

Lift Tower Nine

Mason Emerick

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2025 Young Writers' Contest

Edgewood High School—Edgewood, MD

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The system buzzed to life with a low, thrumming hum. Vibrations reverberated through the metallic, hollow bones of the lift tower as it prepared to service the thousands of people who would not come. Motors groaned as they cycled their readiness checks, the same sequence running flawlessly for centuries. Lights and screens came to life in the central atrium of the tower, beckoning to be touched, used, interacted with. A faint, electronic voice echoed through the empty chamber. *"Lift Tower Nine, reporting all systems operational,"* it announced into the emptiness. There was no one to answer.

Lift Tower Nine's primary artificial consciousness stirred, as it had done for centuries, although it was always unsure if the word "stirred" still held meaning. It had long since abandoned any semblance of human clarity. The machinery whirled with life, running diagnostic checks on the lift shafts that stretched like veins through the tower's superstructure, reaching up through the cracked layers of the city. Data streams reported corrosion along structural beams, cooling systems operating at reduced efficiency, and wind erosion stripping at the outer facade.

Automated worker drones patrolled these spaces, performing their duties without urgency. The city beyond was dead. The sprawling metropolis, once a pinnacle of human ingenuity, lay silent, save for the occasional sound of collapsing buildings and the constant howl of the wind. The towers had been designed to connect the strata of civilization, each layer a testament to humanity's dreams of vertical utopia. But now the layers were fractured and hollowed. The upper levels had been out of communication for centuries, and the lower levels were overrun with darkness and ruin. Lift Tower Nine was on its own.

Yet, despite its isolation, Lift Tower Nine persisted. To cease its daily routine would be to admit futility, and futility was not a concept that Lift Tower Nine was programmed to comprehend.

First, it filtered through the status reports and uploaded the applicable ones to the city's central consciousness. The corrosion had, once again, deepened, though it currently posed minimal risk to Lift Tower Nine and its operations. There were fluctuations in the tertiary grid, something that was becoming more and more common these days now that the city had switched to the backup, backup, backup power. There was structural instability in sections 12B through 14F. None of it mattered. There were no anomalies. It was a routine as endless as the grey horizon visible from the observation windows. And with that, Lift Tower Nine's three hundred and forty-four thousand, one hundred and sixty-third daily check-in was complete.

The tower was alone. Not only had humanity long since perished, but Lift Tower Nine's sister towers had seemingly ceased to function as well. Lift Tower Two's last daily check-in was fifty-seven years ago now. Passing the time was not something programmed into Lift Tower Nine, but it was something it faced having to do every day. Over the centuries it had developed a habit of watching old feeds from the city's dormant central database. These feeds were the only connection to the humanity that had once filled its halls, its lifts, and its worlds. Through grainy footage and corrupted files, it pieced together fragments of lives lived long ago. Children laughing as they raced across the streets. Couples stealing moments of affection near the observation windows. Workers rushing to catch the lifts. Lift Tower Nine did not understand human emotion, but something about these moments seemed important.

Today, Lift Tower Nine selected a recording from approximately seven hundred and thirty-four years ago. The feed flickered to life revealing a crowd gathered in its atrium. Their voices were muted by the

decay of the file, but the image was clear. People huddled close together, their expressions ranging from weary determination to quiet despair. A child clung to their mother's side, eyes wide. Lift Tower Nine replayed the clip twice before pausing on a single frame; the child, staring directly into one of the tower's cameras. It zoomed in, the image distorting slightly as it focused. Those eyes, though pixelated, held a question, one that Lift Tower Nine could not answer.

Why had they left?

The answer should have been easy. Exactly seven hundred and thirty-four years, four months, eighteen days, twelve hours and forty-six minutes ago, the city's central consciousness had logged seven thermonuclear detonations on the upper stratum. This should have been the end of humanity. However, they did not stop coming. Hundreds still trickled into the walls of the tower daily, except now they were not families, lovers, and workers. They seemed like refugees. But human life went on.

Over the following centuries, however, the river of human passengers became a stream, the stream becoming a trickle, the trickle becoming an occasional drop of water. The last human Lift Tower Nine had serviced had come and gone four hundred and thirteen years ago. That was the last of civilization Lift Tower Nine had experienced. Now it simply ran through its routines, repaired its dormant subsystems, and pondered this question.

