

fEAture



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My Dearest Ana
By Annelise Seybolt

My Dearest Ana,

I'll be gone before you read this, but I wrote this letter in hopes that I'll be seeing you again. Maybe even sooner than you think!

Did I ever tell you about the first time we met? I know you didn't think much of me then. I was just another boy, working on a school project with your sister. But when I first laid eyes on you, I knew. You were my soulmate, and I was helpless to resist you. I should have gotten up the courage to talk to you right then and there. In my immense cowardice, though, I decided to get to know you better first. I wish I came over more often, but I'll be sure to make that adjustment in the near future. It's so crazy how much we have in common. I assumed you'd come to talk to me, but you never did. And anytime I tried to start a conversation with you, dear Ana, you'd find some excuse to leave.

I would have given up on you, my soulmate, if it weren't for the events of April 19th, at 4 PM. Don't you remember? The day of the junior fashion show! You were dolled up in that dazzling pink dress you designed and modeled yourself! Yes, I noticed you there. It probably slipped your memory, but I was the one who held the door for you when you got there. That was the highlight of my week, dear Ana because I was graced by your presence for the first time in a great while.

I loved being with you. I couldn't handle the crushing loneliness that accompanied your absence. You rejected my offer to drive you home on that day, but I was worried about you. Your mother was short and slender, like you, and couldn't have protected you like me. Just to be kind, and ease my conscience, I escorted you all the way home. I don't think you noticed, dear Ana, but just knowing that you were safe was reward enough for me.

The world is a very dangerous place for angels like you. I would know, because of all the extra glances the other men gave to you. You needed a better guardian angel to protect you. I took up that mantle because I love you with all my heart. Also, I had an advantage because the tree in my front yard gives me a perfect view of your living room. While I spent all day protecting you, I learned several more things about you, dear Ana. For one, you're just as interested in art and love letters as I am! In fact, one of the reasons I wrote this letter was because I knew you'd imagine that you were Buthainah, and I am your Moreh; you know, from that show that you love, but are embarrassed to talk about.

Being your guardian angel only made me fall ever more passionately in love with you. Now, I know without a moment's hesitation that we were meant to be together forever. Nothing brought me more joy than protecting you when you went out or thought you were safe in your own home. I wish I could've mustered up the courage to have a real conversation with you, but it was enough to know that you appreciated my efforts. Your sisters think it's just an accident, but I know you leave that tiny gap in the curtains just for me. My favorite part is at night, dear Ana, when you fall deeply asleep, and I can hear you make those tiny, whispered, breaths through my hidden walkie-talkie.

I have to go away now, I'm sure you understand. It seems like every cop in the town is out looking for me! They're watching your house too, but they won't keep that up forever and

I'm a master of stealth. Every time you feel alone, dear Ana, just remember that you always have a little friend keeping an eye on you!

I look forward to loving you forever!

Love, Wald

The Arcane By Ryan Zaff

The swamp had been beautiful, once. Its majestic trees had touched the sky; its ground foliage had been a luscious blanket on the soil. Its animals had been exotic and untamed, every species a marvel of evolution in its own right. The existence of the oasis in the woods was known to only a few, but those lucky enough to count themselves among that number had beheld a place like no other.

Now, the once-crystalline water was choked with algae and mud. The great trees lay beneath the bog in a layer of coal; their descendants were monstrosities of diseased wood contorted beyond recognition. The plentiful grasses and shrubs were reduced to rotten compost sitting in the murk. The animals were gone, save for the flightless stilt-legged avians that strutted about the bog making hideous hunting calls as they foraged for insectoid vermin.

The house at the center of the swamp was not so much a building as it was an aggregation of material that formed walls and a roof. A dense ring of gnarled trees formed a rough dome, their tortured trunks bent many degrees so that their upper branches closed around a single opening in the center of the house's roof.

Thick black smoke rose from the opening, coming from the cauldron at the center of the single room within. The woman named Meredith hunched over the pot, grasping a rusted iron ladle as she stirred the glowing soup which belched the foul cloud. She finished stirring and let the ladle sit in the cauldron, striding along the wooden catwalk which bridged the water between the concentric rings of flooring. She pushed an errant strand of graying hair away from her hazel eyes, examining a shelf for the substance she required.

There it was. Meredith allowed herself a small smile, plucking the jar of viscous red liquid from the shelf and carrying it with her toward the cauldron. Her experiment - her final endeavor, her masterpiece, the summit of her skill, and the glorious product that she and the generations of those who'd come before her had labored for so long to create - was almost complete. All that was required were the contents of this vial, along with a single strand of hair from the last student of the ancient arts - Meredith herself.

Meredith stalked toward the cauldron, stopping before the great metal container which levitated over flames rising from the fetid water. She unscrewed the lid of the jar, held it up, and began to tip it forward.

She stopped. *It cannot be.* She could smell magic in the air - and not her own. Meredith's eyes flicked from the cauldron to the jar and back, and she furiously screwed the lid back on before placing the container on a workbench beside the cauldron. How she wished to complete it now when she had the opportunity... but her visitor would only delay her. She needed to savor this encounter.

Meredith opened the door to her house, stepped outside, and closed it behind her.

And there awaited her visitor, silhouetted against the olive sky by the setting sun.

"You," Meredith bit out, her voice hoarse. "What are you doing here?"

"Finishing what I should have begun long ago," the younger woman stated. Her long, flowing hair was jet-black, the same color that Meredith's hair had been before entering middle age. Where Meredith wore her traditional black garb, Abigail was clad in coarse grey and wore a leather satchel over one shoulder. A broom handle was slung across her back, the bristled head hanging on her belt opposite her silver wand. Two decades younger than Meredith, she might still have retained her youthful visage if not for the scowl she wore and the hideous burns that had turned half her face a sickly pale green.

"I know what you're doing," Abigail said. "I won't let you finish the potion."

Meredith frowned deeply. "You forget your place, child. Did you go crawling back to your people after I cast you out of my sight?"

"I was an outcast, but it was better than living under your tutelage," Abigail stated. "I would trade the rest of my face to have seen this accursed place razed."

"Is that why you're here now?" Meredith demanded. Tilting her head back, she spread her arms wide. Does the *great Council of Wizards* skulk in the shadows, waiting to turn me into a lamprey while you distract me?"

"As satisfying as that would be, no," Abigail replied. "The others don't truly understand what is at stake here. I came alone."

Meredith laughed as she lowered her arms. "And you - *you*, a mere child and a failure at that - think you can best *me* in single combat?" She shook her head. "It will be your final mistake." She reached into the folds of her robe and drew her wand, made from the wood of the ancient trees.

Unprompted, Abigail seized her wand from her belt and aimed it at Meredith, who immediately felt the invisible tug of Abigail's summoning spell on her wand. She let it go, but not before instructing the wand to unleash a shower of iridescent sparks in every direction as it hurtled toward Abigail. Abigail's eyes went wide, and she hurriedly waved her wand to pull a globule of water from the swamp and douse the sparks in midair. Meredith's wand clattered harmlessly to the boardwalk.

Meredith raised a hand into the air. Her broomstick burst forth from the house, ramming open the door and flying straight into her waiting palm. She disconnected the bristled head, hung it on her belt, and leaped forward.

