

THOUGH THE STARS WALK BACKWARDS

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feel the wind in my hair (rather than the stone beneath my feet)

“Hey Boss, do you wanna play Chicken?” Sith leaned over the edge of the building they were perched on, the wind tugging a piece of hair in front of her eyes. She shoved it back behind her ear, her focus never leaving the goings-on of the street beneath them. The people were nearly indistinguishable from this height, just a shapeless mass that lurched along the sidewalks. Though, was that really any different from how they appeared up close? The cars, at least, had a bit more structure. They retained their boxy figures as they inched along the road, the sound of their horns lost in the wind.

Sith crept further over the edge. She dropped her hand from her hair, letting the wind have its way with it. Up here, they were so far removed from the city below. But, all she had to do was pitch forward... The world would blur for a moment, become even more unrecognizable as the wind tore at her vision. Then, it would snap into focus as she caught herself. The sudden rush of clarity would hurt her eyes almost as much as the catch would hurt her shoulder, but she wouldn't let that stop her. Not when she was being carried by the wind, with nothing left to hold her down. No, then she would soar.

She felt her muscles tense, her body instinctively preparing itself for the jump.

“Get away from the ledge, Sith,” Bodach rumbled, his eyes never straying from the tactical binoculars he was looking through.

Sith pouted but obligingly fell back into a handspring. Her body arched upwards and she received a few precious milliseconds of absolute disconnect from the earth before her hands made contact with the roof they were stationed on. She completed her rotation and landed several feet back from where she had been. “Come on,” she wheedled. “It'll be fun! We'll both throw ourselves off the roof, and whoever grapples away first loses.”

Bodach didn't bother to dignify that with a response.

“Spoilsport,” Sith muttered. She rocked back on her heels for a moment before dropping into a handstand. As she stretched her legs up towards the moonless sky, she let her eyes drift shut. The breeze stirred her cape and hair, urging them into a gentle sway. It was soothing, in a way. There was no sound up here. It was so drastically different than it was in the city, where the noise never ceased. There, you could always hear someone talking, hear a car moving, or a siren wailing. And you could always hear someone screaming. The screams never stopped in the city.

Though, she supposed she should be grateful for the screams. Without them, there would be no reason for her to be up here. She'd have a normal life, down there on the street with the rest of the masses. Her feet would always be on the ground, and she would spend her nights in a tutu instead of a cape, leaping across a stage in an effort to pretend like she could soar.

Her head moved closer to the ground as her elbows bent, her forehead nearly scraping against the rough concrete of the roof. The ground receded as her arms straightened. She paused for a minute, checking that her balance was stable before she let herself sink again. It was easy for her to fall into the rhythm of the exercise, especially when she ignored how the muscles in her arms trembled with the strain of her inverted pushups.

She felt a pinprick of guilt when she thought of herself appreciating other people's misery. It seemed like a slippery slope. Even her internal justifications that she hadn't meant it like that did little to ease her self-reproach. After all, should she really be enjoying the time she spent out here? Wasn't that line of thinking the exact opposite of their mission? The point of their job was to create a world where they weren't needed anymore. Therefore, shouldn't she consider every night she spent home safe a victory?

But, that seemed like such an unrealistic goal. If she pinned all her hopes on their eventual victory, wouldn't she just get discouraged? Crime was relentless. It didn't matter how many crooks they put away one night, there was always twice as many the next. Whatever lesson they were trying to teach the denizens of the criminal underworld, it obviously wasn't sticking. Maybe they needed a change of tactics.

Or maybe she needed to remember who was the angsty one in this partnership. Her gaze shifted up to Bodach, who was still standing near the edge of the roof. The wind had caught his cape, causing it to billow out behind him, further emphasizing the dramatic silhouette the light of the city cast him in. Sith bit back a snort. She would swear she caught him practicing that same pose in front of a mirror before.

Thinking the way she had been, that was sounding too much like Bodach for her taste. She loved her dad—really, she did—but sometimes he was too doom and gloom. Especially for a hero. He viewed himself as a participant in a futile war, a lone martyr condemned to fight the endless fight so that others might know peace. Which, to his credit, he'd been doing much better about his negativity lately. Sith liked to think that she had a hand in that. It was easy to understand Bodach's point of view; frankly, it was depressing to throw a perp in a jail and then see them right back on the streets the next week. It would be just as easy to give in to her doubts and become as jaded as Bodach had. Who knew? Maybe in a few years' time she'd be just like him. But right now, she had a job to do. And the people in the city weren't the only ones she had to save.

"There's movement in the warehouse." Bodach's voice drew her attention back to him.

Sith let her legs fall forward, her body curling into a roll that carried her towards where he was waiting. She popped up at his side and spread her arms wide in a theatrical stretch. "Finally!" she groaned. "I thought they were never going to show up. It's always fifty-fifty with that coerced info. I'm starting to think that we need better ways to gather intel other than threatening to throw goons off of buildings. Maybe we should start carrying around cake with

us. That might get them to talk; everybody likes cake. Do criminals like cake? Maybe they don't, they are kind of messed up; I could see them not liking cake. What do criminals like? Drugs! Criminals like drugs. We could start carrying around drugs and offer them that for information—no, wait, that's enabling."

Bodach stowed his binoculars away and pulled out a grappling gun. He aimed it at the building across from them, taking a moment to adjust the trajectory.

Sith mimicked his actions, still prattling all the while. "The offer to play Chicken's still on the table, you know. Think about it; we could get down there so much faster if we just plummeted."

Satisfied with his target, Bodach pulled the trigger. The hook shot out, embedding itself into the side of the building. He pulled on the attached line to ensure that it was secure before he dove off the side of the roof. Sith watched as he swung away.

"Or we could do it the boring way," she sighed. She fired her grappling gun as well, then performed a cursory tug to prove that it was firmly stuck. The ledge of the building loomed a few feet in front of her. She eased herself backwards, putting more distance between them as her body settled into a runner's stance. The wind tugged at her hair, causing strands of it to reach for the edge. She gave into the silent urgings with a smirk, and began sprinting towards the end of the roof.

It only took a single leap for her to clear the ledge, and then she was falling. The wind tore at her, her hair and cape being forced upwards by its buffeting. Her eyes closed, the tension in her muscles easing for the first time that night as she completely surrendered to its power.

The line of her grappling hook snapped taut almost instantly, pulling her from a free-fall into a controlled arc. Her eyes flew open at the sudden interruption. A sigh fell from her lips, the gust of disappointment lost to the wind as she altered her course to dutifully follow behind Bodach.

* * * * *

Sith stood on a streetlight, her arms extended above her head. She took a moment to consider the thin stretch of metal in front of her before she deemed it satisfactory. Her feet moved almost of their own volition, sliding forward into a starting position. She pitched sideways, executing a series of cartwheels along the arm of the light. Finishing the routine left her in an upside-down position, a situation she decided to remedy by performing several handsprings back the way she had come. She landed upright, a wide smile on her face. This would do nicely.

Below her, a fight was raging in the street. Several members of a local gang were attempting to eviscerate the hero who had just foiled their very prosperous weapons sale. Spectrum ducked and weaved out of the way of the many knives that were being thrust at him. He was quickly finding himself with only a few places left to go, as the thugs had succeeded in almost surrounding him. His eyes widened as a pistol joined the fray, its hammer falling back with an audible *click*. He waved his hand frantically, and the air in front of the gun shimmered and solidified. A thick layer of ice now covered its muzzle, preventing a slew of bullets from forcefully rearranging his face.

The goon wielding it cursed as the weapon backfired on him. It fell to the street as he cradled his now burnt hand. Spectrum smirked at him as the man gawked at the wintry substance that was coating the front half of the gun barrel. The nauseating fear he had felt was subsiding, confidence welling up to take its place. He stepped forward, his chest puffing up with his newfound cockiness.

“Want some ice for that?” he asked, gesturing with a nod towards the man’s injured hand.

The sound of a gun drew Sith’s attention from where she was practicing pirouettes thirty feet in the air. “Specs?” she called down. “You doing alright?”

Spectrum had learned that taunting a group of dangerous criminals was a bad idea. “Y-yeah!” he squeaked out in reply, now completely encircled by the thugs.

For some reason, Sith doubted that he was. She dropped into a split, using the lower vantage to get a better idea of the situation beneath her. Her tongue clucked in disappointment. “Specs, don’t get surrounded is like Super-Hero Rule Number One. It’s really hard to win a fight when the bad guys are literally everywhere.”

“Okay! Thanks for letting me know!” Spectrum yelped as he narrowly avoided a knife to the back.

“You want some help?”

“Huh?” He looked mortified by the thought. “No, no, I’m good! You stay up there, and I’ll be done with this in just a minute!”

“You sure?” Sith moved one leg so that it was hanging over the edge of the streetlight. “I can come down there.”

“I’m fine; really!” There was a definite edge of hysteria to Spectrum’s voice, and even he was unsure if it was due to the very real danger his life was in, or to his embarrassment.

“Okay...,” Sith drawled, staring skeptically down at the novice hero.

He caught her gaze and gave her a strained grin, which quickly disappeared as a fist came hurtling towards his face.

Sith cringed in sympathy. She moved as if to help, but Spectrum’s frantic waving had her settling back into a seated position with a sigh. It only took a few minutes of watching the fight for boredom to completely overtake her. She rose up on the leg she had kept on the arm of the light, and used it to settle into a crouched position. Bringing her other leg back on top, she made sure to keep it straight and parallel to the metal. Staying settled in her crouch, she began to spin, her extended leg stretching out over the street as she completed rotation after rotation.

There wasn’t much of a breeze tonight; at least, not this close to the ground, but Sith still felt the familiar stirrings of the wind in her hair. It pushed the strands away from her ears, leaving them to float about in the air. She forced herself not to lean into it. Maybe if she had been on stable footing, but forgetting her place up here would lead to painful consequences.

She stood, taking a moment to reorient herself before she began anything else. The wind had inspired a restlessness in her, and this streetlight was too short to do anything about it. She started scanning nearby buildings. They were a good ways away from downtown, so none of them were particularly tall. Of course, downtown was only a ride away. All she had to do was hop on her bike, and she could be at a skyscraper in a matter of minutes. And, if she ditched the helmet while riding, she could catch a nice breeze on the way there as well. Flying down a deserted road with her hair down and her helmet off was closest she could get to falling without actually doing it.

Naturally, she couldn’t let Bodach know that she ever went riding without it. Throwing themselves off buildings on a nightly basis was fine, but going driving without a helmet was just plain reckless.

Speaking of reckless, she was going to have to figure out a way to keep Spectrum safe while she was doing this. She glanced down at him just as he performed a particularly graceless dodge out of the way of a lumbering thug. However, she did spot two goons unconscious on the sidewalk, so he was doing fine. Right? She still shouldn’t leave him here, though. Maybe he could come with her. He’d probably jumped off a building before.

