT: Mhm?
LEE: Like, as I was watching it I was like... "okay, I'm in this study. I'm not gonna leave, this is fine." and also like... I don't want this to be out there in the world and I don't want to be witnessing it.
EMMETT: Mhm.
[slight pause]
CONRAD: I felt pretty embarrassed, a lot of the time watching it.
EMMETT: Embarrassed?

CONRAD: Yeah, um, I felt like... uh... heh, okay, maybe I should've opened up with this, because it was a very strong impression, but I didn't want to like immediately jump into super negative. But no, I feel like it's-- you don't-- you really don't need to, you really don't need to reverse-- reverse it to talk about homophobia or bullying, and... people can just... relate to... not wanting to be bullied. And also it feels kinda like you're-- you're pushing the very real issue of homophobia a little under the table, a little bit and not really confronting... [trails off]

LEE: I wonder if they can relate, though. I wonder if for some straight people this is actually going to help them care more about homophobia. Like, I don't ever wanna talk to those straight people who think that--

CONRAD: [laughs]

LEE: Um, cuz-- the reason that they think that is because on some level they like are not interested in like alleviating my suffering?

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: But, um. To be clear in case you need this in the transcript, I am gay. [laughs]

CONRAD: [laughs]

LEE: [laughing] Um... uh... like... but... [recovers] I feel like I know straight people, like I've had classes with straight people who would watch this and legitimately would be like "you know, I think it's really interesting to think about this thing sometimes," and I wonder if in some way this is like aiding them in a thought exploration that's like... "oh yeah, maybe we shouldn't hate gay people." And like... will that help them not actively hate gay people?

EMMETT: So--

LEE: I'm not saying it will. Just like. I'm interested in that.

EMMETT: Would you all agree that it's a movie for straight people? Like, who do you think the audience for this is?

SIMULTANEOUSLY:
- CALLIOPE: Definitely... this is a movie for straight people.
- ELLE: Definitely for straight people.
- LEE: Yeah.
- CONRAD: Yeah, without a doubt.

EMMETT: Given that, what do you think of the fact that the movie ends with saying that it's a victim-- it's a movie for victims of bullying?

LEE: I think that still makes straight people more sympathetic.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Like, they don't have to feel... they can still like, be comforted that the movie is... even though it's about homophobia, honestly, like it's a movie about straight people experiencing homophobia. Like, I'm not gonna call it straightphobia cuz-- that kid is just experiencing homophobia, uh-- they're like underscoring again when they say bullying and not like homophobia or like homophobic bullying that this is for straight people. And they want you to think about your... straight children. And they just wanna help you understand and like normalize gayness.

EMMETT: Mhm.

CONRAD: It sort of felt like, um, at times the message was a little... um, con-- the message felt kind of fuzzy. Because of that, um. That sort of... like, when-- when it said, y'know, this is for victims of bullying at the end, it did sort of... yeah, it made the mes-- it made it unclear to me who... precisely... in some senses, who the audience was supposed to be. Because throughout the entire thing it felt like. Y'know. This... it was... for straight people to understand homophobia. But at the end, that sort of felt like a step... backward? And, um, also it kinda felt like it was trying to tell the audience, "oh, don't worry, you know, we're not-- we're not going at you about it. I'm-- I'm sure you're nice."
EMMETT: Yeah. Um. So, if it's--
LEE: Oh, can I say something else--
EMMETT: Go for it.
LEE: -- before the next question?
EMMETT: Yeah.
LEE: Um, I also thought it was interesting that they said it was based on true stories from bullying, and I wonder if it's actually all from homophobic bullying or if it's from other bullying stories.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Like, I wonder what their actual source material was. Um... and also whether to some extent they're basing their stories on people who were bullied for being gay, but who are not necessarily gay.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Cuz like there are also a lot of kids who are homophobically bullied who like don't think of themselves as gay. And maybe many years later they realize that they're gay but maybe they don't. And... okay, not to get too heavy into theory but like I think often stuff like that can cause people to repress whatever gayness stuff and maybe as a result they actually never realize that they're gay? But that's also because I think that like on some level everybody is gay. So.

CONRAD: [giggles]
LEE: That's... just my two cents. [laughs]
EMMETT: Um... so, I think the next thing I sort of wanted to talk about was what do you guys think of the way that slurs are utilized in the film?
ELLE: I found that really weird and really interesting that they have this mixture of their made-up fake slurs with real ones? I mean, queer I believe was the only one said out loud?
EMMETT: They do say faggot out loud.
ELLE: Did they say it out loud? I missed it, I saw it written several times which was... weird.
LEE: Do they say-- I don't remember that. Do they say 'faggot' about the straight girl, or--
EMMETT: Yeah, there, um--
ELLE: Yeah.

CALLIOPE: Wasn't it when they were driving? There was like a car that drove by that was the only time they said...
CONRAD: It was like a...
EMMETT: She's sitting on the stairs, and her parents are fighting--
LEE: Ooh, yeah.
EMMETT: -- and a car drives by, and throws something at their window and shouts, 'faggot' and like 'get out of our town.'
LEE: That was another thing that was interesting to me because like obviously gayness is about like generally same-gender or similar-gender relationships? But straightness-- when you wanna make your story about straightness it's about relationships of people who are of different genders and so like normally you have like a multitude of kinds of gayness that create their own subcultures because gay women spend time with gay women and gay men spend time with gay men, but... here you have... the "two genders"-- quote un-quote-- necessarily intermingling to form gayness... and so there weren't like two kinds of gayness. And that was kind of fascinating to me. And so that results in like her getting called "faggot." When like... of course if she were actually like a gay gay no one would call her a faggot. Cuz like... no one calls young girls they think are gay faggots, she would get called a dyke. And I'm also curious about why they used faggot instead of dyke, there, and I assume it's because like dyke is just less well known. Like, straight people know that gay people get called faggot but maybe less straight people know that gay people get called dyke? And I... I don't know.
CALLIOPE: It might have to do with the fact that they kind of like... mas... made her like a masculine figure? They were like "you're gonna take karate," and like women were portrayed as like the aggressors I think you said earlier. That might be another reason they called her faggot? Because I think if this was written in the point where she wasn't a girl and they actually portrayed them [the main character and her male love interest] as like a gay couple of boys, then like she would've been a boy and it wouldn't have been a lesbian couple.

EMMETT: Mhm.
CALLIOPE: And that might also be like kinda interesting is that it's kinda looking at like... I think she would've been-- she would've been portrayed as like a male.... like a male, and not like a...

CONRAD: Um--
CALLIOPE: Like, a woman, I dunno.
CONRAD: The use of the imaginary slurs really kinda disrupted my focus in it and made it a little hard to take it seriously at times I felt. Even though the message is obviously really serious, and they're obviously trying to impart that seriousness. Um, and, when real slurs were brought into it, by that point it felt-- even those felt really jarring and strange after like the fact that they were portraying this strange mirror world or whatever. And then, um, I don't know, it felt-- [stumbles a bit more] it was another thing to me that felt very inconsistent and disjointed about it and sort of weakened the overall impact for me. I mean... [trails off]

ELLE: The worldbuilding was a bit shaky, is what we're saying.
[everyone laughs]
CALLIOPE: Yeah.
CONRAD: I don't mean to criticize it as-- [laughs] as a literary student, even though I am one, but--
[laughter continues]
ELLE: I mean to criticize it as a literary student! [laughs]
LEE: I think there's a lot of legitimacy in criticizing media that you have political problems with from a literary perspective, just because like the ways that stories get framed in a literary sense is like so... integral... to... [inaudible]
ELLE: Yeah, there was um like an interesting thing, in the like bit with the sermon at the church, where they had like the, "oh, uh, couples of the opposite sex can only meet during breeding season" or whatever--
LEE: [giggles]
ELLE: -- so they had this whole opposite world narrative but they still had the like "heterosexual sex makes babies!" thing going on, which I thought was very interesting because that's often something that's brought up in homophobic-- in homophobic rhetoric. Uh, but they retained that as like an element.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ELLE: In the-- the "normality" of their world, which was very weird.
LEE: Yeah, it felt to me like they needed to find a way to talk about like where society came from? Like, they needed to-- because their assumption is that everybody is cis, because there are just like--
ELLE: Yeah, of course they are, yeah. [laughs]
LEE: You know, like, they haven't even--
CONRAD: [laughs] Yeah.
LEE: They're like, "whoa, gayness is so out there, what if everyone were gay?" Uh, they're like. Not ready to think about--
CONRAD: [laughs]
LEE: -- trans and clearly not even ready to think about like gender non-conformity in any sense. Um, and I made a note early on [Lee took notes] like "where"-- my first note is "where do babies come from?" because I knew that they were all supposed to be cis, uh, and-- they-- it was like they knew that
someone like me... or like. You know, maybe not like literally someone like me, but they knew that someone-- a straight person-- was gonna be like, "where do babies come from," and then they put that piece of a sermon in just so that they could like-- it wasn't worldbuilding really because it wasn't like meant to be backround that was existing there, it was just meant to be there to like answer that specific question that they were trying to anticipate.

CONRAD: Which raises the question of, if this is like a oneshot, um... if this is a oneshot anti-homophobia video, why do you care?

