

# The Passing

Kiyanna Remington

First Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2008 Young Writers Contest

Thurmont, MD – *Catoctin High School*

**ten.**

There is no wind.

The slightest brush of a gust is dashed against the steel and concrete walls of the building, towering monstrosities that stare down at their creators with morbid indifference. The smog is just as thick as it was yesterday. Circun knows, because every day, he sits on the balcony of his sardine-can apartment and counts the buildings. Just yesterday, another was lost in that omnipresent, rolling cloud. Except, it's not really a cloud; Circun hasn't seen a real one in years. The thought hurts, just a little.

The smog has been growing steadily deeper for the past twelve years. Twelve years ago, the world finally, *finally* saw the damage being done to the earth in its full magnitude. Twelve years ago, laws had passed, banning excess electricity and banning deforestation and banning mining and cars and banning ~~banning~~—

Then, there were trees. Today, there is one, sleeping in a bubble of glass and God-knows-what-else, a myriad of machines hooked parasite-like to its trunk, tunnels that leech the little oxygen it expels, so that the every-growing, ever-hungry city can feed itself on its labored breath. The tunnels wind serpentlike into the great replication plants, where they copy oxygen molecules one by one by one by one for the world to waste.

It's because they don't understand, they never could, *they* didn't watch the world grow and wither, how could they understand that the slow agony they caused was enough for the trees and the eathandheavenanthattheywerejustwaitingto *Die!*

**nine.**

Four A.M.

Eight hours since the oxygen vents in Circun's apartment started spluttering like a man in the grips of madness. Seven since he was supposed to go on a date. Six since the vent gave one last heave and died.

Five he'd been staring at his roommate's corpse, blue in the face, from the balcony.

It was staring back.

Well, Evan always *was* the sociable one.

It's such a shame, too.

Why are repair men always so damn slow?

...Circun reminds himself to call sooner next time.

**eight.**

He buries Evan at the city limits. He has no doubt that his friend will be unearthed when it rains, but it isn't like Evan's going to mind. Hell, he might even thank him. He needed a bath, anyway. The ash-like soil doesn't want to say put...it's much more content to waft about in the air like dust. But somehow, Circun manages, and goes home.

There's thunder in the distance.

**seven.**

You aren't who I thought you were.

The words race through Circun's mind, his heart pounding. Fear, *terror*, overwhelms him. What's worse, he can't find it in himself to argue with her, to plead, to tell her he's-sorry-if-she-would-only-forgive-him—

Because she's right.

No, he tells her, I'm not.

He knows he's crying, that she isn't. He can feel the hot trails on his cheeks, but he'll never *actually* sob.

It's too human for him.

She shouts, and he flinches. She might as well have slapped him.

*Then who are you!*

**six.**

Once upon a time, there was a boy.

No, that's not right.

Once upon a time, there was an angel. Yes, that's it. He was an angel. The angel sat on the edge of Heaven, watching the humans from his lofty perch, and he wished that he could help them. He loved the quaint little humans, and was *delighted* to be sent down among them.

At first, he loved the humans, and he much enjoyed his stay with them.

Circun's voice shakes.

And then he discovered Time. Or, rather, Time never discovered him. Time gnawed and tore at his heart, though, devouring everyone he had known and loved. Suddenly, it wasn't so wonderful.

And Circun was very, *very* alone, he whispers, *For centuries*.

**five.**

He can't sleep. He hasn't for days. Something is pulling, pulling, pulling at him, at his mind and soul and they feel like they're going to tear right out of his body and *escape*. Blackened, broken, tattered rags of wings suddenly want to stretch after being held down for years. There's something, *something*, that wants him, *needs* him...except he can't, because he's in a hospital, oxygen mask over his face, even though he doesn't need it, won't use it—

That girl! Sarah, *Sarah* put him here, after all he'd told her, trusted her with, she'd betrayed him! But he could never hurt her, because he loves her, and he had really, truly wanted to be with her forever. It's a familiar feeling.

But that calling, that summon, pulling tearingscreaming*needing*—

**four.**

The Tree. The Tree is calling him. He can see it from his window, the one with the metal reinforcements for the mentally unstable. His new window. He can't see his Heaven, but he can see his Tree, and it's the closest thing to home.