“Hey Specs!” she yelled. “You wanna play Chicken?”

Spectrum dropped to the street, just missing another hit to the face. He slammed his hand against the ground, instantly covering the surrounding area in a thin sheet of ice. The man who had been chasing him went skidding across the slick surface, his legs sliding out from under him and sending him headfirst into the curb. Spectrum heaved a sigh of relief as he pushed

himself back to his feet, only to slip and fall on his own creation. He stared up at Sith from his position sprawled on the ground. "Um, I'm a little busy right now!"

She waved a hand dismissively. "Not now! When you're done with all this! Of course, I could still help if you wanted me to..."

"No, it's okay!" He said, trying and failing to stand up once more. "I'm almost done!"

Sith looked at the half a dozen thugs that were still conscious and itching for a fight. Fortunately for Spectrum, they were having the same problem balancing that he was, granting him a brief moment of reprieve. "Uh-huh. So, have you ever played Chicken before?"

"That's the game where you stand in front of a train and whoever wants to get hit the most wins, right?"

"Kind of, except we're not playing it like that."

Some of the color returned to Spectrum's face. "Good," he said, the word exhaled in a thankful breath. "So, how are we playing it?" he asked in a voice loud enough to be heard this time.

"We're going to jump off a building and whoever catches themselves first is the loser."

Spectrum blanched. "Won't we die?"

Sith shrugged. "I mean, it's possible. Why, have you never jumped off a building before?"

"No!" he cried, now stable on his feet, except for his shaking knees, which threatened to send him plummeting right back down.

"Huh," Sith said, sinking into a sitting position on the arm of the light. Her brow scrunched as she thought that over. "Really? That's weird."

"Is it?" Spectrum replied, his voice shrill as the remaining thugs regained their footing as well.

"I guess not," Sith said, staying contemplative. "Well, it's definitely not for normal people. But I always assumed that heroes... well, I suppose plenty of them can fly, so they wouldn't need to. Specs, can you fly? Wait, no you can't; if you could, you wouldn't be busting your butt on this ice right now. Nice wipeout, by the way."

Spectrum groaned in response.

“Okay, now I’m really curious.” Sith swung her legs excitedly. “How do you get around the city then if you don’t fly and you don’t go by rooftop? Which, I mean, I go by rooftop and that’s not the only way I get around the city, so you don’t necessarily have to be limited to one way of traveling, but still, you don’t use either of those, so how do you do it?” She paused for breath and smiled eagerly down at Spectrum. Her smile fell when she noticed that he hadn’t moved from his previous position of facedown in the street. “Oh, you’re unconscious, aren’t you? That’s not good.” Her gaze darted over to the thugs that were rapidly approaching him. “Oh, that’s really not good. Okay, time for me to help.”

She dropped, her hands reaching up and grabbing hold of the arm of the light before she could plummet the complete distance. Her legs swung back and forth as she built up her momentum, her eyes never leaving the men below her. At the height of her rotation, she let go of the pole, flipping through the air until her feet connected squarely with the shoulders of the man closest to Spectrum. He hit the ground, his chin cracking audibly on the pavement and rendering him unconscious.

Sith hopped off his inert form, her arms held high in a gymnast’s traditional finishing pose. She grinned down at Spectrum, who was not as unconscious as she initially thought, and was actually only dazed. “You’ve always got to stick the dismount,” she told him.

Spectrum nodded like she had just given him the most valuable piece of advice he’d ever heard.

Her smile gained a sympathetic twist to it. “Why don’t you take a minute, and I’ll finish cleaning up?”

She didn’t wait for his response, which she was sure would only be another stunned nod. It was fairly simple to dispose of the remaining goons, especially when they were all slipping on the ice. She kept gliding around them, and within minutes she was the only one left standing. Spectrum was staggering to his feet when she made her way back over to him, and he was looking at her with an expression of unabashed awe.

“How are you so good?” he asked once he found his voice.

Sith shrugged. “Years of training, years of field application, custom equipment to help with balance, take your pick.”

“But, you’re so young!”

She frowned at him. “I’m pretty sure we’re the same age.”

“Still,” Spectrum shifted self-consciously. “You’re so much better than me.”

“Like I said, I’ve had years of experience. You’re still new. Besides, you’re not doing half bad! For a rookie,” she smirked, clapping him so roughly on the shoulder that he almost lost his balance again. She laughed at his indignant expression. “How do you not know how to walk on your own ice?”

“It’s not like I practice on it,” he muttered, shrugging off the hand she still had on his shoulder. He cringed at her nonplussed expression. “I should practice on it, shouldn’t I?”

“Oh yeah.” She shook her head and sighed. “Well, if you don’t know how to walk on it, why didn’t you just get rid of it?”

“And how do you suggest I do that?” he asked defensively.

“Spectrum,” she said slowly. “Why are you called Spectrum?”

“Because I can make both fire and ice from my ha—oh...” His eyes widened with realization. “I get what you’re saying now.”

He stretched his hands out over the road, the heat that radiated out from his palms causing the air to shimmer. Fire covered the ground around him, steam hissing as its intensity forced the ice to dissipate, leaving the street glistening in its wake, like the aftermath of a rain shower. It only took seconds for it to grow restless of its confines, and it surged out of the boundaries Spectrum had set for it.

Sith swore and leapt backwards out of the way of the flames. “I’m guessing you don’t know how to control that either,” she sniped.

Spectrum flushed and ducked his head, hoping the tinted light of the fire would hide his changed complexion. “I’m still working on it.”

“Yeah, well maybe don’t quit your day job just yet.”

The fire flickered between them as Spectrum’s head sunk even lower, his body hunching in on itself like he was trying to disappear while still standing. Sith heaved a frustrated sigh and scrubbed a hand over her face. The adhesive she used to keep her mask on was starting to irritate her skin. She needed to take it off soon. Or maybe it wasn’t her mask. Her entire body prickled with itchiness. An uncomfortable squirm worked its way through her, and she shifted from foot to foot, bouncing restlessly on the balls of her feet. She needed to move. She needed to ride, she needed to fall, she needed...

“Look Specs, I’m sorry, alright? That wasn’t cool of me.”

Spectrum nodded stiffly, his shoulders coming down from around his ears. “It’s okay,” he said, the words almost lost to the crackle of the flames.

Sith shook her head. "Nah, it wasn't. I shouldn't have said that. You're doing great, honestly." A small smile quirked up the corner of her lips. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"But, what about the flames?" Spectrum lowered his arms and looked despairingly at the new problem he'd created.

"They'll go out by themselves," Sith said dismissively, after a quick glance around to ensure that anything flammable, including the criminals, was safely out of harm's way. "We should probably cuff those guys, though."

Spectrum stared at her skeptically as she retrieved several pairs of restraints and began securing the crooks. "How do you know that?"

Sith blinked up at him from where she was unsuccessfully trying to roll an exceptionally large thug onto his side so that she could tie his hands behind his back. "Um, because if we don't and they wake up before the police get here, they'll run away," she replied.

"No, I mean how do you know that my fire's not just going to keep burning?"

"Oh, that." The thug fell face-first in the street as Sith's shoving caused him to slide off the curb he'd been slumped on. She shrugged and took the opportunity to secure his hands. "He tried to knife you, stop looking at me like that. And I know your fire's going to go out because, even though it's supernatural, that doesn't mean that it doesn't need something to feed it. Now that you stopped making new flames for it, it should burn out in a couple of minutes. Unless it's gotten strong enough that it could melt the asphalt and start feeding off that. Now, that would be interesting. Has it gotten that hot yet?"

"I don't think so?" Spectrum answered, slightly intimidated by the eager look Sith was giving him.

"Then it should be fine." She tossed him a handful of restraints. "Help me with the rest of these guys, and then we'll go. You can ride with me, if you want. Also, I kind of think that might be your only option, since I'm still not sure how you get around the city."

"So, you'll take me home?"

The amount of pure hope in his voice caused Sith to frown. "I thought we were going to play..." She trailed off as she took her first real look at Spectrum. Despite the mask he wore, it was obvious that he was sporting a black eye. The skin directly under the mask was already swollen, and colored a dark, angry red that was rapidly becoming purple. His busted lip was apparent as well. As he made his way over to the nearest criminal, Sith noticed the limp he was walking with, as well as the fact that he was trying to hide the injury. Watching him try to restrain the criminal was almost psychically painful for her, as she saw Spectrum almost be

defeated by the mere act of bending over. He straightened up practically as soon as he had started lowering himself, his hands flying to clutch at his ribs. A grimace twisted across his face as they made contact. He dropped his hands, then quickly used them to steady himself as his bum leg gave out from under him, nearly sending him to join the thug collapsed on the ground.

“Yeah, I’ll take you home,” Sith called over to him. “In fact, I can take care of the rest if you want to go wait by my bike.”

A look of confusion crossed Spectrum’s face. “You have a bike?”

“Sure do.”

“Doesn’t it take a while to get places? After all, I live pretty far away, and I don’t want to be a bother.”

Sith snorted. “I promise it’s much faster than you walking.” She paused in the middle of securing another criminal, realization dawning on her. “Spectrum,” she said slowly. “What kind of bike do you think I have?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Do you want me to guess the speed?”

Sith made a choked sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a groan. “A bicycle!” she exclaimed. “You think I have a bicycle? Yeah sure, let me just take you home, all the way across the city, on my *bicycle*! You can help pedal.” She doubled over in a fit of laughter.

Spectrum scowled at her. “You’re a brat,” he said.

“You just make it too easy sometimes,” she grinned at him. “I have a motorcycle, not a bicycle, and it’s parked in that alley over there.”

“You just left it there? Weren’t you worried that someone would try and steal it?”

“Oh, people try all the time. I think it’s hilarious. Bodach installed so many security systems on that thing. So, be real careful when you get over there that you don’t set anything off.”

Spectrum looked nervously in the direction that she had indicated the bike was in. “I think I’ll just wait for you.”

“Suit yourself.”

Restraining the remaining criminals was a simple task, and soon Spectrum and Sith were both seated on her bike. Spectrum looked around him, before his gaze settled unhappily on Sith's waist.

"So, do I just hold on to you?" he asked.

"If you don't want to fall off. Actually," Sith handed her helmet back to him. "Here, you should probably take this too."

Spectrum slipped it over his head and waited patiently for her to put one on as well. When it became apparent that she wasn't, he made a small sound of distress. "Don't you have one, too? Is this the only one? Here, you can have it back—"

"I'll be fine, Specs, don't worry about it. Besides, it's my job to look after you. You know, gotta protect the next generation and all that."

He peered at her through the visor of the helmet. "I thought we were the same age?"

"Eh, I'm probably older." Sith shrugged and started the bike. The engine growled to life, and the alley was flooded with light from the headlight's piercing beams. "You ready?" she called over her shoulder.