Abigail was quick to replace her wand on her belt and unsling her broom handle, meeting Meredith's charge head-on. They clashed on the boardwalk, electricity crackling up and down their broomstaves as they exchanged blow after blow. Meredith kept her feet planted, twirling her broomstaff to fend off her former student's energetic strikes. Abigail drove her staff down into the water and pulled it back up dripping with electrified sludge. She spun it around and swung at Meredith, who brought her staff up perpendicular to block the attack. Abigail jabbed with the sludge-encrusted end of her staff, but Meredith got her own staff underneath to redirect Abigail's strike upward and leave her torso vulnerable.

Abigail didn't try to disengage; she let her staff's rotation continue so that its reverse end swung toward Meredith, who gripped her broomstaff with one hand to grab hold of her opponent's. Meredith gritted her teeth as electricity arced up and down her forearm, but pushed Abigail away and swung her staff back into a ready position. "Your form is clumsy," Meredith scoffed. "You have focus and skill, but every move is one-dimensional and disjointed from the rest."

“Perhaps a reflection of your teaching,” Abigail said drily. She thrust her broomstaff forward, firing a bolt of lightning from its tip at the older woman.

Meredith held up her own broomstaff, siphoning the bolt directly into the enchanted wood and discharging its energy harmlessly upward. “Now, now. Where is your subtlety, the intellect that I remember so well?”

Abigail set her jaw. This woman had taken everything from her, and now she dared to *mock* her return to exact justice.

I know what you’re doing here. I will stop you.

She felt the pulse of magic in the air and spun around to bat away Meredith’s levitating wand with her broomstaff before it could strike her in the back. The wand wobbled, discharging its energy away from her, then hurtled back into Meredith’s waiting hand. The elder woman slung her broomstick onto her back and stood there, waiting for Abigail to make the next move.

Abigail knew full well she was being goaded. She didn’t care. She replaced her broomstaff on her back, drew her wand, and with her free hand removed a vial of turquoise liquid from her satchel. She thumbed off the cap and let go of the vial, raising her wand and drawing out the contents to levitate in front of her.

Meredith only smiled.

The potion obeyed Abigail’s mental command, and as she thrust her wand forward it copied the movement, launching a torrent of fog at Meredith to dampen her magic. Meredith raised her own wand and twirled it like a baton, violet energy trailing from its tip as she wove a shield around herself.

Abigail seized another vial and added it to the potion suspended before her. She had no cauldron in which to hold the concoction, and so she used a small piece of her will to keep it aloft while pouring the rest of herself into its cultivation. The swirling potion unleashed a barrage of acid droplets, which Meredith took hold of with her mental grip and hurled back at her student. Abigail vaporized the acid with blasts of energy from her wand, each droplet popping and spewing a shower of sparks in midair.

She waved her free hand, compelling the potion to turn faster. A thin ring of mist formed around its equator. Another ingredient into the mixture, and Abigail let fly a beam of sunlight capable of burning through rock.

Meredith calmly held up her wand, letting the ray of sunlight strike its tip. Abigail watched in surprise as the beam’s energy was siphoned off, concentrated into a single pinprick of light twinkling atop Meredith’s wand. Meredith blew a puff of darkness onto it, and the light vanished.

Her former mentor chuckled, her rich voice grating Abigail’s ears. “Have you even forgotten my simplest teachings?” Meredith asked. “The magic of your people is but a droplet on a leaf compared to the wellspring of my power - and yet you hold yourself back.” Her voice darkened. “I’m more disappointed in you than I was before.”

Abigail had vowed, years before, to never touch the Arcane again. She gritted her teeth.

It had to be done. For all their sakes.

And yes, in the name of exacting justice.

It was surprisingly easy. Abigail plumbed the depths of her power, and then it was at her command, coursing through her veins with renewed fury after so many years of dormancy. She felt a faint tingling sensation in the burnt skin on her face.

Abigail removed another vial from her satchel, this one containing a green powder. She poured it into the already-turbulent sphere of potion. Then she held her wand over the sphere, stoking its magic with her mind. The potion roiled, turning faster and faster beneath the tip of her silver wand.

Meredith watched her carefully, holding her wooden wand at the ready. Her expression was one of smug confidence; but as she watched, it changed to surprised curiosity, followed by wary suspicion.

Abigail closed her eyes, siphoning the potion to her wand until it was wrapped around the metal shaft in a tight sleeve. Her eyes opened, and she glared at Meredith. Then, mentally reciting the words of a language she'd pledged to forget, she thrust her wand forward and unleashed a storm of raw power at her former teacher.

The swamp waters rose, hurtling toward Meredith. The tidal waves turned to acid, boiling from the lightning and sunlight that gushed from Abigail's wand. Meredith planted her feet firmly on the boardwalk and thrust her wand forward to hold off the wall of enchanted energy.

A growl escaped from Abigail's throat. Her expression hardened, both youthful features and grotesque visage contorting into a mask of rage. The tingling sensation in her facial burn grew stronger as if the flames that it had inflicted it were crawling under her skin. The ring of fog around the levitating potion expanded to encircle both her and Meredith, lightning flashing beneath its clouds as it quickened its rotation. Abigail gave herself over to her power and continued to stoke the storm, an icy wind churning the swamp and bending the trees toward the spot where Meredith stood. The boardwalk shuddered, pieces of wood ripping themselves free and hurtling toward the older woman as she fought back with a spray of energy from her wand.

But she could not hold fast against the sheer power of the hurricane that Abigail had conjured. Not for long.

As Abigail watched, Meredith's strained features were replaced by grim resolve. Still holding her wand steady to stave off the maelstrom, she took a step backward. And another.

Abigail's field of vision diminished to encompass only the woman standing opposite her as she bent all her will upon breaching Meredith's defense. Slowly, step by step, she forced her former mentor back. As Meredith approached her house, the amalgamated walls with their shelves of ingredients were stripped away by the force of the hurricane and ground to dust, leaving only the catwalks on the surface of the swamp and the workstation directly behind Meredith. And there was the elder woman's cauldron, still belching smoke and bubbles from the mixture inside it - the reason that Abigail had come here.

Meredith backed up, all the way until she stood beside her cauldron and a workbench with a jar on top. Abigail recognized it as the second-to-last ingredient.

"You will not impede my plans this time," Meredith declared over the roar of the hurricane. "Your reckless intervention before was a betrayal of all that we had worked for years to achieve, and our forebears for millennia prior! This time, you shall not succeed, my failed pupil!" Even as she held her wand in one hand to hold off Abigail's enchanted storm, Meredith used the other to seize the jar on the workbench. Abigail's skin crawled as the jar's lid unscrewed itself at Meredith's mental command; the older woman was able to fend off her onslaught without even committing all of her power to the effort. "And at last," Meredith said, "the power of this world will no longer belong to you, or to the wizards and their ilk. It shall belong to the true inheritor of the Orders of old; the final student of the ancient arts!" She offered Abigail a smug smile. "Me."

The memories came crashing back: The moment that Abigail had realized that she could not go through with her teacher's plan for her. The split-second decision that had prompted her to grab a dissolution potion off the shelf, fending off the enraged Meredith's enchanted attacks. The agony she'd felt as she had dumped the potion into the cauldron, causing the concoction within to detonate and leaving her permanently disfigured as a reminder of her redemption and betrayal.

And yet Meredith was still going to succeed.

With one last burst of will, Abigail summoned all her strength from the deepest recesses of her consciousness and let fly all the magical energy she had left.

Meredith only smiled wider.

Abigail's facial burn exploded with pain - sheer, raw *agony* - and she screamed as her overextended power tore through her. Emerald light flashed from every pore in her skin that was still intact, turning the burnt part of her face into a nightmarish silhouette. When the light faded, Abigail crumpled to the boardwalk as smoke curled from her shivering form.