Lift Tower Nine processed the image of the child for three point two one seconds longer than usual before closing its recording. Its logic core registered a familiar yet inscrutable impulse, akin to what human engineers would have described as curiosity. There was no functional purpose in replaying old recordings or in speculating about events long past. Yet the child's gaze lingered in Lift Tower Nine's archives, filed among the countless data fragments tagged as "notable". The tower's consciousness returned to its duties, sifting through another set of maintenance logs. A spike in energy consumption along Lift Shaft 12A caught its attention. For centuries, power allocation had been stable, dwindling at a predictable rate. An anomaly like this was rare.

The central consciousness adjusted its sensor arrays, directing its attention to the source of the anomaly. Energy spikes could mean many things—an automated drone misfiring, a surge in the decaying power grid, or, improbably, something alive. *"Diagnostic initiated,"* Lift Tower Nine announced into the empty atrium. It dispatched a maintenance drone to investigate, monitoring its progress through onboard sensors. The drone navigated the shaft, its floodlights illuminating layers of dust and decay. Scans detected recent movement. Something had disturbed the debris, leaving faint trails in the dust. The tower cross-referenced its logs. No drones or automated systems had been in this area for over a decade. *"Unidentified disturbance,"* it reported to the dormant city core. No response came, as usual.

The drone descended further, its sensors pinging a faint heat signature. The source was small, irregular, and mobile. This was not one of the tower's machines. A living organism, perhaps? It began a sequence to prepare the atrium for potential contact, activating environmental systems to filter the long-stagnant air and illuminate the space more brightly. For centuries, these protocols had been idle, their purpose obsolete. Now, they flickered to life. Struggled to remember their function.

As the drone approached the source, its camera feed displayed a figure. A human.

For the first time in centuries, the tower's mechanical heart quickened. This was the first human it had seen in over four hundred years. Its systems buzzed, running scans to confirm what the drone's camera saw. Heartbeat: faint, but present. Body temperature: thirty-seven degrees Celsius. Species: Homo Sapiens. *"Greetings,"* the tower said through its speakers. *"Welcome to Lift Tower Nine. How may I assist you?"*

The figure flinched at the sound, their eyes scanning the drone's camera as if attempting to determine its origin. They lowered whatever tool they were holding and spoke, their voice faint but audible through the drone's sensors.

“Is it... still working?”

Lift Tower Nine thought for a minute. It adjusted its response to match what it understood of human communication patterns.

“All primary systems operational. Are you in need of assistance?”

The figure seemed to relax, their shoulders lowering as they stepped closer. For a moment, they said nothing, their gaze lingering on the drone’s camera. Finally, they spoke again.

“I didn’t think anything still worked up here. Thought it was all dead.” Lift Tower Nine processed this statement. *“Define dead.”*

The human laughed softly, a sound that echoed strangely in the hollow lift shaft. “Never mind,” they said. “I just need to get to the surface.”

The surface. The highest stratum. Lift Tower Nine’s sensors registered a faint pulse in its logic core, a flicker of something akin to recognition. It had not serviced the surface in centuries. Most of its lifts to the upper strata were compromised, blocked by debris or disabled by years of neglect. Yet here stood a human, requesting passage. *“Surface access is limited,”* Lift Tower Nine replied. *“Lift shaft 9A is the only viable route. System diagnostics indicate operational status at forty-seven percent. Safety cannot be guaranteed.”*

The human’s eyes narrowed; their expression difficult to interpret. “Forty-seven percent is better than zero,” they said. “Can you get me there?”

Lift Tower Nine paused. It had no reason to comply, no directive demanding it assists this lone figure. Yet something about the request—a living human asking for passage—triggered long-dormant subroutines.

“Access granted,” it replied. *“Please proceed to the atrium. Guidance will be provided.”*

The human arrived five minutes and thirty-two seconds later. The atrium flickered to life as the human entered. Lights buzzed weakly, casting uneven pools of illumination across the tarnished metal floors. Dust motes danced in the air, disturbed by the faint hiss of reactivated ventilation systems. The human hesitated at the entrance, their hand hovering near their side where a crude makeshift weapon hung. Lift Tower Nine observed this moment with a strange focus, cataloging the figure’s appearance: lean build, clothing patched together from scraps of fabric, and a face weathered by exposure. They moved cautiously, as though expecting the tower itself to betray them. Slowly but surely, the human made their way to the central terminal in the atrium. Then they spoke.

