This is *Overture Literary Magazine*, a new pursuit to expand writing, art, and imagination within the Hopkins Junior High School community. Join us as we share the creativity of students by publishing their work in a monthly magazine, distributed to Fremont City constituents.

In musical terms, an overture is an orchestral composition forming the prelude or introduction to a musical piece. Much like an overture in music, this creative writing program will serve as an introduction to the landscapes of creativity, self-expression, and imagination.

*Overture* strives to inspire imagination, foster literary and artistic talent, and promote creative growth by teaching middle school students how to develop their own creative writing or art styles through mediums not offered at their own schools.

The Fall 2016 theme, “Water,” is a study on fluidity and balance. It is of water, necessary for life. It is on tempered emotions, on words that slide across tongues and slip through the body.

**FOUNDED SPRING 2011 BY**
**ROOPA SHANKAR AND KIMBERLY TAN**

**HOPKINS BRANCH FOUNDED FALL 2012 BY**
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if my life were a young adult dystopian

I peer around the corner in the direction of the small cluster of houses. The curtains are drawn in every window, and there isn’t a single person in sight.

Of course. It’s Wednesday. No one’s allowed outside, except for the security to sweep the premises for intruders, who really do nothing other than wave their fancy guns around threateningly, pretending like they own the universe.

Even so, that just means I have to be more careful.

I duck into an alleyway, looking around to make sure no one sees me. I collapse against the wall, legs sprawling lazily over the cobbled stone. I look up at the sky, enjoying the bleak clouds drifting across. There is no sun today, and the air is thick with a weighted haze.

The oval-shaped locket on my necklace lays heavily on my neck. My hand instinctively went to it, fingers wrapping around the cool metal. It’s the only memory of my mother after she mysteriously died years ago, and I’d lose my mind if I ever lost it while scavenging.

I slowly lift it from my neck, inspecting it carefully. Though fully aware that it wouldn’t open, I half-heartedly try prying the locket open for the millionth time. No such luck.

Something flashes around the street corner. An object—or a person; it was too fleeting to tell. A sharp tug wrenches my gut, but then I blink, and it’s gone. I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. It isn’t going to help me if I am seeing things while scavenging. It was distraction, far too risky.

I hear a rapid patter of footsteps on the wet pavement near me. I leap up from my spot, slip out of the alley, and dart into the next street. As a homeless orphan stealing and scavenging the scraps of the streets of Washington DC, I had become fast and intuitive. I’m not going to get caught, and I never plan to.

I back into another backstreet, nodding approvingly at the dim, flickering light. I was safe here. For now. I relax into the dark corner, crossing my legs.

There’s a sudden screech of tires in front of the alley. A large black car rolled silently in front of it, blocking any way. My heart lurched violently, my hand immediately finding a way to my locket. I glance behind me. Dead end. I’m cornered.

How could I have let this happen? How could I have been so stupid enough to forget to check if anyone was following me?

Because you’ve become careless, a voice nags at the back of my mind.

The van door drags open with a sputtering rolling noise, clicking all the way open with a loud pop.

I stand frozen, too afraid to move.

A tall man steps out, dressed in a dark brown trench coat, with shades perched on the bridge of his nose.

I can feel my heart beat wildly in my chest, blood rushing into my ears. I know who that is. That’s James Smith, the vice president. What was he doing here personally? What did I do? Was he going to jail me?
“Take her. We have finally located the locket.” James Smith points at me, and my mind goes a fuzzy blank. My locket? What did he mean by that? Two more men step out of the van, a coarse brown bag in their hands. Before I can fully comprehend what is going on, they recklessly slip it over my head, and firm hands guide me roughly away from my safe, dark corner.

They had no right to just take me away like some stray animal, so I throw my arm out, hitting someone square in the face (by dear golly I pray it wasn’t the vice president, or I’d have something huge to answer to). Using that momentary distraction, I rip the bag off my head, wildly looking around for an exit.

Before the men could react, I charge away from them to the van, jumping over the hood and managing an impressive somersault in the air before I’m out of the alley, running through the streets.

I dare a look behind me, and I see a whole military unit on my tail. I run faster, legs pumping and my lungs gasping for air. Adrenaline make my legs skid as I sprint around a corner of a street.

The men gain on me, but I know every nook and cranny of this state better than they do.

I’m so busy thinking left, turn, back down the street, right—that I don’t realize I’m about to run into a pole until it’s too late.

Pain blossoms in my forehead, and I stumble to get up. The world swims for a moment in front of me.

I’m not too sure what happens after that. I keep blacking in and out and only catch glimpses. But I do remember the dull ache in my bones as they toss me into the van like some worthless rag doll. Then everything goes black.

I’m startled awake as the door crunches open and a pair of hands grip my biceps and drag me out. A migraine starts to form in the back of my head and I feel dizzy.

Blurred bursts of colors flash in front of me that I can’t focus on; I blink hazily, my vision still spinning.

Next thing I know, I’m sitting down in a plush chair in a warmly lit office.

A man is smiling down at me. And oh my god this is John Brown, the president of United States.

“Hello, there.”

Panic grips my insides. What’s going on?

“I realize you are very confused. But I have recently gotten a report that you have been spotted with an oval, silver locket?”

I don’t know whether to answer or to keep quiet.

His voice is soft. “What is your mother’s name, do you remember?”

“Mary Jones,” I say quietly.

There is a sharp intake of breath from both the president and everyone else in the room.

“Mary Jones,” they echo.

My head snaps up. “What, do you know her?”

The president sighs. “Well, you see, your mother… she used to work for a secret organization that fought against terrorism. She was an esteemed spy we all respected. Her reasons for death is still unidentified, but it has caused a major problem in our society. We are prone to more terrorism. She was the only barrier against it.”
A spy? How could she have hidden that from me? “How it that possible?” I hate the croak in my voice.

“She was the negotiator between other countries. She managed to find the peace that protected us from attacks, but it was shattered for reasons unknown. The last words she said to us was to find you—a girl with that silver locket—and give this to you. She said that everything would make sense after.”