Spectrum's squeak of 'um' was drowned out by the sound of her revving the engine. "Is this safe?"

"Yes, it's as safe as any vehicle without seatbelts that's been illegally modified can be. Now hold on!"

They shot out of the alley, Spectrum's arms wrapping tightly around Sith's waist. She laughed, the sound being picked up and carried away by the wind. Faintly, she could hear Spectrum sputtering behind her as the breeze blew her hair straight into his face. Sith leaned forward, into the wind, as she urged the bike to go faster. The machine obliged her, carrying them forward at speeds that were dozens of miles away from legal as Sith attempted to fly with the wind, grounded as though she was.

* * * * *

Farceur sat on the edge of a building, idly kicking his feet against its side. He sipped his tea as he watched the world go by beneath him, a box of steaming dumplings resting at his side. A smirk twitched across his face at the sound of a faint clatter behind him. "You're trash at stealth; you know that right?" he asked, not bothering to turn around.

Sith came and sat next to him, a scowl on her face. “Screw you, I’m great at it.”

“If that was true, then you’d actually be quiet when you were trying to sneak up on someone.” He passed the cup he’d been drinking out of to her.

She accepted it and took a prolonged sip. “Is there just one?” she asked.

“It was all the delivery guy had on him.”

“Why didn’t you just order two—this is stolen, isn’t it?”

Farceur nodded and grinned broadly at the disgusted face Sith was now making down at the cup. “I took it right off the back of his bike. You want some dumplings?”

“Sure,” she sighed, taking the chopsticks he offered her.

He hesitated before giving her the food. “If this is going to offend your fragile sense of justice, I can just keep them all for myself.”

“Please,” she scoffed. “If you did that, they’d all go to waste.” She made a grab for the box.

Farceur held it high over his head, well above her reach. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you eat like a bird. Now, give me the food!”

“Just because I don’t gorge myself doesn’t mean that I don’t eat,” he said indignantly as he set the dumplings in between them.

Sith rolled her eyes. “Oh whatever.” She broke her chopsticks apart and used them to pluck a dumpling out of the box. “You’re probably going to have like two bites and then say you’re full.” The food was tossed into her mouth as she gave Farceur a knowing look.

“Well, maybe if you took fewer bites you’d be better at stealth.”

Stunned silence reigned across the rooftop. Sith stared slack-jawed at him, the remains of the dumpling she’d been chewing exposed for all to see. “Did you just say I was fat?” she spluttered after a moment.

Farceur was quick to defend himself, despite the embarrassed flush he felt prickling up the back of his neck. “I didn’t *say* anything! I merely implied—”

“I can’t believe you just called me fat to my face.” She broke eye-contact with him to take a long swill of the drink, her focus shifting out to the city. Her head bobbed in a considering nod as she finished the tea, sucking loudly on the straw to emphasize the fact that

it was empty. "Okay then," she said. She snapped her attention back to him. "You know, if I was eating with Specs, I'd have to fight for my half of the food. That boy eats like he's scared he's never going to have a meal again!"

A scowl distorted Farceur's features. "Spectrum, huh," he said slowly. He broke his chopsticks apart with more force than was needed, his frown only deepening as he studied the splintered ends.

Sith nodded, apparently oblivious to Farceur's sudden shift in mood. "Yeah, good old Specs. Did I tell you about how me and him took down this street gang the other day? Well, it wasn't really a whole gang, just a small group of them, but Spectrum totally did most of the work. He was awesome, taking them all on at once, dodging this way and that, shooting fire and ice everywhere! I might even go so far as to say he was incredible. He's really come a long way."

"Good for him." The dumpling Farceur had been trying to pick up burst under the amount of pressure he was putting on it, causing the pork filling to spray all across the box.

"Looks like you had a bit of an accident there." Sith's gaze dropped pointedly to the mess. "Is something wrong?"

"Nope," Farceur replied, popping the 'p' on the end. "I'm doing just fine." He gathered up the tattered remains of the dumpling with his chopsticks and placed it in his mouth, where he began chewing exaggeratedly on it.

Sith stared at him defiantly, an expression he readily returned. Their showdown lasted only for a few moments before she abruptly turned her head, huffing out an angry breath as she glared down at the city. A muscle in her jaw ticked as she ground her teeth together, but apart from that, she remained completely still. Not even her eyes moved as she watched the goings on down below. Her posture was stiff, and she was gripping the stone ledge they were sitting on hard enough that he could see the bulge of her knuckles, even through her gloves.

He leaned back on his hands, letting his breath escape him in a weary sigh. It was freeing in a way. That one breath had carried all of the petty anger out of him, releasing it to be blown away by the wind. He lifted one of his arms and wrapped it around Sith's shoulder. She remained tense under him, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his affection. Then, the fight drained out of her. He felt her deflate as she loosed a heavy sigh of her own, her shoulders sagging as she slumped into him. A triumphant smile tried to spread across his face, and he had to quickly bite it back. This moment was going too well for him to ruin it now. They sat like that for several minutes, their peace only broken whenever Sith tried to reach for a dumpling from the box that had been awkwardly crushed between them, until Farceur decided to voice the thought that had been troubling him. "So, you're actually the one that did all the work, right?"

She nodded, her head rubbing against his shoulder. "Yeah, I had to go save him. He was face down in the street with all these thugs coming to attack him. Slipped on his own ice."

“He still doesn’t know how to control his powers?” Farceur cringed.

“I don’t know if it’s that he doesn’t know how to control them, or that he doesn’t know what to do with them.” Sith thought back to the stream of fire that had nearly incinerated her. “Maybe it’s a little of both. I’m trying to help as best I can, but...”

“But it’s difficult when you don’t have powers of your own,” he finished for her.

“Pretty much.”

“I feel like there’s an implication hidden somewhere in this conversation.”

“I really think that you’d like him.”

Farceur hummed his disagreement.

Sith sat up, pushing away from his shoulder so that she could have a better view of his face while she was talking. “Specs is great, I promise! He’s really sweet, and his fighting’s pretty alright, for a rookie. He just needs some help is all.”

“I see.” Farceur’s tone made it clear that he was unimpressed. “And why do you have to be the one helping him, again?”

“Because if I don’t, who will?”

“Are you serious?” Farceur stared incredulously at her before he scoffed and threw up his hands in exasperation. “I can think of at least a dozen people right off the bat!”

But Sith only shook her head. “There’s... issues,” she said slowly. “With Spec’s home life. Some of the other heroes tried talking to him about it, but now he won’t talk to them anymore. Guess he didn’t like what they had to say.”

“Well?” Farceur said after a silent moment passed by. “Aren’t you going to tell me what’s going on with him?”

“That’s not my story to tell,” Sith replied. She tapped her legs against the side of the building, her eyes sweeping restlessly around their surroundings. When her gaze met Farceur’s again, there was a teasing smirk on her face. “Know what you could do to find out?”

He quirked a brow at her.

“You could go and meet him and then ask him yourself.”

Farceur scowled and aimed a playful shove at her shoulder. She laughed and ducked out of the way, dropping into a backwards roll that carried her towards the middle of the roof. He watched as she popped back up, and then immediately launched into a series of stretches. A smirk of his own crossed his face. She wasn’t getting out of this conversation that easily.

“So,” he called over to her, “What about Bodach?”

Sith frowned at him from where she was balancing on one foot, her other leg extended high in the air over her head. “What about him?”

“Why can’t he help train Spectrum? Or is he one of the ones that the kid won’t talk to?”

“Okay, first of all, he’s not a kid. We’re the same age, so that’s just weird. Second of all—” Sith cut herself off with a snort. She dropped her torso forward, bracing her hands against the roof. Her extended leg lowered, then shot back into the air as she began using it to complete a series of reps. “Can you imagine Boss trying to teach anybody? He’s not exactly a people person.”

“You two seem to get along okay, other than the fact that I never see you together,” Farceur replied.

Sith’s extended leg came to rest on the ground, and her other one took its place in the sky as she began using it to perform the exercise. “Of course we get along; we’re family. And you never see him because he hates you.”

Farceur laughed. “I can’t imagine why.”

“Something about how you’re a corruptive influence and a thief.”

“That’s fair. So what, does he just ditch you whenever we want to meet up?” He smirked as another thought crossed his mind. “Or—don’t tell me the Golden Girl actually lies about how she spends her evenings!”

Both of Sith’s legs hit the ground. She kept her hands planted in front of her as she lowered the rest of her body, keeping her back arched upwards as the rest of her lay flat against the roof. Her eyes slipped closed in bliss as she eased the tension out of her back. “Nah, if it’s a quiet night we each go and do our own thing. No ditching or lying needed. Besides, if something came up I could just call him.” Sith tossed her head to the side, sending her hair away from her ear long enough for Farceur to see the earpiece she wore before it was obscured again.

“So, you can call him whenever you want?”

One of Sith’s eyes cracked open. “Yeah?”

“Do you want to call him now?” Farceur was leaning forward eagerly, his eyes glittering with excitement.

“Not really,” Sith said, both of her eyes now open. “Did you miss the part where I said he hated you?”

“Exactly! So, what do I have to lose?”

“Nothing, I imagine. Me, on the other hand...”

“Come on, Sith!” Farceur pleaded. “You know this would be hilarious!”

Sith sighed and rose into a sitting position. “I guess it would be pretty funny. Everything he said about you being a corruptive influence is true, you know that, right?”

“I’m fine with that, but are you really going to act like you wouldn’t have eventually done this all by yourself?” He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at her skeptically.

“Oh no, I call him all the time. It’s the fact that you’re here that he’s not going to like.” Sith pressed a finger to her earpiece, and waited for the device to come to life before she spoke into it. “Boss, you there?”

Her father’s voice instantly flooded her ear. *“What’s wrong?”*

“Nothing’s wrong, quit your worrying. It’s bad for your heart.”

“Then why are you calling me?”

“What, can’t I just want to talk?” Mock hurt filled her voice as her lip protruded in a playful pout that she aimed at Farceur.

He rolled his eyes and mimed for her to hurry up.

“Sith, I’m busy.”

“No, you’re not,” she protested. “You’re staking out the same warehouse that we’ve been watching for almost a week now! It’s time to face the facts, Boss; that info we got was trash.”

“You’re supposed to be here too,” Bodach pointed out. *“If whatever you’re doing is boring you enough that you feel the need to call me, then perhaps you should come back here.”*

“Nah, I’m good,” Sith said quickly.

“Okay, you’re boring,” Farceur announced. “Give it to me; I want to say hi.”

“No!” Sith cried, backing several steps away from him. “There’s no way you’re talking to him.”

“Oh, come on! You’re not even saying anything funny!”

“I’m having a conversation!”

"Boring!" Farceur dragged the word out and ended it with an exaggerated yawn.

"*Who are you talking to?*" Bodach demanded.

"Um..." Sith's tongue darted out to lick her lips as her mouth went inexplicably dry. "A criminal?" she suggested.

