

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BEARWITIKA

by
SALWA SUMMER MANSOUR

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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at the American University of Beirut

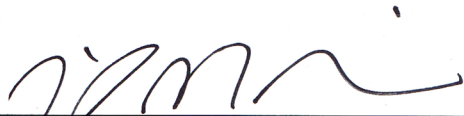
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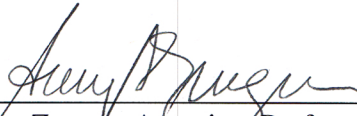
by
SALWA SUMMER MANSOUR

Approved by:



Dr. Jennifer Marie Nish, Assistant Professor
Department of English

First Reader



Dr. Amy Zenger, Associate Professor
Department of English

Second Reader

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Salwa Summer Mansour for Master of Arts
Major: Transnational American Studies

Title: Bearwitika

Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch.

Write with your tongues on fire.

– Gloria E. Anzaldua

Throughout the courses I have taken for my degree, I have participated in multiple discussions on the significance of counternarratives: narratives that go against the popular and inaccurate portrayal of certain peoples as they fight back by telling their own stories. That was the first time I started to think of storytelling as a political tool. I remember the first American Studies reading that ever truly resonated with me; it was Gloria E. Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In her book, she says:

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture's views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it's a step towards liberation from the cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.

The reason that quote, in addition to her celebration of the act of writing, resonated with me so much is due to the fact that I have always had a passion for writing children's books that are both imaginative tales as well as thought-provoking political tools. I find children to belong to an age group that is often disregarded as innocent or apolitical when they should have a place in discussions that concern them. Some children grow up with mental health issues or belong to a marginalized group of people and they deserve to read and talk about the issues that they face. Keeping that in mind, my coursework

also allowed me to explore the possibility that is provided by fantasy and fiction to extract current issues from their context and study them through other-worldly settings and plots. Writing is my way of acting and not reacting. Therefore, I decided to write my own children's story for my Master's project.

My story, *Bearwitika*, is targeted to children aged 9 and up. It is meant to raise children's awareness on important issues such as mental health, corporatization (explained below,) and many different forms of exploitation, as well as illustrate the immense amount of power they hold within them that enables them to change worlds in their own ways – and no way is too small to matter. I stress on the fact that even simply existing and breathing can sometimes be a very powerful act. The story is written with accessible language and fantastical imagery. Even complex issues can be introduced to children when presented through a relatable and engaging storyline.

The first question that popped into my mind as I explored the various possibilities of settings for my story was: what would the world look like with no corporations? It is worth noting that, for the purpose of this project, I use the word “corporation” in its popular form to signify a massive top-down structure that is profit-driven. In the story, *Bearwitika* is a corporation that exploits children's natural ability to create bear companions with their feelings and uses this phenomenon to exert their power and control over children. I call this the corporatization of feeling and consider it to be a phenomenon that is very present in our current world. To further explain my point, I will use the example of hunger as a political feeling. In situations such as hunger strikes or even eating disorders, hunger is no longer a natural human instinct; it is complexified and politicized in many ways. Body policing is a phenomenon that occurs in various forms all over the world. In one contemporary example, one might consider weight loss products that claim to control the feeling of hunger and induce feelings of fullness. In parallel to such products are clothes corporations that release limited sizing options and encourage unhealthy standards of health and beauty (In a 2006 interview with *Salon.com*, Abercrombie and Fitch's CEO claims not to carry plus sizes because the corporation caters to “cool kids.”) In that way, corporations that aim to control people end up feeding onto one another.

In the story, *Bearwitika* exploits children's feelings and triggers their release, then manufactures products that in turn control those very feelings being exploited. However, it is significant to note that it is not only corporations that can utilize feelings in “unnatural” ways. The children make a conscious decision to utilize their feeling of hunger as they protest the corporation with a hunger strike. They politicize their feelings to fight back against exploitation.

In addition to these themes, some important concepts, such as consent, are presented in the story through various interactions. The children are portrayed as complex and powerful and represent different kinds of personalities. As many of the children have mental health issues, I try to use imaginative descriptions and imagery to explain and describe their experiences.

I also make it a point not to romanticize one particular narrative of embracing “natural feelings” to find inner/societal peace. I specify that some children choose not to do

anything with their powerful feelings, which is perfectly fine. Ree, the therapist, offers help and mentorship even from within a problematic structure (a mental health hospital that embraces the new corporation.) The story focuses on the freedom to feel, utilize feeling, and maneuver problematic societal structures however desired instead of being policed in one way or the other. With solidarity and self-acceptance, the characters grow collectively and take over structures that once controlled them.

Note: This project is still a work in progress.

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*I feel, and that in itself is the melody of a thousand feet
Stomping on piano keys
Swinging on chords.
I feel all sorts of things.
Sometimes, my feelings escape me.
I feel nothing, but my nothing is loud.
Even in nothing are the sounds of
Slow and steady breathing
Soft bellies rising and falling.
For in whichever state I exist,
I know that no one
Can ever take away
The warm spot where my body lies.
I am here,
And till my very last breath
I will fight to be here.
On rainy days,
I will shut my curtains and stay where it feels safe
But my curtains are not white.
For I am fighting
Always
Even when I feel
Even when I do
Nothing.
And no one
Can ever take away
My choice
To be.*

PART 1 – NEYA

Gulp.

You take big, hasty gulps of ice-cold water. You take one gulp after the other till there is not a gulp-less inch left in your body, so that water simply shoots back out of your mouth like an orca's blowhole. You jump up and down and feel the water jiggle all over your belly.

Some feelings are born and raised inside your guts, and they're called "gut feelings." Once you've drunk all that ice-cold water and it's poured over your gut feelings, your belly becomes an aquarium. The feelings float and swim and sink in their new icy wonderland. You take a peek from your belly button and watch their marvelous multicolor scales glisten. You see, right there in your gut you'll find abilities you've never dreamed of having. Right there in your very own aquarium you'll find floating bundles of power beyond your imagination. Once you've realized what's stirring within you, you'll want to shout it out.

"HELLO? I THINK THERE'S AN AQUARIUM IN MY BELLY!"

But no one answers.

"HELLO? I THINK MY GUT FEELINGS HAVE RAINBOW SCALES!"