EMMETT: Mhm.

ELLE: Yeah, my-- my question to that explanation is, who's asking the question? But I guess it's you [laughs] so-- as long as someone is, that's fine.

LEE: I am definitely asking that question. I was watching this and was like... okay, but how does this work? [giggles]

EMMETT: Mhm.

[pause]

EMMETT: Um... let me see. Going off of sort of like the idea of history, what did you guys think of the sort of... it was pretty brief, but they did include that conversation about Shakespeare--

LEE: Romeo and Julio.

EMMETT: --and the Romeo and Julio play, which I found particularly interesting. Like, the entire conversation surrounding Shakespeare's secret heterosexuality? Um, did you guys have any thoughts on that? Did you like find it notable at all?

LEE: I was surprised they knew about Shakespeare being gay.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Like, I was like, "oh, they actually knew some shit about gay people. Wild."

CONRAD: [sarcastically] They really did their research. [normal voice] Um... it was... um, I mean... hm. I guess I didn't-- it didn't particularly stand out to me, um. More than anything else in the film.

EMMETT: Mhm.

ELLE: I made a note of it as I saw it but didn't really know what to make of it. I think probably in large part due to the fact that as someone who is not gay, I have not done that thing where I go looking for people like me in the past.

EMMETT: Mhm.

ELLE: And so, since it's an experience I don't really have, it's not something that stuck with me.

EMMETT: Mhm.

CALLIOPE: Yeah, I-- I like-- it was like-- oh, they're-- they're talkin' about Shakespeare. That's an interes-- like, I thought it was interesting they switched the like homosexual and heterosexual thing. Like... he... couldn't go to his husband, and... I dunno, I thought it was interesting, but I-- yeah, I also didn't take too much note of it. I was like, oh, that's a... that's a thing.

LEE: I took a lot of note of it! [laughs] Um, because, of a bunch of reasons. I took a Shakespeare class a couple summers ago, where I repeatedly argued with my professor about Shakespeare's gayness and like the historical facts of Shakespeare's gayness and like the ways that that could be found in his writing? Um, and that was like a constant source of conflict for me in that class. Um, and so watching this child be like... "actually, did you know, my parents--" I've like literally had that experience, and I was like. "Oh, wait. This is finally actually a little bit relatable to me." Um... and... also, I've been, uh, watching-- I've been rewatching the trans anime Wandering Son lately and in there a like key overarching plot is that, uh, they're performing a genderswap version of Romeo and Juliet. Um... and I think that in some sense because everyone's sort of fascinated by the fact that, um, all of the actors in Shakespeare's time were men and they were frequently playing women's roles, like, some sense of that has like lingered on. So that like when we talk about it-- when we talk about Romeo and Juliet now, because it's such a straight narrative we're all kind of fascinated by the ways that it isn't-- maybe
it isn’t a totally straight thing? And, uh, like-- I dunno, I feel like that comes up a lot. I feel like a lot of the time Romeo and Juliet comes up in like different contexts. Also because like we all wanna do like creative re-envisionings of Romeo and Juliet, and so like an obvious choice is to do that gay. So that was interesting to me as well.

EMMETT: Yeah... it’s interesting to me that you mention that was like, specifically an experience that you found relatable. Did any of you find any of the experiences-- like, anything in the movie-- that felt like, real in any sense? Or did the sort of gender... scenario-swap... sort of, like, distance it or make it-- did it make it more real or less real, do you think?

CONRAD: Uh-- okay, for the record, I’m also straight. Um, and, I felt completely, uh, disassociated from anything happening. Um. I-- I mean, I’ve never been a victim of serious or intense bullying, for one thing. Um, but in-- in addition, uh, like I think I’ve already said, I had-- I had some difficulty taking it seriously because of how it presented itself.

EMMETT: Mhm.

CONRAD: And-- I would say that there were no moments in it, really, that I related to.

ELLE: Uh, likewise. It’s an absurd scenario, and I also have never experienced bullying in my life. Uh, so there’s not much for me there.

CALLIOPE: Um, I had trouble relating to it because I feel like the main-- the form of bullying that was used kinda ended up being a cyberbullying thing at the end with all the texting and the computer going off which isn’t something I can relate to because... in the time when I was bullied as a child was before... like, I didn’t have a cellphone--

EMMETT: Yeah.

CALLIOPE: --or a Facebook or any of that, so like. It kinda... [inaudible] the genderswap thing... though I think it was like-- no, I did not find that-- [laughs] I did not find that relatable.

LEE: I was-- uh, I felt like, pulled back and forth on that. Because like, I mean, you and I have talked about talked about this a lot, Emmett--

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: I spend a lot of time thinking about the ways that gay narratives are frequently presented-- presented in straight media, um, and so as I was watching this I was hyperaware that this was a gay narrative. Like, very clearly this is a gay narrative presented along straight lines and it’s not usually this overt but that that happens a lot and so I’m like really used to looking at that and like also on some level relating to it? And so I was watching it and I was like. This is objectively bad art. Like, the acting is bad, the writing is bad, um and like a lot of the cutscenes, when they’re trying to have like two actions happening at the same time were like really poorly done. Like, very difficult to follow. I had a lot of problems with all of that, and yet still on some level sometimes when I was watching homophobic things happen I was like... a little... [clutches hand to chest] ... I know this is a recording. [laughs] I was still kind of like, "shit, they got me."

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Um, and like. I have a history of in person and cyberbullying, and... it wasn't, like... it's this thing where you’re watching it and on the one hand you’re like “this is ridiculous and this isn’t helping anyone” and also you're like "oh, shit." [exasperated laugh] "I feel that a little bit." And I felt similarly actually with the self-harm scenes, because I do have friends who've had like serious self-harm stuff and so-- um, related to their queerness-- and have had a series of those friendships and relationships since like early high school... um, and so... thinking about that also was like... I dunno, I resent that they're making bad art about things that are serious and important to me. And I resent that because there’s like so little media about that in general that like on some level I’m still touched by it.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Like, I mostly feel like angry with the creators because they took my thing. Cuz like. I already see plenty of bad art about queer suffering made by queer people! So like watching more bad art about
queer suffering made by straight people is just like... [exasperated laugh] why are you guys doing this?? And also like. I already said that it's bothersome that I do actually care... yeah.

[pause]

EMMETT: Okay. Uh... probably like two more questions? Uh, did you find-- do you think that this would be effective or helpful in any way? Do you think it's helpful as an anti-homophobia thing, do you think it's helpful as an anti-homophobia thing if it is an anti-homophobia thing? Do you think it's-- do you think the message is coming across to anybody who needs to hear it, whoever that might be?

CONRAD: I... th... I can't say how unhelpful it would be, but I don't-- I don't have a lot of confidence that it would be of help to anyone. Um... I feel like-- [stumbles a bit] I can tell that the people who made the video were taking the matter seriously, in their view. But, um, their-- the decision to-- the decisions that they made on how to portray it, uh, completely crippled the message and its effectiveness as a message. Uh, it-- it was bad art. Um, it was very hard to-- the acting was bad, the uh the terminology and the writing were really bad, and I think that does matter. And people are a lot less likely to take something like that seriously. Even with, um, and-- it's obviously touching on really serious matters, like especially towards the end, the uh the suicide and self-harm images became very graphic and very visceral and intensive. Um... but... at the same time, the rest-- everything else felt... very... s-strangely childish. At times. Um. So, I would-- I would just flat-out say no.

LEE: I... really hate to say this, because I hated that. But there are a lot of real fuckin' idiot straight people out there, and--

[everyone laughs]

CALLIOPE: I was about to say almost the exact same thing.

LEE: I think that in your focus groups, I don't know how you should go about doing this but I think-- okay, I'm about to do a major self-drag, but like go to UMass, find some useless straight people--

EMMETT: [laughs]

LEE: --and get them to watch this, because I think you'd get a very different response than the people you have here. And I think that they might find it legitimately thought-provoking? Uh, like, I'm gonna make an example with trans stuff cuz like that's what I know how to talk about. Um... A friend of mine did a bunch of like intentional advocacy when they were younger and they used this thing called the genderbread man and the genderbread man is this thing where you point to a figure of a person and you have, uh, the head and the heart and the genitals and you're saying in the head is where your gender is and in the heart is where your sexuality lives and in your genitals is where your sex is. It's specifically this tool to say that gender and sex are different things so you can be like-- have male sex, but like have female gender because they're separate-- they're placed in separate places in the body. And like, that's bad, because that's misgendering people based on what their genitals look like and saying that someone has male sex but female-- just like bad for many reasons obviously-- but also, where the fuck do you start when people don't know anything? And I am an advocate of like, education shouldn't start there, you should find ways to talk about how like gender and sexuality and sex are all social constructs, and so this isn't like optimal at all, but... it... might be better than nothing. Like, I would prefer to see a film that's just about gay kids getting bullied... if we're gonna do an obnoxious awkward terrible educational video--

CONRAD: [laughs]

