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Prep H

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Pause

Part I

She pushed the play button and found herself in a graveyard, knelt beside a chest, circled by stone angels marking the bodies, just like the cover of the album. Right now, Rosie was testing the limits of her iPod, she had always been scared of this song, she didn't know what it would bring. Being inside it wasn't like being inside Dancing Queen, which was way more fun, this was just creepy. Perhaps trying a metal song wasn't the best idea on the first day, she didn't want her adventure to end so quickly, and it wasn't just her.

This morning hadn't been too different from any other, after breakfast her dad had taken her to get the iPod nano 4th generation she had always wanted, it was a green one with a video camera. She had been trying to convince him for weeks to get it and finally today they had went to Best Buy. She had browsed through all the different iPods until deciding the blue one was too dark, and choosing this one instead.

"Isn't this also dark? The ones in the catalogue don't look like these." she had said while waiting by the registers.

Her dad had thought for a moment and answered "Well, photos aren't always the same as the real thing."

There was no particular reason she had chosen that present, all she knew was that her sister had gotten a new phone instead. That wasn't a problem for her, especially after opening the white case and connecting the shiny iPod to iTunes. At that moment she had seen a glitch waver over the computer screen, but hadn't thought much about it. No, a wave would be too artificial, maybe she had seen a light come out when she connected the cable?

After uploading the first few songs, Rosie was ready to test it out. She scrolled down to find an Imagine Dragons song and clicked play. Immediately she found herself inside the song, it wasn't too hard to understand since it looked just like the video clip. Olivia paused for a moment, she was hungry. Immediately Rosie found herself inside the song, it wasn't too hard to understand since it looked just like the video clip but a slightly different version. She wasn't scared, she looked around and recognized the lead singer, she approached him wondering if she could talk to him, maybe he

could explain how this being in a song thing worked, but she couldn't talk, Rosie couldn't even open her mouth.

"Olivia come put away your clothes, they are on the bed." Olivia had been walking with her through the song and got out when she reached the bedroom, clicking pause in her mind so Rosie couldn't keep walking without her.

Seeing the words of the songs fly past her had been a great experience for Rosie, but now she couldn't even open her mouth, she was standing beside the singer, or was it the lead guitarist? Still clutching the iPod tightly since it was probably the only way out, she tried to find the source of the music. It wasn't coming from the original members of the band nor the device, it was coming from the air itself. She decided it wouldn't be a problem to stay for a while but it didn't take long to find out she was very wrong. The song was coming to an end and time seemed to go slower, soon some parts of the clip started to become frozen, items frozen in the air. Rosie understood it was time to leave and clicked the pause button. Would it work?, she had waited till the last moment to try, her legs started getting heavy. She saw her reflection on the iPod screen and felt herself being pulled in, into her room where the computer was still open.

After that experience she had tried a few more songs, always cheerful ones, not wanting to get trapped inside because of a ghost. Now she was in a Nightwish song, it wasn't her favorite band or anything, her friend Amaranth had made her listen to them. Others might have even thought that she was a wannabe but that didn't matter, maybe I should get salad for lunch at school monday, Amaranth never gets salad, Amaranth wasn't really the kind of friend you could always count on to be with you.

Back in the Nightwish song she didn't know if the iPod was creating what she imagined about the song or if it already had a set image for every song. Every song ever written?, she thought, what happens when a new song is written? Rosie got out long before the song ended and marched up to her computer. Pausing to finish her homework, Olivia started looking for her computer. Rosie clicked pause long before the song ended and marched up to her computer. She had gotten a great idea, she opened Quicktime and recorded her own song saying random words in a melody close to a Taylor Swift song. She exported it into the device and clicked play, she half hoped it wouldn't work, what if she got stuck inside?

She closed her eyes and opened them to find herself in a dream world just like the ones she saw when she slept at night. The ones she couldn't remember when she woke up, just like now. She was trying to remember what she had seen in the recording but could only gather pieces of colorful

images in her mind. Rosie wanted to remember, wanted to understand what had happened but she didn't have time to try again, Olivia couldn't wait until tonight.