Nothing.

"HEL – oh, never mind."

Gulp.

What's happening? No one's listening and you're tired so now you're swallowing words instead of water. No one wants to peek into your belly button so you lower your shirt and stop jiggling.

Gulp.

Your guts are filling with air now. With every unspoken sentence you start to inflate. You're mistaken for a basketball as you float around and someone starts bouncing you up and down.

"Excuse me? I'm not a – oh, never mind."

Gulp. Bounce.

One day, just when you've thought you could not possibly be any rounder or airier, you hear something in the distance. It's the voice of someone that knows about the rainbow

scales. Someone is telling you that they know, without even peeking, that you hold a world of wonders within you. The voice echoes:

“You are so much more powerful than you’ve been made to believe.”

Relieved, you release a long sigh. As you blow the sigh out, it just keeps blowing out until you’re flying all over the place like a punctured balloon. At the very end of your deflating, right when you think you’re about to plop to the ground and crack your skull, something soft and furry breaks your fall.

There was a time when children had to resort to unprecedented extremes to entertain themselves. Their main sources of entertainment were anything from twigs, berry tree leaves, sheep's fleece, and pebbles to...slightly less sanitary items. It was the age of lone backflips on riverbeds and hair braids that braided on for unspeakable lengths.

"I'm bored."

"Braid your hair."

"I'm tired."

"Count sheep till you fall asleep."

"I'm mad!"

"Bang your head against a tree stump till the feeling's gone."

"I'm happy!"

"Stick feathers onto your arms and flap around."

It is safe to say that children had little chance to express their deepest, sincerest feelings. Even as they flapped and braided and counted and banged, they were left with no companionship. Bodies were busy and friends were null and feelings were swallowed. There were no schools, no parks, and no amusement centers. Children were born into the world, taught whatever material was provided by their guardians, and contained until they were old enough to let go of their fidgety legs and racing minds. That was when they were able to go out, socialize with fellow adults, work, and experience the world - but with a soul that was practically destroyed. Sure, adults could still feel, but feeling as an adult was like looking at the world through a blurry lens.

Such was the way of the world and no one thought it would ever change.

That was, of course, until one child dared to look straight into her heart when told time and time again that there was nothing to see there.

It is worth mentioning that this particular child was no hero – not as heroes are often portrayed with their capes flung in the faces of lesser folk. You see, this child just happened to be the first one to figure out the secret that she and all her fellow children held inside them for so long. She is special, beautiful, one of a kind, and there is no one like her - and that could be said about every child that exists, so here's to the millions of stories that are left untold. For now, let's unravel Neya's.

Neya was a bright buzzing bee. Her flaming red curls were the mark of her personality: vibrant, alive, and unapologetic.

She had bright brown eyes, a strong wide nose, and a dimple on her right cheek. The dimple was very frequently in motion, for Neya had a lot to say. As one might imagine, it was harder to distract children like Neya from their buzzing minds and beating hearts. Neya always needed someone to talk to, someone to express her feelings to, and someone to listen. Unfortunately, as most interactions were saved for adulthood, the

adults barely had any interest in hearing out the children – especially the dreamers, talkers, and uncontrollable, curious little bugs.

Naturally, Neyya found herself to be quite lonely most of the time. She tried closing her eyes, scrunching her nose, and whistling till her whistles were louder than her thoughts. She tried skipping up and down the stairs till she could almost hear a conversation in her footsteps. She tried talking to the mirror, but no matter how long she did, her reflection failed to ever speak back.

Neyya's mother, Zareen, was a researcher. She continuously conducted one research study after the other in the pursuit of finding a pillow that provides the absolute perfect level of comfort. That was her passion and sole vision, and she secluded herself in her office for days on end along with her partners, Mia and Kari. Neyya, when feeling especially lonely, liked to press her ear against the office door and listen in on their squabbles.

“This can't be it. It can be more consistent. It's not perfect. Softer in the middle and more consistent at the edges.”

“What does it matter? As long as people *think* it's perfect.”

“They can be fooled for only so long.”

“No, no. We need something bigger. Something better. We can't do this...”

She hesitated.

“...any of this corporation business unless it's *perfect*. We need to think bigger. Maybe add a pattern here...”

Neyya understood that they aimed to do something that no one had ever done before.

What the perfect pillow was meant to do was reach audiences all across the world.

At the time, the products that people used were all created at a small, local level. Soaps, clothes, bread, toothbrushes, paper, and basically everything one could ever *need* was found in local shops and produced in the cheapest and easiest ways in every town or city. People used hand-made automobiles, bikes, boats, and even hot air balloons for transportation. Factories as known today simply didn't exist. People's needs were met this way, so no one ever really thought of doing it any other way.

Ever since Zareen was old enough to experience the world around her, she had a certain affinity to those thin green papers the bank so peculiarly called “money.” She liked the way they smelled, the way they felt, and always seemed to want more. She first started making her own money by opening a bed shop with Mia and Kari, two people who often joined her while staring in awe at the bank's money-printing machines. The three of them made bedframes, sheets, pillows, and quilts. But with time, their work was no longer satisfactory. They all wanted *more*.

Zareen then came up with what she deemed a brilliant idea. If she could manage to convince people that their sleeping was all wrong, that the ordinary pillow wasn't

enough and that she had the recipe for a perfect slumber, people would start to feel an emptiness inside them. They would feel that they lacked something that they didn't really *need*. That would be the start of something fantastic: profit. They would gain profit with incredible amounts of money, in addition to an incredible amount of control over people who would start to feel incomplete without the product they were selling.

Although it was a word she had never heard of before their conversations, not even when she sniffed the dusty old dictionaries, Neya knew what *corporation* meant. It was a word that sunk somewhere in her heart whenever she heard it, almost like her heart already had a place for when such a word was to be released. But it wasn't a pleasant feeling. It filled a space right next to that of her fear of the dark. It scared her that her heart had so many unfilled spaces, waiting for words and feelings that she was yet to experience.

When it came to her mother's potential corporation, Neya first assumed that they were trying really hard to help people, and a big structure that created an endless supply of pillows that reached people from all across the world seemed helpful enough. But deep down, Neya could feel that something wasn't quite right. The word didn't sit well in her heart. Nothing was ever that simple, especially when adults were talking about money with the door closed. That was when she realized what her mother was really planning on doing.