The president nods toward someone behind me. I turn my head, wincing at the wave of nausea that the action brought forth.

A man steps up, a sleek, black box in his hands. He opens it, and in the red cushions lining the box lays a tiny silver key.

My heart thuds. I look down at my locket, and my mouth feels dry.

“How did you know I had the locket?”

“We spotted you in the alleyway with it in your hands,” a man speaks up from behind her.

“We reported it to the president immediately.”

I nod. I reach out for the box. “May I?”

I accept the key held out for me, finding the smooth keyhole I had located a long while ago.

I slid it in, turning it. There’s a soft click, and everyone in the office seems to be holding their breath.

The locket opens, and there is a small folded piece of paper. I take it out, uncrumpling it. There is a messy scrawl I recognize to be uniquely my mother’s. I feel tears well up in my eyes and I couldn’t help the throwbacks my mind provided of the day when my mother never returned, and the hours of sitting numbly on a hard chair in a pristine building, interrogated sporadically by cold hearted investigators.

“What does it say?” the president prompts, leaning forward at the edge of his seat, looking strangely skittish. His hands are folded neatly in his lap, his eyes wide with unbridled curiosity.

I take a deep breath to compose myself. “One second.”

I read through the paper, my brows furrowed. It didn’t make any sense. It was some sort of sonnet written in loopy Shakespearean format, so my mind didn’t even bother try translating into modern English. Plus, I was sure my brain was still sloshing around up there in my noggin, not quite coherent yet. And if I had to be honest, the whole letter seemed like a whole load of dung. *Caring was the world so far, yet earth will the figures scar*—does that even make grammatical sense?

“I don’t understand,” I say as I look up to the room. “What does this mean?”

The president takes the paper from me. He scans it, then he looks up with a grave expression. “This can only mean one thing,” he says, glancing around the room worriedly before finally focusing on me. Did that mean the president understood what the letter said? Did he really understand, ‘The foes of our streets will be perished, allies will raze held everything cherished’? Rubbish.

The room stretches out with silence. I don’t feel so sure about myself anymore, maybe he did understand what was going on.

There’s a whirlpool of doubt and uneasiness swirling in me, and my chest feels tighter than usual.
The president takes a deep breath. “Our society is crumbling, and only you can save it.”
I stare as the weight of the words settle in. Whatever that letter said, it was important and most-likely life altering. *I have to save the world.*
Nervously picking at her twine necklace in her pocket, Kate walks down Pike Place Market, looking anxiously at the ground. Today, on January 28th, 2017, at Seattle, Washington, her life will change forever. Today, she will no longer be Kate, the girl whose mother didn’t even bother to give her a name before running for the hills. Today, she will become Kate Leyton, fellow family member of the Leyton family. Filled with determination, Kate lifts her head up and stares ahead. Starting from today, Kate Leyton will be afraid no more.

“Hello, Mr. Leyton, Mrs. Leyton,” my orphanage caretaker, Mrs. Mitchell, greets with a strained voice, “This is Kate, she will be your new daughter.” Mrs. Mitchell glances down at Kate with tears in her eyes. Tilting her head upward, Kate meets Mrs. Mitchell’s welling eyes. Too scared to say goodbye and officially meet the Leytons, she focuses her attention back on the ground after a moment’s hesitation.

“Go, Kate. Good luck in your new home,” Mrs. Mitchell manages to choke out before darting for the exit. Kate blinks, barely holding in the tears herself. Mrs. Mitchell is the only mother Kate has ever known. She took her in as a baby and had been taking care of her alongside the other orphans. Kate’s necklace, the one she keeps with her wherever she goes, was a gift from Mrs. Mitchell. It was the first gift Kate had ever received, a symbol of how at least one person loves and cares for her. Kate turns to her new parents. The past is past, and she needs to look forward on to newer and better things. Taking a deep breath, Kate steps forward and addresses her parents.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you both. I can’t wait to be part of your family,” Kate states, as she had rehearsed millions of times before.

“Oh, we’re so excited. I love your dress!” Mrs. Leyton exclaims. Kate looks down at her attire. She had been given a new dress and a pair of sandals for the big day. Wiping her eyes one final time, Kate forces a smile and tries to reply happily.

“Thank you, Mrs. Leyton. I love your home,” Kate answered truthfully. The Leytons really did have a wonderful home, complete with a room just for Kate. Looking around at the bright and glorious home, Kate gave the Leytons a huge smile, a real smile. Her new parents and home were more than she had ever hoped for, and she couldn’t be more excited.

“Call us mom and dad, Kate. Take a look around! We want you to feel at home,” Mr. Leyton stated. Kate smiled shyly and did just that. Although she wasn’t quite ready to call her
foster parents mom and dad just yet, she was determined to try. Walking around the halls with her new parents, Kate decided that she couldn’t be happier. She roamed around the house, peeking into all the unlocked rooms, until Mrs. Leyton kindly took her to bed.

Falling asleep that night was easier than ever, with her comfy little bed and cute stuffy pillows. Opening her eyes, she startled at the young boy standing near the door. He wore a small smile and kind eyes, and Kate realized that not only did she have new parents, she had a new brother. He must’ve locked his door her first day here and she hadn’t seen him. Returning his smile, Kate picks up the breakfast plate her brother dropped at her desk. She had a desk! Kate smiled bigger, thinking about her wonderful new life.

“Hey. I’m Connor. You’re Kate, right?” her brother, Connor, inquired. Kate smiled blankly at him. She couldn’t reply immediately, still in shock of how her new life seemed to be just perfect.

“Hello? You there?” Connor questioned.

“Oh, right. Sorry. Yeah, I’m Kate,” Kate stumbled. She looked at him again, then back at her breakfast.

“Wow, this is the best breakfast I’ve ever seen!” Kate exclaimed, taking a good look at her food. Giddily, she tilted her gaze back up at her brother. Surprised, she watched as her brother’s smile faded slowly.