Was there someone with her? Would someone knock the door or grab her arm as she was going in another song? No, she had a better idea after breakfast. She scrolled down to find Gold and clicked play, she saw everything she touched become shiny metal. She saw the band again, all off them together behind the glass of the recording studio. She saw the band again, all off them together behind the glass of the recording studio, laughing, laughing at her. Rosie couldn't touch them, but she didn't need to, her dream had started coming back to her. The singers in all the songs she had went into yesterday had came to haunt her, they were angry at her because she had paused all of them while coming out, now they were forever stuck in the music. They were angry at her but that was just a dream, one that reflected into the songs, but what had happened in Gold was even more terrifying, the iPod had also turned into gold.

Now the song was coming to an end and Rosie would soon be stuck in it forever. She was trying to click pause but the keys were frozen, she tried running away from the setting of the song but couldn't get anywhere. Her legs were stuck on the ground and her eyes and fingers were the only things moving. Her body was already numb and she could feel her chest tightening, her lungs weren't able grow with the inhaling of oxygen. Soon there was no blood left circling her body, and her brain shut down. That was the end of Rosie, the police came and find her body on the ground, they couldn't determine how she died, at least what happened first.

They took her away as Olivia clicked the imaginary stop button in her mind, not the pause button with 2 lines but the square one, she didn't want to see anymore of her. This story had lasted 2 days, 2 real days and one night for dreaming, though it had only been one afternoon for Rosie. Olivia opened her notebook and recorded this story, it hadn't made much sense and wasn't a very creative one, she would probably soon forget.

Part II

It was Monday, Olivia walked to school. She was entering the main building when she saw Jessica coming from the other side and waved back. She went upstairs to her classroom and sat beside Kyle who was apparently very popular in the social media world, she kept dinging and it was slowly getting annoying. "Can you pass me Cal?" she asked Jessie, she slowly reached to the bottom of the screen and pulled out Cal. Olivia saw that she had writing class next, she would need to work on her story. Too bad Mabel was very tired, she needed her through the whole day. She wondered if Bob

had a charger, he opened his mouth and she pulled out one. She connected one side to Jessie and the other to Otis who always looked sad for some reason.

Olivia looked outside the classroom and saw Connor sitting in his. He had opened Lynx and was playing a game on the internet before the teacher came.

Olivia sat back down, this time beside Jessie, and asked “Is Natalie feeling better today, can she come?”.

“She should be better, but you can never be sure while using Lynx”, Jessie reminded her of what had happened last time, “Everything had disappeared, that was a disaster”.

Olivia knew Lynx couldn't be trusted, that's why she needed Natalie to remind her to have salad with Kyle today instead of hanging out with her, Lynx could have lunch with Connor today, and...

“Wait, I don't understand this story” Abby told Claire pausing their game. “What don't you understand?” Claire asked. Abby hadn't understood anything and wanted Claire to explain the characters.

Claire started “Well, Lynx is the Internet, Jessie is the Mouse, Kyle is Whatsapp and Mabel is the computer itself. So some characters in this story are computer parts that have come to life and some are computer users like Olivia and Connor”, they continued playing.

Lynx could have lunch with Connor today, and everyone else in the world that used her in their classrooms.

“Lynx may cause problems from time to time, but it's not her fault” Connor remarked, he was standing right outside the entrance, “It is Uriah you should beware, one step in the classroom and it will take over forever, like a more disgusting version of MacKeeper, it hides and devours from the inside”.

One step?, Uriah had come so close before, sitting in her seat. She had quickly replaced it with a new one but it showed how far it could go.

It was soon almost the end of the day, Olivia picked up Mabel and took her to the lab for science class. They were going to film the rap battle they had been working on. She got Jessie to bring Tiffany, found the rap beat and clicked pause immediately to wait for the rest of the group.

“Claire, it's almost time for Abby to leave” Claire's mother was calling to her from the living room. “Okay, give us a few more minutes...”.

Arthur took the last pieces of green paper from the table and stuck in on the whiteboard to make the greenscreen for the background of the video. Olivia glanced at the clock, they didn't have much time left before the bell rang. Their group was the last to go, the teacher told them to hurry up and picked out one of the iPads to begin the filming. Just as they were starting, the bell rang and people

started coming out of the classrooms. One of her teammates quickly closed the door and as she was giving the final instructions to Da Vinci and Alan Turing, Uriah, who happened to be near her classroom of people, set his finger on Jessie and clicked play.