Bodach's reply was barely audible over the sound of Farceur's snickers. "*You're with the clown again, aren't you?*"

"Maybe."

"*Does he want to talk to me?*"

"No?" Sith tried.

"*Good. Put him on.*"

Farceur had once again grown tired of listening. "What's he saying?"

"He said he doesn't want to talk to you," Sith replied.

"*I don't care.*"

"That's great," Farceur smirked. "But I'd still really like to talk to him."

"Boss, I wasn't talking to you, and Farce, that's not going to happen. Besides, Boss," she said, making sure to emphasize who she was talking to. "How much did this comm cost to make? And you really want me to just hand it over to a notorious thief?"

Farceur rocked back on his heels, looking thoroughly chastised. He let his attention drift down to his feet as he awkwardly toed the ground. "That's understandable." His gaze darted back up, a cheeky grin on his face. "Guess I'll just have to steal it then."

"Don't you dare! It's in my ear, I don't want you messing around in there!" Sith clasped her hands around the earpiece protectively.

"*What's he doing with your ear?*" Bodach interrupted.

"Nothing!" Sith squeaked, her face flushing. She shot an irritated glare at Farceur, who was cackling maniacally, before she quickly changed the subject. "Hey, did you ever apologize to those janitors we almost attacked the other day?"

An indifferent *snort* was the only reply she got.

"What are you talking about?" Farceur asked.

"I didn't tell you this story?"

"Um, no. Why did you almost attack janitors?"

"Okay, this is great. So, me and Boss have been staking out this warehouse for like, the past week right? What are you talking about Boss; I helped for like the first day. Doing cartwheels totally counts as helping. Anyways, we got a tip that a major drug shipment was supposed to go through there. So, me and Boss are watching the place, when he sees someone moving around in there. Naturally, we go and check it out. And, who do you think we see? Not gang members or anything like that; no, we see a pair of helpless old janitors. Me and Boss came expecting a fight, so we were all in 'terrify-criminals mode' and it worked a little too well on them. I think one of them died. Huh? Oh wait, Boss said he didn't die, he just fainted a bit. Still, he was pretty old to be doing all that, so I'm pretty sure he's dead. I haven't been back since then, but Boss keeps staking out the place, because apparently our intel said the deal could happen any night this week, but I think the whole thing's bogus."

"So, basically you're embarrassed," Farceur surmised.

"Uh, yeah! We almost beat up a couple of janitors! I'm never showing my face there again."

"Who hires a cleaning company for a warehouse anyways?" Bodach grumbled.

"Exactly! The whole situation was stupid," Sith said.

"If all you wanted to do was gossip, I'm hanging up now. I have actual work to do."

"Kay, bye! Try not to kill anymore janitors!" Sith tapped the earpiece, disconnecting her from Bodach.

"I never got to talk to him," Farceur complained.

"Oops," Sith said, unapologetically. "It was totally for the best, though. He definitely doesn't need any more reasons to hate you."

"For all you know, I could have utterly charmed him! You might have just lost your chance to change his whole opinion of me."

Sith shook her head at his antics, still looking unconvinced. "You were way too excited to talk to him. Nothing good ever comes from you getting excited."

"You didn't seem all that reluctant yourself. I was a little surprised at how easy it was to convince you to do that. Of course, you didn't really do anything, so I guess it's not that big of a deal."

“Eh, I needed to talk to him anyways. Since I haven’t been with him for the stakeout, we haven’t really talked much this week. Had to make sure he wasn’t brooding too hard up there by himself.” The levity in Sith’s smile and tone seemed forced, like she was straining under the weight of her words to keep her demeanor light.

“You know it’s not your job to check up on him, right?” Farceur asked her. “He’s the adult in this relationship, not you.”

Sith stared at him like he’d suddenly started speaking in a foreign language. “What are you talking about? Of course it’s my job. Me and Boss look out for each other. He teaches me everything I need to know, and I make sure he doesn’t go too far over the angsty edge. It may not seem like that fair of a trade, but we make it work.”

She met his gaze easily. There was nothing imploring in her eyes, no effort on her part to try and make him believe the words she’d spoken. They were facts, and whether he chose to accept them as such was up to him.

He scrubbed a hand over his face, suddenly feeling very tired. The wind had started up while they were talking, and it toyed with his hair idly. It caught on his clothes, tugging them in the direction of the ledge of the building. Farceur looked over his shoulder, taking in the vast expanse of space that lay between him and the bustling city below. A smirk curled his lips. He turned back to Sith, who was still sitting on the roof, looking antsy as she had been ever since they finished talking.

“Do you want to play Chicken?”

Her head snapped up so she could fix him with a wide-eyed expression. He smiled encouragingly down at her and held out his hand. The deer-in-headlights face faded as Sith beamed up at him and took his hand. He pulled her to her feet, where she shrugged indifferently, her wide grin belying every bit of her nonchalance. “Eh, why not?”

“First one to catch themselves loses?” Farceur asked, matching her grin with one of his own.

“Is there any other way to play?”

“On three then. One!”

They both lowered themselves, their bodies settling into a runner’s stance.

“Two!”

Farceur was watching Sith out of the corner of his eye, his smile gaining a tint of fondness to it. She was paying him no mind, her attention rapt on the open air in front of them. Her body was practically vibrating with the force of all of her pent-up energy, her feet inching ever closer to the edge.

“Three!”

Sith shot forward, Farceur hot on her heels. She launched herself over the ledge of the building, the echoes of her whoop of triumph all that were left of her by the time Farceur reached the edge. He threw himself after her, his yell mingling with her own as they plummeted. The wind met them with an eager embrace, its power running through their hair and tugging at their clothes as it carried them safely down.

Neverwhere Analysis

There are many things that I love about Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*. I love the way it seems to blend genres; it's a fantasy adventure story at its heart, but it is simultaneously able to be funny, contain romantic elements, and though I would never label it a tragedy, it possesses the ability to make me feel emotional at various points throughout the story. It's talent for defying the constraints of just one type of story is something that I would very much like to steal for my own work.

Another aspect of Gaiman's story that I would like to 'steal' is its narrator, Richard Mayhew. In my opinion, he was absolutely hilarious. His dry perspective on all the fantastical things happening around him was so interesting to read. He takes it all in stride, which almost elevates his character to the unrealistic heights of the world around him, but his down-to-earth commentary is so entertaining, that I find myself trying to relate to him while I'm reading the book. I love the fact that I'm connected enough to this character that I want to relate to him. It is a testament to Gaiman's writing that he has created a character likable and interesting enough that a reader can form an attachment to him throughout the course of the book.

I particularly enjoyed the wit of Gaiman's story, so when writing the main character of my piece, *feel the wind in your hair*, I had the character introduce herself with a joke of sorts. Like Gaiman, I tried to infuse humor throughout the piece, primarily as a way to keep the story and the character entertaining and engaging for my readers. Unlike Gaiman, however, my character is well acquainted with the world that her story takes place in, so there was no need to introduce her to any of its fantastical aspects. In that regards, she is more like the female lead of *Neverwhere*, Door. She serves a vehicle through which readers are introduced to a world unfamiliar to them, yet it is not unfamiliar to her. The world I was trying to create experiences events like the ones depicted in this story regularly, so there was no need to have my main character who all of this was new too. At least, not one that was focused on for the entirety of the story.

Bedtime Stories

“Okay, sweetheart, what kind of story do you want tonight?”

“I want one about *princesses!*”

“About princesses? So, you want more than one, huh?”

“Yeah, I want bunches and bunches of princesses! And they should all be pretty, and sing, and you should do all of their voices!”

“I think we’re going to hold off on the singing for tonight. But, they can all be pretty, how’s that sound?”

“Well, okay. I guess that’s fine.”

“Alright then. So, is there going to be anyone in this story besides princesses? Or is that it?”

“There’s other people, silly. There’s got to be a prince.”

“You’re right, my bad. Just one prince, or is each princess going to get one?”

“No, one’s enough.”

“Okay, so we’ve got a bunch of princesses, and one prince. Anyone else?”

“Yeah, a dragon! And a witch! And we need an evil stepmother too! Oh, I know! The evil stepmother *is* the witch!”

“Slow down, slow down! Okay, let me make sure I got this straight. We’ve got a dragon, and a witch, and an evil stepmother, and an evil stepmother who’s also a witch.”

“No! The evil stepmother is the witch!”

“That’s what I just said! We’ve got a witch, and an evil stepmother, and an evil stepmother who’s a witch!”

“There’s only one evil stepmother!”

“Oh okay, so there’s just a witch and an evil stepmother!”

“No, the evil stepmother’s the witch!”

“So, there’s just a witch?”

“No!”

“I’m confused, what happened to the evil stepmother?”

“Daddy, you don’t listen.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. Let me try again. So we have a bunch of pretty princesses, one prince, a dragon, and an evil stepmother who’s also a witch?”

“Yes! See, that wasn’t so hard.”

“You’re right, I guess it wasn’t. So, are you ready for this story to start?”

“Yes!”

“Okay. Once upon a time, in a land far, far away—”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Why do all stories start far, far away?”

“Well, because there aren’t any dragons or princesses around here, are there?”

“No, I guess not. Do they mean far away like Chuck E. Cheese is far away?”

“Sure honey.”

“Okay. What does ‘once upon a time’ mean?”

“It means it happened a long time ago.”

“Like 1970? Was that a long time ago?”

“Yes, this story took place in 1970 at Chuck E. Cheese. Can I keep going now?”

“Uh-huh!”

“So, once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a beautiful princess.”

“Hey! I thought there were supposed to be a bunch of princesses in this story!”

“Well, I can’t introduce them all at once, that might get confusing.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Now this princess was named—”

“Princess Sparkles!”

“Right, she was named Princess Sparkles, and she had a problem. Princess Sparkles had an evil stepmother, who was also a witch, who wanted to kill her!”

“That’s not very nice.”

“Well, she is an evil stepmother. Anyways, she wanted to kill Princess Sparkles and—”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did she want to kill Princess Sparkles?”

“Oh, um, she wanted to kill her because... Princess Sparkles was prettier than she was and she didn’t like it.”

“Okay, that makes sense.”

“Does it really?”

“Yes. Now, keep telling the story, Daddy!”

“The evil stepmother tried everything she could think of to kill Princess Sparkles. She tried poisoned apples, poisoned pears, poisoned plums, and poisoned pancakes! When those didn’t work, she tried spells! She tried sleeping spells, dancing spells, laughing spells, and even itching spells! But nothing worked.”

“Why didn’t anything work?”

“Because, Princess Sparkles had a true love. His name was Prince...”

“Why’d you stop telling the story?”

“I was kind of waiting for you to name the character.”

“I’m not the one telling the story; you’re the one who’s supposed to name him.”