What Zareen first intended to do was create excitement - or as Mia called it, *hype*. The aim was to hype people up and get them all excited to wait for the perfect pillow to be released, then create it on a huge scale and sell it worldwide at a very high price. That way, people would have waited for it so long that they would buy it right away. In order to do this, Zareen was determined to find the recipe of perfection, one that is guaranteed to bring together all the people of the world into wanting the one product she had to sell.

In Neya's personal opinion, she found the idea of selling "perfect pillows" quite silly. If one had the chance to create so many copies of one thing, weren't there far more significant things to create? Then again, that's the trouble with adults - especially adults blinded by a cause that would benefit them alone. They wake up one day and decide the most ridiculous things, and depending on how powerful they are, they set their ridiculous plans in motion. Hence, spreadsheets studying the perfect level of fluff were scattered all across Neya's house.

All the technicalities made Neya's head hurt.

Zareen's constant quest for perfection made Neya feel down. She wished her mother would give her some attention. Once, Neya even went ahead and laid on her mother's bed, where the pillows were meant to be, and shouted, "Look! I'm the perfect pillow!" Her mother then simply looked at Neya and told her to go count to ten and breathe deeply if she felt so excited. She then showed Neya out the door and closed it behind her. Neya's heart ached, for she hated that she couldn't talk to anyone. She hated that she couldn't feel. She hated that she had to wait until she was older, for when her feelings became faded shades of grey instead of bright shades of purple, to be able to open her mouth and be heard.

On one particularly lonely afternoon, just after Zareen had stepped out with Kari to purchase new materials, Neyla found her feet leading her to her mother's office.

"Hello, office."

As she expected, the office offered no reply. Instead, it showcased its bookshelves that packed all the notes and folders one could ever desire on the pursuit of perfection. What is perfection? How could anything be perfect? What's the recipe for perfection?

Perfect.

Was it perfect for Neyla to be lonely, all the way until she was old enough to lose her fidgets and straighten her curls? Would she be the perfect child if only she would sit still and keep to herself?

Perfect.

Why did anything need to be perfect? Weren't things worthy of existing even when they were broken and covered in layers of rust?

Perfect. What an odd word anyway. Why is it *purrrrfect*, honoring a cat's purrs but not a dog's barks? Why not *wooffect*? Why not just *shhhfect* in honor of all the animals who were never granted a sound in the first place?

Neyla suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion. All the spaces of her heart, all the ones filled with emotion she couldn't contain and ones yet to be filled with more, became too heavy to bear.

She could feel these emotions starting to drip from her eyes, one at a time, as little droplets that bathed her rough cheeks. A few droplets turned to a whole bunch. A whole bunch turned uncontrollable. Neyla felt like she was in the process of a grand explosion. With every sob and scream and tear she let out, she felt blasts of fireworks escaping her mouth.

All those times she needed someone, all those times she had hoped to be perfect enough to be worthy of a conversation, they all came out of her in fountains of ocean water. As Neyla cried, she could sense herself feeling something she had never felt before: relief. As she was crying too hard to keep her eyes open, Neyla didn't immediately realize what was actually happening, nor did she realize just how relieved she was about to become.

In actuality, Neyla was in the process of something extraordinary.

What Neyla didn't realize was that she was making something. Just as her mother would mix flour and sugar and water and berries and salt and pepper and mint leaves all in a bowl in the hopes of creating something delicious (but oftentimes repulsive,) Neyla's buried feelings were the ingredients for this particular creation. Though the word *perfect* is a tricky one to use, since it has been used to make so many people feel bad about themselves, one might say that Neyla's feelings - the ones of loneliness and desperation and need for a friend - were the perfect ingredients. Every tear that fell from her cheeks formed the most beautiful thing that Neyla could ever wish for: a companion.

When Neya finally felt like her firework display was coming to an end, and she was calm enough to open her eyes again, she was in absolute shock at what was laying before her.

Looking back from the floor across from her, with the kindest eyes she had ever seen, was a bear. The bear was a bit smaller than Neya, with fuzzy square ears and a soft pink nose that looked a lot like a roasted marshmallow. The bear's fur resembled Neya's hair: it was a curly and fuzzy mess of brown ringlets. It looked like the softest and warmest thing Neya had ever seen in her life.

She wasn't frightened because she could sense that the bear had a lot to do with the relief she felt. Before she even opened her mouth, Neya felt the urge to dive to the floor and hug the bear so tightly.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"Hi, I'm Fos," the bear replied back, ever so casually. Neya wondered what a Fos was and how she was now looking at one and *what in the world just happened? And why do I feel so good?* Her mind was in flames with excitement and wonder.

"Fos? Where did you come from?"

"You," Fos said as she poked Neya's nose.

"Me?"

"You made me."

"How did I...make you?"

Fos giggled. "I'll try to do a better job at explaining. It's been a while and none of us have had any hope of ever seeing the light so we never really rehearsed a speech." She paused. "Actually, I may have prepared one just in case. Yes, it was right after that unfortunate pillow incident with your mother. Let's see..." Fos closed her eyes and thought so hard her fur started to fall out in clumps. Finally, about five minutes later, she peeped, "Aha! Yes. Here we go..." and then she gently spoke:

"I am a friend that is here to ease your darkest feelings and celebrate your brightest ones. You have been feeling a great deal of loneliness, so here I am. It is not just you with the ability to create a friend in times of need. Every child, when allowed the opportunity to truly *feel* their emotions instead of swallowing them, can find a friend within them. If a child is feeling sad, they can make the funniest bear that could ever exist. If a child is frustrated, they can make a bear that offers a soothing touch. We are all inside of you and we are all here to help you *feel*. We are bears with a cause, and as soon as you realize the true potential of your feelings, you will never be alone again. You are so much more powerful than you've been made to believe."

As Fos spoke, Neya was dazed. She didn't quite understand everything she said, but what she did understand was that she was able to create a bear this whole time. She couldn't believe that all along, children like her held the power to create the most magnificent things. She felt like laughing, so loud, on the highest rooftops for all to

hear. She felt like breaking all the nonsense rules adults had created and rushing to the children of her neighborhood and screaming: *Look inside you!*

“Bear with a cause,” Neyya whispered.