At that moment everything seemed to go quite, Olivia couldn't hear the rap beat or see the teacher filming with the iPad anymore, everything was dark except her, Uriah and her classroom. She was scared of what would come next, Connor had warned her and now this virus had infected her computer, just one touch was enough.

Abby listened Claire attentively as she kept on narrating, "Jessie was the first to drown, suffocating in disgust as the infection spread from the spot Uriah had touched, through the surface of Mabel, leaving no place undevoured".

The ones at the bottom of the screen were next, they easily crumbled into ash in the hands of this strong, intoxicating monster. Soon there was no one left except Olivia, crying because she didn't have an antivirus program she could install with her at school. The fall of Mabel was remembered and written in History as the loss of one of the most important...

Abby's mother was waiting outside the door, "Come on, it's time to go, Claire has to go to ballet anyway", she said laughing in that way mothers do, at their childish imagination gone wild with a few dolls and a laptop. Claire glanced one last time at Olivia before stopping the game and seeing all her characters die.

Part III

Claire was 10 years old, she lived in Lexington, South Carolina with her family and she loved to dance. She wanted to open her own dance school when she grew up, but for now, she was stuck going to school every morning and to Ballet Class only on weekends. She was trying to convince her mom to also sign her up for Jazz, her mom was having a hard time since it was on Thursday, who would take her there after school?

After Abby, her best friend since kindergarden left, she got dressed for the class starting on 5 o'clock. She had had lunch with Abby so she didn't have to wait for her mom to prepare her some snacks before they left. Yet she was anxious to go, her mom was taking way too long to get ready, they were going to be late.

Claire always had to wait for her mom whenever they went out, this usually resulted in them having to panic in the car and try to go faster, once they had entered a shopping mall parking lot to hide from the police since they had past the speed limit, and again she had been late.

She checked the iPhone sitting on her mom's drawers to see what time it was, she guessed they didn't have much time left until 4 and the road would take at least an hour. Pause. Play. Finally her mom came, she grabbed her bag and together, they walked to the car. Claire opened the door to the backseat and threw her bag inside before getting in herself. Her mom handed her the blue handbag to carry while she was driving and pulled out from the garage into the driveway.

As Claire was checking her mom's iPhone again to see if she would make it in time today, someone called and she slid the lock screen open. She had recognized the name as her aunt who lived in Chicago, she was probably calling to ask their christmas plans. Pause. Play. Her mom reached out her hand to grab the phone, stopping at the red light right before the bridge that linked Lexington and Irmo together.

She was driving slowly across the bridge, "Yes, the kids can stay at home by themselves and we'll go out", Claire thought it wouldn't take them too long after this to get to the small mall where the dance classes took place.

They soon reached the end of the bridge and Claire started to wear her coat and gather her stuff. She didn't notice the black dressed woman watching them but she saw the black sign with the same design as the owner's shirt, pointing to the small, one floor building behind the mall. Her mom stopped the car and they got out, it was 4:56 pm, Claire was happy they got there in time.

This isn't right, the woman thought as Claire started talking to her friends, I won't go back as a failure and risk losing the appreciation of my mentors, no one ever tells me anything now, but soon... Pause. Rewind. Play.

She was driving slowly across the bridge, "Yes, the kids can stay at home by themselves and we'll go out", Claire thought it wouldn't take them too long after this to get to the small mall where the dance classes took place.

Right at the end of the bridge, a young woman with a black car got out of her lane and came speeding towards them. Claire was thrown forward and her chest pressed against the driver's seat, her mother had hit the breaks but it was too late. First her ribs got crunched and she started crying from the pain, she couldn't feel it but her skull had also cracked. She looked at her mother for help but saw that she had fainted and was suffocating from the airbag her head had fallen on. Claire fell back to her seat, passing out and soon dying before anyone even noticed the car crashed.

The young woman got out from the black car, smiling with content, she was wearing a black coat like in the Matrix and metal rings with shiny gems. Her name was Jo, Jo grabbed a rifle from the back of the car and walked towards the family's large white car. She opened the front door first, the

woman wasn't dead so Jo killed her with a single shot to her head. She went to the back door next, the girl was what she'd wanted all along, she pulled out a hancer and started cutting her open.

No blood came, just like her mentors had said, the girl wasn't human. She cut through the skin until she hit the metal cage protecting the battery, then she carried the young girl to her car and drove away. Finding this girl had been her mission, one they had thought was impossible, but achieving it didn't earn her anything. Jo's reputation as untrustable wouldn't change, it was too late for that. Stop.