And it wants him.

**three.**

Circun stares out at the Tree, and feels pain for it.

It hadn't done anything for this, he muses. It only ever stood tall for the world. Except, now, it's only a means for humans to continue their ways. He lets out a harsh bark of laughter—the queer, fascinating humans have showed their adorable, cheery little teeth.

**two.**

Impure smog. Pure oxygen. The malign and the benign.

Glass, metal, concrete and God-knows-what.

It's quieter than he can ever remember, and every breath he takes sounds like thunder to him.

**one.**

When he left home, they told him that he would know how to come back, when the time came.

It doesn't take long to break the casing, to shatter it with a well-placed blow with the backs of his arms. It's raining crystalline shards, and the Tree makes a groaning sound as its branches are released, the clinging wires straining as it billows outward. The calling is stronger now, like a storm, like wildfire, and it's *ever-so-appropriate*.

All the authorities ever see is Circun, eyes that seem too old for his young body wide with anticipation. Their own shouts to stop, cease, stop, are ignored and cut short as a pair of ancient wings snap into existence.

All they ever see is an angel. And as he lights a match and throws it, as the Tree ignites spectacularly, as if it had been waiting for this, as the fires soar through the the tunnels, as the oxygen plantations burst into pyrotechnic majesty, they see their world end.

Circun smiles, and falls into the flames.

**end.****Tied for Honorable Mention**

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2008

Young Writers Contest

<[www.bsfs.org/bsfsywc.htm](http://www.bsfs.org/bsfsywc.htm)>

**A Beginning**

Constantine Nakos, Annapolis, MD

Severn High School

**Drained**

Molly Szpara, Towson, MD

Carver Center for Arts and Technology

# A Cardboard Box

Hiroko Nishimura

Second Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2008 Young Writers Contest  
Columbia, MD – *Atholton High School*

“My collection is growing,” a tall angel in all black, grinned with satisfaction as he caressed a large orb of swirling gray clouds.

“That’s quite sad,” an angel farther down, clad in white, replied. She was holding a smaller and rather clear orb.

“It means the world is deteriorating, Aliephas,” the dark man replied. “The darker and larger this orb becomes, the more humans there are in hell.”

Aliephas glanced over at the man flicking around his long, black hair with disdain in her eyes.

“The more corrupted souls to collect, the larger my collection becomes,” he said, cheerfully. “I personally think my souls are quite beautiful. The swirls of gray are much better than a clump of milky white.”

“These are the souls of the innocent, Rimanus,” Aliephas retorted. “They went through good deeds! All souls are born clean. And yet, your souls decided to use them unwisely.”

“At least I don’t have to go picking up dogs and cats to make my quota,” Rimanus laughed.

“Well, anyways,” he said, waiving his hand. “I’ll be going now. I need to collect another soul.”

Two great, black wings suddenly grew from his back, and after a few beatings, he kicked off the ground and shot down towards the earth.

“Well, let’s see the coordinates,” he muttered as Rimanus paused in midair and opened a large scroll. “Over...”

His voice was cut off by a gust of wind and a sudden shower of hail. His scream lingered in the air as an abnormally large piece of ice struck one of his wings, sending him hurling down.

When he came to, the sun was already low on the horizon. He was lying flat on the sidewalk of a busy street, sprawled on the concrete, one of his wings tucked under him in an awkward position. He winced in pain as he tried to get up.

People walked around him naturally without giving him a glance. Rimanus coughed and pushed himself up on his knees and shook his head to in an attempt to get rid of the small ringing in his head.

He stood up and took out his crumpled scroll once again, trying to locate the next damned soul on the list. The arrow that points to the exact location was pointing to a place only a few meters away from him, on the side of the road.

To a weathered, cardboard box.

Maybe he was supposed to be looking for a cat. Maybe an evil cat. Maybe the cat cheated on his wife? Or killed

one of his youngs?

The injured angel got up and felt a sharp pain in the area behind his shoulder blades. One of his wings was broken. He could feel it sagging with its own weight. He half limped to the cardboard box, his body unbalanced from the broken wing, not expecting anything more than a dead cat.