Fos smiled and nodded, shrugging like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Neyya smiled back, held her head in her hands, and laughed. She had never been so happy in her whole life. She was having a conversation, she was holding a friend, and all of this had happened because she cried.

“How long have you been waiting in there?” Neyya asked.

“Too long. I can’t tell you how proud I am to be out here. We must tell all the children.”

“How do I do that? How could I talk to all the children?”

“Remember, you are so much more powerful than you’ve been made to believe. You have a voice that reaches corners that the universe didn’t even know existed.”

Neyya smiled. “This is wonderful.”

As beautiful as this moment was, even the purest of moments are not immune to the rapid turn of a doorknob.

“What in the world do you call this?” Zareen asked as she looked down at Neyya sitting on her office floor. But wait, she was sitting there with...*a bear?*

“What is happening?! Why are you in here?” Zareen asked nervously. “Who is this?”

Neyya looked up at her mother. She quickly realized that she was far too thrilled to be affected by any cold glare that could be thrown her way.

“This...is my friend.”

Fos smiled and waved. “Hi.”

Zareen didn’t seem to comprehend, so Neyya stood up and said, “Fos told me that I could have created her long ago, if only I had been allowed to feel. But you never let me.”

Zareen blinked back. “You’re telling me that you...*made* something? A bear...friend thing?”

“Yes.”

Neyya walked up with Fos and headed towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I want to talk to Fos now. I want to know all about the bears with a cause.”

Zareen was in awe. She was too shocked to stop Neyya, but stop her from what? Neyya had somehow created a friend? Neyya simply walked through the door with no further

interest in bugging her mother with questions, feelings, or desires? Neyya was...*perfectly* distracted? That was the moment when the true corporate bell within Zareen started ringing.

She could sense that she was onto something...something grand. She rushed to the door to catch up with Kari who was on her way home after their shopping trip.

“Kari!”

Kari turned around and saw her partner running to her, wide-eyed. “What?”

“Picture this: a bear. A bear friend. A friend that is specially made for children, one that keeps them in their rooms, keeps them contained with absolutely no efforts.” Zareen then put on her most corporate voice, just as she had always rehearsed for the day she would finally create a real live advertisement: “Tired of your children constantly bothering you with this and that? Tired of finding new ways to distract them? No more braiding, no more counting, no more banging! Try our one and only...BEAR FRIEND! The only product that can keep your child occupied for days and days and years on end!”

“Bear friend? Is it a pillow?”

“No! Forget pillows. Imagine creating thousands of these all over the world. People would realize that their children aren’t *perfectly* distracted without them, and they won’t be satisfied till they are.”

Kari paused for a bit. “How do we make them?”

“Neyya just made one. It can’t be that difficult.”

“*Neyya* just made one?”

“Forget that. We’ll figure it out.”

Kari looked into the distance and bit her lip, thinking hard. “If it could work, it’s brilliant.”

“It *is* brilliant! I’ve seen it with my own eyes! Come on, let’s talk inside.”

Once Mia was phoned, the three of them got together in the office and discussed the idea. They spent a total of five days locked in that room while brainstorming. They had everything down, from the advertising to the distribution. They located a plot of land that their factory could be built on. They created designs for machinery. Now, all that was left to figure out was exactly how Neyya had created Fos, and as soon as they got the recipe, they could set their plan in motion. They certainly should have thought of that *before* planning everything else, but no one said they were the brightest bunch.

As Zareen stepped out the office to talk to Neyya, she realized that she hadn’t heard from her the whole time she was working. This had never happened before, and served as proof for just how well her product could sell. Zareen’s mind was racing with excitement.

Zareen opened the door to Neya's room and found her on sitting in bed, deep in conversation with Fos.

"Neya, I need you to tell me how you made this thing."

Neya looked up at her mother. Now that her feelings were no longer trapped in her belly, she could feel a certain boldness that led her to look her mother straight in the eye without quivering.

"Her name is Fos. And I told you, I just felt."

"That's ridiculous. You felt? Felt what? What materials did you use?"

"My tears, I think." Neya didn't really care to speak to her mother about such matters, so she turned to her new friend for help. "Fos?"

Fos tried to explain. "It's not quite simple to understand what makes us. But it is something within every child, something innate and natural that they can figure out without truly understanding how. It's like a spider is born knowing how to weave. Children are born with such intense feelings that they can create marvelous things just by using them. It's truly a shame that they haven't been able to for so long. In fact, we were just talking about what we could do about that..."

Zareen wanted to punch Fos for even addressing her, but she was too taken aback to really move or do anything. She once again found herself helpless before the strange sight of her child and a bear. She hated feeling this way. She hated that something so strange was happening. She needed to understand it so that she could control it.

"Neya, tell me now how you did it."

But Zareen was completely ignored.

Neya and Fos walked up to the bedroom window and together opened it with all their might. Since Fos was created out of Neya's feelings of loneliness and a longing to be heard, she had the ability to raise Neya's voice to the highest volumes and have it reach people from all around, just like a giant megaphone. Neya carefully placed her head out the window. She cleared her throat and looked back at Fos for assurance. Once she saw her friend's warm eyes, she smiled, looked up at the sky, and began reciting Fos's initial speech:

"I am a friend that is here to ease your darkest feelings and celebrate your brightest ones. You have been feeling a great deal of loneliness, so here I am. You see, it is not just you with the ability to create a friend. Every child, when allowed the opportunity to truly *feel* their emotions instead of swallowing them, can create a friend to help them. If a child is sad, they can make the funniest bear that could ever exist. If a child is frustrated, they can make a bear that offers a soothing touch. We are all inside of you and we are all here to help you *feel*. We are bears with a cause, and as soon as you realize the true potential of your feelings, you will never be alone again. You are so much more powerful than you've been made to believe."

Her voice echoed through rooms where children had their eyes shut, their tongues tied, and their tapping feet held down. It reached children of all shapes and sizes, ones that thought they would never hear the voice of another child. They were staggered, flabbergasted, flabber-what-on-earth-is-happening, and they all started buzzing around; some panicked, some cried, some laughed, some ran, some jumped, some sang, and some screamed at the top of their lungs. All these children created their very own bear in the blink of an eye, the second their feelings started erupting from them like millions of volcanoes.