LEE: -- about homophobic bullying, make it at least about gay kids... but I do think there are some straight people who would benefit from seeing this versus nothing at all. because they do have this like the same bullshit idea that the producers do that gay people are unrelatable and they need to see straight people getting bullied in order to empathize and like that sucks and I still don't wanna talk to those people ever which is why I understand if you don't wanna have them in your project but I think they should be in your project because the film is made for them so it's important to feature them and like try to understand if it can actually help.
EMMETT: Mhm.
CONRAD: Okay, in light of that, I guess I would also sort of change my answer to "better than nothing."
ELLE: I would say that the very fact that this film was made means that there are people to whom it would be meaningful.
LEE: Yeah.
CALLIOPE: Yeah.
ELLE: I don't know how many of those people there are--
CONRAD: [giggling]
ELLE: --and whether in an average population whether this would do more harm or good. But I wouldn't be surprised if there were people to whom it was helpful.
EMMETT: Mhm. [Calliope]?
CALLIOPE: Yeah, I would agree that I think there are-- there's definitely a population to which this would be very helpful. And that's the population that it was made by.
EMMETT: Mhm.
CALLIOPE: And who it is probably like geared towards. Not our pop-- not the population in this room, and probably not the majority of like the Hampshire community, but there are people who would look at this and be like, "wow, I never thought of it like that."
LEE: I have met people at Hampshire who I think would think this...
CALLIOPE: Oh, okay.
LEE: And I recommended that you go to UMass because I think it would be easier to find those people, but they definitely exist at Hampshire.
CALLIOPE: They exist, I just think it's a little harder--
LEE: I wanna underscore that Hampshire is homophobic, just like Umass, and this is not actually about the project but I go to UMass so I have to be like. Hampshire's homophobic too.
EMMETT: Mhm. So, it seems like, you guys... agree that it could be helpful for some straight people. Do you think it would be helpful for any gay people? Or any trans people?
ALMOST SIMULTANEOUSLY:
LEE: Never.
CONRAD: No.
LEE: No, actually, I take that back. I'm sorry. My kneejerk response is no, but I definitely know-- okay, this is bad, I hate that I have to say this, but uh lots of gay and trans people also have really bad politics and like I think there are plenty of like fourteen year olds, twelve year olds, who could see this and be like, "I'm a tiny gay! I'm a tiny trans! and I have feelings!" and their politics if they remain centered on ideas in this are not gonna be very good. But I think they could still find it meaningful. Maybe not like politically helpful, but like personally meaningful. So.
CONRAD: I guess in the vein of the last question, amongst a select group it could be helpful.
ELLE: I could imagine... like... a young gay kid-- or maybe a young trans kid but I don’t have as much like knowledge in that area-- who's very isolated from the community in general and is just like. Y'know. Very... surrounded by straight culture and that persistent narrative that only straight people matter could see this and think, "oh, I understand this." But... I don't really know what I'm talking about, so who knows? [laughs]
LEE: I don't think it would be good for them.
ELLE: Mm.
LEE: I guess it could be like an emotional crutch.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: But I don't think it would be good for-- like, any gay kid that I knew that watched this I would like give a hug and intentionally befriend them.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Rather-- like, that would obviously be more helpful to them than watching this movie. I think that like... a lesbian they see in the street one time who like sees them looking at her and then nods at them would be more helpful than this movie.

[everyone laughs]

CONRAD: It, uh.

LEE: Like, have you seen "Ring of Keys?" Cuz that's what that song is about! I don't know if the lesbian even notices her.

[ring of keys is a song from the musical fun home, in which a young girl who doesn't yet know she is gay sings about seeing a butch lesbian for the first time and finding that experience deeply meaningful]

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Don't think she does, but like that would be a more meaningful experience than this. Cuz like that person is a visibly queer person in the world and this isn't about visibly queer people at all.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: This isn't about having a life as queer. Okay. I'm dialing it back again!

EMMETT: [laughs]

LEE: Once again, I think it's bad. Because it's still a narrative about young gay suicide and like... young gay people don't need that shit.

CONRAD: Um... like... I feel like when it comes to-- when it comes to matters as serious as self-harm and suicide especially in-- and-- and homophobic bullying, um... when it comes to like a gay audience, doing it poorly can be way more-- way more harmful than not doing it at all. And, especially exposing them to like those very visceral images toward the end. I could see some kid getting traumatized by that.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: I feel hurt, currently, right now.

CONRAD: It was-- it was-- it was like-- I mean, I-- I don't wanna say it was powerful, because it was not.

[everyone laughs]

CONRAD: But-- um--

LEE: I think it can be powerful.

EMMETT: I think it's powerful in the sense that it's intentionally meant to get an emotional reaction out of you? Like, that's-- the imagery of suicide and self-harm is used to get an emotional reaction.

LEE: Yeah. Mhm.

EMMETT: Which is powerful.

CONRAD: Yeah, it-- it was effective in that, and I wanna say it was a cheap shot.

EMMETT: Mm.

CONRAD: Um... and, uh... I would be... I would basically exercise a lot of caution before I would show this to any gay kid. And... I-- I would not blame you-- I would not blame anyone at all for saying "no, don't-- just don't."

CALLIOPE: Yeah.

LEE: What if... it was about, um... what if it was a narrative about straight oppression in normative gay society and she grows up and she gets married to a man and like-- okay, she befriends the straight couple that just moved in down the street, uh, and like they support her and high school's hard and like she and that boy get together and get married and it's like positive and uplifting narrative about how you-- you know?? Like, how is that different?

EMMETT: Do you think that would have the same effect?

LEE: Wouldn't have the same effect. But also like because this is media about straight people capitalizing on gay suffering it would never do that because the like inherent thing of the movie is that she kills herself? Like, the power of the movie comes from that. But like if you're gonna try to argue that this
could ever be helpful for gay kids, that would be more helpful. *This* would never help-- I'm going back to that!

[laughter]

LEE: The fact that she kills herself at the end makes it that-- something that like will never help a gay kid.
EMMETT: [to Elle and Calliope] Do you guys have thoughts on that? Agree, disagree?
ELLE: Yeah, I think that makes sense. It's... it's a very hopeless story. Like, it has indeed more of a strong anti-bullying message-- it seems like the kind of people for whom it would be helpful is the people who would be bullies rather than the people who would be bullied. It's saying "hey, what you're doing is wrong and has real consequences," rather than "have hope!" because... we see how that ends.
Uh...

CALLIOPE: Yeah, I feel like the point that it was trying to drive across was... "straight people, please feel like-- straight people, look at these problems, that, what if you had to suffer them?" in like a very obvious like way that is not gonna help someone who's gay. Who's actually like... it's not...
EMMETT: Who's actually experiencing that.
CALLIOPE: Exactly, who's actually experiencing that. Like, a-- a trivialized like version where someone else is dealing with their problems like that's not gonna...
EMMETT: Mhm.
[pause]
LEE: I think it's also interesting that they specifically use Romeo and Juliet which ends in suicide. Like, I don't know if they were going for like some kind of artistic thing? With like nesting the suicide narrative within the broader thing? Like I know that at some point she compliments one of the boys that's playing Romeo or Julio-- [laughs] I feel so stupid saying that.
[everyone laughs]
LEE: Um, I know that at some point she like compliments him on his performance in the suicide scene?
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: And I don't really know what they were going for or if it was like-- what I think about that? But something about that is like interesting and notable.
[pause]
CONRAD: I also kinda-- have been going back and forth on... [laughs] on what a... on whether just to outright condemnation or not, but uh it. It... it definitely-- the film definitely has made me think about, uh, its portrayal of stuff a little bit, insofar as... would it be helpful. But... um... a-a suicide narrative is something that you would show to, uh, bullies. Not the bullied. You can't-- you can't like-- crush people like that. Okay?
CALLIOPE: [laughs]
CONRAD: [laughs a little] That's not okay. You have to like remind people that people have made it through this and that therefore they can too.
EMMETT: Mhm.
CONRAD: And-- and it's like-- in that sense, the movie-- I once again have no idea who the movie is intended for, because that jumped it way over toward... the bullies rather than the bullied. That-- that whole sequence at the end.
EMMETT: Mhm.
CONRAD: [sighs] It-- it confused me. I felt really confused, about the whole entire thing, what it was trying to do.
EMMETT: Okay. Um... yeah, that's all my questions. Do you guys have anything else that you'd like to... like, say? Anything you'd like to add? Thoughts you had on the movie that didn't really fit into any of my questions?
[pause]
LEE: I was sort of interested in the like existence of religion there without being about like any other religions. Because like a big thing, especially for white people, is frequently being like... "well, you know, Islam is so homophobic, Islam is so sexist," um, and... I dunno, I was just sort of like interested? That-- [stutters] Christianity only existed as like a handwave towards like...

[voices audible from the common room of my mod, it's distracting]

LEE: Homophobia's bad... Christianity is homophobic... and they had a lot of that but there was like no... actual engagement... with like what... people who are in those religions have to-- like how they would interact with that? Um... and... oh, God, I had an actual thought that was interesting about this and now I'm forgetting it. Um... I think... oh! On some level, that like probably comes from the perspective of these straight, presumably liberal, people, who uh like also have some like handwave condemnation of religion as well.

EMMETT: Mhm.