Much to his surprise, he found a person. A very old person. He was shriveled and small, but he was a person, sitting inside the cardboard box just high enough for him to sit in, and wide enough for him to sleep, in fetal position. He seemed to have been drowsing when the angel approached him, but opened his eyes when he stopped in front of him. Much to Rimanus’s surprise, he smiled up at him when he caught his eyes.

“I was expecting you,” he said.

“You can see me?” Rimanus asked, bewildered. Living humans were, by nature, unable to see angels that came to take away the dead.

“Yes, indeed,” The old man replied. “I have been seeing your white friend many times recently. She comes around to pick up the cats and dogs that die in the streets. I’d assumed that someone was coming to get me soon.” He let out a small laugh.

“Well, I usually come for dead ones,” Rimanus admitted. “But I guess my timetable was wrong.”

The old man tapped the space beside him when he noticed Rimanus’s awkward stature.

“It isn’t much, but at least you’ll be out of the rain,” he said. Only then, did Rimanus realize that it was raining.

Rimanus took the offer and both men sat in silence, staring at the people walking by busily. All were in a hurry to get back home to the warmth of their family and out of the rain.

“What are you waiting for?” the old man asked after a very long moment.

“For your soul to become ready, I suppose,” Rimanus replied absentmindedly, not turning to look at the old man, choosing instead, to stare at the people walking by. He had never bothered to observe live humans, he realized. He was always more than ready to pick the souls out of the body of the dead, and leave before his body was polluted, for angels’ sensitivity to pollution greatly outranked that of humans. However, this time, leaving seemed impossible with his broken wing, and much less for collecting the soul he was sent out to find. As the people rushed by, he

wondered to himself, *why are they in such a hurry? Do they not realize that they are only hurrying to their deaths?*

"Ho ho ho," the old man let out a jolly laugh. "Dead, I'm assuming?"

Rimanus tore his eyes off the people and looked over at the man uneasily.

"I have been told that death is not a merry topic between humans," he said.

"Oh, to most people, I'm sure it's not," the old man replied. "After all, this society is built on fearing death."

Seeing the confusion on the angel's face, he added, "I've been ready, kid. I've been ready. I'm ready to accept. There's nothing for me to lose."

He smiled again, and his voice dropped.

"I've lost everything already."

The old man tugged his blanket closer to himself and moved his toes out of the rain and tucked under the roof of the box.

"I did many things I regret as a lad, and even more as I got older," the old man said, his expression mild. His eyes were staring blankly at the horizon. The sun was setting and the air was starting to get chilly. The old man tugged his blanket closer to his body and settled back, dragging in air and slowly breathing it out.

The people on the streets on their way to everywhere, though usually uninterested in the lonely, dirty, homeless man, stared for a few seconds with appalled expressions. *He's finally gone insane. He's talking to himself now.*

He coughed a few times into his blanket and then went on.

"I've done practically everything you could ever think of. I've dropped out of high school, ran away with a woman 15 years older than I, though she was, I have to admit, pretty foxy. I've stolen from old women, did drugs with my 'hood friends during my teenage years. I can't say I didn't have fun. I smoked my lungs out, and drank my way through the nights with my buddies, cursing and talking. But I know they weren't the best things to do, now that the effects are coming to me."

Rimanus listened silently. The way the humans thought was beginning to fascinate him. *Fun. What is fun?* It must be a pretty good state of being if he was willing to go that far to achieve it.

"When I got older," the old man continued. He was on a roll. He had not had anyone that listened to him speak in a very long time, and he wanted his story heard. "I got married to a very nice, pretty girl. She didn't mind that I was a kid from the ghettos. And I loved her very much. And I started working, too. For her. But I only got jobs at construction because I dropped out of high school.

"Things were going relatively smoothly. We got a son. He was the best thing to happen to me, ever. He was a little me, a little her. But mostly her. His nice personality certainly didn't come from me." The old man took a moment to gather his breath again. Rimanus noted that he seemed to be having breathing difficulties at times. But he talked. A lot. And he still kept on talking even though he was

coughing. The air was very cold and the old man was shaking. His thin blanket was not enough for the frigid air passing through the cardboard that signaled that winter was about to come.