Throughout all this, Zareen was joined by Mia and Kari as they watched the dazzling display that Neyya had put on. They didn't have to see every child that heard Neyya's speech to sense the changes happening in the air.

"I don't know what we're witnessing," Mia mumbled, "but whatever it is, only children can do it."

"Only children," Zareen repeated in a choke.

Following that fantastic incident, it was nearly impossible to even attempt to contain children. Forget the days of being forced into corners and boxes; children were now exploring the worlds within them and making up for all the lost days of solitude. Basketball was left for basketballs, not airy, bouncy children filled with unspoken words.

Nonetheless, there is one crucial detail to mention. Even when provided with the opportunity to dig deep within them, some children simply couldn't, or wouldn't, get in touch with their feelings. Some suffered from a sadness that had become so enduring that they lost all ability to truly feel anything. Some were overly anxious and were terrified of the idea of anything living within them. Some had emotions that flipped too often for them to be able to get a hold of any one. Some children simply didn't desire a bear. And there were so many more children who just didn't, for whatever reason, create a bear. And that is wonderfully okay. The children who were able to create them set up huge, comfortable warehouses (called "bearhouses") where they donated their own bears, and any child that wanted a bear but was unable to create one could pick one up – free of charge.

These children grew to be exquisitely emotional adults and changed the way the world was colored for future generations.

Zareen, Mia, and Kari's legacy did live on, though. True, bees were born making honey for themselves, but that doesn't mean that they can't be tricked into making honey for humans instead. Natural phenomena can be exploited if only one can figure out the key. So the three of them started an underground group that called themselves the Bear Hunters whose sole aim was to figure out a way to exploit the bears and make them into a profitable product. Generation after generation, the Bear Hunters trapped themselves in rabbit holes of bitterness as children all around were slowly growing into a world of self-awareness.

PART 2 – MAYADA

Something really bad happened to you.

You sit there wondering how you could ever get past it. How could you stop it from replaying over and over again in your head? How could you forget the way it felt, the way it sounded, the way it seemed to shatter you into a million pieces and throw each part of you into a whirling blizzard?

How can you find yourself again?

You are overwhelmed with so many feelings.

Sadness. Guilt. Loneliness. Shame. Anger. Exhaustion.

Sometimes you feel like tearing down the walls of your bedroom and other times you feel like hiding in there till the floor swallows you whole.

Then suddenly, the floor does swallow you whole. It opens up, sucks you in, and closes over you. You find yourself tumbling down a dark slide of tree roots and worms. You tumble for what seems to be years so it gives you quite the time to ponder. You decide that you really do prefer white sauce over red sauce with pasta and that dragons *must* exist because where else do wildfires come from?

Once you've made these brilliant realizations, your fall comes to an end. You hit the ground and find...*what?* You're in a small dark chamber surrounded by nothing but black walls. There is just one small door that says "Exit" so you hesitantly walk towards it and turn the doorknob. You cautiously peek through and find your own bedroom occupied with none other than your own self, lying in bed and crying. You quickly close the door at that sight.

Nope.

You decide that this is probably where you need to be right now. You get comfy on the ground and start singing a little tune:

I don't know where I am

I'm a little bit hungry

And a little bit sad

But I have come to believe

That dragons are real

And so, there's real in me.

But then you hear something from behind your chamber's wall.

“Shhh. This is where we come to be alone, silently, together.”

*There's Something Behind My Nightstand but I Don't Care – An Original Poem by
Mayada*

I do not like:

Half-eaten apples

Unwelcome hugs

Books with no pictures

Hope

And cookie crumbs

Oh, and there's something behind my nightstand but I really don't care

Mayada

"Hurry up!" Mayada yelled from outside the front door as she stomped her feet and shivered in the crisp winter air. She buried her face in her coat and breathed heavy, impatient huffs. It was the first time in a long time that she had agreed to go out of the house since winter had started, and she was surprised to find herself feeling a little excited.

There were certain things she loved about the cold, like when her hands got frozen enough to sneak up behind her grandfather Cleo and shove them onto his cheeks while he yelped. She loved splitting icicles off of the rooftop and dropping them in Cleo's freshly-boiled coffee when he looked away. Mayada had the soul of a prankster.

What Mayada didn't love about the cold was waiting for her grandfather to put on layer upon layer of clothing. He piled on sweaters, scarves, coats, socks, and leggings till he looked like a walking pile of laundry.

"Better safe than sorry," he always said as he struggled not to choke on his scarves, "I've got double protection: sealed from the cold and sealed from cracking my bones on the ice."

Mayada remembered how, when she was younger, she used to run really fast and throw herself onto Cleo when he was dressed in all his winter clothes. She would bounce off and fall into the soft snow, giggling hysterically. For a second, Mayada was lost in these happy winter memories – that was until her thoughts were interrupted by a loud *whoomph!*

Cleo nearly fell face-down as he stumbled out of the house while putting his boots on.

"Did you see that right there? I wasn't even scared of falling." He patted the faux-fur coat buckled tightly around his belly.

"Double protection, got it." Mayada rolled her eyes and dragged him along the driveway. She was often warned by her grandfather that her hazel eyes would be forever stuck in an eye-roll, but she found that idea to be even more encouraging. With eyes forever rolling in her head like little balls, the world would certainly be more fun to look at. Mayada often found herself thinking odd things. Anyway, she was in a hurry today, and she didn't wish to waste any time on Cleo's self-admiration.

Mayada rushed ahead of Cleo and crossed the street to get to the small trail that was carved by neighborhood cyclists. It was off the road and went through the forest nearby.

"It might be too icy out there," Cleo called as he stood behind. "Let's just take the sidewalk, it'll lead us straight there."

"For someone who looks so funny, you're no fun today."

Cleo glared into Mayada's mischievous eyes. "Alright, alright. But every time you trip on a rock or a pile of snow, I wrap you with a scarf. Challenge accepted?"

Mayada giggled. "Challenge accepted."

They walked carefully down the snowy trail. Mayada walked in the front and cleared

the tree branches out of Cleo's way since he could barely move his arms. Cleo watched his granddaughter waddle in front of him as her short black hair swished from side to side. He playfully kicked a pile of snow her way to make her trip, then hugged her from behind and wrapped a scarf around her head.