LEE: Like, that, I think is notable? That like religion only existed as something for them to be like. "Religious people are homophobic." Quote-unquote homophobic. You know? Straightphobic, whatever. Uhh. Yeah.

CONRAD: I feel like that kinda fits into another thing I noticed about it is that, um, a lot of these things like felt one-off. Felt tacked on. The like sorta move on Catholicism-- like, they didn't go into how religion, like, effects homophobic-- like -- homosexual-- uhh-- the lives of young, like young gay people. Um...

EMMETT: It's also interesting that the main c-- the girl didn't, doesn't seem to have any thoughts on her religion?

LEE: Yeah.

EMMETT: Like, it's not actually a story about how faith effects like faithful young gay people.

LEE: Yeah.

EMMETT: She like... doesn't think about that in terms of herself. It's more like... she is at church.

LEE: Also she doesn't-- she's not expressed to have any personal thoughts.

EMMETT: Mm.

LEE: Like, she doesn't have any-- she is like a passive thing to have straightness painted upon her, but like she has like no presented personality. There's no character development whatsoever for her. And I think that's like notable.

CONRAD: Yeah, her-- what thoughts we got out of her like where she sort of said the like um... the like... I wanna say, like, store-brand, really by-the-numbers, uh coming out story, dialogue? Like the, oh, "I thought-- it was not a phase after all."

EMMETT: Mhm.

CONRAD: That also felt really tacked on. That didn't feel consistent. Um... I didn't... it came at really inopportune moments and like there was no conclusion in her... mind. So to speak. Um. It's...

[modmates in common room laugh and talk loudly]

CONRAD: That's so... like...

LEE: You wanna close the door, [Elle]?

ELLE: Oh, yeah.

[door closes]

ELLE: Done.

CONRAD: Surprisingly quiet. Um. Uh. It-- [laughs] yeah, um. I like... [stutters] Yet again, I hate to stress this over and over again, but another reason why I couldn't take it very seriously was that... things were disjointed.

[muffled scratching at the door]

EMMETT: The cat is angry now.

[laughter]
ELLE: I was just reminded of—so, when our main character girl thinks about holding hands with her boyfriend, she describes his grip as **strong**.

EMMETT: Mhm.

ELLE: Which runs contrary to the weird genderswap—

LEE: Yep.

ELLE: --narrative masculine/feminine thing they had going on and that's like— an actual straight people thing! Is the girl being like, "my strong boyfriend," but every other time they mentioned that sort of thing in the movie they're like "the boys are the weak ones and the girls are the strong ones."

SIMULTANEOUSLY:

LEE: I think—

CALLIOPE: Um—

ELLE: I thought that was really strange.

LEE: [to Calliope] You go.

CALLIOPE: No, it's okay.

LEE: Oh, I think that actually made sense, because, uh, like, in the same way that—[Calliope giggles because I reach over and open the door with one hand and am holding the recording phone with the other and waiting for my cat to come in through the door. I look very silly.]  

LEE: In the same way that gayness is associated with being gender non-conforming—[Lee giggles, also at me, and then everyone laughs. my cat takes another long moment to come inside so I can close the door and not look so silly.]  

LEE: Uh, in the same way that gayness is associated with being gender non-conforming, like, also in this movie gayness is associated with being like straight gender non-conforming? And so when she had a straight dynamic with this guy it was that they were going to have a gender-conforming...relationship.

ELLE: I think that makes sense, but it surprised me because it was more subtle than anything else they had been doing in the movie thus far, where they didn't seem to put very much thought into--

CALLIOPE: Um—

ELLE: --what it actually meant to be straight versus gay in real life and how that would relate to their scenario. Anyhow, I'm sorry to interrupt. Go ahead!

LEE: No, I was just—

CALLIOPE: My question about what you guys just said is... is whether that was purposeful or like...happened. As like. Whoever it was that... I don't know, I just got like, the whole time I was watching it I [stutters] I had a feeling this was made by a straight white man.

EMMETT: Mhm.

CALLIOPE: I just. Because it just seemed very like--

LEE: I felt like women were making it.

CALLIOPE: Really? I don't know, I felt like if women were making it it wouldn't have been addressed as...or maybe it... I don't know. It felt just like it was addressing like the very like. Like talked about uh. I think I said this earlier but like the two boys, the little gay couple, that are getting bullied in the schoolyard. Like, saying "faggot" and there's no reference to "dyke," like, the female was like portrayed to have like she needed to have masculine characteristics. I don't know, I just felt like that. I could be wrong.

LEE: I also don't know.

CALLIOPE: I didn't pay attention to the credits.

[laughter]

LEE: They dropped the narration thing partway through.

EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: She wasn't narrating by the time she was killing herself. But like she was a narrator at the beginning? So that was a little bit like.
EMMETT: Yeah.
LEE: Annoying.
[someone knocks on the door to the mod]
EMMETT: Is that my door?
[opens door]
EMMETT: I think that might be the engineer. For the... fire alarm.
SIMULTANEOUSLY:
LEE: Ah.
ELLE: So we should wrap this up.
EMMETT: Only took them like forty-five minutes. [laughs]
EMMETT: So yeah, any other... last thoughts?
LEE: I have one more thought.
EMMETT: Mhm?
LEE: Sorry, I feel like I'm talking too much. Um... the... so when she's--
[knock on my door]
EMMETT: Please gimme a sec!
LEE: Uh... When she's, uh, having her head dunked in the toilet the teacher says that there's a zero-tolerance policy?
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Which means that they specifically have thought about the potential for there being gay kids and they have a specific policy at their seemingly public school--
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: --about not letting kids be gay or do gay shit. Or, y'know, straight shit. Whatever. [laughs]
EMMETT: [laughs]
LEE: I can't keep track.
CONRAD: God.
LEE: Uh, and that they will call the mothers, and it was just like interesting to me that they would specifically have that policy and that they'd specifically bring that up because that's like. Not how homophobia works.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Currently or even in the recent past. Like, basically... for most of the time, it was like, "we hate gay people and we don't think about them enough unless they're presented to us to like have any rules about not being gay." Cuz like.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Anyway-- except for like sodomy laws-- um, so, that was interesting and they were just like. Clearly had no idea what like institutionalized homophobia looks like. Cuz when your school is interacting with homophobic bullies they're not interacting with it well, but they're not interacting with it that-- like that kind of bad. So.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Just that. They didn't know what was going on. They don't know-- like--
EMMETT: [laughs]
LEE: Nothing-- very little of what they were doing was like actually representative of what gay bullying looks like. That thing with the mommies and the daddies at the beginning? It-- most gay kids know better than to bring-- if they know they're gay, they know better than to bring that up when they're playing house as children. Especially in an environment that's clearly as hostile as it is.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LEE: Anyway.
CONRAD: It didn't feel competent or uh. I mean I'm very uh I'm being very generous when I say that it was pretty-- it was not well put together and... as-- I mean-- I-- as a straight person I felt really embarrassed on behalf of the people who made it! I feel embarrassed for them. [stutters] I wasn't like paying too much attention to how I was reacting, but I think I was visibly embarrassed going through it and I thought I felt myself blush a little bit. [laughs] Because I was like... [sighs] It gave me a very visceral sense of... not... being... effective at all. And being really-- not-- I don't wanna say "half-hearted" because I don't think it was half-hearted... um... but... not done well.
ELLE: Perhaps "clumsy."
CONRAD: Clumsy! *Extremely* clumsy. Yes, that's the word I was looking for. That's my sort of final thoughts on it.
EMMETT: [Calliope], [Elle], final thoughts?
ELLE: Uh, not especially.
CALLIOPE: Uh, I dunno.
EMMETT: Okay, cool. Well, thank you for participating in my study! Cool.
EMMETT: me!
ANISE: 20, cis female, woman's studies & theatre student, straight, white
LENNY: 20, cis male, music student, straight, white

NOTE: [pause] indicates at least four seconds of silence.

EMMETT: So... recording now. Obviously it [the film] ends with some pretty upsetting imagery, um so if you need to like take a moment to take a deep breath it's okay. I wanted to start off by just getting like general initial reactions to the film as a whole.

[pause]
EMMETT: Doesn't need to be that, like, in-depth or sophisticated or complicated, just like, what'd ya think?