“Right, my bad. His name was, um, Prince Perfect! And he was Princess Sparkles’s true love. Anytime the evil stepmother did anything to try and hurt Princess Sparkles, Prince Perfect would just give her a kiss, and she’d be alright again.”

“That’s awesome!”

“Yeah, well the evil stepmother didn’t think so. One day, she decided that she’d had enough of it, and that she was going to get rid of Princess Sparkles once and for all. So, she called up her dragon.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes. She called up her dragon, and he came and grabbed Princess Sparkles and carried her away!”

“Why didn’t he just kill her?”

“What?”

“The dragon? Why didn’t he just kill Princess Sparkles?”

“Um, because that’s really violent.”

“Yeah, but isn’t that what the evil stepmother wanted him to do? So, why’d he just carry her away. That doesn’t make any sense, Daddy!”

“Okay, okay! So, he *originally* came to kill Princess Sparkles, but once he got to her castle, he realized that she was too pretty, and um, nice, and that he just couldn’t kill her. So, he picked her up and carried her away instead.”

“So, the dragon fell in love with Princess Sparkles?”

“Yeah, sure. Is that better?”

“Yup!”

“Okay, so anyways, Prince Perfect was not about to just let his girlfriend be carried away like that. So, he jumped on his horse, and he rode like the wind, and he—”

“Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Where are all the princesses? You said there’d be princesses in this story.”

“I did say that, didn’t I? Okay, so Princess Sparkles had a best friend, Princess—”

“Princess Rainbow and Princess Sunshine!”

“I thought she just had one best friend?”

“No, she had two.”

“Well, you would know better than me. They also weren’t going to sit back and let their friend be carried away by a dragon, so Princess Rainbow and Princess Sunshine grabbed their own horses, and rode off with Prince Perfect to go get her back. On their way to the dragon’s lair, they had to cross a bridge that was guarded by a terrible troll!”

“What’s a troll?”

“A troll is a big, angry monster that eats people.”

“Like Grandpa?”

“Grandpa doesn’t eat people, honey. But other than that, yes, trolls are just like Grandpa. Now, this great, terrible troll was blocking their path! Prince Perfect knew what he had to do. He rode up to the beast, drew his sword and—”

“They had a tea party!”

“A tea party?”

“Yes! Princess Rainbow and Princess Sunshine sat down with the troll and had a tea party.”

“But what about Prince Perfect?”

“If he’s done being a dummy with his sword, then he can come too.”

“Why is Prince Perfect a dummy?”

“Well, maybe he’s not a dummy, but he is a big bully!”

“Why is he a bully?”

“Because he tried to hit the troll! What did the troll ever do to him?”

“Well, it was blocking their path.”

“Did he ask it to move? No! He just tried to hit it! He’s a big bully.”

“Okay, Prince Perfect’s a bully. So, does the troll let them pass over the bridge after their tea party?”

“Yeah, they’re all friends now. Even Prince Perfect, ‘cause he told the troll he was sorry.”

“Did he now?”

“Yes! Daddy, make Prince Perfect tell the troll he’s sorry!”

“Okay, so Prince Perfect apologized to the troll, and then he and Princess Rainbow and Princess Sunshine continued traveling towards the dragon’s lair. They made it maybe halfway, before their path was cut off by a huge ocean. And it was full of pirates!”

“This is where they meet the pirate princess!”

“The who?”

“The pirate princess, princess of all the pirates!”

“Is she a good guy?”

“She’s a *princess*, Daddy; of course she’s good!”

“But, I always thought that pirates were bad.”

“Well, she’s a nice pirate.”

“So, she doesn’t steal?”

“She only steals from the bad pirates.”

“Oh okay. So, is she going to steal from Prince Perfect and the other princesses?”

“Mr. Jeffers? I’m sorry to interrupt, but the doctor is ready now.”

“Already? Okay, thank you for letting me know.”

“Daddy? What’s going on?”

"It's nothing, sweetheart. Are you almost ready to go to sleep now?"

"No, I'm not tired!"

"What, my story didn't put you right to sleep?"

"I can't sleep now, I gotta hear the end!"

"This story's turning out longer than I thought it would be. How about we pause it here, and we'll finish it up tomorrow?"

"No! I wanna hear all of it tonight!"

"But sweetheart, it's time for bed now."

"I'm not tired!"

"We talked about this, honey, remember? It's okay if you're not tired right now, the doctors are going to help you go to sleep. They're going to put that funny mask on your face, and then you're going to get sleepy."

"Because it's magic, right?"

"That's right, honey. It's magic."

"But, it's not bad magic, right? Like in *Sleeping Beauty*? I'm not gonna sleep forever, am I?"

"No honey, you'll just sleep for a little bit. And when you wake up, you'll feel all better."

"Promise?"

"Pinky promise."

"Those are the best kinds."

"That's right, they are. Now, are you almost ready?"

"You're coming with me, right?"

"No, sweetheart, we talked about this too, remember? I'm not going with you, but Nurse Julia is! You like Nurse Julia, don't you?"

“Yeah, she’s nice.”

“And Doctor Stephen will be there, too! You like him a bunch, right?”

“Yeah, we’re gonna get married.”

“Yes, well, we’ll talk about that when you wake up.”

“And Rabbit’s going to be there, too!”

“Actually, sweetheart, I have a really big favor to ask you.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do. You see, it’s almost time for me to go to sleep, too. Only, Nurse Julia and Doctor Stephen aren’t going to be with me. I’m going to be out here all by myself. And, you know how sometimes Daddy can get scared when he has to sleep by himself. So, I was wondering if maybe you would let Rabbit stay out here with me, so that I won’t be all alone.”

“Here, Daddy, take him! I don’t want you to be scared! And I don’t want to leave you all by yourself!”

“Hush sweetheart, it’s okay; don’t cry. Daddy’s not going to be by himself. You just gave me Rabbit. I can’t be alone if I have him. Besides, you can’t stay out here. Nurse Julia and Doctor Stephens are waiting for you. You don’t want them to be sad, now do you?”

“No.”

“And you want to feel better, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, so then it’s time to go to sleep now. Can you be a big girl and do that for me?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Is everything ready in here?”

“Yeah, I think we’re just about done. Thanks for checking in.”

“Hi Katie, are you ready to go?”

“Hi, Nurse Julia. Um, I guess so. But, I think I’m going to need the magic mask, because I’m not sleepy like I’m supposed to be.”

“That’s okay, honey. We’ll get you all set up with the magic mask when we go and see Doctor Stephens. Does that sound okay?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You’re being such a brave girl about all of this; I bet your dad’s really proud of you.”

“Am I supposed to be scared? Daddy said that you and Doctor Stephens was gonna make me feel all better.”

“He did? Well that’s... right, we’re going to do our very best.”

“And then I’m going to go home and sleep in my real bed, and I’ll get to hear all of my bedtime stories there.”

“Right. Well, that sounds like a lot of fun. Why don’t we go on and see Doctor Stephens now? I’m sure he’s waiting for us.”

“Okay! Oh, wait! Nurse Julia, I forgot to do something!”

“Alright, what is it?”

“Good night, Daddy! I love you! Sleep tight, and don’t let the bedbugs bite. And Rabbit, you take good care of him while I’m gone.”

“Good night, sweetheart. I love you too.”

To Kill a Mockingbird Analysis

My favorite thing about Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is her characters. The plot is absolutely amazing, and full of valuable lessons and social commentary that are primarily the reason that it has become as famous and beloved as it has. I certainly enjoy the plot, and remains just as good no matter how many times I read it, but I do not reread the book for the plot, I go back for the characters.

Atticus Finch has become one of literature's most recognized characters for a very good reason. His wisdom, his kindness, his morals and his wit help to set him apart from most other characters. His circumstances are also unique, being a single father, especially in the time period *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in, adds so much depth to his character. Atticus is a great father to his children, and he proves himself to be a role model that they can both look up to.

I was especially intrigued by his relationship with Scout. Since the story is told from her perspective, naturally the view of her father that we as readers are given is how she sees him. Despite all the differences between them, ranging from gender to personality, Atticus and Scout maintain a healthy relationship. That was the kind of relationship that I was looking to capture in my story, *Bedtime Stories*.

One of the things that I really appreciated about Harper Lee's writing is all of her descriptions. It is so easy for me to visualize everything that is happening in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One of the scenes that stands out the most to me is a scene that is relatively insignificant to the story as a whole. It happened when Scout, Jem, and Dill are trying to spy on Boo Radley, and they assign Dill to be the lookout. They give Dill a bell and tell him to ring it if anyone comes up. Dill does exactly what he's asked to, and when Scout and Jem turn around, they find him ringing the bell right in Atticus's face. Only a minimal amount of dialogue is needed to convey the sheer childish innocence of that action, and I admire that she was able to do that.

But, my goal with writing this story was to use the concept of 'show don't tell' in a more unconventional way. I wanted to clearly communicate a loving relationship between a father and daughter, without having them saying that they loved each other until the end. I also wanted to try depending on just dialogue to move a story along, with depending on actions to convey their relationship. I do believe that actions speak louder in words, but in this particular story, I wanted words to have a chance to throw their weight around.

episode i: a dreary midnight (and nothing more)

Two men ran down an alley, swearing and stumbling over themselves as they attempted to get from one end to the other. The light from the street failed to reach farther than the entrance, leaving them to scramble in the dark. However, it provided enough illumination so that, when they turned and looked over their shoulders, they were able to see the shadowy figure that eclipsed it as he stalked after them.

A high-pitched moan of terror squeaked out from one of their throats. "Come on man, we've gotta go!"

"Get off me; I'm moving, I'm moving!"

They were able to make it another twenty feet before the sound of laughter echoed around them. The snickers seemed to bounce from wall to wall, following the silhouette that dropped down from above, and landed in a crouch directly in front of them. Slowly, the girl rose up, her cape falling from around her shoulders as she did. It revealed her black bodysuit, solid save for the white circle over her chest.

Her eyes flitted between the two of them. "What are you guys supposed to be? Some kind of zoo breakout?"

The plastic animal masks they wore obscured the surprise that flickered across their faces, but the uncovered eyes clearly revealed when they glared down at the girl blocking their path. "You're his brat, aren't you?" one of them snapped. He shoved a gun at her chest, his fingers shaking as he reached to flick the safety off. "Let's see if he still cares about us while you're bleeding out."

His friend shoved him roughly, causing the barrel of the gun to drop so that it was now aimed at the street. "Forget about her! He's catching up; we need to go!"

The girl paid them no mind as she rose up on her tiptoes, craning her neck to see past them. "Oh, you're way too late. He's right behind you."

A gloved hand curled around the shoulder of the man holding the gun.

He spun around, raising his gun back up into a firing position, and came face-to-face with a demonic snarl. Fangs protruded from a twisted mouth, the blackened tusks too large to fit behind closed lips, so they forced them open into a hideous expression. The eyes were as dark as the rest of the mask, but their slitted appearance and slanted brows gave the man the distinct impression that they were glaring at him. A pair of horns curved their way up from the top of the mask, the ends of them brushing against the edge of the hood that was pulled low over the guise.