Meredith lowered her wand as the maelstrom dissipated, leaving only the benign clouds circling them. Her face was grave. "And there it is," she said darkly. "You always did let your passion rule you, in the end. Had you been found by any of our forebears, you would have been dismissed for that reason alone. I thought I could temper that beautiful fire - fashion it into the perfect melding of raw power and disciplined skill. The perfect heir to our legacy." Tears trickling from her good eye, Abigail blearily raised her head. Meredith continued, "But I was wrong. I chose not to accept that your power could never be tamed. I failed to foresee the *disappointment* that you would become." She looked away. "I should never have taken you on as my student."

Abigail had no strength to reply.

Meredith calmly hung her wand on her belt, turned to face the cauldron, and poured the red liquid into the potion. After placing the vial on the workbench, she drew a small knife from its sheath on her belt. Cutting off a short lock of her hair, she replaced the knife on her belt.

And she let the hairs fall into the cauldron.

For several long moments, both women were frozen in place, Meredith's eyes wide in anticipation and Abigail's in horror.

But both women then narrowed their eyes as nothing happened.

Meredith stared at the potion for several more seconds. Her gaze began to shift in Abigail's direction as they both realized what had happened.

"Impossible," Meredith bit out as she turned to face Abigail fully. "Your inheritance is nullified. The line of our forebears ends with *me*. I am the *true* final student of the ancient arts!"

Despite the pain still racking her body, Abigail managed to move her head. As she gazed up at her former teacher, relief flooded through her and she cracked a derisive smile. "No. Seems *I'm* still the final student, whether either of us likes it or not."

And, as her fingers closed once again around her wand, she fired a burst of white energy that threw Meredith backward to the edge of the outer catwalk with a satisfying thud. Abigail got one knee underneath her and managed to stand. She leveled her wand at her former mentor. It wouldn't take much. Meredith was strongest when she was composed, and now her guard was down.

But as she stared down the length of her wand at the older woman slowly sitting up, Abigail realized that she could not. She let go of the Arcane, allowing only the pure magic of the world to flow through her.

Abigail lowered her wand. Meredith no longer posed a threat: Even with one ingredient left, she could not take control of the world's magic, since the final ingredient was not hers to contribute. Without it, the masterpiece potion amounted to little more than an elaborate incendiary device.

Meredith clambered to her feet. "Is that it?" she demanded. "You know that our order's resources are now exhausted. Will you just leave me here to wallow in my defeat?"

Abigail shook her head. "Once the Council of Wizards finds out what you were about to do, I'm sure they won't be nearly so lenient as they have been in the past."

"Is that so?" Meredith replied. She set her jaw. "Then I suppose no one can be left to tell the tale."

Faster than the blink of an eye, Meredith slung her broomstaff off her back and grabbed the bristled head from her belt. Joining the two halves together, she leveled the broomstick's head at Abigail. The bristles sparked, and Abigail's eyes went wide as Meredith let fly a torrent of emerald flame.

She dove behind the cauldron, clutching her wand tightly to herself as the wall of fire slammed into her only source of cover. Sweat beaded on her forehead as the air all around her burned. Abigail tried to cast a shield around herself, but she lacked the strength. She had forsaken the Arcane, and now it threatened to finally consume her.

The heat was painful beyond belief, but she'd felt that pain before. It was the same agony that she felt in her facial burn when tapping into the Arcane.

But she'd conquered the Arcane already. She could do it again.

After hanging her wand on her belt, Abigail unsheathed a knife, not unlike the one Meredith had used. She cut away a lock of her singed hair and rose to a crouch. The flames closed around her, but the pure magic coursing through her veins kept her fear at bay. She sheathed the knife and raised her wand again, conjuring a violet shield. It would only last a split second, but that was all she needed.

Abigail reached over the edge of the cauldron and dropped the final ingredient into the potion. Her shield broke, and she dropped back behind the cauldron to avoid being incinerated.

Behind her, the cauldron rumbled.

The flames closed in, Meredith's incinerating fury coming within centimeters of Abigail's disfigured face.

A ring of energy burst forth from the top of the cauldron, pure white and expanding rapidly as it hurtled over the swamp and out of sight. Abigail gripped her wand in both hands. *Obey*, she thought.

The flames stopped. Green embers faded to nothing in the swamp's humid air, and Abigail let out a sigh of relief as she clambered to her feet and stood amid the scorched timbers of what had been Meredith's house. She turned around.

The older woman stood three meters away, quivering in mortification and rage. "No," she whispered. "No!" She gripped her broomstick tighter, but no fire came from the bristles. She reached for her wand, but it did not respond to her touch. "What have you done?!" Meredith demanded.

Abigail lowered her wand, glancing down at the clear water that now filled the cauldron. "I completed the potion. After all these years, your order's plan was fulfilled after all."

"The magic does not belong to you," Meredith snarled. "You are a disgrace to our tradition!"

“Maybe,” Abigail admitted. “But I don’t care. After all, I abandoned your Order of my own volition - not yours. You have no power over me anymore, through authority or magic. The Arcane no longer controls me. *I* control the magic of this world... and I’m going to make sure it’s used as it’s meant to be.”

Meredith stared at her for a long moment. Finally, she hung her wand at her belt and slung her broomstick across her back. “Very well. I yield.” She considered her next words for a moment, then said, “You’re going to turn me in, I take it?”

Abigail nodded but paused before she spoke. “Actually... perhaps I can persuade the Council of Wizards to reduce your punishment.”

“How?” Meredith scoffed.

The smile Abigail offered was a genuine one. “Look all around you.”

Her greying hair tied back in a long ponytail, Meredith carefully stirred the potion in the cauldron. Once it was adequately mixed, she reached for a container of blue powder on the workbench beside her, opened it, and poured the powder in. Reaching for her wand, Meredith nourished the magic that resided within the ingredients she’d added.

Her former student watched from a short distance away. The Council of Wizards had agreed to Abigail’s conditions, and though their verdict had been firm, it was not the lifelong punishment that Meredith had envisioned for herself. After Abigail had first allowed Meredith to tap into the world’s magic again, she had been with her constantly. As their work had progressed, however, Abigail would occasionally go for walks along the earthen paths that wound their way around the marshes.

Meredith still marveled at the absurdity of it: Abigail held sway over all of the magic in the world, and yet she did not use the power. In fact, she was letting it go: Day by day, Meredith could sense that Abigail was allowing control of the world’s magic to seep back into the soil and water, and air.

Meredith stirred the potion again, and let the ladle rest on the cauldron’s rim. “It is done,” she said.

Abigail stood and walked over. “Excellent,” she replied as she glanced into the cauldron. “I’ll take it from here.”

Meredith stood back, allowing Abigail to walk forward and raise her wand over the cauldron as Meredith had done so many times before their fateful encounter.

Abigail closed her eyes to begin the mental incantation, but opened them again and glanced at Meredith. “Would you like to do it?”

Meredith stared. “Me?”

Abigail shrugged. “Sure.”

Meredith watched the younger woman, her mouth slightly agape. This was the first time that Abigail had trusted her to activate a potion. Meredith was prevented from touching the Arcane, but she could still sabotage the potion and force Abigail to create it all over again. It would set her former student’s cause back by weeks or more.

Meredith walked over to Abigail’s side and raised her wand over the potion. She closed her eyes.

And she decided that she was content. She did not understand why this work was so important, but she decided that it was irrelevant as long as she had the opportunity to exercise her magic.