[pause]
LENNY: Hm. Uh, at first I thought it was going to be a little more lighthearted?
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: Because I forgot about the warning you mentioned earlier. [I gave a content warning for the graphic suicide scene before we started.]
EMMETT: Oh.
LENNY: And I thought it was going for a more satirical tone? But um. Yeah. It was very jarring to see... that it was a, uh, very very serious film.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: It was hard to follow because... the roles were... backwards.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: Or, maybe not backwards, but... Eh-- would think that the story takes place with... um... like, uh... heteronormative... um... perspective.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: In a way of like two parents who are male and female and then a kid and the kid gets bullied and it-- it was just hard to follow, um, because of that.
EMMETT: ...Mhm.
[pause]
EMMETT: Okay, so if you could just sort of, generally say what like what do you think this film is about, fundamentally. Like--
ANISE: Bullying.
EMMETT: Bullying?
LENNY: Yeah, I would say it's--
SIMULTANEOUSLY:
ANISE: And its effects.
LENNY: Yeah. Bully-- yeah.
LENNY: It is... it's trying to get, like, a point-- a different point of view, for-- for bull-- or what it feels like to be bullied. Yeah.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: Right. If the roles were reversed. In-- in society and culture.
EMMETT: Yeah, so... following that, what do you think like the message of the movie is?
[pause]
ANISE: Bullying is an ongoing... issue, in the world.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: No matter who you are or what your sexual orientation is or what your gender is. Or what your
views are. [barely audible] Something like that.
[pause]
LENNY: I-- I got um, the opposite? That if-- if you're the minority... that you get bullied it feels so-- it's--
it's much much worse? Than being like in the majority.
ANISE: Well, bullying happens to everybody. And that-- that's just my... personal... thought.
LENNY: I, I didn't disagree, I was just-- that's what, that's just what I thought-- thought of the film.
ANISE: Yeah, no, I'm not disagreeing, I'm just speaking up openly about my thoughts.
EMMETT: Mhm. Um, so, if that's the message of the film, who do you think that message is sort of
gearied towards? Who do you think like the target demographic for this film would be?
[pause]
ANISE: Preteens.
[pause]
ANISE: Cuz, the... age group is so young that they're targeting in this film.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: So I think that it's... it's close enough, where, preteens are at that age where they're starting to
like discover um... um, more about like, their identity, and what they like, and what they don't like,
and like who people are and like how people treat them and how their response is to that. And how
they're affected by how people treat them.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: Yeah, I-- I would have to say my guess would be um... young, um... heterosexual people.
EMMETT: Mhm. Heterosexual specifically?
LENNY: Heterosexual specifically, yeah.
EMMETT: [to Anise] Well, would-- do you think-- agree, disagree?
ANISE: What about what?
EMMETT: Do you think it's for like heterosexuals specifically? Do you think it's for a broader
demographic?
ANISE: Oh. [gets progressively quieter with every word] Um.... yeah, I think it's for [barely audible]
heterosexuals.
EMMETT: Um, okay. So that's-- about half of my questions. Um, uhh. Next I wanted to ask you a couple
more specific questions about the film, um. So, how like relatable did you find it? Did you think that
like anything in the movie really spoke to real experiences that you've had or... heard about? Um, do
you think that this is, like, an accurate reflection of reality? Did you find it like spoke to you on a
personal level? Anything like that.
ANISE: Um, I thought that the bullying, no matter who was doing it, n-- of-- no matter who was doing it
and no matter of their sexual orientation like I understand that. I understood the concept and I also
understand that like I haven't personally... taken it out on myself in that physical way but like I have
been bullied? and I know that people who have been bullied have like done these type of things as a
result. And... so I do think that's... this is depicting a very real like an issue. And um... a very real
mental breakdown of what happens to people who are bullied to an extent... so...
LENNY: Hm. Yeah, I've-- it definitely mirrors like points I've heard about people who've been bullied but
not-- but I've never been like pushed to that level, I would think. Or treated with like-- like that badly.
EMMETT: Mhm. Um, this might seem a bit like inane, but like-- huhhh-- how did the movie make you feel? Could you desc-- like a couple of words describe like emotional reaction you might have had to the movie.

[pause]
EMMETT: If any.

[pause]
ANISE: It was hard for me to feel anything.
EMMETT: Mhm.

ANISE: Because I haven't... been... bullied in such a long time. Uh, like I can-- I can understand how people feel, because I've felt that way, about other issues, just not... bullying.

[my cat scratched the couch and she flinched away from him]
EMMETT: He won't scratch you, he's just scratching the couch.

[pause -- I expected her to continue talking, she didn't]
EMMETT: So you just didn't really have any emotional investment in it?
ANISE: I don't know, it just-- it was just hard because I-- again, I was trying to like figure out "okay, what is going on" and why they're doing it the way that they're doing it and like--

EMMETT: Mhm.

ANISE: It was like I just was-- I sort of took myself emotionally out of it and I was like okay well this is clearly, um... an issue that they're-- y'know, representing. Um... that happens... across the board.

And...
EMMETT: Mhm.

ANISE: A like... I dunno... it just was... like, subconsciously, was just hard for me to sort of be there. I dunno.

[pause]
LENNY: Yeah, it definitely made me feel jarred.
EMMETT: Mhm.

LENNY: Um, by... like, making me think like "what if this was me."
EMMETT: Mhm.

LENNY: Like, it-- I think it did try to get you into the uh... into the shoes of the... the protagonist. And... was-- was successful in that.
EMMETT: Mhm.

ANISE: [a noise that might have been "yeah"]
EMMETT: Um, did you find it upsetting? I mean, obviously the suicide scene is very like-- jarring and graphic. Um... was it like, upsetting? Because you [indicating Anise] said that it was difficult to be like emotionally invested because the premise was sort of confusing.
ANISE: Yeah, but like I can understand... yeah. Sorry, what was the-- what was the question?
EMMETT: Um, did you-- did you find it upsetting, particularly?
ANISE: Um... [pause] In a very very light sense.
EMMETT: You don't have to have found it upsetting. [laughs]
ANISE: No, no, I... just... I'm being honest. About my thoughts. Um. [nervous uncomfortable laugh] I... I could connect a little bit, to it, uh, just not that much.

EMMETT: Mhm.

[pause]
EMMETT: [to Lenny] You said it was "jarring," was it, uh, upsetting? Like, jarring in an upsetting way or was it mostly just shocking?