"And then, I ruined it all. I began drinking to alleviate the pain in my joints from the hard work. And that came through in my work. What I started to try and help with what I was doing ended up destroying it. I was fired. And I got even more drunk. My wife had to go out and start working while I lay around at home, too drunk to do anything. I just couldn't do anything. And then I became violent. I had nothing else to do, you see? There was a screaming kid wanting his mom, and there was nothing I could do. So I hit him to silence him. He learned soon enough. But my wife found out. And of course, she fought for her son's health. But that didn't stop me. Not only was I drunk, but her screaming irritated my brain. So I struck. And struck. She couldn't go out for days because of how bad her face was."

The old man took another gulp of air. His voice was becoming raspy.

"And I regret everything. She, of course, walked out on me after that. I tried to get her back. Begged. I loved my son. Despite everything, I loved him. And I loved her, too. But I lost everything then. So all I could do was drink. So I did. I drank and drank. Ran out of money, got kicked out the house... Had no where to go. The support checks stopped coming in when it became apparent that I wasn't looking for any work."

"And..." the old man trailed off. Rimanus stood with his back to the old man, pruning his now-healed wings. He waited for the rest of the sentence, but it did not come. Only when he turned back around wondering what the old man was doing did he realize that he was asleep. The night was beginning to settle in and the breaths of the people walking hurriedly to their warm homes puffed in white clouds.

He slid to the old man to pull up his thin blankets that were drooping. He paused for a second, and peered into the old man's sleeping face. He looked serene, as though he were enjoying a nice dream. But he was not breathing.

"Hey..." Rimanus whispered, shaking the old man's shoulders. "Hey, old man!"

Rimanus shook the old man's shoulders violently, and his head buckled back and forth limply.

For as long as he had been working as the Black Angel of Death, Rimanus had never encountered a dying man. He had never seen anyone actually die.

Rain began pouring down in much greater force than the drizzle before while he stood, dumb folded, unable to accept the fact that someone was actually dead. A person whom he had begun to regard as a friend, a person who was the first to not judge him by his black colors that represented death. He could not get himself to collect his soul. He touched the old man. He was still warm. He could be still alive! But he knew that that was not possible. He

- There was never a time he hadn't loved her. Even now, his soul was entwined with hers. She slept so sweetly... innocently... deceptively so. He gently kissed her cool forehead and contemplated her betrayal.

The recoil from the gun surprised him, the finality of it all didn't. Then he turned the gun towards himself next.

With all fiction, and most decidedly in micro fiction, you have to choose carefully. Think of the emotional investment of the words you put to the page... for example, in the last line of the first paragraph, the first version has the main character "considered" the woman's betrayal, in subsequent versions it was changed to "contemplated"... Considered is an everyday word, an ordinary word. Contemplated is more involved, has more impact.

It is cliché, but no matter what the length of your prospective work one needs to go for quality, not quantity, but most especially with something like this, where you only have so many words to use... each one has to score.

Words should have purpose, a goal, all of them used to good effect. Unless it is for a reason, never use more words than you have to; your work can drown in a profusion of "highfalutin" words, as my Daddy likes to tell me. Use a fancy word because it lends something, because it enriches the beauty of your poetry or prose; by the same token, do not be afraid to use a simple "workaday" word, if it suits your purposes. Simply put, use a word because it does what you need it to do, not because it is delightfully pretentious.

And finally, because it bears repeating over and over—ironically enough—when you are writing and rewriting your work, no matter the length, always keep close watch, guarding against our natural impulses to repeatedly use the same familiar words, even if we have used them three times already on the same page. Many word processors (if not *all*) have a Thesaurus option; my greatest advice to you: use it.

*Cardboard Box, continued from p. 38*

had no choice.

A drop of water unrelated to the rain dropped on the gray soul that he was holding. At that moment, Rimanus was rushed toward the skies, back to his home land. Rimanus looked around him in bewilderment until he saw an ancient man standing with a cane in his hand.

"Great Dema," Rimanus bowed in respect. "It is an honor to see you."