“Yeah,” he replied with a touch of sadness. Kate stared at Connor, confused. What had she said wrong?

Later that day, the Leytons took Kate to the donut shop across the street. They said that Connor had started to work there during the summer. As a child, she had dreamt of caring, loving parents, but she hadn’t even dared to hope for a sibling. A sibling symbolizes someone who travels through your life experiences with you. A sibling symbolizes someone who will put you above others in their life. A sibling symbolizes someone who will care for and love you, and Kate couldn’t be more thankful that she now had Connor.

“Connor!” Kate bellowed into the shop, unable to contain her excitement. She saw Connor at one of the tables, lifting his head to meet her eyes. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around him. Startled, Connor pulled back and pushed her away.

“Kate? What are you doing here?” Connor asked, surprised. Grinning, Kate pointed at her mom and dad, and told him that they had brought her here to meet him. Connor snarled at her words, but plastered on a smile in a blink of an eye, so fast that Kate almost missed it. She
realized that he must have secrets, secrets that he didn’t want her, someone who may as well be a stranger, to know. She gave a silent nod and headed to the door, not wanting to disturb Connor.

“Wait! Kate, wait,” Connor shouted. Kate turned around, anxious for a chance to bond with her brother. Connor gave Kate a sliver of a smile and said, “I can’t really stop working right now, but I want to have a chance to talk with you later.”

“I want to, too, Connor, but I can tell you’re keeping something from me. It might just be some small insignificant thing, but I don’t like secrets. My biological parents have been kept a secret from me my entire life, even now, and I would give anything to know them, even though they threw me away,” Kate stated truthfully. Connor took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Kate, I would tell you, but I barely know you. Plus, this secret might ruin your life, it doesn’t really even affect me,” Connor argued, seemingly trying to convince both Kate and himself of his words. Kate then knew that her new parents, her new life, wasn’t as peachy as she had thought. She stepped forward and looked Connor in the eye.

“I don’t know you either, Connor. But I know I want to. Whatever you’re hiding, just tell me. I’ll be in my room for the rest of the day. If you decide to come, I’ll know you want to talk and tell me about this secret. If you don’t come, I’ll just figure it out on my own. I know that my new life isn’t as wonderful as you and our parents make it seem. For example, you look nothing like either Mr or Mrs Leyton. So, you must also be a foster child,” Kate reasoned, “It’s your choice, Connor, but I would really like for you to be honest with me.” Walking out of the donut shop and back to the house, Kate began thinking. Realizing that there must be something more to Connor, her mind spun like a spinning wheel. Concluding that Connor was, indeed, also a foster child, she realized with a start that it wasn’t summer. Mr and Mrs Leyton had said that Connor only worked during the summer, or rather, summer vacation, and yet it was both winter time and the weekends. Connor was only sixteen, two years older than the legal working age. Kate blinked. Connor worked to make a living.

Kate stared at her door. Judging from the clock, it was already six and Connor hadn’t come. She also hadn’t eaten lunch or dinner yet. Kate gave a small laugh, it almost seemed like Connor and food were a package deal. Getting up from the bed with a sigh, she swallowed her disappointment at Connor not being so perfect after all. Just when she was about to give up and sleep early for her first day of school tomorrow, she heard a faint knock on the door. Grinning from ear to ear, she barely contained her excitement that Connor had come. Walking to the door with a bounce in her step, Kate realized that she didn’t care about whatever secret Connor had. This feeling, even if it was fake, that she had a family, was better than she had ever imagined.
“You came,” Kate acknowledged. Connor nodded, looking around frantically.

“Yeah. Listen, I’ll tell you everything, but only if you’re sure you want to hear it. What I’m going to tell you will shatter every illusion about our so-called family, Kate. You have to be one hundred percent sure,” Connor stressed. Kate’s smile vanished, and she looked down at the wooden floor, remembering how it felt to feel like nobody wanted you. Did she really want to feel like that again? She’d only been a Leyton for two days, had only met Connor for one, but in those two short days, she had felt wanted. She’d felt loved, appreciated, cared for. Watching as a large drop of water fell to the ground, she found that she’d been crying.

“I’ve only known you for one day, Connor, but I feel like I trust you. That trust may be based solely on the fact that you’re willing to tell me the truth, but it’s something,” Kate confessed. “You’re only sixteen, you shouldn’t be working—especially on a weekend! I know you’re trying to protect me, but it shouldn’t be at the cost of your freedom. I admit, I liked the whole perfect family illusion thing, but I’m ready to know the truth.” Smiling through her tears at just how true her words were, Kate thought to herself that at least she had Connor, someone who seemed to genuinely care about her. Lifting her gaze to her brother, she caught him smiling back at her. Happiness swelled in her chest, causing Kate to vow to someday repay Connor for everything he had given her.

“Alright, then, little sis. Here we go,” Connor choked through his own tears. “Let’s do this quick before I find a reason to stop myself. You’ve probably realized that I basically come with the food. That’s because I pay for your food, Kate. I do this because the Leytons treat me horribly. They neglect me, forcing me to fend for myself. Before I turned fourteen and started working, I either asked a friend for food or hoped some kind citizen would buy me a burger,” Connor admitted. Pausing for a breath of air, Connor searched for Kate’s reaction. Kate was too stunned to speak, even though she had gathered as much. Connor continued, “There’s no phone or anything they gave me that I could’ve used to report them before, and they’d kept a close watch on me. I was also just so scared. Whenever I tried to tell someone about how they treated me, they hit me. Softly at first, but the blows got harder and harder as time went on. I’m stronger now, but I still can’t report them because they threatened to do the same to you.”

After finding her voice, Kate interrupted, “Why didn’t you report them to stop me from being assigned to the Leytons, though?” The corners of Connor’s mouth lifted slightly, and he blinked away his tears.

“Because after doing some research on you, I found that you’d never truly experienced family. I wanted to give you a taste of family. I know that the Leytons aren’t the only ones who
neglect and abuse their foster children. With me here, at least I could give you the illusion of a family,” Connor replied. Kate’s mouth dropped open.