[pause]
LENNY: Hm... I would have to say both.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: Um, the-- the last scene more so than the uh the buildup.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: I'd say the buildup to it is a little more of the uh-- of the, of the shock, just. Seeing like. The reversal of like... y'know, our norm.
EMMETT: Mhm.
[pause]
EMMETT: Um... and I guess one of the last couple questions I had was, um, so since this is-- you said you feel like it's an anti-bullying kind of message? How effective do you feel like it is in communicating that message and sort of getting across whatever you think it's trying to get across? Um, like, how emotionally effective is it, how educationally effective is it?
[pause]
ANISE: Um... um, I think that because... the graphics are so real, I think that people... can... understand more of... the issue. Because of that. I think just talking about it isn't enough. I think that... if... more people saw this movie, or just saw documentaries or saw other depictions of bullying I think that the message would be more clear. But... yeah. [nervous uncomfortable laugh]
LENNY: Yeah, I think, um... what really got me at the end was the disclaimer that it was based on real events.
EMMETT: Mhm?
LENNY: And I think that it-- it is effective, because it-- it's a very compelling story, and there-- there is fact to it, but it's not like a dry st-- like a dry-- like a documentary, on bullying. I think something like that would be less effective.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: With this, with education, actually, so. I would say, yes, it-- it's-- yes, it w-- it's an effective film.
EMMETT: Mhm. Um, it's interesting that you mention the thing at the end-- I wondered if you had any thoughts on how it says that it's dedicated to victims of bullying? Um, if you had any particular thoughts on that?
[pause]
ANISE: I guess if I was younger, I'd be able to be like. "Oh, that's targeted right at me." But because I'm like a twenty-year-old in college who like, hasn't been bullied since like I don't even know when, it's just like, "oh, ok." I dunno. Maybe I'm being really shallow about this but um... I... like, can understand, for a younger age group, just not an older age group.
EMMETT: Mhm.
[pause]
EMMETT: So you think a younger age group would find-- like, be able to connect to it in a...?
ANISE: Yeah. Yeah. Just not anyone over the age of... like... I don't... 20. [laughs] Cuz that's-- that's my age. I dunno.
EMMETT: Yeah. Is that because of the age of the characters?
ANISE: Yes.
[pause]
LENNY: Hm. It didn't really... affect... affect like uh what I thought of the... the, like the story arc of the film.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: But ultimately I think it is-- it was good, it's good to spend the effort to stop bullying.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: In the name of people who have been driven to that point from bullying.
EMMETT: Yeah. Do you think that this film, uh... you said that you thought it would be helpful for educational purposes, for um preventing bullying. Do you think that this would be helpful for victims of bullying in any way?
[long pause; 13 seconds of silence. longest pause in the whole interview!]
ANISE: Mnnn... don't... I wanna say no... because... there's nothing that shows like... her trying to stand up to anybody. Cuz I feel like victims of bullying need to be shown and taught how to stand up for themselves and this... film did not represent any of that.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: This just was a very fast depiction of like, oh, bullied. Into suicide.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: So, as a victim, I'd-- I wouldn't wanna see this movie, I'd just wanna be able to learn the ways in which I could stand up for myself and feel better and stop being bullied. Cuz that's-- when I was being bullied, that's all I wanted--
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: --was somebody to teach me how to stand up for myself and not let words or actions get to me.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: By... other people.
LENNY: I'm sorry, could you repeat the question please?
EMMETT: Um, given that it's dedicated to victims of bullying, if you-- how, like, helpful do you think this would be for victims of bullying, if it's, like, helpful. Because you said that you thought it would be educational for stopping bullying, do you think it would be helpful for victims of bullying that it's theoretically dedicated to at the end?
LENNY: Um... I-- I don't think it would be effective, for victims of bullying, on account of the fact that it presents like... uh... like a graphic suicide which is... y'know, not a-- a solution for bullying.
EMMETT: Mhm.
LENNY: And then... recovering from that? Y'know, while it creates a powerful like anti-bullying message with that... I don't see it, it doesn't seem like... like, helpful for a victim.
EMMETT: Mhm.
[pause]
EMMETT: Um, and uh I guess one last question about the movie specifically would be um... do you have any thoughts on like-- if you had to take a guess, who do you like... what kind of person do you think made this?
ANISE: Somebody who's trying to change the issue of bullying.
EMMETT: Mhm?
ANISE: Are you talking about sexual preference? I just was-- sexual orient-- like the person themselves or just like.
EMMETT: Yeah, like, um--
ANISE: Like, their sexual orientation, or--
EMMETT: Yeah, this came up in one of the other--
ANISE: Their gender, or...
EMMETT: Yeah, this came up in one of the other interviews, and people sort of speculated about like if they thought the directors were straight or if they were gay or whatever, so I was interested if you guys had any thoughts on that.
ANISE: Mmh...... I think...... cis female.
EMMETT: Mhm?
ANISE: Yeah.
EMMETT: Do you think... straight?
[pause]
ANISE: [strained] Yes.
EMMETT: [nervous laugh] C-could you elaborate, or is it just sort of a gut feeling?
ANISE: Gut feeling.
EMMETT: Yeah.
[pause]
LENNY: Hm.
EMMETT: This isn't terribly important, you don't need to like-- [nervous laugh] put that much thought into it, I'm just curious--
LENNY: Okay.
EMMETT: --cuz it came up.
LENNY: I-- I would say, uh... the movie was made by a, uh, a queer woman.
EMMETT: Mhm. ...Uh, it's interesting that you both agree-- do you-- I'm guessing you're both sort of like, gut feeling, could you begin to try to explain why you think that? Or... just like, because the main character's a girl...?
[pause]
ANISE: [strained] Uh... hhgh... I think because... [less strained] I-- if I was gonna do a-- an out there sort of film, I'd want it to be different. Than. Previous films I'd seen.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: About this issue. So I-- I guess that's where I'm coming from. Cuz like if I was gonna do a film, how would I wanna make it so that ev-- so that it's different and it's watchable and you know d-- people'd have a desire to watch it and, and like y-y'know like "oh this is just another bullying movie" it's like no, this is like-- this is a bullying, um-- issue, movie, or short film, um, and, it's not like... normal-- y-you know what I'm trying to say.
[i definitely do not.]
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANISE: [mumbling] So. I. [inaudible]
LENNY: Yeah, I would say um, a queer person would probably be more strongly invested in this project. And um I cheated a little with uh with gender, because I'm using the name? Of the director? [Kim Rocco Shields]
EMMETT: Mm.
LENNY: For my reference.
EMMETT: Mhm.
SIMULTANEOUSLY:
EMMETT: Yeah.
LENNY: So it's more--
LENNY: -- it's not explicit, I know it's like-- that gives me an, an idea, I don't-- I would be-- I can't-- obviously I can't be one hundred percent.
EMMETT: Yeah, you don't have to be--
LENNY: That's my guess.
EMMETT: -- I'm just sort of wondering your reasoning behind your guessing. Um, okay, that's about what um I have for like prepared questions, [It wasn't!! I forgot to ask one of my prepared questions!!] is there anything specific about the movie that struck you that you wanted to talk about?
ANISE: Uh, not at the moment. No. [exhales a laugh]
LENNY: Hm.
ANISE: I-- well, I am curious to understand why they did it the way that they did it, but other than that I have no more questions.
EMMETT: Mhm? [slight pause] Why they had the orientation swap kind of thing?
ANISE: Yes.
[pause]
LENNY: Uh, I'm fine, thanks.
EMMETT: No? Okay. So any last thoughts at all? Um, before we stop?
LENNY: No.
ANISE: Nn.
EMMETT: Great. Thank you so much for participating in my study!
EMMETT: me!
SEA: 20, unspecified gender, unspecified major/area of study, unspecified orientation, unspecified race/ethnicity
AMINA: 19, she/her pronouns, film/critical race theory student, straight, black/Korean
ANYA: 21, cisgender female, film/narrative arts student, queer & aromantic, black & African American

EMMETT: Okay. So the first thing I wanted to get was general, like, overall impressions. Um, what’re your general thoughts on the film?
AMINA: Mm.
EMMETT: Just, generally speaking.
ANYA: Um, I've seen that before actually.
EMMETT: Really? Fuck.
ANYA: [laughs] Um...
AMINA: It was weird. I've seen... uh, there's this film, it's called Oppressed Majority and it's kind of like a similar concept to what this movie is about. This was kind of...
[modmates walk through, there's some clattering around in the kitchen]
AMINA: I dunno. It's just weird how like they always have to do like the-- the like--
SEA: The flipped role? [laughs]
AMINA: Yeah, I don't... really... get that? Or like why... I guess it's cuz like straight people... it's a way for like... straight people to like... understand something about that? I dunno-- it was-- I dunno.
SEA: Or maybe they're just tired of hearing the same "wahh you're gay you're bullied!" narrative.
AMINA: Mhm.
SEA: So they want a little spin on it.
EMMETT: Mhm.
SEA: And at the same time they can get it.
SIMULTANEOUSLY:
EMMETT: Okay... um... so--
ANYA: Do you have to like-- oh.
ANYA: Do you want us to focus on like, quality, content, like...
EMMETT: Literally just whatever.
ANYA: Okay.
EMMETT: I just like want the broadest spectrum of just like. Everything you thought about the movie.
ANYA: Basically I didn't like it.
[laughter]
ANYA: I... the first time I watched it, I had to skip through it, because I wasn't really engaged, but I understand like what they were trying to do.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Yeah, I didn't like it.
EMMETT: Yeah... um, cool!
[laughter]
EMMETT: Great, that's a good start. Um, you would not believe how nonspecific people can be [laughs] about it. Overall, if you had to sort of guess, um like just sort of broadly speaking what would you say the movie is about? Like, what would you—what would you think the core theme of the movie is?
ANYA: Uh huh. Um... core theme... like, anti-bullying but also like... like... specifically targeted at LGB—white LGBTQ people.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Yeah.
EMMETT: [to Sea and Amina] You'd agree?
SEA: Yep.
AMINA: You got it, yeah.
ANYA: I "got it?" [laughs, so do Sea and Amina] Y'all have to talk, too...!
AMINA: I'm just, I mean, we just watched it so I've kind of got to think about it maybe?
EMMETT: Mhm. Yeah. [slight pause, silence] Given that, who do you think the intended audience for the movie is?
AMINA: Hm. Um...
SEA: The Bible Belt? [awkward chuckle]
AMINA: The who?
SEA: The Bible Belt?
ANYA: The fuck?
AMINA: Yeah.
SEA: Like, the... the South part of the US, like, it's... resembles a belt, and it's just the working--it's the most religious slash...
AMINA: Oh.
ANYA: Oh.
SEA: ...anti-LGBT...
ANYA: Mm.
EMMETT: Mhm.
AMINA: Yeah, I guess, just, not people part of the LGBT... QI... A...
SEA: Plus plus.
[laughter]
AMINA: Yeah, plus plus, community? I don't think it's really a... I don't know.
ANYA: Yeah, it's definitely like... not written for... like... it was written for straight bigoted people. Like, yeah, people who like wanna bully people for having different sexual or romantic orientation, I feel like. Cuz the way they like portrayed the situations were very like textbook?
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: It wasn't nuanced.
AMINA: It wasn't really realistic. Like, I don't think it...
ANYA: It was informative, it was like... or like, instructional?
AMINA: It was pretty...
ANYA: Whatever.
AMINA: Yeah.
SEA: It was trying to do the bare bones. Cuz I feel like they knew that this alone would be hard enough for their audience to swallow. Their intended audience, I guess.
EMMETT: Mhm.
SEA: Whereas if you are, I guess, LGBT, then you don't need someone to tell you this, because it's like.
AMINA: Yeah.
SEA: It's your life. So. Like.
EMMETT: Yeah. Given that you would all, sort of agree that it's for straight people or for cishet people...
ANYA: Mm.
EMMETT: What would you-- what do you think about the bit at the very end where it says that it's dedicated to victims of bullying? Do you have any thoughts on that?
AMINA: That's what I thought was weird! I was like... what?
[soft laughter]
AMINA: Why would this be dedicated... to victims? I don't... I'm just trying to understand [mumbling] how that would work.
[pause]
ANYA: [sort of exasperated sigh] Um...
SEA: It was really confusing. Cuz it was such--
AMINA: It was like unique-- it said something about, like, being unique is okay. And it was... like... it was strange? Cuz... the...
[pause]
AMINA: I dunno, cuz it's not like a straightforward like bullying like... LGBTQ, like, youth, so it... I dunno. It wasn't-- like the, the fact that they flipped the story made it, made the message at the end like kinda weird.
[pause]
EMMETT: Um... Yeah, um, so-- given you would probably agree that it's like, j-- an anti-bullying movie, do you think that's the main message of it?
SEA: I don't really know what it was about.
EMMETT: Yeah. [laughs]
SEA: To be honest. Because it's like... I know it wasn't for me to watch--
EMMETT: Yeah.
SEA: So... I don't know what to get out of it, really.
EMMETT: That's fair.
SEA: Like am I supposed to feel... X, Y, or Z? Because I, I'm this person who's watching it? I kinda feel like I'm intruding because it just was not meant for me. It just feels so awkward.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Maybe it was like to call out people who've like been perpetrators? The perpetrators in situations like that? Or that seem similar? Or if they recognize a situation that, like... call them out on their absurdity or their violence...
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Like, explicit violence. Um... yeah. Wh-- well, like, anti-bullying as opposed to what? You know?
EMMETT: Um... yeah. [laughs]
SEA & ANYA: [also laugh]
EMMETT: Uh... it's interesting, cuz, um. Some respondents say that it's, like, about bullying? And some respondents say that it's about homophobia?
ANYA: Mhm.
EMMETT: Um, so-- so, like, depending on... that's why I ask--
ANYA: Yeah.
EMMETT: --because everybody's like, oh, it's obvious what it's about, but everyone has like a different idea.
ANYA: Yeah, no, it's definitely anti-bullying because they try to-- when you like flip the script, that like technique that people use, it's to point out like some type of absurdity in like people when they... you know, perpetrate violence against people that aren't like them.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: So they try to like use "oh, like, that's absurd." There were a lot of moments where I was just like... like... doesn't make sense, or like they try to like... you know... I don't know.
AMINA: [snickers quietly]
ANYA: I don't know if I can explain it exactly, but they're just trying to like call people out on that.
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: Yeah.
EMMETT: Um, how effective do you think it is in delivering its message to its intended audience? Or how effective would you guess it would be?