Part IV

Princess Soon-To-Be-Queen Nebula woke up inside her cozy bed and jumped up to go to the library, she had dreamt of another world, another universe, and not just one. She was anxious to learn the rest of their stories but she didn't know how. "Good morning Your Highness.", Joanna, the Duchess of the North greeted her, Nebula didn't even notice and pushed her aside. By now, Joanna had learned not to bother thinking about the young girl's rudenesses.

Why she was rushing to get to the library? Because she wanted to speak to her teacher. Princess Nebula was the only Princess in the 5 kingdoms that had control over the Skies instead of the Earth, and the only person they thought could teach her anything was The Hatter, a Half-Prince that had ran away to study star formations and planets instead. The Hatter spent most of his time in the library with the books written by the older civilizations that had found the magic the royalty now used, sometimes he wrote his own books.

Nebula walked past the guards and pushed the large oak door, her teacher was sitting inside mapping out a new constellation to hang in his bedroom.

"I had a dream, I had a dream of another place!", she said rushing to his side, "Please, I want to see it again, I want to learn the rest of their stories".

The Hatter looked up at her for a moment then grabbed her hand and dragged her out of the library and out to the castle's garden.

The Princess saw something glitter in his hand, he spoke in a low voice "If your dream is one of a different universe, then it must have had a linker, someone that links the dream into this world. Did you see anyone familiar in it?".

"Joanna, at the end Jo killed..." she was responding when he cut her off saying he didn't want to hear it and asked her to bring The Duchess.

The Hatter calculated the star shapes and positioned Joanna right under Leo, he also sprinkled some of the glittery substance on her hair. Duchess seemed bothered that she was not being told

anything, but remained still following Nebula's orders. Finally when the sun's position was right, the young girl casted a spell.

After Joanna finally stopped asking questions and went to lunch, they came up with a plan. The Hatter had watched her dream and said that this was a sign, The Duchess wanted to kill the Queen and her daughter.

That night Nebula went to Joanna's room with a sword she had borrowed from her great-grandfather's collection, she slid past the guards and opened the curtains so the moonlight could come in. She cut Jo's head off with a quick slice first, before she could get a chance to scream and then started cutting through her skin just like she had seen her do in the dream. The Hatter was right, no blood came out. The young girl continued to cut until she heard the sharp sound of metal hitting metal, she pulled out the sword and put her hand in instead. She was trying to find the battery that powered The Duchess, she was told it was dark magic, she was going to ask Princess Lava, her youngest sister, to destroy it.

The next morning Princess Nebula was found dead in her bed, they lifted her body and put it in a coffin so they could take it to the family mausoleum, but her soul was in a different place. Last night she had finally found the battery and as soon as she had touched it, she had drifted out of her Princess body that kept her magical powers, to the stars, passing through all the planets and to the end of this universe. She hadn't ever known The Hatter too much, but the first thing she'd thought had been that he had tricked her. How had her family decided to trust this runaway Half-Prince that caused her death, she couldn't find the answer.

Eventually she had reached darkness, pure darkness and nothing else. She had came to a place with no right and no wrong, no happiness or sadness, no hunger but no satisfaction, a place where gods lived and planned the destiny of the little creatures living under them.

Nebula learned more from these gods than she could ever on Earth and she even created her own universe. Her little dwellers, she called them Imagineers, had been the first to be born on this world. The first was Claire and then Abby, later Olivia and Jessie. Rosie was the last Imagineer to be created by Nebula other than The Wisher. The Queen of the Imagineers had created, or perhaps called from Earth, The Wisher to look after her people in her absence. She wasn't sure how much The Wisher could be trusted but he had shown her the way here, to her dream. Yes, she had thought The Hatter had tricked her but actually it was him who lead her to the place where she could learn the rest of the story, just like she had wanted.

As her world grew and her Imagineers became old, Nebula became immortal, she watched The Duchess sometimes, the young girl had thought Joanna had been an important character, but now

she seemed merely human. Joanna hadn't died that night, she wasn't even injured in the morning, spending long time in the end of the universes had made her realise that. The soon-to-be-Queen Princess had eventually become a Queen, one that sat in darkness for the rest of Eternity. Stop.