“Oh, Connor. I don’t know what to say,” Kate whispered.

“Don’t thank me or anything like that. It’s sad and unfortunate that you would need an illusion in the first place. You’re smarter than I thought, little sis. My illusion didn’t last long,” Connor laughed, drying his tears with his shirt. Kate let out a small laugh too, and reached out to hug her brother.

“It never felt right calling the Leytons my parents, but I hope you know that I thought of you as my brother since the moment I saw you standing by my door with that breakfast plate. Granted, the amazing breakfast might’ve given you an unfair advantage, but more importantly, I want you to know that you’ll always be my brother, Connor,” Kate promised. Finally thinking of something to say, Kate cut Connor off before he could reply.

“Sorry, I’m being rude. If I don’t ask this now, though, I’ll forget it later. Why do the Leytons do it? Why do they take us in if they don’t plan on treating us right?” Kate questioned.

“Reputation, Kate. To their friends, their other family members, we are the adored members of the Leyton family. They kindly took us in when we had nowhere else to go. They’re the best people in the entire world,” Connor replied, rolling his eyes. Kate, however, was far from amused.

“That’s it?” Kate demanded. She couldn’t believe that all this was for the Leytons’ precious reputation. Anger rose up in her stomach, and she grabbed Connor by the arm, dragging him with her to the Leytons sitting in the living room.

“Yes, Kate?” Mrs. Leyton asked nicely. Connor snorted, glancing at his bedroom door, looking for an escape. Kate kept her firm grip on his arm, however, preventing him from moving.

“Don’t bother. I came down here just to let you know that I’m reporting you,” Kate stated coldly. Turning to Connor, she explained her decision. “I know that you were trying to protect me by not reporting them, but we can ask to be moved together. I can’t stay knowing that this was all for their reputation,” Kate informed. Connor, smiled, giving her his approval.

“What you did to Connor was disgusting. You used me to stop him from reporting you. I was going to go and report you myself, but I feel like Connor should have the honor. I’ll bet he has quite some things he wants to say about you,” Kate growled. Giving the Leytons no chance to reply, Kate headed out the door with Connor by her side.
Kate rose from the hotel bed the next day with a grin on her face. Eyeing her brother’s closed bedroom door, she thought back to the previous night’s events. What a sight they must’ve been, two children barging through doors after hours. The battles ahead with the Leytons and their lawyers were inevitable, but she and Connor were promised new foster families. This time, the homes would be inspected carefully beforehand. Everything was good and well, but Kate’s grin grew as she remembered one thing that had yet to be resolved. Knocking on Connor’s door, Kate thought about her vow to repay Connor’s kindness. She couldn’t do much yet, but her first step was to convince him to quit his job. The job represented Connor’s independence and how he had to support himself, without the help from his family. Kate was confident that their new family would be wonderful, and she didn’t want him working all the time. He wouldn’t get have the full teenage experience if he spent all his time wiping down tables at a donut shop. Her smile faltered as she thought about her and Connor’s lost childhood, but she was impelled to move forward and leave the past behind her.

As soon as Connor opened his door, Kate stared him in the eye and went right to it. “Quit your job,” she demanded. Connor lifted a single eyebrow, refusing to reply. “Connor, we’re going to join a great family. I know it. There’s no reason for you to keep your job, come on! If you don’t quit, you won’t have time to spend with me!” Kate persuaded. Connor rolled his eyes and smiled, feeling really and truly happy for the first time in his life. He didn’t know if he was ready to fully depend on someone else, but he decided that he would try, for Kate.

“It would be hard, I guess, letting go of that job. It would mean trusting and depending on our new family, and we haven’t even met them yet. But if it means that much to you, I guess I can work something out with my boss. I can always go back if I need to. Plus, it would be nice to have some time to spend with you,” Connor agreed. Kate jumped up and down, clapping her hands together.

“Yay!” Kate giggled. She exchanged smiles with Connor, the two happier than ever. Kate hadn’t known family for very long but, she realized, that with Connor, she was ready for anything. Thinking back to something Mrs. Mitchell had told her, Kate concluded that everyone was, undeniably, stronger with family.
Snow Under a Moonlit Sky

As the clouds parted, and silver beams of moonlight swept through the paper window, Adrian lay awake.

He leaned on his bed, seemingly entranced by the dappled, ever-changing patterns. A cold, but beautiful painting that decorated his room.

He sighed. For many nights he couldn't sleep. This night would be his third.

Something nagged at him from the back of his mind, something important. He furrowed his eyebrows, deepening the creases from endless tactics and calculation, from leading a revolution. If he only knew what was troubling him.

He remembered that only three years ago, he lay in the same position as he did now. But without the wrinkles, nor such a stone-cold heart. How could he have been so naive to think that bringing justice came without a price? Adrian smiled bitterly at the thought.

“Too naive,” he murmured to himself.

He remembered the momentous day that changed everything. That day three years ago…

After twenty-six peaceful years, his father’s long-defeated enemies had finally found him just in time as dark clouds gathered upon the clear blue sky.

Adrian’s father was a good warrior, but every man’s undefeatable enemy, time, had been laying more and more blows upon him. Thunder rumbled. The blows that made him defenseless against the younger generation. It was a valiant sacrifice that ended his life. Lightning clashed and tears fell from the heavens.

At the moment, it took all of Adrian’s self-control to not lunge at them. They murdered his father and caused destruction to his homeland. His father’s blood was on their hands. Blood for blood. It was the only honorable way. But he knew something else was at stake. Their appearance indicated that the Sorrow Clan meant to bring chaos to the world. It was his duty, then, to stop them before they caused destruction, just like his father did twenty-six years ago. They came from the Sorrow District, a rich district with a few real people supporting their cause to take over Wulin. The rest were either mercenaries or people being threatened into submission.

Usually, the Wulin Lord would send a hero, more like a sacrificial lamb, and a portion of his armies to defeat them. The last one had been his father, bearing the sword that was passed down from generation to generation, brought peace to the land for twenty-six years.