She directed the potion to activate. As Meredith opened her eyes, blue flares leaped out of the cauldron, pleasantly contrasted against the pink sunset as they shot across the landscape. After each flare landed, a small green plant was left in fertile dirt.

Both women gazed out over the marshes as the potion did its work. Perhaps one day, the swamp would be beautiful again.

Where's Chuck E?

By Quinn Galuski

A powerful rat named Charles Entertainment Cheese had been waiting for so long to see his boyfriend again. They had been in a long-distance relationship for about three months at that point, but not being able to see each other had taken a toll on their relationship. Waldo had been traveling the world while Chuck E was busy working at the pizza arcade of his namesake. Waldo had offered to take Chuck E along with him, but Chuck E was forced to decline due to his job. He was regretting it, but he was trying to be patient.

But today, he's missing him more than ever. You see, it was Chuck E's birthday. He was turning... well, no one really knows his age. Chuck E is somewhat of a timeless being. Regardless, it was still a significant date for him. It was the day he met Waldo a mere two years ago.

To see all of these children celebrating their birthday at his establishment broke his heart. He wanted to be appreciated for once. He prayed to the pizza gods that his birthday wish would be fulfilled.

Surprisingly, at around 4:00 PM, he received a text. His ringer, the Vine "boom" sound, rang loudly so that he could hear it among the din of the busy arcade. He looked both ways before slipping into the back room. It was a text from Waldo. His breath caught in his throat as he saw that it was an attachment, a photo of Waldo with the classic red and white hat over his neatly combed brown hair; he was standing in front of the baggage claim of an airport.

"Where are you this time?" Chuck E mumbled under his breath as he typed his reply. He so desperately hoped it was the airport in their city. He clutched his heart, brushing a stray piece of colorful confetti off of his shirt in the process.

"I won't tell," Waldo responded teasingly. "You just have to see."

Chuck E wiped a stray bead of sweat off of his forehead. Despite the air conditioning of the establishment, the many children touching every surface made the air suffocatingly hot, and it made him anxious.

He set his phone on the table and went back out into the public after composing himself.

There were so many people in the arcade that day- people swam out of every crevice, their grubby fingers sullyng every surface and their nasty faces filling the building with general stink. Charles spent his time absently looking for Waldo, who was clean and kind, unlike these ruffians. He had looked all day without avail. He was starting to believe that he hadn't really come back home when out of the corner of his eye, he spied a familiar red and white striped sweater.

"Chuck E!" the man in the sweater yelled, practically toppling the children around them to hug the rat.

“Waldo!” Chuck E gasped, returning the hug immediately. His heart was beating at breakneck speed as he buried his face in his neck and breathed in his natural scent, feeling his brown hair tickle the back of his head. “Where have you been?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” They pulled away and Waldo showed Chuck E a professionally printed picture of him in a large crowd of people. “Where’s Waldo?” he teased, waving the photo in front of his face.

Chuck E laughed, snatching the photo from him. “That’s not important right now. I missed you, you little weasel.”

Waldo shoved him playfully. “I missed you too,” he admitted, pushing his glasses up his face with his finger. “Why don’t we go catch up?”

The rat mascot nodded, taking Waldo’s hand and holding it close to his face. “My shift ends at 10, I’ll meet you here then?”

“Sounds lovely,” the elusive man in the striped sweater agreed. He stood on his toes to kiss Chuck E’s cheek, waving goodbye before running to a game and sticking a coin inside.

Chuck E rubbed his cheek wistfully.

As planned, at 10:00 PM on the dot, just as Chuck E was locking up, Waldo emerged from the shadows. “Chuck E,” he said in his gentle voice.

“Hello, Waldo.” The rat turned around to look him in the eye. He looked unusually sweaty. He held up his paw to wipe off Waldo’s forehead. “Hey, are you okay? Your breathing is ragged and you’re sweating a lot.”

Waldo brushed him off with a sweet smile. “It’s okay, Chuck E. Happy birthday to my favorite person... er, rat,” he congratulated. “I got you a gift.” He held out a very small red bag filled with tissue paper.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have!” Chuck E gave him a quick peck on the lips before he reached into the bag and pulled out a little box. Glancing at him for a moment he opened the box to reveal a large diamond ring, the perfect size for his finger. He covered his mouth with his free hand in surprise. “I mean, you really shouldn’t have, Waldo...”

“Chuck E, will you marry me?” he asked, now on one knee.

“Y... yes, I will.” The rat nodded nervously. There were tears in his eyes because he loved him so much; the ring slipped onto his fourth finger easily. “How did you afford this?”

Waldo shrugged. “I have my ways.”

Chuck E was too surprised to question it further.

“What do you say we go catch up, fiancé?” Waldo asked, grabbing his arm to lead him further into the shadows.

Chuck E pulled his arm back. “Hey, what’s the rush? Why don’t we go for a walk?”

The man shook his head in disagreement. “No, I think we should go back home. What do you say?” he insisted.

“You’re being weird,” the rat noted as he raised his eyebrows.

“No, I’m not; I just wanna tell you about my adventures!” he asserted firmly.

“But-”

“Chuck E!” He had raised his voice at him, which should have been a red flag for Charles Entertainment, but all he did was nod slowly and let his partner drag him off to Waldo’s sleek black car. It looked expensive.

On the drive back to their shared home, Waldo recounted his travels but was suspiciously vague about some places he went to. He went on and on about the rainforests of Brazil and the beaches of the Caribbean, but he left out what he did in the cities of London and Shanghai.

Once they pulled into the driveway, Chuck E finally had to ask. “Hey, what in the burning animatronic restaurant is going on with you?”

“I didn’t burn it!” he yelled. “I-I mean...” He tried to recover, lifting his hat to fix his disheveled hair. “I must be jet-lagged, I’m just... not...”

Chuck E Cheese stared blankly at the man. “Tell me the truth or I’m calling off the engagement.”

Something flashed in Waldo’s eyes. “No! I mean, ugh...” He covered his face. “Can we talk about it later?”

“No.” His voice was firm.

Waldo sighed heavily. “Alright. I... I didn’t mean to kill that man. And those three other men.” Chuck E was at a loss for words. He couldn’t even respond. “And that Fazbear Frights building had it coming-”

“Wait a moment,” Charles interrupted. “You were the one who burned down the Five Nights at Freddy’s 3 location?”

“I had my reasons,” Waldo answered. “Not everyone will get that reference, either, babe.”

“Don’t you dare call me babe, you just confessed to arson and murder!” His fear turned to anger. “What else did you do, huh? Is this ring stolen?” He held up his hand to display it. “This car?” he continued once he saw he wasn’t responding.

Waldo’s silence spoke volumes.

“I’m sorry, I’m calling the police,” Chuck E said bitterly, clearly not sorry.

“N-no! I was just joking!” Waldo laughed awkwardly. “Of course I didn’t, it was just a funny joke.”

Charles was already dialing 9-1-1 as he removed his ring.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

Waldo was heartbroken, but he actually did kill those people so he deserved it.

In a mere 20 minutes, blaring red and blue lights meant the police had arrived to take Waldo away.

As he was arrested to be taken into questioning and shoved into the backseat of their car, the powerful rat named Charles Entertainment Cheese smirked a little to himself. He too had a secret, but that’s a story for another time.