[pause]
SEA: Just because it's so far away from my own worldview, like. I think it would be effective. Cuz I don't think in that way, like I don't need this type of media to tell me what it's like, you know, so. Just because it's so far removed, I think it would be effective. Because I tend to have like nothing in common with people who actually... who I imagine would be the intended audience for this film.
EMMETT: Mhm.

[pause]
ANYA: For me, it's not-- I mean, what-- effective in what, would be my question. Because I didn't really-- I didn't leave it with any action, or-- also, it wasn't, it did not reflect my reality? [smiling, nearly laughing]
EMMETT: Mhm.
ANYA: I just did not see me as a black queer woman, I didn't see myself in that, necessarily.
EMMETT: Yeah.
ANYA: Um... so like that was like the first thing that like took me out of whatever they were, might have been trying to do. Um, and so... yeah. It wasn't effective for me.
AMINA: I just don't think it was effective because it wasn't for me either.
ANYA: But it just didn't end with like, action. Like, just... it was hi-- like showcasing that, but. [clears throat] The story wasn't finished.
EMMETT: Mhm... that's a pretty good segue because I wanted to make sure to ask everybody how relatable or like realistic did you find the movie?
AMINA: Yeah...
EMMETT: Um, does it like, speak to any personal experiences, or, um, do you think it's like actually any kind of reflection of reality?
AMINA: Hm.
SEA: I mean... I'm just thinking about the different scenario where like the person didn't end up taking their own life, and they just kept going?
EMMETT: Mhm.
SEA: Um, and I guess in my own experience, like the people who made fun of me for being... the way that I am, they're like “oh you're so weird,” um, they ended up just-- go-- like, dropping out of high school, or just being queer themselves, and just not coming to terms with it, so. I feel like that's also important to show? That, like, every-- although it is about this central theme it's very flat to me because it's not over a period of time, I think, that's long enough for people to really understand that no, this is a real human being and they're like. There are consequences and reasons that people have acted this way?
EMMETT: Mhm.
SEA: And... yeah. Maybe that's deviating too far... from... the script, though. [small pause]
ANYA: It was too extreme. I like couldn't... [sighs, sounding tired] I don't know. It just... I couldn't connect to it. Yeah.
AMINA: Yeah, same.
ANYA: Like, an extreme-- extremely white, not, like... [exasperated laugh]
AMINA: I don't think I've ever experienced any of what happened. I mean... I don't know. But that doesn't mean it doesn't happen, so.

ANYA: I mean, that's textbook bullying, though, like--

AMINA: I mean, it could be realistic--

ANYA: [laughs]

AMINA: I just never, like-- that's never, I don't know. It just seemed a little...

ANYA: But isn't that textbook bullying to you?

AMINA: It is, but like--

ANYA: When someone like turns on them and says, "what are you doing," like...

AMINA: And the fact that there's no explanation for like why the people are like bullying this person so badly kind of, like, makes it... or like, the film loses meaning, kind of, because of that. Cuz that-- like, there is a reason why people act that way. I mean, it kind of touched upon like uh parents and like their influence on children?

ANYA: Mhm.

AMINA: But I just don't... there wasn't like a very clear reason for why all the kids were being so... aggressive. Which would have been helpful, I think.

ANYA: Mm.

EMMETT: Um... [flipping through notes] covered that, um. So yeah I had like a couple more specific-- [my cat walks up] hi! [clears throat] specific questions about the film, um. I was interested in what you thought about the way the film uses slurs? In the narrative and like in the dialogue of the movie. Did you have any thoughts on... how that... works?

[slight pause]

ANYA: Hrm.

EMMETT: That's-- not a really good way to phrase it [laughs nervously] but there's-- like, any thoughts on like... how that's included? Because they have, um, the artificial, like, breeder and hetero slurs, but they also have actual homophobic slurs.

ANYA:Yeah.

AMINA: That was confusing.

ANYA: I can't recall...

AMINA: Like, she was getting texts where like they were saying like--

ANYA: Faggot.

AMINA: The f word, and...

ANYA: Yeah. Mhm. [looks at Emmett] What did I think about it...?

AMINA: It made me confused, because they kinda were like flipping a lot of like-- like gender roles, and like, that made it a little... I dunno. Cuz they-- it was just inconsistent, I guess.

EMMETT: Mhm?

[pause]

SEA: It just made me feel how redundant it was. Like. And I guess maybe that wasn't... the point, either? But um like... why are you gonna go and get out of your own lane and jump into somebody else's? Like, for any reason? Why?

ANYA: What do you mean?

SEA: Like... don't you have enough stuff to worry about in your own life, without giving people shit for living how they do? Or... just... acting the way that they do? I-- I never understood that. Like, why do you feel the need to... constantly take yourself out of your own space and like. Intrude on somebody else's life. I've never understood why people have the need to do that.

EMMETT: You mean the filmmakers or the bullies in the movie?

SEA: Um...... I mean, I'm not-- I don't study film so I don't have any idea why people actually, you know, would... what the exact rationale would be so I guess the people in the film?
EMMETT: Mhm?
SEA: And... they do have their reasons, I guess, but think like [Amina] said it’d be nice if they gave a formal explanation. But that would also probably take away from what the whole idea of making the film is, so I don't really know.
[pause]
EMMETT: Um, if you had to guess, who would you say made this movie? Do you think they were... gay? Straight? Et cetera?
ANYA: Straight. And white. And probably had a friend that... or several friends that were not straight and had experiences with bullying or something. Yeah.
AMINA: I don’t know! [laughs nervously]
EMMETT: Yeah, it doesn't have to be like well thought out, I'm just wondering if people had any like, "oh, this was clearly made by a..."
AMINA: I mean, I think they’re white.
[laughter]
AMINA: [laughs] I’m pretty sure they’re white, but, I don’t know about their... [trails off]
ANYA: I can’t articulate it, but this just--
AMINA: I’m curious.
ANYA: Wasn’t good. [laughs]
[everyone laughs]
AMINA: [laughing] It was pretty bad!
ANYA: It just wasn't good! [still laughing] Like, this is the second time I've like stumbled upon this--
AMINA: I was just disappointed, I don't know!
ANYA: --in my life, I... [laughing]
AMINA: I mean, I've seen-- it's just-- I'm curious to know who directed it though and what like... I dunno, what they were... thinking? Cuz I’ve seen like... I don’t know, this seems like something like you know how your grade school teachers would sometimes give you DVDs or something on bullying? And be like, "here, watch this." Like, this is something that they would give you maybe. Minus like the suicide part.
SEA: Hm.
[pause]
ANYA: Yeah, like you can't honor victims of like... LGBTQIA plus plus victims of bullying and suicide with this. It’s catered to straight people and I feel like it might have been made by a straight person.
EMMETT: Mhm. [to Sea] Any thoughts?
SEA: I didn't gain anything from that movie. I gained absolutely nothing.
EMMETT: Mhm.
SEA: I... yeah. That's it.
AMINA: RIP.
EMMETT: Alright. That's all my specific questions. Is there anything else about the movie that you wanted to talk about?
AMINA: Maybe how you felt about the like girl killing herself at the end? Cuz I really... I was asking myself "does this make me feel upset" and it... didn't? Which is weird. Like, it was, it was graphic but I didn't feel like "wow this is really tragic." I just. I don't know.
ANYA: Cuz you knew it was gonna happen, though.
AMINA: Yeah, I did know it was gonna happen, but I also just... I don't know... it could just be like stylistically, the film didn’t have... like I wasn't invested enough in her life.
ANYA: Mhm.
AMINA: But...
ANYA: Yeah, from that standpoint, like technical and then like stylistically the film wasn't very effective in like getting me invested in it.