When there were rumors of the Sorrow Clan starting to plan an uprising, nobody was worried. Wasn’t there his father to deal with that? But now his father was dead. The Wulin Lord probably had already gone into hiding, and nobody wanted to deal with the district that killed the last hero.

Carrying only his father’s sword, Adrian stepped out of his carefully protected life, into the blurry path that the layers of rain made, and ventured out to accomplish the impossible.

His first step was to find himself some allies. It would be impossible to defeat the Sorrow Clan without the help of others, especially without support from the Wulin Lord.
It wasn’t hard to find them. It turned out the Sorrow Clan has offended many people, many who would love to see their heads on a platter.

The first girl he met went by the name Snow. In Adrian’s opinion, the encounter was bit embarrassing. Like her name suggested, she was a girl of a cold appearance. But what the name didn’t imply was that she had a warm heart. He had saved countless lives in his journey, but she was the only one who saved his.

Their course of events to their encounter started in one quiet night when he was still camping out in the forest. Too quiet. In the blink of an eye, he had found himself surrounded on all sides with hordes of people, all sorts of painful-looking weaponry, chanting his name and for him to surrender.

“And this is why you never stop in an unusually quiet clearing,” he muttered to himself. He then ran blindly in the darkness, not really knowing where to go. Pulling out his sword of the scabbard, he managed to block some of the arrows. The rain of arrows sent a searing pain through his body, spreading through like wildfire. Their poison began to take effect and he breathed heavily. His body felt as if it was made of lead. He cursed as it refused to move, no matter how hard he tried.

Unable to go any further, the lay there waiting to join his father. In his dimming vision, he saw the gleaming of the torches and heard the hysterical cries of glee, celebrating their catch. He then feel somebody hit him on the head. Hard. The gleaming torches then subsided into darkness. When he woke up, he found himself in a dirty dungeon, complete with hay-covered floors and four stone walls. The only way out was through a locked door. There were still arrows protruding from his back and he grunted as he tried to sit up. The action made him dizzy with pain, and as his vision dimmed, he saw a girl in blue unlock his prison door...

When he awoke the second time, he found himself in a lavishly decorated room. He looked down to find his wounds cleaned and bandaged with clean cloth. There was also a girl in fine, blue clothing by his bedside. The same girl who came in the dungeon before he fainted.

Before Adrian could have a proper glance at her, she spoke. "I suggest you to stay silent at the moment because whatever comes out of your mouth is going to leave the wrong first impression on me."

Dumbfounded, Adrian only laid back and stared at her. She had crisp, delicate features as if they had been drawn by a master artist. They consisted of curious eyes, pale skin, and cascading black hair. But in the midst of her beauty was coldness which radiated an ethereal yet unforgiving aura around her.

After sampling the different sentences in his mouth, he finally decided on the polite and valiant one, “Thank you for saving my life,” he said. “One day, I shall repay you.”

The girl in blue smiled coldly, “Not bad. However, there’s no need to repay me. Weren’t you informed that I’m the Thirteenth Grand Advisor of Sorrow Clan Council? But if you insist, of course, I will abide.”

Adrian's eyes widened in shock as he tried to get up from the bed he was lying on, but his pain in his abdomen forced him back down. Gritting his teeth, he snarled at the advisor, “What do you want with me?”

“Oh nothing, really,” she said absentmindedly. “Except to join your cause. Long story short: the Sorrow Clan killed my last and only lover.”
Over the next few weeks, he nursed his wounds in the secret chamber within the mansion that the Sorrow Clan Lord had provided for Snow. He knew he was safe here from the frantic searches of the escaped prisoner. Because no matter how desperate one was, who dares to search the Mansion of the Thirteenth Grand Advisor? Snow still attends to matters within the District to avoid suspicion. They planned to escape the district as soon as Adrian’s wounds have healed.

After his wounds had fully healed, he and Snow, escaped at the dead of night, wearing veils to hide their identity. Snow insisted that she kept the veil on the whole journey because she knew it would make it easier to make allies, who loathed the Sorrow Bringers.

The first allies they found together were Sally and Jaison. Adrian and Snow found them at their third hotel. Sally, was the hotel keeper, both of her parents had been murdered by the Sorrow Clan. Jaison’s parents had sold their lives to the Sorrow Clan, so he could live in peace. Because his parents were in Sorrow District, he worked at the hotel and stayed under Sally’s care.

They also found Wren, a young apprentice to the best doctor in the Wulin. His master and the other apprentices, died defending the precious herbs that the Sorrow Clan stole for their own use. He only survived the ordeal because he was too young to fight.

Their fifth ally they found when they caught a glimpse of a thief raiding a young girl. Things have been getting messier and messier as the expansion of the Sorrow Clan grew. They were about to help her when a muscular, wearing coarse clothing came storming in, beating the thief up. The hero also gave the thief a lengthy speech that contained threats and lessons on moral. Intrigued, Adrian went to have a conversation with the hero. He called himself Benjamin and worshipped Adrian’s father, his deeds, and character. When he learned of Adrian’s ancestry, he vowed, “I will help any descendant of his legendary bloodline and his allies.”

The last one was Sage, whose alliance Adrian had to beg for on bended knees. He remembered hearing her family name from his father, and that this family held all the secrets of the Wulin. After five days of pleading, she finally obliged, saying that maybe for once her family may be known for something else.

The seven of them, connected by hatred (and duty) was able to stop almost every obstacle the Sorrow Clan threw in their way. Everywhere they went, they spread hope and their fighting spirit. People from all four corners of the Wulin revolted against the Sorrow Clan. Even the cowardly Wulin Lord, who had hidden in some mysterious area, appeared and rallied enough troops to support the revolution. Gaining the respect and support of almost the entire population, they lead them in a march to the Sorrow District.

For many months, they camped on its border, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. At least that was what they made it appear to be. The truth was that the Sorrow District was just too strong, making it almost impossible to penetrate. Winter was coming and a plan must be made soon. After debate and debate, they came to no conclusion. After several days of deliberation, on the first day of winter, Adrian decided not to tell his soldiers they couldn’t go forward. He made the choice to venture into the forbidden territories alone.