He bowed even lower in an effort to conceal the fact that he, an angel, was crying. He heard the ancient angel approaching him and looked up.

"You know, Rimanus," the old man said. "The tears of an angel have the power to cleanse. You, of all people, crying. I would have never thought that was possible." The corners of Dema's eyes wrinkled in a smile. "You have learned what compassion means. I'm not sure what was so special about that old man, but he's changed you.

"Look down there," he commanded as he tapped the ground with his cane. The ground around it became transparent, and Rimanus was suddenly staring at a pregnant woman walking hand in hand with a young man in a sunny street.

"See that woman?" the old man asked. "She will be where this soul is going to be. Give his soul to me, Rimanus."

Rimanus meekly handed the small soul to the old man, noticing in the process that the soul was white—not unlike those in the orb of Aliephas.

He dropped the soul, and it sunk smoothly through the transparent ground and shimmered into the woman's body. The woman looked up and put her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. She smiled.

"I just felt him move!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"Really?" her husband jumped, and touched her oversized stomach. The old man's soul was kicking vigorously. He was ready to start his life over.

**The Balticon 41 audience votes for the movies screened at  
The Balticon Sunday Night Film Festival were as follows:**

- 10<sup>th</sup> place *Nebulous 1* (G)—David Wanger; soundscapes by Seiss; 199 points
- 9<sup>th</sup> place *The Vibrator*—Tepid Fish Productions; 304 points
- 8<sup>th</sup> place *First World: The Revelation of Mankind* (PG)—Written by Mark Lund; Directed by Adam Starr; 337 points
- 7<sup>th</sup> place *Copenhagen Cycles* (G)—Eric Dyer; 359 points
- 6<sup>th</sup> place *Dark Operations: A Dark Odyssey Begins* (PG)—Rising Phoenix Productions; 370 points
- 5<sup>th</sup> place *The Bushman of Bunyip Billabong* (G)—Cameron Edser and Michael Richards; 492 points
- 4<sup>th</sup> place *Starship Groove* (G)—from the Animusic2; 551 points
- 3<sup>rd</sup> place *Bastards of Kirk* (PG-13)—Director: Logan Lubera; 592 points
- 2<sup>nd</sup> place *Delivery* (G)—Till Nowak; 628 points

**Viewer's Choice Best Film of The Balticon 41 Sunday Night Film Festival, 645 points:**

*Hide and Seek* (G)—Chris Romano

## Seer

Rebecca S. Mazariegos

Third Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2008 Young Writers Contest  
Bowie, MD – *Home Schooled*

My first mistake, I would have to say, was leaving the safety of Bloomington, Iowa. That was only my first mistake, however. I would make many others afterwards, as any human is wont to do. But my first mistake, the first of consequence and lasting effect, was leaving Bloomington, for this one set into motion a series of *very* unfortunate events.

I was born Belinda Scheherazade Atherholt on July 7, 1991 to Peter and Catherine Atherholt. I was their seventh and last child. Being the youngest, one would have thought that I should have been spoiled rotten. But I was treated differently, a fact for which I would have to blame my parents. I'm sure they didn't mean for it to be the way it was, but they really could not help themselves. For there was a prophecy (although most would call it a rumor, being that prophecies are quite *out*) concerning the seventh child born to anyone with the blood of the house of Atherholt flowing through his veins. The prophecy stated that this child would become immortal if he lived to be 18, which was a hard thing for any of the seventh children to do because of a certain curse.

No one knows the full extent of this curse or how exactly it originated, save for the fact that the last seventh child had a severe case of klutziness and general bad luck. Needless to say, he did not live to be 18. For this reason my parents feared becoming too close to me, and my siblings picked up on this and therefore did not love me either.

In spite of what you have heard about the damaging effects of a loveless life, I was not severely emotionally damaged by this lack of love. I was, strangely, one of the happiest children in my tiny town and so bore my parents no ill will for their neglect. Having such a happy disposition, I didn't really need much in the way of companionship. It was as though Fate had prepared me emotionally for a solitary existence, at least for the first few years of my life. Because the other children considered me peculiar, my only friends were Mistress Doyle, a woman rumored to be a witch, and all the stray animals I could find. These were the truest of friends to me because we all had one very important thing in common: no one wanted us.