Horror filled the man's face as he attempted to stumble backwards, but the figure's grip tightened to prevent him from moving. The aborted action seemed to jar his tongue loose, and he screamed. "Bodach!"

His shriek of terror drowned out the *click* that came just before Bodach swung a metal baton into the side of his jaw. He went sprawling on the ground.

The other man took a panicked glance at his accomplice, then shoved past the girl and went sprinting down the alleyway. One of her brows arched high over the mask that covered her eyes as she watched him flee. "Do you have to act like an animal?" she called after him.

"Sith," Bodach said, inclining his head in the direction of the escaping man.

"On it, Boss." Sith lunged forward, a chain whip snapping out as she moved. The end of it wrapped around one of the man's ankles, catching him mid-step. Her biceps flexed against the spandex of her sleeves as she pulled backwards, unbalancing the man and sending him crashing down. "Okay, so like, is it just me, or have my jokes been kind of lame tonight?" she asked. She fell forward from her lunge into a rotation of cartwheels, landing upright in front of the man frantically trying to untangle the chain from around him. "I don't know, I just feel like they could be so much better. What do you think?"

What little light there was in the alley glinted off the knife he fumbled out of his pocket. "Get away from me!" he shouted, aiming a defensive slash at her.

"Wow, that was aggressive," she said, easily sidestepping the blade. "And not helpful at all. I mean, I really don't know what the problem is. It's not like I'm lacking material. Just look at you guys!" With one hand, she caught his wrist as he attempted to stab her again, and with the other, she gestured backwards towards his companion.

A thunderous *boom* echoed out across the alley as the man at the other end fired off a wild shot from his gun. He lurched back to his feet, blood dripping from underneath his mask. His fingers curled around the chin of it, and he lifted it enough that he could spit the remains of a shattered tooth onto the street. It splattered between him and Bodach.

Bodach stepped forward, one his dark boots landing in the bloody puddle and grinding the remnants under his heel. Another *click* sounded as the baton in his hand doubled in length, leaving him holding the middle of an elongated staff. With one sharp twist of his wrist, Bodach knocked the gun from the man's hand to the ground, letting it fall to the pavement. One more twist had the thug doubled over in pain. His hands tightened over his stomach, where the end of the staff had collided, as he staggered back against a wall. The tip of the staff slammed against his throat, effectively pinning him in place.

"Well, looks like Boss is finished," Sith said, turning her attention back to the man whose wrist she was still restraining. "Guess that just leaves me and you. Which, you should probably

go ahead and drop that knife. Because otherwise, I might think you still want to fight, and that really wouldn't be smart."

He released a feral sounding growl that almost matched his animalistic mask, and swung his fist towards the side of her knee. She stomped on it before the blow could connect. A groan, equal parts rage and pain, escaped his lips as she dug her foot in, and he felt his skin scrape off against the street.

"Okay, so you're an idiot. Look dude, you're done. I know you're done; you know you're done. You didn't even start fighting until after I had already caught you. So, how about you drop the knife, let me cuff you, and come along quietly? The faster we finish up here, the faster I get to go to Captain Chicken. My coupon's going to expire if I don't use it tonight."

There was a silence for a beat, until the knife dropped with a dull clatter. A smile broke out across her face as she released his wrist and stepped off his hand. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" She fiddled with her belt and pulled out a pair of restraints that she used to secure his hands behind his back. "Alright, up and at 'em," she said, unwinding her whip from around his ankle.

One last longing glance was sent towards the back of the alley and the safety its empty shadows promised, before he sighed and shuffled to his feet. She shooed him onwards, following into step behind him.

Bodach turned and stared as they approached, low gurgles coming from the throat of the man he still had trapped against the wall. Sith nodded approvingly as she flitted over to his side. "Still choking him, huh? That's kinky."

The staff lifted off the man's throat, letting him slump to the ground as he took large, hacking breaths. "Where's Goodfellow?" Bodach growled. His voice carried a deep, artificial rasp with it, a byproduct of the modulator built into his mask.

At his feet, the man began massaging his throat. He tilted his head back to look up at Bodach, defiance shining in his eyes. "Who's that?"

"Okay, seriously, don't play the ignorant card on us," Sith said just as Bodach took a menacing step forward. "You're obviously part of the Pooka gang—don't try to deny it, you're literally wearing the masks; they're right there, on your face—and everyone knows Goodfellow's in charge of that."

"So what if he is?" the man snapped. "Why does that mean we know anything about him? Go ask somebody who's actually in charge of something. We don't know anything."

Bodach's grip on the middle of his staff tightened, and he twisted it forward. Spikes shot out of both ends of the weapon. Panic filled the man's eyes as he tensed into a more defensive

position. “H-hey, what do you think you’re doing? You can’t use that on me, I know the law, you’re only allowed to—”

His words ended in a scream as Bodach raised the weapon high, and brought it down towards his head. The spikes scratched into the wall beside the cowering man, the point of one of them close enough that it dug into the corner of his eye when he tried to turn and look.

“Seven,” Bodach said, continuing to hold the weapon in place.

“What?” the man asked, the word leaving his mouth in a gasp he didn’t seem aware that he had let out.

“That’s how many masks have died in Pooka territory these past four months. Each of them registered Alliance members, all of them murdered. Not just murdered, tortured. Tortured in sick, unfathomable ways. You wouldn’t believe how some of their bodies were twisted. Actually, maybe you would. Were you there? Did you see them? Because I did. I saw each and every one of them. I know every way in which their bodies were forced to break. Would you like to know? Because I’ll show you.”

“No! No, I don’t know, no, I wasn’t there, no, I don’t want to know!” The man was blubbering, his hands scrabbling at the staff in a futile attempt to keep it away from his face.

A slow pivot of Bodach’s wrist had the spikes shrieking against the bricks they were pressed against. The one nearest to the man’s face tore into his flesh, slicing into the corner of his eye and tearing it until it met the beginning of his mask. Bloody tears flowed freely down his face.

“One of them was cut to death. Her name was Orbit, and her body was hacked into pieces. Her main defense was flying, so whoever killed her put razor wire all across the ceiling. Then, they made sure she couldn’t do anything but fly by covering the floor in broken glass. That wouldn’t have been a problem, except, when we found her, she wasn’t wearing any shoes. The only skin left on the bottom of her feet was too tattered to even be called flesh anymore. Still, it doesn’t seem like she should have died from that, though; not as long as she made sure to stay in the safe space between the glass and the wire. Except, she wasn’t alone. There were drones in there with her. They were very advanced, military-grade. And so were the guns they used to chase her with. You’ll have to tell me where a *street gang* got the funds to purchase weaponry that sophisticated,” Bodach snarled as he leaned his weight into the staff, causing the spike to dig in deeper.

“I don’t know! I swear I don’t!”

The staff was ripped off the wall and pulled back over Bodach’s shoulder. He swung the weapon like a bat, the end of it crashing into the wall just above the man’s head. Fragments of cracked brick fell into his hair, some of them landing in the fresh cuts caused by the spikes raking through his scalp. He howled in pain, doubling over into himself.

“Taiji!” he cried, raising his hands to ward off another blow as Bodach hefted the weapon back over his shoulder. “Goodfellow’s at Taiji.”

Bodach regarded him for a moment before he lowered his weapon. The man’s hands fell, his shoulders shaking with a relieved sob as Bodach twisted its middle once more, and the spikes retracted. A pair of *clicks* sounded as the weapon shrunk back into itself, and Bodach’s hand disappeared into the folds of his cape as he stowed it away. His hand remerged with a pair of restraints, which he used to secure the man to an exposed pipe on the wall.

Sith stepped over to the man she had caught, who had sunk into as unobtrusive a position as possible as he watched Bodach work in mute horror. “Come on,” she said. “Time to go join your friend.”

“Goodfellow might not be there,” he said suddenly, his gaze fixed on a trail of blood snaking its way out from under his companion’s mask.

“What?” Bodach snapped, twisting his head slightly to scowl down at him.

He cowered under the unchanging expression. “He might—well, he’s supposed to be at a meeting now.”

“Might supposed to be? Oh, that’s real convincing.” Sith’s lips flattened out into an unimpressed line.

“Look, I don’t know! I just overheard some people talking about it.”

“And it’s might supposed to be where?” Sith asked.

“The docks. At pier number eighty-three,” he said. “Like I said, I’m not certain that he’s there, but...” His eyes followed the blood as it dripped steadily to the ground.

Sith nodded and herded him to sit beside the other man, fastening his restraints to the same pipe. “Try not to get too comfortable, the police will be coming to get you soon.”

Bodach turned his back to them and adjusted the sights on his wrist. Satisfied with the trajectory they showed him, he fired a line from his gauntlet. The clawed end of it dug into the ledge of a building above them, and the cable was pulled taut. He activated the recoil, letting the device carry him upwards to the roof as it drew the line back into itself.

“He always ditches me,” Sith grumbled. She took a couple steps back, then did a running jump towards a low-hanging fire escape. Wrapping her hands around one of the rusted bars, she pulled herself onto the platform. From there, she climbed atop the safety railing. Eyeing an

identical structure higher up on the building across from her, she sprung forward, flipping through the air over the alley until she caught herself on the rungs of its ladder.

Using this rotation, she continued to go from building to building and work her way upwards. She stopped once to detangle a black feather that floated into her hair from the roof above. “Stupid birds.” The feather fell from her fingers and drifted down to fade against the dark street below.

She pulled herself up to the top of the building, then curled into a roll that ended with her popping upright, her arms held high in a gymnast’s traditional finishing pose, and a triumphant smile on her face.

“One of them is lying,” Bodach said. His gaze was fixed on the two men they had left in the alley.

Sith snorted and lowered her arms. “You think?”

“The only question is which one. Ordinarily, I’d suspect the man I was interrogating—”

“Fuzzy,” Sith said as she sunk into a spilt. “That’s what we’re going to call that one. My guy’s Cuddles. Otherwise, we’re just going to keep calling both of them ‘man’, and that’s just going to get confusing.”

“Right. Ordinarily, I would suspect Fuzzy, because of how loose lipped he was. That was a fairly light interrogation for what he gave up.”

Sith tossed her hair away from her face to fix him with an incredulous look. “Light?” she echoed. “What part of that was light? No, the sus part about that was the location itself. I mean, it’s believable enough, every sketchy person ever hangs out at Taiji, so it could be true, but it could also be a cop-out. He might’ve just rattled that off so you would back off.”

“I’d believe that, if it wasn’t for Cuddles’ surprise confession. Just surrendering information, with no prompting whatsoever? That’s very suspect.”