AMINA: I mean cuz in the end she's-- she's like a straight cis white girl. Which is-- it's just-- I don't get it.

ANYA: [snorts]

AMINA: It's just a weird concept, I don't know!

ANYA: [laughs softly]

EMMETT: [to Sea] Anything?

SEA: No, they covered it.

EMMETT: Yeah?

[laughter]

EMMETT: Okay. Um. Okay, if that's everything you wanted to talk about, then...? Alright. Great! Thank you so much for participating in my study!

SEA: Thanks for havin' us.
Appendix B: Savior Complex Extra Materials

Cast of Characters

SQUELCH HARPER GARVINSON
A girl disguised as a boy so that she can live up to her father’s legacy and be the hero everyone wants her to be. She’s popular, good at everything, and emotionally disengaged from her life.
also known as: kel, harper, squelch
age: 16
birthday: may 3
gender/pronouns: secretly a nonbinary girl / she/her/hers
orientation: asexual & aromantic
height: 6’2"
appearance: white. tousled blond hair. pale blue eyes. as european-farm-boy-takes-up-his-father’s-sword-lookin as they come. handsome, broad-shouldered, always smiling. her right hand is made of metal (and magic.)
favorite food: apples
favorite drink: chamomile tea

***

SKULLDUGGERY CREED
This kid would be the greatest sorcerer of all time, if it could just get its act together. It’s impulsive, very mentally ill, and meaner than it wants to be.
also known as: SD, creed
age: 17
birthday: october 17
gender/pronouns: gender-neutral / it/its
orientation: exclusively attracted to men, IDs as gay
height: 5’5”
appearance: very very pale. small. round face. covered in faint freckles. big green eyes. dyed bright green slightly curly hair. dark circles under its eyes because it never sleep enough. scars all over its body that it doesn’t like to talk about.
favorite food: meat-lover’s pizza
favorite drink: sex on the beach

***

TAKASHI BLOOD DIAMOND “JOHN” JOHNSON-ASADA
John has no natural talent whatsoever; no matter how good he gets, he’ll never be better than harper. He’s ambitious, hardworking, and he hates everyone including himself.
also known as: john, bd, blood diamond. only his parents call him takashi.
age: 18
birthday: april 15
gender/pronouns: male / he/him
orientation: gay
height: 6’0”
appearance: mixed-race. short brown hair. brown eyes. always looks exhausted and sort of angry, because he is always exhausted and sort of angry. solidly built & muscular. could be pretty if he smiled more.
favorite food: miso soup with tofu
favorite drink: water

***

CADFAEL ILLARION AELIUS
the much-beloved witch prince of atlaras, heir apparent.
also known as: your highness, cadya
age: 18
birthday: march 10
gender/pronouns: a boy, mostly / he/him
orientation: pansexual with a strong preference for men
height: 6’0”
appearance: brown skin. long white-gold hair. hazel eyes. very beautiful.
favorite food: rosewater & pistachio cupcakes
favorite drink: vanilla almond milk

***

MORRIS KKIERHAN
an immortal sorcerer hell-bent on destroying the world.
also known as: the archvillain
age: 222
birthday: ????????
gender/pronouns: male / he/him
orientation: ???????
height: 6’7”
appearance: a shade elf. gray skin. black eyes, no white in them at all. long black hair. one of his ears is a bit longer and more pointed than a human ear; the other one was cut in half a long time ago. crisp black tattoos: lines on his face, rings around his arms, and a tesseract in the hollow of his throat.
Timelines

MORRIS-ERA

- 2/17/2867 -- Institute Inquirer interview with Morris
- 2/28/2867 -- The school bans them from publishing it
- 4/4/2867 -- Addison Harper goes missing
  - had joined Morris in protests & publicly came out in support of radical restructuring
  - is put in a reeducation program
- 2868-70 -- Morris becomes increasingly radical
  - protests get more widespread across the country
  - government starts planting violent instigators
  - shit spirals out of control into riots
  - Morris is considered a domestic terrorist
- 5/19/2871 -- Morris is reportedly assassinated
  - actually disappears
  - Oirir government begins a lowkey manhunt
- 2870s and 80s - Tzokhari people are targeted by the government
  - their numbers dwindle
- 5/24/2883 -- Han Forest Massacre
  - the last of the tzokhari are killed by the government for harboring an unidentified terrorist + "resisting"
  - Morris is the only one left

BACKGROUND

- 3032 – Jenson Garvinson saves world from Demon Plague
- 6/4/3048 – Jenson marries Marie Harper
- 7/13/3050 – Pietr Garvinson Born
- 3/10/3054 - Cadfael is born
- 4/15/3054 – John/Takashi is born
- 4/18/3054 -- John/Takashi is adopted
- 10/17/3054 -- Skullduggery born
- 5/3/3055 – Squelch is born
- 5/6/3055 -- Marie Harper Garvinson dies
- 3/5/3058-5/12/3058 Cadfael comes to stay at the Johnson-Asadas' house
  - they both turn 4
  - they become friends but don't keep in touch after
- 8/20/3060 -- John/Takashi goes to school for the first time
  - 6 years old, 1st grade
  - speaks Common poorly, has a thick accent
  - meets Skullduggery
- 1/20/3061 - Skullduggery is named most powerful sorcerer in the world
- 2/1/3061 -- John/Takashi is diagnosed with autism
• He's been having a lot of trouble in school
  • Can't communicate effectively due to language issues
  • It goes on his permanent record
  • Miya & Garnet are furious

- 7/14/3063 -- Squelch's brother Pietr runs away from home
  - Squelch is 8
  - She now has to “become a boy”

- 8/20/3063 -- Squelch starts 3rd grade as a boy

- May 3064 -- Skullduggery's family moves away from Hillside
  - John is 10 years old
  - Skullduggery is 9
  - 5th grade

- 9/15/3066 -- Efferent (Effy) Creed dies in fire Skullduggery accidentally started
  - Skullduggery is 11
  - 7th grade

- September 3066 - March 3067 - Skullduggery descends into depression
  - Can no longer use magic
  - withdraws into itself, stops talking to people mostly
  - Gets angry

- 3/10/3067 -- Skullduggery makes deal with Kythir
  - 12 years old

- 3/11/3067 -- ORB Meeting with Skullduggery

- 6/3/3067 -- Skullduggery is hospitalized after a failed suicide attempt

- 10/10/3068 -- Skullduggery is hospitalized after another suicide attempt
  - Spends its 14th birthday in the hospital

- 4/18/3069 - Days after his 15th birthday, John sweeps national fighting championships
  - He is hailed as a prodigy
  - He is exhilarated and overexerts himself training too hard

- 5/4/3069 -- Skullduggery meets Alexei for the first time
  - They start dating

- 6/2/3069 - Squelch wins Junior World Championship swordfighting & hand to hand
  - 14 years old

- 12/22/3069 -- Alexei tries to murder Skullduggery
  - It is hospitalized

- 1/5/3070 -- Alexei's trial
  - Skullduggery testifies, sees Alexei at the courthouse even though it wasn't supposed to
  - It breaks down so hard it doesn't speak for months & withdraws from school

- April 3070 -- Skullduggery's family moves back to Hillside for "a fresh start"
  - Skullduggery basically never leaves the house

- 4/2/3070 -- Cadfael comes to stay at John's house

- 4/15/3070 -- John's 16th birthday & hero's journey

- 4/27/3070 -- John WINS national swordfighting & hand-to-hand championships
  - Squelch doesn't enter because she doesn't need to
  - Cadfael watches him fight & is all a-flutter

- 5/3/3070 -- Cadfael & John have sex for the first time
  - They're both 16

- 6/13/3070 -- Squelch WINS world swordfighting championship
  - She's 15, no one even knows who she is
• john gets silver
  • 6/16/3070 -- Squelch WINS world hand-to-hand combat championship
    ○ john gets silver again & is devastated
  • July 3070 -- Squelch is scouted by UPI and moves to Hillside to go to school there
  • 8/20/3070 -- Skullduggery & Squelch are the new kids at school
    ○ Skullduggery is determined to start fresh
    ○ it immediately starts bullying John because he looks too much like Alexei (it can’t remember him at all, he remembers it)
  • 10/17/3070 -- Skullduggery's 16th birthday & hero's journey
  • 12/13/3070 -- Student Council Election
    ○ Squelch wins but gives it to John
  • 5/3/3071 -- Squelch's 16th birthday & hero's journey
  • 6/15/3071 -- Squelch wins Worlds again
  • 6/30/3071 -- Squelch is interviewed in Slice magazine
  • 11/13/3071 -- meeting with John about bullying

STORY

• 3/31/3072 -- Ch 1 & 2 (Monday)
• 4/3/3072 -- Ch. 3 (Thursday)
• 4/7/3072 -- Ch. 4 & 5 (Monday)
• 4/15/3072 -- Ch. 6 & 7 (Tuesday)
• 4/30/3072 -- Ch. 8, 9, 10 (Wednesday)