Snow didn’t like that idea. “No! It’s too dangerous! You barely even know the Sorrow District! There are traps and schemes in every corner, with one objective: to kill. What if something happens to you? You’re the heart of the people! You’ll be flinging yourself carelessly into a death trap! I won’t allow it!” she argued.
“It is my duty,” Adrian said calmly. “Like you said, I am the heart of the people. What will my soldiers do if they see their leader being frightened to lose his own skin, that he’d rather risk the life of another rather than his own? I know it is dangerous, but we can’t afford to lose another man.”

“Then why do you have to go? There are thousands of them! There ought to be one of them who is brave enough to volunteer! If you think this some cheesy heroic sacrifice joke, you’re not being funny. Besides, what is one man for eternal peace in Wulin?”

Adrian smiled faintly, “Exactly.”

After a few more hours of bickering, they’ve finally made an agreement to go in the Sorrow District together.

Adrian snapped, “Fine! I’ll meet you at your tent tomorrow right after sundown. We’ll go in there together.”

At first, all was smooth sailing. Snow was able to guide them through every trap. After avoiding and dispatching them, they were finally able to make a safe, and a not-too-noticeable route for their armies to go through. On the way back, Adrian stepped out of the corner of an old building. The minute his foot touched the ground, arrows soared from their right. They barely dodged them as new ones came. It was a trap. A trap that Snow hadn’t known about because it was installed after she was gone.

Getting past the trap itself was easy enough. The hard part, however, was all of the noise the trap had created, which drew the attention of all the Night Guards.

The leader laughed mockingly. “What luck! The Eighth Grand Advisor knew that sometime sooner or later, there were going to be scouts trying to find their way in, but not the son of the hero! Now, drop your weapons, and perhaps I’ll spare you from a painful death!”

“In your dreams!” Snow snarled.

Charging within the disarmed trap, the Night Guards attacked. They were prime fighters. Even Adrian, an experienced fighter had a hard time defending himself. Snow, however, who knew the Sorrow Clan’s fighting tactics, fought with ease. That was her greatest mistake.

The leader of the Night Guards, who was watching the ongoing battle, furrowed his eyebrows. Something wasn’t right. Why was the veiled person so familiar with their tactics? Silently, he snuck behind Snow and threw his dagger sharply at her head. Snow to ducked violently, successfully missing the blow, but her veil fell.

The Night Guards froze. It was the missing Thirteenth Grand Advisor. What was she doing here? And to be standing at the sides of a rebel!

Taking advantage of their disbelief and gaping, Adrian grabbed the Snow, also frozen with shock, not believing that her identity was revealed, and ran. Returning to camp, they found the rest of the seven heroes were anxiously waiting for them at the border.

Wren looked at Adrian, and questioned worriedly, “Adrian, where were you? You just went! Snow’s gone too! Do you know where she is?”

Suddenly realizing the presence of a foreigner amongst them, Wren asked, “And who is this girl beside you?”

Snow smiled, “I am Snow.”

Adrian nodded.

Struck with envy and awe, Sally said, “Snow, I never knew you were so beautiful...”
“Well, I never knew that either, so how would have you known that? I just always assumed that you were ugly or had some serious face damage that you didn’t want everybody to see, and wore the veil.” Sage remarked.

Snow glared at her.

Jaison eyed Snow suspiciously, “Then why were you wearing a veil?” he asked, with suspicion lacing his words.

Snow looked at Adrian for support. Adrian nodded encouragingly. “Well, I am--or was, actually, the Thirteenth Grand Advisor of the Sorrow Clan Council. When we were scouting in the Sorrow District, we kind of been discovered, and my veil...fell.”

Benjamin looked at them seriously and asked, “Why were you and Adrian in the Sorrow District?”

Adrian then proceeded to tell the whole story of what had happened. After a long discussion, they agreed to lead the armies into the Sorrow District two days later. Only Jaison still eyed Snow suspiciously.

What happened the next two days for Adrian was a blur. It was still too painful to remember the events that followed. All he knew was that the next morning, Sally had fallen victim to a deadly poison, one that even Wren couldn’t heal. Jaison then started to viciously accuse Snow of doing the deed. The others, besides Sage, who were all suspicious of which side Snow really was on, didn’t say a word to defend her.

Angry and frustrated, Snow declared that she was going to go into the Sorrow District and steal the cure. When Adrian insisted to go with her, she refused.

“No, you will stay here. Wait for me to return,” she said softly. She then walked into the brewing blizzard, flurries fading Adrian’s vision of her.

When Snow returned, she stumbled back with a deep red flower on her side, blood flowing from the wound.

Adrian caught her as she finally fell from the slippery pavement, “Snow! Snow! What happened? Here, I’ll take you to Wren!”

“Don’t...bother...them. They all hate me anyway,” she said in a weak voice. From her inside pocket, she took out a tiny vial and handed it to Adrian. “Here is the antidote. Take it Adrian, and go. Sally needs it. I’m already a dead person, after all.”

“Don’t say foolish things like that,” Adrian said. As he tried to carry her, she cried in pain. “Snow! Are you okay? It’s all my fault, I shouldn’t have let you go there alone.”

“It’s not your fault, Adrian. You are the best person I have ever met after...he died. If only I could watch the snowfall under a moonlit sky again...”

The memory of them watching the early soft snow fall under the glistening moon last week burned his mind.

“We’ll watch it again. We’ll watch it every day after you get better,” Adrian promised with his cracking voice, tears glistening in his eyes.

“Don’t cry,” Snow whispered. “Promise me that you’ll be better than me. Promise me...that...you’ll be...a hero.” Snow’s head sunk down a bit, and the life went out of her beautiful eyes.
They took over the Sorrow District the next day. The traps that he and Snow dispatched helped the process. The Sorrow Clan had no mental preparation. They never expected them to attack, especially in winter. Since a lot of them never was for the Sorrow Clan’s cause anyway, they attacked their leaders and joined Adrian’s side.