“That’s true, except that he saw you slicing his friend’s face up. I’d call that prompting.” Sith stretched her hands out and grabbed the toe of one of her boots. “He could have known Fuzzy was lying, and decided to give us the real location, because he was scared you’d come back otherwise.”

“That’s also a possibility.”

“But neither one’s a certainty.”

“No.”

“So basically, there’s no way to figure out which one’s telling the truth?”

“Not with our current information and time constraints. Cuddles said the meeting was happening now.”

“That he did.” Sith switched sides and grabbed at her other boot. “Good thing there’s two of us. I can check out the club.”

“Not likely.” Even with all the filters layered over Bodach’s voice, the wryness in his tone was still evident.

“Aw, come on, Boss. I always drink responsibly.”

“Orange juice, maybe.”

“That almost sounds like you’re calling me immature.” Sith pressed her hands in front of her and rose up into a handstand.

“I think you’re very mature. Mature enough to go down to the docks by yourself and look for Goodfellow.”

Sith leaned sideways, turning her handstand into a cartwheel that put her back upright. “Fine. But, after I find him, you and I can celebrate with my mature palate at Captain Chicken. This coupon’s not going to spend itself, you know.”

Bodach’s breath hissed out in a sigh as he crossed his arms over his chest. “If you find him. If I find him, we’re having leftovers.”

“Boss, nobody wants dumplings for the fifth night in a row. Why did you make so many of them? Also, leftovers don’t come with a Shangdi action figure. I just need one more to complete my collection.” Sith spoke this last bit over her shoulder as she walked to the building’s edge. She punctuated it with a cheeky grin before she vaulted over the ledge.

Bright lights cut across the rooftop as Bodach’s glider flew up from the far side of building. The sleek metal reflected the lights from the city as it soared over to him, then lowered enough for him to step on. His feet settled into their usual perch, a heavy *thud* signifying that the soles of his boots had been magnetically locked into place. A slight tilt of his body had the glider moving forward, carrying him away from the building and out over the street.

Below him, a motorcycle pulled out of the alley, its headlights becoming indistinguishable from the other vehicles as it merged into the flow of traffic. Bodach watched for just long enough to ensure that it was speeding towards the docks, before his glider turned, and he flew off in the opposite direction.



Sith left her bike tucked between a pair of buildings a few piers down from Pier 83. If Goodfellow was here, it wouldn't do her any good if he was able to hear her coming. He'd spook, and run off, and then they would have to repeat this whole process all over again. While Sith had no problem getting more Pooka trash off the streets, she could live without watching more of Bodach's interrogations, thank you very much. No, her best plan of action was to sneak up on Goodfellow, and catch him off-guard.

She ran from rooftop to rooftop, making her way across the dock. Just because she had to be stealthy didn't mean she couldn't make a dramatic entrance from above. Actually, didn't being sneaky only encourage big, dramatic entrances? You couldn't really have one if everyone was able to see you coming from a mile away.

Which, the closer she got to the pier, the more obvious it became that it wouldn't matter if she ran screaming down the dock. There was no there to see her. She stopped at the very edge of Pier 83, her shoulders slumping in disappointment. It looked like Cuddles was the liar after all. That meant that Goodfellow was probably living it up down at Taiji, surrounded by some of the worst people in Taesong. And Bodach was headed there, alone, with his only backup halfway across the city.

It was fine, or at least, it would be, because it was *Bodach*. He was a legend before she was even born. That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but still, most of those guys would probably flee for the hills the second they saw his face. Well, mask. Regardless, he would definitely be able to handle the few brave souls that dared to face him. All by himself. Without any help from her, or anyone else.

Sith ran a hand through her hair, feeling the restless urge to fidget well up inside her. She shifted her weight to one leg and extended the other one behind her. Her foot curved upwards, and she reached behind her, grabbing hold of the appendage. The burn of her muscles grounded her, and she let her gaze drift over to the sea. Light from the pier illuminated the churning water, and her chest rose and fell as she synched her breathing to the waves lapping at the seawall.

Whether or not Bodach was capable didn't matter, it was the principle of the thing. She couldn't just let him run into danger by himself. Well granted, she couldn't exactly stop him, seeing as he was probably already there, but she could go and help. Taiji was a pretty good distance away from the docks, but it wasn't like her bike had been built with legal things like speed limits in mind.

She turned to head back the way she had come, when movement caught her eye. Two men walked out onto the roof of the building across from her. Sith dropped her leg and ducked

down into a crouch, but neither of them appeared to have seen her. They walked over to the side of the building that was facing the pier, hefting up rifles as they did.

So, they were guarding something. They had to be; their masks showed they were part of the Pooka gang, and no one would hire them to take somebody out. Not with both the Legion and the Syndicate filled to the brim with actual, competent assassins. Although, they'd somehow managed to kill seven heroes. That already defied their M.O. of being absolute, bottom of the barrel, street trash. It was also very unusual, given their history of generally sucking at anything more than low-level drug distribution and turf wars. That was why Bodach and Sith needed to talk to Goodfellow, so he could shed some light on how the Pookas were able to step up their game so significantly. So, who knew? Maybe they had decided to add 'contract killers' to their updated resume. Sith doubted it, though. There was something else going on here.

A glance down showed that Goodfellow had still not arrived. Unless, he was already inside. Sith took another look at the building across from her. It was dark, and seemed unremarkable from the hundreds of other buildings that littered the surrounding area, but, when Sith activated the thermal lenses in her mask, her sensors lit up with several heat signatures wandering throughout the structure. And that was ignoring all the rats that were scurrying around in there.

Sith sighed and switched her mask back to its normal display. Hypothetically, Goodfellow was in there, having his alleged meeting. In the dark. Though, technically, Cuddles never did say what *kind* of meeting it was. But, if that was the case, what was with all the other people...? Sith pulled a face and quickly derailed that train of thought. It was gross, and unlikely. She would have noticed if people were doing that.

No, something was in that building. Something that needed two guards watching from above, and a whole bunch more keeping an eye on things inside. She had no idea what it could be, though.

Her fingers flitted over the communication device she wore in her ear, and she pressed down on it. "Hey Boss. I'm at the docks, and the Pooka gang is here alright, but I don't think there's any kind of meeting going on."

"I'm at the club," Bodach's reply crackled in her ear. *"There's Pooka here, too, but they scattered as soon as I arrived. I'm currently in pursuit."*

Sith frowned. "They're at both places? What is going on?" Her crouch turned into a half-split as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Any sign of Goodfellow near you?"

"No."

"I don't see him here, either. So, he's nowhere to be found, and we've wasted our evening chasing after no-name members of his gang."

"*The night's not over yet.*" There was a dangerous promise in Bodach's words, and Sith almost swore she heard a faint scream come through his end of the channel.

"Right, well I'll get started rounding these guys up, and we'll see what we can find out."

"*Keep in contact.*"

"Please, you couldn't shut me up even if you tried." Sith pressed the device again, effectively ending their conversation as she stood back to her feet.

The first order of business would be taking care of the two on the roof. Sith affectionally dubbed them Roofie and Pork Chop. She couldn't quite tell from this distance, but she was pretty sure that he was wearing a pig mask. Taking a couple of steps back, she noticed with disgust that neither guard turned to look at her, even though she was now clearly visible, and moving. Clearly, the Pookas quality hadn't gone up that much.

She broke out into a run, and leapt over the gap between her building and theirs. Landing with her knees braced helped to absorb some of the impact, and she was able to continue running almost as soon as her feet touched the roof, calling out as she did. "Hey Pork Chop!"

The guards whirled around, finally seeing that she was charging straight towards them. Her whip snapped out as she ran, wrapping around Pork Chop's ankle and knocking him off balance as she pulled it back. He fell down, his head smacking against the concrete. The whip uncurled from around him, then lashed at Roofie's gun and snatched it from his hands, still lax with surprise. She flicked the whip, discarding the rifle several yards away from any of them.

Her eyes darted over to Pork Chop, who was attempting to rouse himself from a groaning heap, and her mouth fell open in disbelief. "You're not even a pig!"

He glared at her, and attempted to lift his gun, only to have it kicked away.

"I gave you a *nickname*, and this is how you repay me? By having the audacity to wear a— what kind of mask is that? No, seriously, tell me. I have a hard time figuring out you guy's masks because they all suck so much. That's not actually a pig, is it?"

Roofie came barreling towards her, arms outstretched as if he were trying to give her a hug. Sith dodged to the side, sending her whip out to deliver a stinging *crack* on one of his hands. "Don't worry, Roofie, I didn't forget about you. You know, I'm really glad I didn't try to pick a name for you based off your mask. You have it worse than Pork Chop! Is that even an animal?"

Keeping his injured hand close to his chest, Roofie swung a fist towards Sith's face. Her whip caught the blow before it could connect. She pulled downwards, sending him stumbling as all of his momentum was suddenly redirected. "It has to be an animal, though, right? Isn't that you guy's whole shtick? Everyone's an animal?"

A pair of hands fisted into her hair, pulling her head sharply back. Sith's breath left her body in a hiss of pain, as Pork Chop leered from behind her, blood dripping down his mask from a fresh gash just above the top of it. She turned her body in the direction he was forcing her, one of her legs kicking out and into the side of his knee. He staggered as the joint was dislocated, and attempted to pull her down with him. Sith went with the motion, bracing herself as she stepped back, and then abruptly stood back up, twisting his arms as he continued falling. He let go with a cry, and collapsed to the ground. A savage kick from Sith had his head snapping to the side and against the brick ledge of the building. New blood seeped down his face as his body went limp.

She looked around, frowning as she saw Roofie in a fumbling attempt to reclaim his gun. "Don't touch that!" Her whip cracked out, the end of it snapping dangerously close to his face.

His eyes went wide, and he scurried back, leaving the weapon discarded on the ground.

"Those things are dangerous, Roofie, you could hurt yourself." The whip danced around him, an echoing *crack* sounding out whenever he so much as twitched in a direction that wasn't a straightforward retreat. His scrambling eventually led him to trip over himself, and he sprawled on the ground in front of Sith, terror-bright eyes looking imploringly up at her.

Sith sighed and sunk into a crouch in front of him. "Dude, I barely even touched you." She reached out, and he flinched away. A sympathetic smile quirked up her lips as her hand closed around his shoulder. "Don't worry, you're going to be fine." Under her hand, she felt his shoulder sag in relief. That was when her grin took on a more mischievous tilt. "But, I can't exactly leave you awake. So, night-night!"

She sprang backwards, going into a back handspring, and felt her foot connect with the underside of his chin. Roofie's head connected with the roof, rendering him unconscious. Sith continued her rotation, and ended upright at the door that led down to the rest of the building.

The door opened up to a deserted stairwell that she quickly made her way down. She turned her thermal lenses back on, as the building was just as dark as she expected it to be. There were three Pookas on the walkway she was about to step out on, and several more on the floor below. She would have to take care of the first three before the other guys figured out that she was here, so that meant she was going back to being stealthy. No problem, it's what she was trained for.