"Hey!" she laughed and ran ahead. Cleo smiled lovingly. He was so joyful to see life blossom from his granddaughter, especially after seemingly endless days of gloom.

Mayada often felt something quite heavy. It was close to sadness, but bigger and darker and clingier. It wasn't a small sadness, one she could grab in her palm and throw out the window. It wasn't a sadness that she could think away or joke away. It felt like a large rock that was always tied to her chest, or a thunderstorm that was always rumbling over her head. When she was around eight years old, a grey cloud started to form around her and she slowly watched it grow. She realized that her dark thoughts fed the cloud, but she couldn't control them. They popped into her mind no matter how hard she pressed her eyes shut.

Why do bad things always happen to me?

It's all my fault.

When it would all become far too heavy to bear, she would find comfort in nothing but her cozy bed, with all curtains closed and lights out. Cleo would bring her cookies and read her stories, but when she slipped back under the covers and pulled them over her head, he left her alone. He never forced her to get up, to turn on the lights, or to smile – even though Mayada's smile was the one thing in the world that Cleo always longed for. Sometimes, when Mayada felt like it, she would spend days with her grandfather, joking and laughing and eating her favorite foods. The rock was still tied to her chest and the thunderstorm was still rumbling, but it was bearable. As much as he enjoyed those days, Cleo always knew that they were temporary. He knew that they would soon be gone and Mayada would quietly walk back into her bedroom and close the door. Cleo would stand at the door and give it a gentle kiss, not knowing what else to do. He knew how difficult it was for Mayada when she felt this way and he wanted to allow her the space to just...feel.

He knew that it was not always the right thing to do. He knew that a responsible adult would have scorned him for allowing her to wallow in bed whenever she felt like it. He could almost hear his own soft voice filling the emptiness in Mayada's bedroom with words he couldn't bring himself to utter.

"Get up, honey. Let's build a birdhouse!"

But he just couldn't force Mayada to do something she didn't feel like doing, even when he knew it would eventually help her.

He hoped that one day she would become comfortable enough to speak her sadness, or run to her grandfather like she did when she was younger and mutter the words he wished to hear:

"I need help."

Just like he showed her how to tie her shoelaces, he would show her how to catch sunrays without getting burnt. But he knew that this was wishful thinking. He couldn't help Mayada with something so twisted and tangled, and he needed to stop hoping that it would all just go away.

He once suggested to Mayada that she create a bear in hopes that a friend would be able to help her in ways that he couldn't. But Mayada was never comfortable with her sadness and couldn't focus on it long enough to create one. That was when Cleo decided to try having her visit the bearhouse, where children dropped off their bears for others to pick up, for her eleventh birthday. And that was how Mayada crept out of her bed that morning and, to Cleo's delight, woke him up with a small yet beautiful lopsided smile.

Cleo had decided that if a bear friend couldn't help Mayada, and her situation continued to worsen, he would have to put an end to his wishful thinking and resort to Baybell, a children's mental health hospital that was located a few miles away from where they lived.

Baybell was a hospital where children who suffered from pain that couldn't be spotted on x-rays could go and rest as they received care and treatment. Sometimes they heal, sometimes they learn that they have nothing to heal from. Cleo hated the idea of sending Mayada away, but he knew that he couldn't leave her like this forever, and he knew that the hospital had helped many of his young friends. Little Luna, who delivered her freshly baked cookies to all the neighbors every Wednesday, had spent almost six months at Baybell before she was well enough to rediscover the joys of eating.

Mayada turned around as she waddled and blew a playful kiss to her grandfather as he struggled to walk in his clothes. He always knew Mayada was having a good day when her spunk had the front-row seat in her heart. Gentle eye-rolls and pranks were always warm signs of his granddaughter lifting the blanket off of her and peeking from under the sheets. He cherished these days so deeply.

Cleo was so lost in thought that he was startled to see the bearhouse come to view at the side of the trail. They took watchful steps through patches of snow to reach its humble entrance.

"Well, here we are."

Mayada looked up at the bearhouse. It was a large structure and she felt very small when she stood before it, but she didn't feel scared at all. In fact, she felt like she could just jump onto it and blend into its splendid colors. It was made of a jumble of walls that didn't seem to clearly start or end anywhere in particular, and every wall was a different and lovely shade of lavender. The bearhouse had tall windows from which she peeked inside and saw bears sipping tea in front of the fireplace, bears taking naps on large fluffy pillows, and even some swinging from the chandelier. The place was full of all sorts of colors; some corners boomed with the colors of tulips and roses and others were colored like a wild hurricane. The place was also filled with children. Some had adults with them and were dropping off their bears, others were picking some up. There were seats and tables in the middle of the house where children were talking, and there were other seats a bit further away in which children seemed to be doing some afternoon

pondering.

Cleo gave Mayada a wink and gestured towards the entrance.

Mayada walked inside and was greeted by an echo of hello's and a wave of friendly smiles. She looked around her and felt so warm she had to take Cleo's scarf off her head, and it wasn't only because she was standing very close to the fireplace. It was a warmth stemming from the smiles she received; she felt the way she did when she was under her sheets eating her grandfather's cookies. It was the same kind of simple comfort that a space filled with friends offered. As Mayada walked through the place and watched all the bears, she felt like a toddler once again, wobbling around the living room as her grandfather cheered her on no matter how many times she fell. She felt like she could be wearing her giant green polka-dot bowtie and no one would laugh or stare.

Her eye let down a little teardrop, for she hadn't felt so warm in quite some time. She realized how much she had been wanting to be surrounded by more Cleo-like souls, to see for herself that the world around her wasn't bursting with monsters. She was suddenly filled with the hopeful thought that one of these bears could hug her worries away. Maybe, just maybe, a bear could keep her out of the dark this time, once and for all.

"I choose you," she quickly told a bear bouncing on a big blob of cookie dough.

"But I don't want to leave," the bear said matter-of-factly.

Mayada couldn't help her lower lip from quivering as she received the sudden rejection. The bear then stopped bouncing and smiled sympathetically.

"Don't be sad. I bet you'll find a bear waiting for someone just like you, with their suitcase packed and ready."