How Cry of Fear utilizes “Dread” (and why it’s genius)

By Owen Boersch Shill: Owenx33 on YouTube :)

Introduction

Horror is not something I’m the keenest on. Last year’s Halloween magazine featured my first movie review, being about Tim Burton’s “*The Nightmare Before Christmas*” which, if you know the movie, isn’t the most terrifying experience in cinema. But this year, I decided to take a venture I had never wanted to. In the name of content, I played a horror game. More specifically, *Cry of Fear*. The game was released in 2012, a time when horror games were not in the greatest light. Most horror projects released during that time were very cookie-cutter and formulaic. But *Cry of Fear*, while mostly unnoticed today, still holds a place in people’s hearts as a cult classic horror title in the realm of gaming.

Cry of Fear

Cry of Fear takes place in Stockholm, Sweden (Already a horrifying concept but let's keep going). Our main protagonist, Simon, wakes up in a dank alleyway, with two questions: "Where am I?" and "How did I get here?". He also wakes up with two belongings, his cell phone, being your main connection to other people, and a Swiss Army knife. Throughout the game, you discover that Stockholm has been ravaged by monsters, including a man with a leather mask and chainsaw (It's different I swear). You venture through the sewers, Vasaparken, which is a real place in Stockholm, and even an abandoned college, modeled after the university the developer attended. But at the end of the game, you realize that all the torment you've been through throughout your whole adventure has been inside your head. This is where it gets complicated, so pay attention. Simon (In real life) is a very lonely and depressed man due to becoming disabled from a car accident and is now wheelchair-bound. His doctor, as a form of treatment, suggests he writes his angry or sad thoughts down in a journal, expressing himself in a way other than depressive episodes or outbursts. But this journal is the reason you are put through the torment and horror of your adventure. Writing his thoughts down is not helping Simon, but instead, internalizing those thoughts in his head, twisting and morphing them into demonic versions of himself, his friends, and everyone around him. In one of the multiple endings of the game, you fight the version of yourself you have been playing as, as the man you are in reality. A depressed, disabled man who has nothing but the clothes on his back, and the first firearm you're given in the game, while the Simon you're fighting has the powerful arsenal you've collected throughout the adventure. If you lose the battle against your powerful "other self", you learn that even the battle was in his head, and the real Simon losing equates to his suicide. Real Simon winning the duel, equates to the killing of two police officers who attempt to enter his apartment after one of Simon's close friends is concerned about him and sends them over. With the killing of the officers, Simon is admitted into a mental hospital and is assumed to be recovering from his trauma, thus finishing the good ending. There are a few other variations of the ending that don't serve as much of an impact on today's topic. Speaking of today's topic...

Today's Topic

_____ "Dread" is an emotion that is largely unused in today's horror scene. Much of horror media in the modern era is just, "Oh no! The scary JPEG just appeared in my face... ah." but dread is much more than just fear. Dread is the feeling of being truly alone, helpless, like every odd is stacked against you. *Cry of Fear* is comparable to the feeling of dread because you are truly alone. Even the one time you find someone who is perceived to be your friend, they commit suicide right in front of you. Then the burden that their death carries with it manifests into a monster you have to fight (Long story, don't question it, watch a video on this game if you want more context). In other words, the people you meet in gameplay rarely try to aid you. You also meet your doctor, but he always seems skittish around you. Like he isn't sure who is on his side or who is "turned". Then later on you're given the option to trust or distrust him. The ending of the game changes depending on your choice. Simon rarely ever finds an area to relax, he is constantly being watched, helpless. You truly are against all odds in *Cry of Fear*...

Vanish
By Vanessa Lutz

Ghostly figures circle my ceiling.
A chill washes over me, goosebumps beginning to crawl
I pull my blanket up to my eyes to avoid this dreadful feeling.
I shut my eyes and pray,
For these horrible demons to go away

Suddenly, the house begins to shake.
I run out into the living room, expecting to find everyone awake
But the house is quieter than a passing thought
The windows burst with rage, shattered glass covers the floor
I rush outside, the wind yanking at my sweater

Then I see it,
The figure is only known in a child's worst nightmare.
Tall and lanky, no face, just white.
I tremble and cry, pleading to God to keep me alive.
I stand there, frozen in place, as the creature's long arms move to my throat.

I scream at my highest pitch,
until my vocal cords get torn out by razor-sharp talons,
and the monster drags me into his ditch.

Days later, missing-person posters are dispersed around town.
But, little do they know, I am buried underground.
Beneath their feet I lay, troubled by the memories of that traumatizing day.

Don't Blink
By Alex Jones

“You there yet?” a voice called through Eric’s phone, tightly clutched in his hand.
“Yeah, yeah, I’m there you idiot.” Eric snapped back.
“Jeez chill, ya scaredy-cat.” the voice replied.
“Alright look, I’ll call you back when I’m done alright?”
“Good luck...” his friend taunted before ending the call.

Eric stood in front of an abandoned factory. The factory that had haunted his childhood dreams for years. Stories from his youth and urban legends had terrified him. He wasn't here to face his fears or vanquish his demons, he was here for what he thought was the worst reason of all. A dare. After years of his friends calling him a chicken, he had had enough of the abuse. He just needed to go in and out, and take a photo to prove he had accomplished his task. He gulped and stumbled forward towards his destination.

The factory loomed above him, completely obscuring the horizon and blocking out any view of the moon. There were no windows as far as he could see, and the factory was covered in rust and ash. What surprised him was that none of the nearby vegetation seemed to grow anywhere within five feet of the entrance. It was almost like they were just as afraid as he was. He wrapped his hands around one of the doors and heaved until it was open a few inches. Just enough for him to squeeze in. He swallowed hard; he could feel the lump of spit travel down his throat. "No going back now," he muttered to himself.

He pushed himself through the crack. His head briefly got stuck, and he freed himself with a slightly painful tug. He was in. From out of nowhere, the stench of old metal and rotten... something filled the air. Eric resisted the urge to gag and prayed that he wouldn't find the source of the smell. As he looked around in the pitch blackness, he felt the cold blanket of despair settle over him. He couldn't figure out why, but he never wanted to leave a place any more than now. Even though he knew he was alone he couldn't stop shaking. He fumbled around in his pocket until he found his phone. His only beacon of light had no cell service and only twelve percent battery left. "Crap," he mumbled. He toggled the flashlight mode on and light flooded the area in front of him.

He looked around the space in front of him, not seeing anything of note. "Well, that won't do," he muttered. He knew that if he just took a picture of the floor, he would be laughed at for years to come. He needed to find some machinery, or something along those lines, something that proved that he had ventured further than a few feet into the factory. He took a deep breath of the cold, musty air and trudged forward. After a couple of minutes of searching, he found something of interest. A small plaque shone in the beam of his flashlight. He walked over to it and brushed the dust off in a quick sweeping motion. He coughed and retched as the dust attempted to fill his lungs. He looked back to the plaque after his coughing fit and saw the design of a large metallic spider engraved within it. *What?* He thought to himself. He had presumed that the factory had been for making iron or steel, but robotics was the last thing he had expected.

