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The Woman at the Top of the Bridge
10th Grade
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“Funny running into you here,” were the first words the young, porcelain-like woman said as she took a seat on the bench next to Alina.

The woman looked no older than twenty-five, with pale skin that shimmered under the sunlight. Her raven hair was long and stringy, like she’d just gotten out of the shower. However, it wasn’t the woman’s hair that stood out to Alina: it was her eyes. They were two dark orbs that engulfed Alina’s soul into an abyss of darkness. Despite their eerie sense of gloom, Alina couldn’t stop herself from staring at them. There was something about the woman’s stare that was odd. Perhaps it was the absence of dark bags that displayed imperfection, or maybe it was the missing speck of light that signified vitality. They looked barren, robbed of their form of humanity. The lifeless gaze followed Alina everywhere she went, judging her every move.

“Why are you here?” Alina’s stare took an interest upon the sidewalk. There was a moment of silence, and the only thing Alina could hear was the woman’s gentle breathing.

“I want to help you,” the woman’s raspy voice finally replied. Alina closed her eyes, as a gust of wind lifted her curly locks from her face. She felt at peace there—sitting next to the woman. It was the first time in a long time she had felt that kind of tranquility. She opened her eyes and found herself facing the smiling woman, who was now standing in front of her.

The woman offered a fragile hand for her to take. Alina regarded the hand with a certain interest. The woman had long, slender fingers, with faded nails. They looked healthy and refined, freshly dipped in the fountain of youth. She gazed up at the woman, who was illuminated by a beam of daylight that forged the appearance of an angel sent down by God. Alina took her hand and followed her to the concrete railing of the bridge.

The view was outstanding, nothing that she had ever witnessed. The railing looked over an immense lagoon ringed by a forest of spring trees near the shoreline. There was a pleasing carol coming from a giant V of migrating birds in the sky. The sun was just beginning to sink, creating a blend of warm colors in the horizon. Alina wondered why she hadn’t been to that part of town before. The experience was simply

wonderful, everything from the sounds of the water clashing against the shore to the essence of freshwater and blooming daisies. She absolutely loved it.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” the woman asked.

“It’s wonderful... I’ve never experienced anything like it...” Alina exhaled.

“I’m glad you like it,” the woman smiled and looked out into the body of water.

Alina turned to the woman and took a moment to examine her expression. She looked empty and emotionless—like someone had stolen her sense of existence. She looked dead, a tragic yet beautiful form of mortality.

“Why are you following me?” Alina questioned, feeling a burning sensation in her eyes.

“Like I said,” the woman looked at Alina. “I want to help you,” she smiled and took her hands. A tear escaped from Alina’s eye and trailed down to her mouth. She bit her lip tensely, tasting the saltiness. She couldn’t contain it any longer. Her melancholia was chipping away at her soul little by little. Alina broke down with a heavy cry and fell to her knees in front of the woman. Her sobs grew uncontrollable, and soon enough they enveloped her whole. As much as it hurt, she could not let the feeling go. It was the sensation of its heaviness that comforted her and nurtured her spirit. It was the only thing she was used to feeling. It was her home. Alina’s weeps diminished until all she had left were shallow gasps of breath. Letting her demons loose consumed all of her energy.

At that moment, her phone began ringing inside the pocket of her sweater. She removed the device and looked at the caller. It was her sister. She glanced back at the woman, who shook her head. The ringing stopped, and the call went to voicemail. Her sister’s voice spoke, it sounded like she was trying not to cry, “Alina... If you’re there, please, come back home,” there was a pause and a gasp for air. “Mom is worried sick about you, she really wants to know if you’re okay. We’ve been looking everywhere for you. Please, I love you,” and the voicemail ended.

Alina sat in silence, hoping the woman would say something, but she didn’t. She leaned back on the railing and hugged her knees. She focused on the other side of the horizon where the moon was now setting into place.

“Well?” the woman asked after a few minutes went by. “What do you suggest we do?”

Alina shrugged. She was not in the mood for thinking logically, and she was exhausted.

“You know I’ll always be here for you, right?” the woman noted.

“I know. You’re always here,” Alina said, although her words didn’t sound exactly comforted. The woman was a stalker, always present in Alina’s shadow, waiting for a chance to strike. The woman took a seat a few feet away from Alina.

“You can’t run away from it, but I can help you.”

“I know I can’t... But I have to try,” Alina replied, banging the back of her head on the concrete railing.

“I can help you, you just have to trust me,” the woman repeated. Alina counted the specks of brightness in the sky to calm herself. She had always wondered how it was that people visualized shapes in the constellations. All she ever saw were just dots of light scattered about. However, today, for the first time ever, she was able to connect those dots. It was the figure of a cardinal flapping its boundless wings and wandering across the universe free of obstacles. It brought a warm feeling to her chest—something she’d felt back when she wasn’t numb to the world. Maybe it was a sense of awakening, maybe it was because she wished to become the bird, or maybe it was her first peek at sentience.

“You’re not alone, I promise,” the woman suddenly said. Alina offered a small smile and turned towards the woman.

“Thank you,” she murmured softly.

“Let me help you,” the woman repeated. Alina turned back to the sky and shut her eyes. She took a breath that profoundly filled her lungs and then emptied her body of air. All of her worries, all of her problems, all of her demons, everything was out.

“Okay.” The woman stood up and helped Alina to her feet. She placed both her hands gently on Alina’s shoulders and turned her to face the lagoon.

“Just look, all of this beautiful nature, all of this peace, it can be yours. It’s all just one step away.” Alina looked onto the dazzling landscape and nodded. She finally felt at harmony with the world. She had finally reached nirvana. She turned back to peer at the woman who still held an expressionless face. She took another breath and felt her body loosen.

“It’ll be okay, I promise,” the woman smiled, a wistful smile. This was it. It was her time. She knew it. She felt a sense of relief, as though a sudden weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She would finally be able to be free. She would finally be able to forget her struggles. Her mind would finally be at peace, like she’d always wish for it to be. She could finally become the cardinal.

Her muscles relaxed, her breathing slowed, she closed her eyes, and she let her body drop. A sudden rush of ecstasy engulfed her whole being. It was a mix of hysteria and anticipation all over her skin, like she was teetering at the towering edge of a rollercoaster. She opened her eyes to look back at the woman at the roof of the bridge, but she was gone. It’ll be okay; the woman’s voice rang inside her head. However, just as fast as the euphoria had consumed her, it was gone. All that was left was the immense feeling of regret, but, like everything else, it was too late.