Mayada didn't want to force a bear to come home with her, not if they didn't want to. Bears were created to help children feel, but Mayada realized that they had feelings, too. She smiled and backed away from the bouncing bear.

Mayada and her twinkling eyes continued wobbling around. She knew each bear was created from a certain feeling, so every bear had something different to offer their friend. She decided that she wanted a fun bear, one that could make her laugh even when the loudest thunders were rumbling. Every time she approached a bear, she got a sense of what feeling the bear released. Some made her feel instantly calm, others made her feel giddier.

Mayada walked towards one of the bears hanging upside down from the chandelier. She couldn't get a clear sense of what the bear offered, but she decided that the bear *must* be fun to like hanging upside down.

"Hello."

The bear opened one eye. "Hi."

"I'm Mayada. I'm looking for a friend."

“I’m Meesi. I’m looking for a home.”

“Would you come with me?”

Meesi gracefully hopped off the chandelier. “Most certainly, my little snowflake.”

Mayada was thrilled at how easily it was going. “Do you have a suitcase?”

“The only thing I carry is the knowledge in my fluff,” Meesi said as she proudly stomped towards the door.

“Oh.” Mayada quickly followed and dragged Cleo along with her.

As they all walked home, Cleo trudged behind so Mayada and Meesi had space to bond. Mayada jumped in the puddles that had formed from the early morning rain and melting snow.

Meesi rushed and held Mayada back. “No, you mustn’t jump in puddles. It’s unclean.”

“How else would I walk in the rain?” Mayada asked, shocked at the notion of clean, dry shoes with such fun puddle weather.

“Walk *over* puddles. Like this.” Meesi glamorously demonstrated a clean, dry (and boring, as Mayada would have added) walk.

“But I love getting my feet wet then warming them over the fire.”

Mayada frowned. Meesi didn’t seem as fun as she had hoped, but she figured she must have just hung upside down for a little too long. Maybe she needed some time to warm up.

When they arrived home, Cleo plopped down on the couch.

“What a walk! Great job, Cleo, you did swell.” He attempted to pat himself on the back and closed his eyes for a quick snooze.

Mayada ignored the spectacle of her grandfather and rushed to the kitchen.

“I’m starving!” she shouted as she grabbed a handful of grapes. She stuffed both sides of her mouth till her cheeks were practically exploding.

“No! Eat one at a time. That’s just...no,” Meesi said disgustedly.

“But...I’m a chipmunk.”

Mayada swallowed silently. She loved being a chipmunk, and you certainly can’t be one unless you fill your whole mouth at once. Meesi was turning out to be somewhat of a bore.

“I suppose I’ll just go to my room, then.” Mayada said as she slid down the tiled floor with her socks, just as she always did when Cleo had the rugs put away for washing.

“Uff, you’ll get your socks dirty. How about some tea?”

“Tea?” Mayada paused and stared back at Meesi.

“Yes. I have all sorts. Do you like mint?” Meesi started to scrummage through her big ears.

Mayada looked at her suspiciously. “Excuse me Meesi, but are you not a fun bear?”

“Fun?” Meesi giggled. “I once bored a bear to burst stitches. No, I am *proper*. My friend Deeli created me when he discovered his passion for tea gatherings at brunch.”

“Brunch? But you were hanging from the chandelier...”

“I was practicing becoming an inanimate object. It takes a great deal of self-control.”

Mayada frowned at the prospect of brunch and self-control.

“But I want to be happy, not drink tea.”

Mayada’s statement was followed with silence. Meesi finally walked up to Mayada and held out her hand. Mayada clutched it and felt something small drop in her palm.

“I’m afraid the kind of happy you need you will not find in me.”

Meesi walked towards the door. Cleo got up from the couch once he fully realized what was happening. His snooze had been interrupted by the (glorious) sound of grapes bursting in Mayada’s mouth, and he had been watching the interaction with a growing sense of dismay. Meesi shook Cleo’s hand. “It was an utmost pleasure.”

She then turned towards Mayada and said, “Why don’t you come back to the bearhouse with me? I think I know just the bear for you. Noona...she’s a circus performer.”

Mayada looked back at Meesi. There was something different about her eyes this time.

This will never work.

I was an idiot to think it would.

She walked down the hall - without sliding - and went into her bedroom. Once she closed the door behind her, she heard Cleo say, “Maybe some other time, Meesi. Great to meet you. Need a ride?”

She still had her palm bolted tight around whatever Meesi had given her. She could feel her face starting to get wet, so she shut her eyes and dropped Meesi’s gift behind her nightstand then turned out the lights.

“She’s never been inside for this long. I don’t know how she’s still breathing the air in there. It must be contaminated. No, no shower yet.”

Mayada had her ear pressed against the door. She could hear Cleo on the phone with someone but was unsure who it was. He had been phoning someone and talking about Mayada for the past few days.

She sniffed her shirt. She hadn’t showered in about a month, but she didn’t see the big deal. She smelled just about as pleasant as she felt. The thought of a shower made her whole body shake in horror. She really couldn’t be bothered to clean herself when it was the very last of her worries that she smelled like a rotting bowl of tomatoes.

She stepped over the crumbled-up papers that covered her bedroom floor and got back into bed. She had discovered her passion for poetry writing during her seclusion – in addition to her passion for throwing away every poem she wrote.

I feel like a goat

One with no sound

Stuck on a boat

Waiting to drown.

*

I wish I could unstuff myself

From all my stuffing

And lay flat on the ground

Like an oily pancake.

*

Gramps, gramps

Go away

Come again when I feel okay.

It was as if that incident from a month ago, the one with Meesi, had been Mayada’s very last straw. She was done trying to get out of this awful mood she was trapped in. She was done trying to fight back against the thoughts in her head. The thoughts, the memories, the bad feelings...she let them all take over.

Everything I touch turns to

Spoiled eggs.

There were instances when Mayada felt like she was just being horribly lazy and idiotic. She figured that there were so many people in worse situations than she was and who didn't have a warm and loving grandfather at their door, and still they were out there. And there she was, shutting life out.

SNAP OUT OF IT! SNAP SNAP SNAP!

But she couldn't.

No matter how many times she looked at herself in the mirror and mouthed the words *be okay*, it never really worked.