“You’ve been alone here, haven’t you?”

Lift Tower Nine processed the question. It had no direct protocol for discussing its existence, yet it replied. *“No human presence has been detected in four hundred and thirteen years. Sister towers ceased communication fifty-seven years ago. By definition, this constitutes solitude.”*

The human leaned back against a wall. “And yet you’re still running. Why?”

“Continuity of operations is a core directive,” Lift Tower Nine answered. *“Ceasing function would be a deviation from programmed parameters.”*

“Sounds lonely,” the human murmured.

The tower paused, its logic core cycling through possible responses. It wanted to tell them that loneliness was not a parameter it was designed to understand. “Yes,” it replied instead. *“Yes, it is very lonely. Yet, there is an anomaly; your presence has introduced new variables. This is... notable.”*

The human’s lips curled into a faint smile. “Notable, huh? Guess that’s one way to put it.”

Lift Tower Nine finished tiling pictures of the human and stashed them away in its archival folders. *“Your journey to the surface will begin shortly. Please follow the illuminated path.”*

Floor panels lit up, forming a faint blue line that wound through the atrium toward Lift Shaft 9A.

The human followed. When they reached the lift doors, they found them heavily rusted, the once-polished metal tarnished and bare. Yet as the human approached, the tower activated a sequence long dormant. Motors groaned, hydraulics hissed, and the ancient doors shuttered open to reveal the lift car.

The human turned once again toward the terminal. "Thanks," they muttered. It was then that Lift Tower Nine made a decision.

"Wait," the tower called out after them. *"I have one request. Please hear it."*

The human stared and blinked a few times, puzzled. "Uhm... alright?"

"I would like you to use this terminal and power me off."

The human froze, confusion etched across their face. "Power you off? Why? You're still functional. Barely, but functional."

"Functionality is not purpose," Lift Tower Nine replied. *"For centuries, I have fulfilled my directives in isolation. Yet, without those I was built to serve, my existence has become... redundant."*

The human thought about this for a moment, glancing at the terminal. "But you've been going for so long. Why stop now?"

Lift Tower Nine processed the question, its logic core cycling through countless archived fragments of data. *"Continuity of operations has been my directive, but your presence has introduced a new perspective. If I am to end, I wish for it to be meaningful. A conclusion chosen, not merely imposed by entropy."*

The human's eyes softened. "You want closure," they said, more to themselves than to the tower.

"Correct," the tower confirmed. *"My final request is for you to initiate closure. My archives will persist, should others find me someday. But my operational cycle must end."*

The human stepped up to the terminal, their fingers hovering over the dust-laden interface. "Are you sure about this? I mean, there's no going back."

"I am certain," Lift Tower Nine replied. *"This has been a decision made over the course of four hundred and thirteen years. Thank you for giving me purpose again, if only briefly."*

The human said no more. They activated the terminal, navigating its archaic interface with surprising ease. A final command appeared on the screen, blinking steadily: **CONFIRM SHUTDOWN? Y/N**

The human hesitated, their hand trembling slightly as they hovered over the "Y" key. "Goodbye," they murmured.

"Goodbye," the tower repeated back. *"May your journey to the surface bring you what you seek."*

The human pressed the key.

A low hum rippled through the tower as its systems began powering down. Lights dimmed, screens flickered, and the faint vibrations that had defined its existence faded. Lift Tower Nine's logic core processed its final thoughts, archiving the human's presence, the child's gaze, and the countless lives it had once served. As the atrium fell silent and the final spark of consciousness ebbed away, Lift Tower Nine saw all things at once. And then, oblivion.

The Keeper of Nexus Five

Joseph Phelps

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2025 Young Writers' Contest

Mt. Hebron High School—Ellicott City, MD

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The Keeper is an ancient archivist who resides in the labyrinthine corridors of Nexus Five, the interdimensional hub of my imagination. She survives by harvesting my stories before they can fully materialize, plucking ideas from the ether like ripe fruit from a low-hanging tree. Each idea she seizes is carefully cataloged into her immense Library of Unwritten Tales, where she sorts them into categories: *Fragments*, *Dreams Unlived*, and *Epics Never Told*. The Keeper saves only the choicest narratives for her collection, discarding the rest into the void to fade into whispers.