So it was for the first 11 years of my life. It was, all things considered, a perfectly normal childhood. After I turned 11, however, horrible things began to happen. It would have been bad enough had it just been puberty that I had to suffer through, but no, I had to start *seeing* things too.

The first time it happened I thought it was just a dream. I'd just finished my chores and was very tired. I sat down for a quick rest and closed my eyes, expecting to see nothing but the inside of my eyelids for a few minutes. Instead of that calm restful feeling before sleep I felt a strange chill, a burning cold that raced through my veins and made my hands shake. My teeth chattered as a slideshow

of images raced across my vision, horrid and grotesque. I saw a boy, my age, sitting on a stump. It was strange because he seemed to be in deep conversation with a very large toad sitting next to him. Then I saw him again, a little bit older, being attacked by an abnormally large crow. The final picture, and worst of all, was of him, almost a man, lying facedown in dark murky water. He was dead.

My eyes popped open and I felt something stuck in my throat, choking me, trying to force its way out. But I would not scream. I would not give voice to my horror. I knew who he was. And I was afraid. That could be me, I thought. That could be me lying face down in that dark water, lifeless. I had never before put much stock into the rumors of the prophecy. But this vision gave me pause. I needed to know more.

Hurrying away from my little house with only moonlight to guide my feet and keep me from tripping and falling to a premature death, I was more than a little terrified. My horror at what I had just seen still had not waned by the time I reached Mistress Doyle's manor. I gave my signal knock on the door to the kitchen and waited for her to answer. I was cold again, my teeth chattering, when she opened the door. She took one look at me and her face took on a look I had never seen before on her beautiful countenance: pity. I was too terrified to be indignant, letting her take me into her comfortable sitting room and be wrapped in blankets before being given tea and other comforting foods. After I had calmed down some, she faced me with a hesitant look and asked softly, "What happened, dear?"

My insides froze again and for a moment I was afraid that the scones I'd just eaten would make a second appearance. Finally, I managed, "I had a nightmare."

Mistress Doyle nodded and continued to gaze at my face. I felt my fear begin to ebb and then my limbs became less tense. I let out a deep breath and she asked, "What did you see?"

"Him." Tears clouded my vision as the images came back to me, and suddenly it all came spilling out of my mouth. "The first two images were strange. I saw a boy, talking to a really big toad. Then I saw him again, but he was older, and being attacked by a big, evil crow. But the last one, Mistress Doyle, it was so unfair. He wasn't even fully-grown! The last image I saw before I woke up was of him lying facedown in dark muddy water. He was dead." I spat out the last part with so much venom that all of my sadness evaporated.

Mistress Doyle put a comforting hand on my shoulder and I went again from anger to sadness. My face crumpled up as hot tears raced down my cheeks and I let myself be comforted by the witch.

Yes, the rumors about Mistress Doyle were true. But I was the only one who knew it for fact. No one else got close enough to her to find out. Living in a small town had its drawbacks, but Mistress Doyle, whom I now suppose we should call Constance, as that is

her name, had learned to live with the superstitious townspeople.

"You know what this means," she said, after some time. I made no reply, but she knew that I'd heard. "You must do all you can to escape the same fate."

There is a time for anger, a time for sadness, and a time for joy. All emotions have their place. And though I probably should have been feeling a mixture of the first two, I think it is only fair to say that I was too tired to focus on either one, and too young and naive to know what I should rightly be feeling anyway. So it was with very little resistance that I accepted my fate.

This was the point at which Constance told me that I was a seer. The obviousness of this fact is unmistakable to you, my dear reader, but I, being the person it was actually *happening* to, was quite blind to it. I had been, for many years, learning of the supernatural from Constance. However, believing that all of what I had been hearing was actually *true* was much more difficult than one would think. I eventually did believe though, and life moved on. As much as could be expected, I mean, considering Death was always at my door, smiling his gap-toothed smile at me as he stroked the blade of his scythe.