"Li, what are you doing back inside?" a voice called out.

Sith froze on the stairs. Or she could be noticed immediately because some idiot architect built a completely exposed roof access, and have to improvise. That worked, too. She jumped down the rest of the stairs, landing in front of the man stalking towards her.

“I said, what are—”

“Would you believe I forgot something?” Sith dropped into a sweeping kick that knocked the man’s legs out from under him. She reached for her belt, and pulled out a shorter chain than she had been using previously. A weight hung from each end of it, and she swung it down, one of them colliding with the man’s temple.

Her sensors showed that the other two men were heading in her direction, alerted by the noise. She could also hear voices from the lower floor, shouting up.

“What’s going on?”

“Is it her?”

“She’s here?”

“I don’t know, we can’t tell; turn on the lights!”

The building came to life in a disconcertingly bright blaze of light as the overhead fluorescents flickered on. Sith scowled and went back to her mask’s normal view. Was this supposed to be a trap of some sort? Did Cuddles try to set them up? Because, if so, that was rude of him. Which, it didn’t sound like they were expecting both her and Bodach. At least, they’d only asked about a girl. They could be seriously confused about Bodach’s gender, but his outfit didn’t leave much to the imagination, so that probably wasn’t it.

One of the two men still conscious up here came running at her, fishing a gun out of his belt as he did. Because there was obviously no other type of weapon available on the black market. She stayed low, casting the chain out again so that it wrapped around his leg and a weight struck the back of his heel. He went sprawling as she pulled up, the force of the weight causing him to nearly flip over himself.

How did they know she would be the one coming here? What if she had gone to Taiji? Bodach had said that there was a group there, but he had made it sound like they weren’t very interested in dealing with him. An anxious ball formed in the middle of Sith’s stomach, twisting her organs in a nauseous grip. She reached out and grabbed the gun the man had been trying to retrieve. Her fingers flicked the safety off as she aimed it at the last man standing.

The gun bucked in her hands as she pulled the trigger, a bloody spot appearing on the man’s shoulder. He cried out and grabbed at it, dropping his weapon as Sith’s chain swept out

and knocked it from his hands. A *thud* sounded as he sunk to his knees, though it was drowned out by the rattling of the metal stairs as a herd of men tramped up them.

She spun to face them, raising the gun back up to firing position. Muttered curses left her lips when she saw just how many there were, and she began a backwards retreat, sending bullets out while she did. Shoot a foot there, an arm there, avoid the chest if possible, but if it's not, just keep it away from the heart, *never* aim for the head or the neck, and—her gun clicked empty.

“Seriously?” she shouted, tossing the weapon at one of the Pookas still coming for her. “Why do you guys like those things so much; they’re worthless!”

A hail of bullets answered her query, causing her to dive over the railing that separated the walkway from the main floor, fifteen feet below. Sith grit her teeth and ducked into a roll, but the impact still rattled her bones. If Bodach were here, she would have already gotten five lectures about ‘looking before she leapt’, but what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. She, on the other hand, was definitely going to be sore in the morning.

Masked faces loomed down from the area above her, as bullets began shattering the concrete around her. She began running, aiming for one of the pillars that held up the walkway, as hiding behind it would give her the perfect opportunity to catch her breath and reassess her strategy of ‘improvise’. Throwing herself around it, she leaned her head back and heaved a giant sigh of relief. She was safe. Well, for like the next thirty seconds anyways, or however long it took them all to run back down the stairs, but she could totally come up with a plan in that amount of time.

That was when it occurred to her that she wasn’t the only person hiding behind this pillar. She saw the Pooka at the same time she felt the burning sensation of something sharp sticking into her side. Her mouth dropped open as she released another breath, this one a soundless gasp as her legs slid out from under her. She’d just been stabbed, hadn’t she? Okay. Okay, she could work with this. She’d been stabbed before. It wasn’t fun, but she’d get through it. Probably.

Except, she wasn’t supposed to be feeling so dizzy already, was she? And...and the wound should hurt, shouldn’t it? Right now, it just felt numb. Not the nice kind of numb that you felt after just waking up from a good night’s sleep and you couldn’t feel your fingers. No, this was the kind of numb that you felt after falling through a frozen lake in the middle of winter. It was cold, and it was sharp, like dozens of icicles were being speared into you from all directions, except it didn’t hurt, because it was numb, and she shouldn’t be feeling like this already, should she? Numb meant shock, and she couldn’t be going into shock already, it was too soon. It had only been...how long had it been?

It couldn't have been too long, because the knife was still in her. She couldn't see it, but she could feel it, kind of. Something was sticking in her, and the guy wouldn't have just left her with his knife still in her, would he? Surely, he'd want that back.

Why couldn't she see it? Oh yeah, her eyes were closed. Why were her eyes closed? She needed those open. She couldn't fight if her eyes were closed, and she needed to fight. Why? There was a reason, she knew there was, but she couldn't remember it right now. But she needed her eyes open. She needed to look at that knife.

Slowly, her eyes slid open, feeling as heavy as if she'd thrown her weighted chain across them. It was easy to turn her head downwards, yes, down was very easy. And, the knife was down, wasn't it? It went into her side, right? Sides were down. It was...

Wait. That wasn't a knife sticking out of her. That was a syringe. Oh, that really wasn't good. Well, if it was a full syringe, that might be okay. A full syringe meant that she hadn't been injected with anything and—no, that was a very empty syringe. She was straight up screwed.

Sound crackled in her ear, stirring the last, fading vestiges of her consciousness. Words, she heard words. What was the word for words? Talking, it was talking. Someone was talking inside of her. Must be her conscience. She didn't need to listen to it, she already knew exactly how abysmally she'd messed up. But wow, it sounded really upset. Calm down, conscience, there's no use yelling about it now. It was actually kind of funny. Her conscience sounded a lot like Bodach.

Boss. He could fix this. Boss could fix anything if he set his mind to it. But, he didn't know what was going on, which was a good thing, because that meant he couldn't be angry. So, she shouldn't tell him. But she had to tell him, because he couldn't fix it if he didn't know. So, he had to know. That meant she had to talk to him.

But talking meant moving. If down had been easy, movement was hard. Moving was very hard. Her jaw felt like a gate that had been rusted shut, her tongue was a bag of the cement that covered every inch of this city. The inside of her mouth was also dry, like someone had taken a straw and sucked all the moisture out of it. Which was pretty disgusting. No one needed to drink her mouth-water, she wanted that to stay where it was, thank you very much. She heard a dry, rasping sound, and she realized that it was coming from her. Words, she was making words with her mouth.

A hand reached into her line of sight. When had someone else gotten here? Oh, wait, that was the same guy from before, the mean one with all the sharp things. Or maybe it was just one thing. He reached past her, and his fingers began probing around her ear. The sensations reached her with the same clarity as an out-of-synch video. She knew that something was happening, but she wasn't aware what it was until well after it had occurred. Alarm coursed through her, trying to fight past the numbness with its panic. He shouldn't be doing that, he

wasn't supposed to be doing that, he had to stop doing that, but moving had become an impossibility.

All the while, her conscience kept yelling at her, somehow staying just as shrill and insistent when everything else dulled around her. Until it wasn't. The noise quieted, growing fainter and fainter as the man pulled something from her ear. Huh, so the voice had been coming from that. Guess it wasn't her conscience then. What was it? She felt like it was something important, but then he stepped on it. Not just stepped on it, he ground it to pieces. Oh well, there was no noise anymore. She let her eyes fall shut, the darkness peacefully quiet. It must not have been important after all.

The Graveyard Book Analysis

This is without a doubt, the book that inspired my anthology the most. I first read this book when it came out, back in 2008, but I recently reread it for a Study Abroad trip I took this past summer. At that point in time, I was just beginning to create Bodach and Sith, and the world that their stories take place in. I had a few novel-length ideas in mind for them, but nothing I was too serious about. The only thing that I was sure about was what I wanted to write something starring these characters.

Then I read *The Graveyard Book* and I absolutely loved every page of it. I am an enormous fan of Gaiman's work, and this book was no exception. But while I could rave about the plot or the characters, or both, what caught my eye the most about this book was its setup. *The Graveyard Book* is classified as a novel, but it reads like an anthology. Each chapter is its own short story. I did some research on the book, and found out that Gaiman actually published one of the chapters separate from the novel, a year before the book itself was released. Despite being individual stories in their own right, they contain the same characters, and contribute to an overarching plot. So, it's episodic, almost in the same vein as a television or streaming show.

Reading it inspired me, and I realized that a book like this was exactly what my characters were looking for. Many of my ideas for them were short, and stretching them out to cover an entire book would have felt bloated. I also felt like a traditional anthology would have limited the amount of character development I could have provided them. So, an idea such as this provided the best of both worlds. As such, it inspired me to write *a dreary midnight*, the first part of episode one, if you will, of Bodach and Sith's adventures. Having the promise of being able to take my time with the writing, and not worry about cramming all of their emotional arcs into one piece, allowed me the freedom to create a piece that I find to be enjoyable, just as *The Graveyard Book* was.

The Kite Runner Analysis

The Kite Runner is one of the best books that I have ever read. I first read it my sophomore year of high school, and I knew that I had to come back to it while writing this piece. One of the interesting things about this book is that it is told from a child's perspective; at least, the first part is. Despite that, the book does not hold back from the full brutality of its subject matter. As its subject matter stretches from the destruction of Afghanistan's monarchy all the way to the rise of Taliban, there is a lot of brutality.

When I was first creating the character of Sith, I went to one of my favorite child characters, Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But, while Scout has the right amount of pluck and charm that I wanted to give Sith, I feel that Amir, the protagonist of *The Kite Runner*, has a better understanding of the type of world that Sith lives in. *To Kill a Mockingbird* covers some intense issues, but *The Kite Runner* has a much grittier feel to it, that I felt better served the world I was trying to write. However, I wasn't as interested in Amir's character as I was in Scout's. I didn't feel like his personality was a very good fit for Sith, but his world view and understanding of horrible things occurring around him felt like they belonged with Sith, who has been very exposed to violence, better than Scout's innocent naiveté.

One of the things that I admired most about this book was how real it how felt. It didn't feel dumbed down, or diluted. Every part of it was raw and emotional. I wanted to convey that same intensity in my work. I struggled capturing the same essence from a child's point of view; I had to write the most intense scenes of my story from a very objected third person point of view, rather than the very limited third person that I wanted to write the rest of the story in. Having the first scene be from either Sith, or Bodach's point of few felt as though it would be too biased for an introduction. Both of their views are so heavily skewed to one way or another, that I wasn't conveying the tone that I wanted to convey. That is something that I need to work on, both in edited drafts of this story, and in other works that I write. Perhaps it gives me an excuse to re-read *The Kite Runner* yet again, so that I can further study the way Hosseini creates his dramatic scenes.