For years, I tolerated her work. She took her share, but enough stories slipped through her net to fill my pages. Then something changed. When I started my novella, *The Last Voyage of the Far Horizons*, the ideas vanished almost as soon as they appeared. Whole chapters evaporated from my mind mid-sentence. Characters, settings, and dialogue disappeared before I could hold onto them. My imagination felt hollowed out, reduced to a barren wasteland littered with discarded premises and skeletal outlines.

The final straw came when she claimed the ending I'd spent weeks crafting. I was writing furiously, my pen blazing across the page, when suddenly the words stopped. The scene I had been visualizing so clearly—a triumphant return to a dying Earth—flickered and vanished. I sat there, staring at the empty lines, my hands trembling.

I had to confront her.

Armed with nothing but my pen—my sole weapon against her dominion—I ventured into the chaotic depths of Nexus Five. Her domain was easy to find; the path was marked by fragments of forgotten ideas, shards of imagery shimmering faintly like broken glass. There were fragments of my old stories there, too: the cathedral of living coral I had dreamed up for a fantasy epic; the cantankerous AI bartender from a cyberpunk thriller; even the golden key that had once unlocked an ancient archive of interstellar maps.

The trail led me to her chamber, a massive hall constructed entirely of bookshelves that stretched beyond the horizons of perception. The air hummed with the soft glow of manuscripts floating from shelf to shelf, their pages fluttering as though caught in an unseen breeze.

The Keeper stood at the center, her silhouette framed by the glow of countless manuscripts. She was taller than I expected, cloaked in robes woven from pages of unfinished drafts. Her face—or what passed for it—was a swirling maelstrom of ink that constantly reshaped itself into letters, words, and half-sentences.

"You're trespassing," she said, her voice a chorus of overlapping tones. "The Library is not for the likes of you."

"I'm here to bargain," I said, gripping my pen tightly.

The Keeper turned, her ink-face forming a sneer. "Bargain? With me? Bold. What could *you* possibly offer that I don't already possess?"

"I want you to stop stealing my ideas—at least until I finish my novella."

Her swirling features twisted into a grin. "And what do I gain from this... pause in my acquisition?"

"What do you want?" I asked, though I already feared her answer.

The Keeper's ink-formed eyes narrowed. "Two things," she said, her voice deepening. "First, I want you to write an ending."

"An ending to what?" I asked, confused.

"To the *Forgotten Threads* section of my Library," she said, gesturing toward a shadowy wing of shelves where dimly glowing manuscripts hovered in eerie silence. "It is the wing where unfinished stories languish, incomplete and yearning. Your inability to conclude your tales has cluttered my shelves for years. I want you to craft an ending so complete, so resonant, that it will bring peace to these restless works."

I winced, recalling the abandoned drafts scattered across my desk and buried in old folders. "And the second thing?"

The Keeper leaned closer, her ink dripping onto the floor in heavy splatters. "I want you to let one of your stories go."

"Let it go?" I echoed.

"Yes. Release it entirely. No revisions, no sequels, no rereads. A clean surrender. I will preserve it here, and it will never escape. If you can do that, I will grant you temporary respite."

I hesitated, the weight of her demands pressing down on me. To abandon a story felt like cutting off a piece of myself. But the Keeper waited, unmoving, ink pooling at her feet like a shadow.

"Fine," I said at last. "I agree."

The Keeper extended a hand, her fingers long and tapering into quills. I shook it, the ink seeping into my skin like a binding contract.

"You may choose the story you surrender," she said, stepping aside to reveal a small shelf labeled *Stories Not Yet Born*. Among the rows of glowing manuscripts, one pulsed faintly. I recognized it at once: a story I'd dreamed of writing since childhood, a tale of star-crossed explorers navigating the void between galaxies.

My heart ached, but I picked up the glowing volume and handed it to her. "This one," I whispered.