Two years passed, and seven different visions, each as strange and terrifying as the first one. They each featured people whom I knew to be the seventh born children of Atherholt. I knew they had to be connected somehow, but I couldn't figure out how they meant something to my life as it was. I spoke to Constance about each of them, poking and prodding every morbid corner of the visions until I wondered whether they had any point at all. Those two years passed quickly, it seemed, and they brought me closer to the age I feared. I was 13, and there were only five more years until *immortality*. The closer I got to that age the more I felt a sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. I knew that danger was coming. The curse would not overlook me; there was no question about *that*. The question was, *when?*

I opened my eyes to the ceiling of my room, its wooden planks seeming to glow in the moonlight spilling from my open window. I blinked a couple of times, trying to remember what had awakened me. The ceiling seemed to shake for a moment. I gasped, blinking rapidly, but the ceiling had stilled when I sat up. I felt a chill, though no breeze had disturbed the curtains, and a sense of dread. Something wasn't right. In the corner of my vision a shadow moved, and the taste of metal filled my mouth, the air seemed to hum with a current of electricity. I was being pulled, compelled by something to get up and get out. Get out. There was danger in this place.

It was from a darkened house that I stumbled at three in the morning that day in May. Into the night I went, compelled by fear, forgetting to grab anything from home. I could feel, like cold fingertips brushing against my back, the danger that now lurked here. I blinked my eyes, seeing the traces of spells, dark and malevolent, fresh on the trees that surrounded my house. They had not been there before this night. A whimper sounded in my throat and I realized from the pain in my feet that I had forgotten my shoes.

I eventually came to a fork in the road and saw Constance, her face pale and full of fear, waiting for me. "It has come."

I nodded. She had two packs with her and offered me one of them. "Then we must go."

I extended my hand to take the pack. The trees began to shake and everything came to a sharp focus, bright, almost painfully bright, then time seemed to slow. Constance's face was frozen with her eyebrows furrowed with worry. Nothing moved except a shadow moving through the trees, coming closer and then taking the form of a woman clothed in scarlet as she entered the blinding brightness beyond the forest.

"We've been trying to reach you."

Her voice was a million whispers. She came close enough for me to see the features of her face, and when I did I gasped.

"You." It was the only thing I could think to say.

The seventh born smiled and answered in her whispery voice, "The time is at hand." An inhuman shriek sounded from somewhere behind me. Her smile vanished and she turned to me with a worried look. "We will be in touch. But now you must hurry."

She whirled around and disappeared into the woods. I shook as time resumed its normal pace and Constance asked what had happened.

"Another vision," I said, still shaking as I blinked my eyes to readjust to my surroundings, which had become less bright after the woman's disappearance. "But it was more like a message from the seventh born. A woman in red came and told me that they, I'm assuming she meant herself and the other seventh born children, had been trying to reach me. Then she said we should go." My vision had adjusted when I turned to look at her. "Her voice was like a million whispers."

"Scheherazade." Constance said, "One of the seventh born. See, your middle name isn't so random as you thought." That brought a smile to my face briefly.

She was helping me into a pair of shoes from one of the travel packs when a shadow passed over us. I looked up and saw an abnormally large crow. Fear gripped me. "We have to leave."

Constance straightened. The taste of metal was back, the air suddenly filled with electricity. "We have to leave now!"

The crow spotted us and changed its course. It was coming towards us, gaining speed every second. Soon I could see its beady eyes and the taste of metal was starting to choke me. At that moment Constance grabbed my hand, fearfully whispering a spell. The world around us began to fade.

We left Bloomington that night. I called it a mistake, when I first began this narrative, because of what happened *afterward*. But I wonder now if I was a bit hasty in declaring it so. No doubt it changed the direction of my life. But what would have happened if I had stayed? Would I have most certainly died? These questions plague me now, as I sit and write this letter. For I am writing this to calm myself from thinking of the fate that awaits me after I am released from the prison I am currently in. I wonder and fret though it does me no good. But I close my eyes and think back to that first mistake, the one that brought me here. I see the trees, silvery in the moonlight, Mistress Doyle as she takes my hand and whispers a spell to take us away, and then the scenery fading away as I leave my old life behind and start on the path that brings me to where I am now, awaiting a fate *worse* than death.