He examined the plaque further, and he discovered that the name of the creature - or contraption, whatever it was- was completely faded away. Frustration built up inside him. This was a dead end. Suddenly, something much bigger caught his eye. Enormous, rusted metal poles hung from the ceiling. Poles that could easily be mistaken, for legs. Spider legs. Eric's heart leaped from his chest to his throat. That couldn't possibly be what he thought was. Legs for a giant metal spider? *That's insane*, he thought to himself. He was just tired and afraid, and his imagination was getting away from him. But no matter what he told himself, he couldn't rationalize the insane discovery he had just made. *Well, that was certainly good enough for a picture*, he thought and took a couple of photos. "Time to go," he mumbled. As he was about to kiss this nightmare goodbye, something grabbed his attention. Another plaque shone on the opposite wall of the factory. Well, a few more pictures for proof couldn't hurt. He dashed over to the other plaque, and read its inscription. PROJECT ABOMINATION: CANCELLED. The plaque almost seemed to yell at him. What could that possibly mean? Even though these words were meaningless to Eric, they still drove fear into the core of his heart. But what sickened him

the most was the fact he could almost sense the presence of something above him. He slowly raised his flashlight into the air and it flickered out. His phone was dead. But what he saw had haunted him. A large, presumably metal sphere had been suspended from the dark consuming void that was the top of the factory. But what had scared him so much was the face. The sphere had an inhuman face with huge beaming eyes and giant teeth, twisted into a smile. He knew it was time to go.

He bolted to the small pinprick of light that shown from the door but tripped on something he couldn't see in the darkness. As he quickly glanced at what had caused him to stumble his heart dropped. A crusty decaying skeleton lay on the ground in a tattered factory uniform clutching a small piece of paper in its skeletal hand. For some insane reason, he thought it would be the best course of action to read whatever was on the paper. He quickly unfurled the paper, he read the two words on the paper. *Don't Blink*. He tossed the paper on the ground and even though it should have scared him, he was already so terrified out of his mind that he didn't think he could be any more terrified. As he got back to his feet, those two words echoed through his mind. He couldn't make any sense of it, but that message was the least of his problems. The sound of screeching metal echoed through the air. Eric turned around and saw a giant lumbering mass towering over him. The massive, rusty creature stared back at him dragging large metal limbs behind it. Topping the creature was a head, fit with a large twisted grin. Just as it had started to move, it had stopped. But Eric forgot to heed the words he had read. To stop from screaming and crying he blinked multiple times. In the split-second time he had taken to save his eyes from watering, the Abomination had somehow lowered its massive head only feet from Eric's face. Still forgetting about the note he ran as fast as he could toward the door, still blinking as he did so. The grin of the unnatural face was burned into his mind. He couldn't tell if he was screaming or if the monster was. Everything exhausted Eric, everything hurt, his ears were practically bleeding from the grinding of metal and the screaming. But then everything was pitch black. Eric was violently dismembered, torn limb from limb. He had been consumed.

The night was cold and dark. The factory looked like it hadn't been touched in years. Eric's friends never made fun of his fears again. But they always wondered where he went, and why he never came back.

Monster design based off on "Ultra Violence" by Xender Game

That Old Town

By Colin Jones

The cornstalks weep in vain
For the sun has stopped rising in that old town
When treachery has come too far
You can't feel good things anymore

The trees creak as if in agony
The children stumble through their whitewashed dreams
It is not their fault
That the dead are still rising from the grave

All things are feeble or feral
In that old town
One man's handshake doomed a generation to eternal night
And now he sobs in chains and wishes to turn back the clock

The specter of death hangs over that town
Inhaling vitality in a shuddering rattle
And coughing out spires of thick black smoke
All that remains of that old town's spirit is a sign,

"Heartsburg: Smile and we smile with you"

No one is smiling now
Except for the forced grin of skulls
Watching that town at night
All they see is a fading dream

A cold wind blows the smoke away
And the town is gone
Perhaps never there
Perhaps

We All Scream For The Silver Scream (Album Review)

By Colin Jones

Band: Ice Nine Kills

Album Review: The Silver Scream

Happy Halloween, reader! I wanted to do an album review, but keeping in theme with Halloween and general spookiness, I chose to review Ice Nine Kills' horror movie-inspired album, *The Silver Scream*.

Ice Nine Kills (INK) is an American heavy metal band formed in 2000. Their earliest work could be categorized as ska-punk, but they then shifted to a more accessible pop-punk sound, which then evolved into their more recognizable metalcore style. They garnered a steady following in the earlier stages of their career, but their 5th record, *The Silver Scream*, brought them into the spotlight, not only because it was a fantastic metalcore record, but because each song was inspired by a classic horror movie. I have indicated the corresponding movie next to each track for those who are curious. I highly recommend this album for anyone who likes metal, horror movies, or just wants to try some music that fits the season. There are some lighter tracks for those who prefer softer, more rock-oriented songs, but for those who like heavier music, there is plenty of that too. Here is my track-by-track review of *The Silver Scream*, by Ice Nine Kills.

Language Warning: This album does contain explicit lyrics.

Tracks:

The American Nightmare [Nightmare On Elm Street]

This song and album kick off with a crackling sample and building guitars before exploding into a devilish lead riff and kicking into high gear with punishing scream vocals. This song blends both melodic and harsh vocals perfectly, with a soaring chorus that easily catches in your head and balances out the brutal growls that populate the rest of the song. Samples of fearful cries, jarring panic chords from the guitars, and occasional string accompaniment add to the feeling of being immersed in a horror movie. A chilling children's chant precedes a smashing breakdown (to readers unfamiliar with a breakdown, it's essentially an intense section of a metal song made for headbanging) before finishing off with that fantastic chorus. In my opinion, this is a perfect metalcore track, and probably my favorite on the album. 10/10

Thank God It's Friday [Friday the 13th]

Fittingly, given the source material, this song begins with a mock campfire song before descending into a snarling verse. INK also delivers another earworm chorus with this one, as well as some of the most tortured-sounding screams on the album. The screaming on this album is overall fantastic since the guitarist provides co-lead harsh vocals, which makes for a powerful layered sound when combined with the lead singer Spencer Charnas. This song has even more strings and sampling than the previous track, both of which are present throughout the album, but add to this track in particular in an effective way. Overall, this is an extremely solid track, although it doesn't quite reach the heights of The American Nightmare in my opinion. 9/10

Stabbing In The Dark [Halloween]

Another favorite for me, this song begins with ominous ticking percussion and atmospheric piano and keyboards, then progresses into the first chorus, punctuated by doomy alarm noises. It then plunges into a feverishly fast lead riff, coupled with blast beats and screams for yet another high-energy tune. This is another song with a memorable chorus; said chorus has a more epic and evil feel than the others, which is fitting for the perspective of a murderer. The first breakdowns in this song also incorporate discordant keyboard reminiscent of John Carpenter's score of the movie itself, which I felt was a nice touch. The double meanings in the lyrics of this song (as well as the rest of the album) are quite entertaining as well- INK is great at using tongue-in-cheek humor, making their lyrics a blend of goofy and grim. The song closes with a final breakdown that pounds like there's no tomorrow, another favorite moment for me. One of the best cuts on the record. 10/10

SAVAGES [Texas Chainsaw Massacre]

Unfortunately, it is at this point that most of the rest of the album loses some of its steam in my opinion. Compared to the first three tracks, most of the remainders pale in comparison. They all have a unique feel, and while I certainly don't mind a change of pace on any record (I praise it, in fact) this track is an example of INK embracing a somewhat generic hard rock sound. and

while they pull it off well, the song is simply not very memorable. Unless I'm listening to the album in full, I rarely listen to it, as aside from a few vague lyrical references, it's a pretty standard radio rock song. Fans of less aggressive stylings may take to this track more than I did, but to me, it came as a bit of a disappointment after such a stellar opening. That's not to say I dislike their lighter tracks- there are other tracks on this album that were fantastic and radio-friendly. This song just didn't have anything that stood out to me. 3/10