What surprised them the most was finding the Wulin Lord hiding in a basement, cowering beneath a table, begging for mercy. He was the puppet put in the position of power by the Sorrow Clan leader, so then the leader could do whatever he pleased. Desperate to continue living in luxury, after he heard the reveal of Snow’s identity, the Wulin Lord ordered his servant to poison Sally, in some vague hope that the Sorrow District will be saved because of an inner conflict between the seven heroes.

Adrian killed the coward himself.

But that was all three years ago. The new Wulin Lord was Sage, who would invite Adrian to drink tea with her monthly, but Adrian always refused, saying that he enjoyed the quiet of the forest.

Suddenly, Adrian figured out what was troubling him. Three days ago was the last day of autumn. It should be snowing now. Getting up from his bed, he opened his window. Gusts of cold wind with pale snowflakes blew into his room. A silver moon shone brightly above as small flurries of snow fell its way down to the earth.

“Being a hero isn’t easy, Snow,” Adrian said to the moon.
Chapter 4: Ryker

Ryker was waiting in his room in a fresh black t-shirt and jeans. He actually had a room. When he walked inside his new living quarters, there had been an actual apartment, with a kitchen and everything. He had ignored Doc, who had been prattling on and on, and had just followed as Doc led him to his room. The first thing Ryker had done was check the closet, which was packed with clothes of any and every kind. All his size. He had changed into a clean copy of what he had been wearing before, which was fine for clubbing.

A few minutes later, Doc had knocked on the door and stuck his head in. “Hey. I’m going clubbing with you. My girlfriend, Nee, is Alex’s roommate and is coming along, so I’m coming too. I see you’re ready too. As usual, we’re waiting on the girls.”

Ryker had smiled. “They better look fabulous if they’re gonna keep us waiting like this.”

Doc had smiled back. “Don’t worry. They usually do.” Then Doc left, probably to return to his own room.

Now Ryker was wondering what was taking so long when there was a knock on his door. He opened the door to find Doc.

Doc said, “Come on dude. I can’t wait to see your expression when you see the girls.”

Ryker followed Doc to the kitchen where the girls were apparently rummaging around for some food. There was a blonde girl with blue eyes in a silver dress and platforms. Ryker assumed this was Doc’s girlfriend. His suspicions were confirmed when Doc walked over to her and kissed her.

In the meantime, Alex turned around, saw them kissing, and said, “Aw, come on guys. Wait for the club where there will be lots of nice shadowy corners for you.” She turned to face Ryker, and he was stunned. If she was gorgeous before, now she was simply breathtaking. Her black dress clung to her shapely figure, and her heels added to her already considerable height. Her short black-streaked red hair had nothing done to it, and yet it looked more beautiful as well. She had on lipstick that was striking against her pale skin, and Ryker’s gaze was fastened on them.

His reverie was broken by her saying mockingly, “Enjoying the view?”

Ryker snapped back to the present and said, “How could I not?”

Instead of blushing like any sane person, Alex simply said, “Good. Judging from the male test subject’s reaction, I would say I should have an interesting night.”

The girl who must be Nee said, “And by interesting night, you mean you’ll get to punch at least one person in the face.”

Alex nodded. “Exactly. Let’s go.”

While Alex and Nee led the way out the door, Doc dropped back to walk next to Ryker. “Now that you have shown zero romantic interest in my girlfriend, I’m willing to be your friend. Just watch the other male agents. They tend to be a little handsy when the girls are going clubbing, and the only exit we’re allowed to leave through is the front door.” Ryker watched the other guys,
but they were either intimidated by Ryker and Doc, or they knew not to try anything with Alex, or Nee, or both.

When they left the building, Alex made a screeching noise that walked the line between a whistle and a banshee’s shriek.

A black toyota avalon pulled up to the car, and the driver stepped out. “Here you go, Alex. How did you know I would be driving past just now in this car?”

Alex replied, “Stan, you’re very predictable. Also, I was checking the roster for when the avalon was being checked out. Then I knew I had twenty minutes to get to the front and whistle. You always run a maintenance check, then a paint check. I had thirty minutes if you found a flaw, but you usually never do because you check it out every day.”

The driver, Stan, shook his head and laughed. “And that’s why you’re the second in command and not your brother.”

Alex laughed, too. “That and a bunch of other reasons. Now, keys.” Stan tossed over the keys, and Alex simply watched them fall into the gutter.

She said, “The real keys, please.” Ryker glanced sharply at Stan. He had a mop of black hair and deep, blue eyes. That paired with his tan skin made him pretty handsome too. Alex was right. I am enjoying the view here, too.

Stan tossed another set far above her head, but she just reached up and the keys came flying back to her hands. “Thank you. Now scoot.”

Nee shook her head looking exasperated. “You had to bring your batons, didn’t you.”

Alex smiled innocently. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Ryker was very confused. “Batons?”

Doc answered both Ryker’s asked and unasked questions. “Yeah, batons. Alex’s chosen weapon of mass destruction. She has these metal bands the color of her skin that are like super magnets. They can bring her batons to her hands if they are taken away. The bands can work on other magnetic things as well. They are tapped into her nerves, so she doesn’t have to fiddle with anything with her hands to change its settings or whatever. Her batons themselves are also pretty awesome. They have multiple secret compartments that hold lots of helpful things. Things like lockpicks, knives, guns, ammo, and I’ve heard there’s a laser. Somehow the stuff doesn’t get banged up and the batons aren’t slowed down at all. Plus, she can electrify them with her bands. The bands will also self-destruct if someone unauthorized touches them on purpose.”

When Ryker shot Alex’s wrists a panicked look, she laughed. “Chill. Somehow the bands are able to tell if it’s on purpose or an accident. Otherwise I would’ve fried like fifty people in an hour at least. Now, let’s go.” She walked over to the driver’s seat and sat down behind the steering wheel. Nee slid in the back, and Doc followed. Ryker sat in the passenger’s seat, and Alex shot him a wicked grin before stepping on the acceleration. Ryker didn’t have time to buckle up. He just held on tight and used his training to try not to get killed.