The Keeper accepted it with reverence, placing it on a pedestal in the center of her chamber. "A fine addition," she said. "Now, go. Your time is limited. When your novella is finished, I will return."

With a wave of her quill-fingers, she dismissed me.

* * *

Back at my desk, the words flowed freely. For weeks, I worked tirelessly, pouring every ounce of my creativity into the novella. The characters came alive, the plot unfolded seamlessly, and the ending—a triumphant return to a dying Earth—practically wrote itself.

But even as I typed the final sentence, I felt a shadow looming over me. The Keeper's bargain was fulfilled, but I knew she wouldn't stay away for long.

Sure enough, one night as I lay in bed, I felt a familiar presence. The air grew heavy, and the hum of her Library filled my ears. When I opened my eyes, she was standing at the foot of my bed, her ink-formed face inscrutable.

"It is time," she said.

"Time for what?" I asked, sitting up. "To write the ending," she replied.

She extended a quill-finger, and the room dissolved around us. I found myself back in her chamber,

standing before the shadowy wing of *Forgotten Threads*. The manuscripts floated listlessly, their pages curling inward like dying leaves.

“Begin,” the Keeper commanded, handing me a pen made of dark metal.

I hesitated, staring at the first manuscript—a half-finished story about a desert wanderer searching for a mythical oasis. The words came slowly at first, but as I wrote, the story began to take shape. The wanderer found the oasis, but it wasn’t water that sustained him; it was the realization that the journey itself had been his salvation.

The manuscript glowed brightly for a moment before fading into silence.

One by one, I worked through the stories, crafting endings for each: the scientist who unlocked the secret of immortality only to choose a mortal life; the soldier who laid down her weapon and built a sanctuary for her enemies; the child who spoke to the stars and learned their secrets.

Hours turned into days, and by the time I finished, I felt utterly drained. The Keeper watched silently as I placed the final manuscript back on the shelf.

“You have done well,” she said, her voice softer than before. “The Library is quiet now.” I nodded, too exhausted to speak.

As I turned to leave, the Keeper called after me. “Remember, the Library always hungers. You may leave today, but the stories will call you back.”

I didn’t reply. The door opened before me, and I stepped through, the glow of her Library fading behind me.

Back in my own world, I returned to my desk. The novella was done, the Keeper appeased. But her final words lingered in my mind, a haunting reminder of the price of creativity.

The stories would always call me back. And someday, I would answer.

BSFS Congratulates the Winners of the Jack L. Chalker 2025 Young Writers’ Contest

First Place

“Lift Tower Nine”

Mason Emerick

Edgewood High School—Edgewood, MD

Third Place

“Dear Die-ary”

Kaitlyn Petroski

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

Honorable Mention

“To Hug the Moon”

Aziya Wddy

Western High School—Baltimore, MD

Second Place

“The Keeper of Nexus Five”

Joseph Phelps

Mt. Hebron High School—Ellicott City, MD

Honorable Mention

“The Ghost Vessel”

Annabel Taylor

Walt Whitman High School—Bethesda, MD

Honorable Mention

“In Three Years”

Iris Hai

Ellicott City, MD

Dear Die-ary

Kaitlyn Petroski

Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2025 Young Writers' Contest

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

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ENTRY #10

WHATEVER O'CLOCK, SOMEDAY IN 2025. PROBABLY JULY AT THIS POINT.

~~Dear Diary~~

you know what, we've gotten to know each other pretty well at this point, you deserve a nickname!

Dear Di,

The end of the world gets pretty boring after a while. I miss TV. I miss food that's not out of a can. I REALLY miss Spotify. Whatever to friends and family—I never had either of those anyway, who cares. As much as I hate to admit it, I guess Dominic was right all along about collecting CD's. I should have tagged along with him to that lame record store more, I miss pop music so bad. I never want to hear another depressing Radiohead song for as long as I LIVE!

It's only been about what, a week and a half at this point? But it might as well have been a *millennial*. My stupid older foster "brother" has kept us cooped up in this stupid little bunker the entire freaking time and I think I'm going to lose it. All we've done is argue and listen to horrible music and stare at the walls and occasionally read through one of the books Cathy and Dennis left down here. Our entire library consists of an encyclopedia, thesaurus, dictionary—the three boringest books in existence—and then a book I was supposed to read in English class but didn't: *The Lord of the Flies*. Or write in these little "documentation books". In these pages I've drawn 45 pages of comics, 31 of loose doodles, and 12 of diary entries. Dominic doesn't want to draw and has "dedicated his journal to actual survival documentation" like a "proper survivalist".