The Jig Is Up (feat. Randy Strohmeier of Finch) [Saw]

A haunting piano melody kickstarts this track, which balances a slightly lighter sound while maintaining the heaviness of the first three tracks. The verses of this song have an almost violently rocking tempo, accentuated by orchestral flourishes and the interplay of both vocalists. This song is one that really plays with the vocal layering and is all the better for it. As I mentioned, this song is also heavier than the previous track, with more guttural vocals, a section of blast beats (a fast and chaotic style of drumming used most commonly in heavier genres such as death metal), and a thundering breakdown that feels like a cinematic climax with its tasteful choir accompaniment. This song, while not quite reaching the heights of the better tracks, still stands out as a very solid track. 6/10

A Grave Mistake [The Crow]

While this song is a lot more radio-friendly, it has a beautiful progression from an acoustic verse to an explosive chorus that is one of the catchiest on the record. It manages to be both accessible and anthemic in a way that I feel SAVAGES attempted to reach but couldn't. A pleasantly melodic guitar solo also helps this track stand out. It beautifully recounts the source material with an impressive hook that makes for a nice change of pace from the dark and heavy tracks that make up most of the tracklist. 8/10

Rocking The Boat (feat. Jeremy Schwartz) [Jaws]

This song has an eclectic charm that sets it apart from the others. Wordplay abounds here, with the band even referencing its discography for their hardcore fans. An ominous bell during the verses leads into yet another catchy chorus- INK seems to have the secret formula to writing hooks. My favorite part of this track is the breakdown- even those who haven't seen Jaws likely know the sharks' iconic theme, and the way it is cleverly incorporated into the song in a way that adds suspense and unique flair shows the appreciation of the source material. 7/10

Enjoy Your Slay (feat. Sam Kubrick of Shields UK) [The Shining]

This song has perhaps some of the goofiest wordplays on the album, with the chorus especially containing some wonderfully campy lyrics. The song begins with an expected snarling verse but then draws back to dramatic piano and strings that build up to another solid chorus. The second verse has some extremely heavy moments with fantastic horror chords, as well as some of the most advanced guitar work on the album. This album has one of the more punishing breakdowns

on the album, accompanied by bells and choir vocals, as well as guttural snarls from featured vocalist Sam Kubrick (relative of the one and only Stanley Kubrick, director of *The Shining*). Overall, probably the best example of all of INK's talents combined on one track. 6/10

Freak Flag [Devil's Rejects]

Similar to SAVAGES in its rather vague lyrics and generic feel, Freak Flag is somewhat redeemed with more interesting guitar riffs and a catchier chorus. While the lyrics are not very unique, they provide something of a misfit anthem, a concept that, while not new, is a favorite of mine. The track does what it sets out to do, if in a rather cookie-cutter way. 4/10

The World In My Hands (feat. Tony Lovato of Mest) [Edward Scissorhands]

While Edward Scissorhands is a rather odd choice for a horror movie album, given that the movie, while somewhat gothic and monster-themed, is rather family-friendly, this song does take an interesting approach. This is one of the most cinematic sounding cuts on the record- it feels like it could be on the soundtrack of a remake of this movie. Tonally, the song also defects from the gruesome, evil direction of much of the others, in favor of being a lament of the circumstances Edward Scissorhands faces. There is also a nice guitar solo that also sets this track apart from others. 5/10

Merry Axe-mas [Silent Night, Deadly Night]

While this song is a lot more Christmas-themed, it still keeps the horror vibe well, as well as being perhaps the heaviest song on the album. This song keeps up a wickedly fast pace for its runtime, with another soaring chorus being the only levity from frantic verses and a slow, grinding breakdown with deathcore vocals. The idea of an evil Santa is explored with Ice Nine Kills' typical tongue-in-cheek dark humor, with both holiday and murder puns sprinkled throughout. This song is also one of the few on the album with a guitar solo, which keeps up the frantic energy of the tune. A creepy sample of jingle bells pulls the track together. 8/10

Love Bites (feat. Chelsea Talmadge) [An American Werewolf in London]

Another of the more downtempo tracks on the record, Love Bites takes an almost romantic approach to the typical story of a werewolf, with dual male and female vocals giving it a ballad vibe. Guitars and drums, manic throughout the album, take a backseat to more calm vocals. While this track is still undoubtedly pop, it ventures into pop-rock territory (with a typically theatrical sound, being Ice Nine Kills), and does it in a very effective way. While not the most unique track, it is a nice palette cleanser before the end of the album and a more relaxing INK song. 7/10

IT Is The End (featuring Peter "JR" Wasilewski and Buddy Schaub of Less Than Jake and Will Salazar of Fenix TX) [IT]

Finishing off the record with a bang, this song features several members from ska bands, with the orchestral and brass elements adding to the evil carnival vibe that is appropriate for a song about

a murderous clown. This song features a long theatrical intro with creepy organ and voice acting, before dropping into yet another breakneck verse. This song shows all of INK's strengths- humor, choruses, theatre, heaviness, instrumentation- a perfect closer to the album. The song fades out grandly and dramatically and concludes the record in a satisfying and thrilling way. 9/10

Overall Rating: The Silver Scream is a thrilling and diverse album that lovingly pays tribute to many iconic horror films, all while being both a unique metalcore record with touches in both lighter and heavier genres. Some of the vocal features felt rather unnecessary or phoned in, but this is a minor nitpick. While it does stumble into generic territory a few times, it overall is incredibly unique and a must-listen for fans of metal and/or horror. 8/10

For anyone curious for more, INK has just released a sequel album on October 15th of this year entitled Welcome To Horrowood: The Silver Scream 2. In my opinion, it surpasses this album in almost every way, and that's saying a lot considering how much I enjoyed the Silver Scream. Thanks for reading; if you have music you want me to review, email me at cjones19@eak12.org :)

Cold Heart

By Ashlyn Houghton

My name is Amelia. I am a loner. I have no friends- except my best friend, Julia. While in class, I stay in the back; I never talk unless I have something to say, which is almost never. I am seen as the oddball, the one that will never fit in. But that all changed when I met a guy. *The* guy, to be more specific.

BEEP BEEP BEEP. My 6:00 alarm starts ringing.

No. I think. *It's too early to get up today. Why on Earth does school have to exist?* Oh well. I know complaining about it won't get me that far. Grumbling under my breath, I grope along the top of the clock until I hit the off tab. Slipping out of bed, I head downstairs, smelling the aroma of freshly baked muffins drifting up the stairs. *Yum, my favorite,* I think as I step down the rest of the stairs and enter the kitchen. There on the table were my mom's famous chocolate chip muffins. I start to stride over to the table to get some when I see a little hand reaching over the table, plucking three, and disappearing back under. It's my little brother, Alex. Hurriedly, so as not to lose any more to my brother, I grab one and head back upstairs, even though I am breaking the number one rule of the house: No food upstairs. It doesn't matter though, because I'm in a rush to get out the door. As I'm crossing the corridor to the bathroom to brush my teeth, I feel my phone buzzing in my pocket. Without looking at the caller ID I know it's Julia. I pull out my phone and answer it.

"Ayo what up, Julia?" I ask, hoping she catches on. There is a pause on the line before I hear a small laugh, then her reply.

"Ayo what's up!"

“No seriously, what’s up?”

“Nothing much. Just wondering if you were on the bus today?”

“Heck yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I honestly have no idea.” There is a pause in there for a few seconds. I don’t hear anything from the other line and get a bit worried that she hung up on me before she says,

“Well, I guess that’s that. See you later!”