Chapter 5: Alex

Alex loved driving. Everyone else in the car usually hated it when she drove after the first few seconds, but that didn’t matter. Alex put the pedal to the metal and drove, some would say like a maniac. My driving might be a bit unorthodox, but at least it’s efficient.
Ryker released his death grip on the panic bar and sighed. “Well then. And I thought I was going to die fighting for my life. I never thought I would go because of a heart attack.”

Nee said weakly, “Yeah. Every time you drive, Alex, I lose years of my life.”
Doc added, “I almost died of a heart attack. You need to be more careful, Alex.”
Alex grinned like a maniac. “More careful? Or less?”
Nee said fiercely, “Definitely more.”
Alex simply said, “We’ll see.” Alex turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car.
Ryker stepped out as well, and they both turned around to see Doc opening the door for Nee.
Ryker clapped his hands. “What a gentleman.” Turning to Alex, Ryker offered her his arm and said, “My lady.”
Alex looped her arm through his, and they turned and walked to the line, laughing all the way. “Welcome, to Tango Terrace. All the member are either FBI or CIA, so there’s no chance of you pulling any funny business”

Ryker smiled innocently, and Alex was immediately suspicious. Ryker said mock-seriously, “None of my business is funny. In fact, it is completely serious.”

They finally reached the line and Alex walked right up to the bouncer, who she knew. “Hey Louie. Listen, I’ve got a dangerous newbie here, and I can’t promise not to punch him in the face multiple times if I don’t get something carbonated stat.”

Louie grinned. “He’s that bad? Well, come on in. Anything for you, Alex.”

As they walked through the door, leaving Nee and Doc behind to do God knows what, Ryker hissed, “And why will he do anything for you?”

Alex walked up to the bar that would have been impossible to find in the pulsing strobe lights if you didn’t know where it was and ordered a root beer float before turning to ask, “Why? You jealous?”

Ryker waited for the bartender to leave before replying, “Yes. Absolutely.”
Alex glanced at Ryker, startled. “I saved his and his entire family’s lives.”
Ryker visibly relaxed, making Alex wonder why exactly he had been so tense. “I’m not surprised. Do you have a boyfriend?”

Alex looked at Ryker sharply. “Recently broke up. Why?”
Ryker exhaled, and said quietly, “Good.” Alex became aware of the distance between them. Or rather, lack thereof. Ryker leaned in even closer, and Alex found herself closing her eyes.

“How dare you!” a voice yelled in her ear.

Alex’s eyes snapped open and she whirled to find Nee and Doc glaring at her. “How dare I do what?”

Nee laughed sardonically. “You left us out there on purpose. I should have known. You had told me yesterday how you thought Doc and I didn’t get nearly enough alone time.”
Doc started. “You were talking about our relationship, Nee?”
Nee said hastily, “No. I was rescheduling, when Alex looked over my shoulder and noticed how little free time I have.”
Doc relaxed a bit. “Oh. Okay. Too bad you were too furious for us to take advantage.”
Alex said, “There’s still time.” Nee and Doc glanced at each other then rushed off.
Laughing at her friends’ lust, Alex turned around to see Ryker staring at her.
Self-consciously, she asked, “What?”
He shook his head in what looked like amazement. “How did you do that? You know, patch up their strained relationship?”

Alex said, “Simple. I went to a club.”

Ryker looked like he wanted to say something else, but then Grant walked over. “Hey Alex. You’re looking as hot as ever. I heard you’re single now. Care to dance now that your chaperone is off chaperoning someone else?”

Alex felt her anger pooling into a molten core. “I would love to. There’s just one problem. You’re as much of a slimy sleazeball as you were the last time you asked me. Now why don’t you go hit on one of your girlfriends. Or maybe another girl you want to make one of your girlfriends. Just not me.”

Grant’s eyes flashed, and he said, “With that attitude, you’re lucky a guy even wants to talk to you.”

Alex spat, “I’m not if the guy is someone like you.” Grant whimpered and stalked off. *Probably to find whichever girlfriend he brought along today and rant about how I verbally abused him.* Before she could turn back to Ryker and make a joke about it, a force threw her to the side. Alex turned around, and saw that the bar had exploded, as had multiple booths. Alex saw Ryker lying down on the floor a little farther away from where Alex had landed.

Alex checked to make sure he was alive and wouldn’t immediately die, then sprinted to find Nee and Doc. She found them in one of the intact booths, thank god, trapped under some debris from the booth next to theirs that had exploded. Alex freed Doc first, because he was stronger than Nee, and they both released Nee.

Nee asked, “Ryker?”

Alex replied, “Alive and unconscious. Let’s see if anyone else needs help.” The three of them pulled a lamp off an ex-CIA agent who was too old to remove it on his own.

Alex also saw, to her satisfaction, that Grant was trapped by a decorative jukebox that must have been jarred into playing a song about a cheating boyfriend by its fall. Alex took a picture while Grant snarled obscenities at her.

Nee said cloyingly, “But you’re finally getting your close-up. It’s so amazing, I just need you to send it to me, Alex.”

Doc piped in, “That pose really brings out your personality. I think I want a copy too.”

Alex smiled viciously at Grant. “Oh, of course. I’m going to send it to my entire contact list under #TruthRevealedViaJukebox. You’ll be famous.”

Alex glimpsed a running figure out of the corner of her eye. The profile was too skinny to be male, and too vague to be up to good. Without another word, Alex ran after the girl to see what she was up to. Alex quickly caught up to her in a dark alley, but she couldn’t see the girl.

Something shoved her against the wall, and a feminine voice said in her ear, “Well hello there Agent King. Funny seeing you here.”
ARTWORK

NISHEET PANDA; GRADE 7
THE PEACEFUL SWAN
SAIRA HAMID; GRADE 7

It’s Cold