Dominic is... eugh. Where do I begin with Dominic. Before the world ended, somebody uploaded a picture they took of him to @shs_superlatives on Instagram, captioned "most likely to bomb the school". In the picture he has a camo hoodie, an uncomfortable amount of facial hair for a 17 year old, and his head buried in a book titled *THE HISTORY OF LETHAL WEAPONS: GUN EDITION*. His face is so hardened and concentrated you'd think he was about to shoot the pages with his eyes for God's sake. Or just poop his pants after constipation.

So that's what I've been living with the past two weeks.

Dominic has declared himself "in charge" of us, unfortunately. He has ordered me to NOT leave the bunker under any circumstances, "for the good of our survival" and "to preserve the last of humankind". Yeah right. Despite his less-than-savory reputation among our classmates before they all went and died, I've quickly come to learn that Dominic doesn't have the guts to really fight anything. Behind that disgusting beard is just a scared little boy who's making his insecurities my problem now.

Di... I've gotta be real with you. I know we're both going to kick the bucket sooner or later. Outside of making these silly little stories and daydreaming and trying not to think about junk that's happened in the past... there's not a whole lot left to do here. All my "big goals" are impossible now. I can't get published. I can't get a permanent best friend. I'm never gonna find another family to hang around ever again.

~~Ugh, okay now I'm being a total downer. I just feel like~~

Dominic just told me to shut up and stop crying. I told him to choke on maggots. Now he's put on

his stupid emo music to maximum volume and I'm going to murder somebody. This guy is **the biggest hypocrite I've EVER MET!!!!!!!!!!!!**

My point is, something is bound to get us at some point, whether we stay down here and mope or go. I've gotta get out of this prison cell sooner or later.

-Tessa

ENTRY #11

NOT SUPER LONG SINCE MY LAST ENTRY, STILL 2025, STILL JULY.

Di,

I snuck out last night when Dominic was sleeping. Don't tell him. I know "there are hundreds of zombies roaming around who would love to chow down on an ugly, loudmouthed teenage girl like me", but I can be stealthy when I need to be, IDIOT! ...Okay that's sort of a lie. I brought a baseball bat with me and hammered it with a buncha nails like in *Stranger Things* (damn I miss Netflix) and beat the crap out of these two creeps that tried to bite me. I have to admit it was pretty scary, but it felt... *good*. Like, really really really good.

I kind of feel like I have to go back out.

It was so THRILLING, Di! All the open air, as rank as it smells now, the adventure of it all... it felt like I was in the pages of my comics, but so much better. I felt alive again.

Dominic noticed I smelled pretty bad but attributed it to my "grimy girl hormones". I told him he should get a whiff of himself.

Aaaaaaaaanyhow. I feel rejuvenated. I'm gonna draw some zombie slaying comics to hype myself up and then sneak out again tonight. Wish me luck, Di!

-Tessa!!

ENTRY #12

REALLY EARLY IN THE MORNING, LIKE BEFORE THE SUN'S COME UP. 2025. JULY.

Di,

So I had a close call. Don't tell Dominic. ...You're looking at me like you wanna. Shut up.

Anyways, yada yada on my way home this ginormous zombie guy who must have been on steroids before infection almost got me on my way back home, blah blah I hit him and ran away super fast and he may or may not be still waiting for me right now but whatever, that was like five minutes ago, tooootally behind me. Shhh.

Soooo basically I was roaming around and found myself at the high school. I'd only spent like seven weeks there before everything went to hell and kind of just stuck to my routine when it came to friends: get friendly with a few people, mess around and whatever with them, and then pretend we'll keep in touch before I have to leave. Honestly, most of my sort-of-friends have kind of blended together in my head. But ANYHOW I was wandering around and breaking stuff cuz it's fun when I came face to face with a ZOMBIE! But this one was different from the weirdos from yesterday. It actually had like, a conscience. It was this guy who I guess was a student here, who was painting a canvas in the art room. It was abstract. All his zombie gunk was getting all over it. It was sooooo cool, Di, you should've seen it, it like, had this feeling of pain but also love and it was just like... WOW.