“Yup, see you!” I hang up and continue my interrupted routine.

When I head back downstairs, I am the only one left in my house. My mom has already left, taking my brother with her and dropping him off at school. I get ready and, throwing my backpack over my shoulder, head out the door and into the sunny morning. As I walk down my driveway, my thoughts are running awry. I’m not sure about what, exactly, but I keep seeing this man. Tall, muscular, with hair black as the night sky, eyes dark chocolate brown. A beautiful, wide smile that lights up a room. Sadly, though, he doesn’t exist. I don’t think I will ever meet someone like him. I sit on the curb, waiting for the bus, reading my book of faraway places. Soon enough, the bus pulls around the corner, halting at the curb. I stand, tucking my book under my arm, and mount the bus stairs. I look around for Julia and spot her, sitting in our normal seat. I slide in next to her. We don’t talk much on the ride, but I do tell her about the weird visions of the guy I saw. Afterward, she is silent for a few minutes then says,

“Amelia, I don’t even know what to say. Do you think there is a possibility that there could be someone like that?”

“No, Julia. I know there’s not. This guy that I’m seeing is too perfect to be real.”

“Oh well, I was really hoping.” The conversation stops there and silence comes once more.

Once we get off, I head inside and over to my locker, grabbing my History binder. I head over to the classroom and almost run right into my teacher. *Oh right, we have a history test today. Good thing I studied though.* I take the test from the teacher and head over to my desk to start working on it. As I finish my test, I hear the door creak open and footsteps walk over to the teacher. I slowly look up and almost gasp out loud. There, talking to the teacher is a tall, muscular boy with black hair and, although I can’t really see them, eyes like dark chocolate. It is the same boy from the visions I had this morning. *What does this mean? Is there a specific reasoning?* I am still thinking about it as I finish my test and go to the teacher, handing it to her, my backpack over my shoulder. The bell rings then; I head out of class and to my locker, Julia behind me. As I’m walking through the hallway, my shoulder runs into someone and I fall, my binder slipping from my hands and papers flying everywhere.

My face turns bright red as, together, Julia and I start picking up my papers and putting them in my binder. Suddenly someone else is there too, helping us. I look up and, lo and behold, it's the boy from History class. He hands the rest of my papers to me, concern in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asks, his voice deeper than I expected it to be. He extends his hand to me and I take it, allowing him to help me up.

"Yes, thank you." I can feel my heart pounding in my chest and I have a feeling that he can hear it too.

"Alright, just making sure you're okay. My name is Jackson by the way."

"Amelia."

"See you around, Amelia!" he says over his shoulder as he walks away from me. I turn to Julia, smiling.

"What's up? You're blushing and smiling like an idiot right now." she said. I knew that I was, but I didn't care. All I could think about was that I had found someone that apparently likes me; which is strange because I haven't really known anyone like that other than Julia. Something stuck out to me about him. He was very mysterious and reserved. It was as if he was hiding something. The rest of the day, I tried to figure out what on earth this boy was hiding, but I couldn't do it.

On the bus home, I sit with Julia, although neither of us talks at first. I was too busy thinking about the mysterious boy Jackson. My thoughts were soon interrupted as Julia says from beside me,

"Didn't it feel like there was something off about Jackson? I can't seem to put a finger on it but I swear, I felt something odd." *So it wasn't just me then if Julia felt it too.* I don't reply and the conversation ends there. The bus soon pulls up by my driveway; I wave to Julia and leave the bus, still lost in thought. I still can't put a finger on what was off about Jackson. Oh well, this isn't worth it. It will be a mystery to be unsolved. Boy was I wrong. That night, falling asleep, I remembered something that I noticed about Jackson and sat bolt upright. I can't believe I forgot about it. It was a little detail but when we smiled at me, I saw a peek of inhuman pointed teeth. Jackson is a vampire! I consider texting Julia, but because it's so late at night, I decide against it. I don't know what to do now. I'm nervous that if I go back to school, something could happen; it could endanger me. Oh well. I guess this is my life now and there is nothing I can do about it.

Halloween Kills Movie Review (WARNING: SPOILERS)

By Jack Accurso

Pacing: Is the story spread out well, and not forcing anything?

Story: Am I gonna be bored of this or is it actually interesting?

Acting: Do I connect with the characters? Do I understand what they're going through?

Antagonist: Is this character well-written?

Score: If I watch this without the audio will it be better or worse?

Cinematography: Is it beautiful looking?

Editing: Are the shots and angles used well in this movie to convey themes?

Climax: Does the climax live up to the building tension

Rewatchable: Do I ever see myself wanting to watch this movie again?

Style: Does it live up to its genre? If it's horror does it scare well, if it's action how are the action scenes?

Total: Each category is ranked 0/10, with the highest score together being a 100%

Review

The Halloween Saga first began in a small town called Haddonfield in 1978. From the first movie, the series has gone on to produce 8 sequels, 2 reboots, and 1 recalibration. It has one of the most diverse timelines in horror movie history, all centering around one famous killer, Michael Myers. A reboot was made for the series in 2007 and a sequel to that film in 2009. Both didn't do as well as predicted at the box office, forcing the series to lie dormant for 9 years. In 2018 the saga was recalibrated, making this new timeline only centered around the original 1978 film, with the 2018 Halloween film going by the same name. And now we have this 2021 sequel, Halloween Kills. The studio plans to make one more film by the name Halloween Ends and will finally see the end to Michael Myers.

Focusing on this new film, Halloween Kills, I have to say in my personal opinion, it did not live up to what I wanted it to be. Following the surprisingly good 2018 film, with an ending that worked really well and the character arc perfectly made between Michael and Laurie, this new film took that and threw it out the window. Jamie Lee Curtis is barely in this movie and to market it where you bring back all of the original characters from the first movie, those being Tommy Doyle, Lindsay Wallace, Marion Chambers, and a side character with only one line in the original film, Lonnie. The writers even go so far as to make Lonnie more of an important character by making him the father of Cameron, just to then kill him offscreen.

The pacing was done decently well in this movie and was pretty well spaced. However, the story was done not as well as I would have liked, but it was a decent story, despite a dumb side plot where another escaped mental patient was mistaken for Michael Myers even though they look nothing alike. The acting was decent at best but with no Jamie Lee Curtis, this movie just didn't have the drive that the previous film had. And speaking of characters, the antagonist in this movie is horrible as well, because now apparently Michael Myers is no longer a man but has the same powers as undead Jason Voorhees.

The score is amazing but then again it is the same track used in the 1978 film which is one of the most iconic horror scores in history. The cinematography is ok, and the settings are shot decently well, making Haddonfield more of a real place, but it still doesn't stand out, unlike other movies. The editing was fine until the end, where some of the choices were a bit strange to add in, but the climax did live up to where it wanted to go, finally bringing the people together to take down Michael, except for it to all go nowhere and make him immortal now, making the ending utter garbage.

In the end, I would say this movie is rewatchable, but I would not pay money to see it again. The horror elements involved are pretty well done, but it was not what I was expecting. Hopefully, the next film, Halloween Ends, will finally bring an end to this saga with 40 years of films involved.

Ranking

Pacing: 4/10
Story: 4/10
Acting: 5/10
Antagonist: 6/10
Score: 6/10
Cinematography: 3/10
Editing: 6/10
Climax: 5/10
Rewatchable: 3/10
Style: 7/10

Total Score: 49%