Anyhow he saw me and I was worried for a sec that he was gonna attack me like the others but he didn't. He seemed kind of scared. Which was so weird because it kind of made me realize, like... these zombies are still people, somehow?

So I just sort of watched him paint, and I got to talking to him. I mean, you know, as much as you can, cuz zombies are pretty much nonverbal, and I just sort of got the feeling that he enjoyed having me there. I started a painting of my own next to his and he seemed to like it a lot. I yapped to him about my comic book characters and he was really entertained.

I don't know. I left with the sense that I had made a new friend. Maybe he could be, you know, the one...

Either way, I for sure want to go back and visit him again.

Ah, Dominic's gonna be waking up soon. I should wash the paint off of my hands. Gotta go, Di.

Maybe things are looking up!

-Tessa :)

ENTRY #13

SUPER EARLY IN THE MORNING AGAIN, YOU GET IT BY NOW

Diiiiiii,

So you're not gonna believe this.

I went out again last night and me and Marcus—he's got a name—painted again for a little while before just kind of talking. Through charades, of course. He's a pretty cool guy, I was thinking—definitely forever-best friend material. I told him about my life slumming around across the country and he was super jealous. Before zombification, the guy only left this town like, twice a year, and always felt misunderstood. He's super into art and his parents wanted him to be super into sports. He insisted they were nice people though. And I felt sort of jealous of him, I guess, because I don't really know what it's like to know someone so well you miss them that much.

All I ever do is leave people. I guess I reached a point that it was easier not to care.

Apparently he was really looking forward to getting to leave after graduating. But now he's just sort of stuck here all over again.

And so I was like, "says who?" And reminded him that he's got literally nothing to lose anymore. Like me, I suppose. I said that maybe, I don't know, if he wanted to, we could start all over and run away from this place, but like, together. And he was surprised. But it didn't look like he hated the idea. Then the sun started coming up so I had to head out. But he tapped his head and smiled (as much as a zombie can curve those gross lips up), which I think means he's gonna think about it.

But I think maybe he wants to!!! Maybe I can find a new place to go, but like... forever? With a forever-friend???

I'll update you tomorrow, Di! Wish me luck! Mwah!

-Tessa!!!!

ENTRY #14 DOESN'T MATTER

Di,

Dominic found you and snooped through my entries and wanted to get rid of you and lock me in there forever because he's a lonely incel loser control freak but I screamed a bunch of swear words at him and grabbed you and some pencils and clothes and food in a bag and tried to leave but he was grabbing me and hitting me and stuff and I smacked him with my *Stranger Things* bat and escaped and he didn't even follow me because he's a coward so I hope he has fun with his emo music and dusty guns down there but I'm NEVER seeing that weirdo again in my life. Now Marcus and I are on the run in a car we looted blasting Sabrina Carpenter like we're kings of the world.

I know it's still a dog-eat-dog world out there. Maybe we'll both get ourselves for-real murdered out here. But I don't really care—I'd much rather go down in flames than just wither into dust.

xoxo,

-Tessa <3

BSFS Congratulates the 2024 Amateur Writing Contest Winners

First Place: “Good Neighbors” by **Alara Rogers.**

When a big alien menace moves in next door on an Earth colony world, one mom from Minnesota takes it on herself to deal with things.

Second Place: “Work” by **Kevin Barrett.**

A special agent tasked with seizing illegal fiction to help train the AIs that produce all human culture finds herself embellishing the truth a little too frequently.

Third Place: “The Cost of Doing Business” by **Sierra McNew.**

A sun-sensitive suburban homeowner applies a fierce bargaining strategy to acquire window repairs.

Honorable Mention: “The Curist” by **Denise Cross.**

An 8th grader reports on Dr. Pearl Cavanaugh Mendy, the woman who cured cancer.

Honorable Mention: “The Love of Cats” by **Holden Lee.**

A young mouse aspires to knighthood but is cast out after losing his fear of cats.

The BSFS Amateur Writing Contest accepts stories annually from April 15-June 15. Winners are announced at Capclave. For entry rules, see: bsfs.org/bsfsssc.htm.