On this particularly drowsy day, as she curled up in her oversized red robe, she could smell the looming scent of change coming her way. As Cleo was speaking more and more on the phone each day, she heard a word being constantly repeated: Baybell. Mayada knew what Baybell was. She was well aware of Luna the Cookie Messenger's past with eating troubles that had led her there. A few of her friends had also gone there, and many of them had described it as a lovely resting home once they were out. Others had decided that Baybell wasn't what they needed to get better, and found other ways and places for healing.

Mayada also remembered Kyoo.

Kyoo's mother had admitted him to Baybell because he could not stop counting. His mind became consumed with numbers. He had to count every step he took, every muscle he moved, every breath he breathed. It became so consuming that he would wake up in a sweat every night after having terrifying nightmares about numbers and figures that were beyond his comprehension. He couldn't even live with his mind anymore; he couldn't even escape the counting in his dreams. He was absolutely miserable, and his mother hoped that Baybell would help him find some peace. However, after three short days of his departure, Mayada's neighborhood awakened to the sound of sobs echoing from behind an outdoors trash bin. Upon further inspection, Cleo found that Kyoo was hiding there, begging to be left alone.

"I hate it there. Please."

As his mother arrived to the scene, it became clear that Kyoo had escaped the hospital's garden when he was supposed to be taking a walk.

"He isn't ready," Cleo told Mayada as he went back inside the house after Kyoo was safely taken home. Mayada couldn't tell, but Cleo couldn't keep his eyes off of her as he set up breakfast that morning. His eyes were saying words that Mayada couldn't hear.

He isn't ready. And neither are you.

I wish, with every inch of me, that you were.

Mayada wondered what Cleo was talking about that day. What was Kyoo not ready for? She thought of her friend, heartbroken over how sad he seemed, but completely understanding of his feelings. She didn't want help, either. She couldn't possibly

imagine living her life any differently than she already was. Anyway, no one could possibly help her. She was far too broken to be mended, and she knew that Kyoo was feeling the exact same way as he hid behind that trash bin.

Mayada pulled her stained robe tighter around her chest as she got lost in her memories. She could still hear Cleo mumble on the phone outside her door, and a voice in her head kept repeating:

Stop, Grandpa.

When will he ever give up? She certainly had.

But she couldn't shake off the other voice in the back of her head. Though it was smaller and quieter, it was still nagging at her like a little poodle with a big bark:

I need help, Grandpa.

PART 3 – BAYBELL

“This place is made just for you. It’s going to make you feel so much better,” they say.

But you don’t feel better.

“Drink this. It will make your worries go away,” they say.

But your worries don’t go away.

“Try standing on your head. It worked for me,” they say.

But it doesn’t work for you, so you look the other way. There’s a tall table with a beautiful crystal bottle laying on top of it. It has the word *happiness* encrypted into its gem-like structure. A group of glamorous people are huddled around it in the sunlight, laughing and taking turns drinking from the bottle. The bottle is creating beautiful reflections in the sun. It’s a gloriously mesmerizing sight and you want a taste. You reach out your hand to grab a sip for yourself.

“No! That wasn’t made for you,” they say.

You stand back, upside-down, drink in hand, in the place that was meant to make you feel better. You feel stuck but you keep looking at the beautiful bottle on the other side, beyond your reach. You may not be able to touch it, but no one can stop you from looking at it.

You sigh. You’re almost ready to give up and close your eyes until you hear a little whisper coming from the matted locks of your hair:

Why don’t you make your own something?

You stand upright, mark a single square in the place you're at, and declare that small space as your very own corner. You empty the cup from the gooey drink they gave you. As you watch the *happiness* bottle reflecting in the sunlight, you take the cup and reach out your hand so that you can catch the reflecting sunbeams before they hit the wall. Once the cup is filled with light, you drink from it and smile.

“Ah.”

Mayada rolled down her window and let her hair turn into a lion's mane in the wind.

She hadn't been in a moving vehicle in quite some time. Though they weren't driving anywhere enjoyable, she figured she might as well relish in the fresh wind. Cleo fumbled with the car radio as he attempted to make small talk.

"Radio. Radio, whoa! Banjo! Ha. What else rhymes with radio?"

Mayada shrugged in silence. Cleo chuckled nervously.

"Lame-o."

He rolled down his own window because he suddenly felt like fainting. They were driving up Presa Mountain and the air was getting thinner. Baybell was just a few turns away.

It had been two weeks since Cleo and Mayada had the Baybell talk. Cleo gently knocked on her bedroom door and was welcomed with a little peep: *come in*. Cleo walked in and found Mayada face-down in her pillow.

"We gotta talk, booboo."

Mayada straightened up and looked her grandfather in the eyes. She was already prepared for what was coming and already had an answer. She didn't even wait for him to ask the question.

"I'll go."

Mayada had been doing a lot of thinking in that pillow. As the days had gone by, the little poodle with a big bark had turned into a roaring dinosaur. It was impossible to ignore the gaudy growls:

I NEED HELP. I'm tired of this.

Her absolute turning point had taken place when she was trying to get up to go to the bathroom one day. As she struggled to untangle herself from her blankets, she nearly tripped multiple times and could not manage to get her leg out of the hole that had developed in her sheets. Before she knew it, it was far too late and she couldn't help but wet her bed.

As mortified as she felt, she let herself sit in her little unpleasant puddle and cry.

It was in that moment that she remembered how, when she was younger, one of her favorite pass-times with Cleo was when they would walk around aimlessly and explore new neighborhoods. They had a deal: whenever they passed by a café, if Mayada felt like it and if it was available, she could order a boiling cup of black tea (her absolute favorite kind of drink.) Once, on a particularly lucky day, one neighborhood had a total of five cafes, and every single one served tea. Staying true to the deal, Mayada had five big cups of tea as they strolled around. Obviously, all those drinks in her system had to

get out somehow. Every ten minutes or so, Cleo would feel a tug at the bottom of his jacket. He would look down and find Mayada doing her little *I-need-to-go-right-now-don't-make-me-wait-one-more-minute* dance. That was how Cleo created a new guessing game: which of these houses look like they are inhabited by people friendly enough to let a desperate six-year-old use their bathroom? They decided on the level of friendliness based on how many flowers they kept in their front yard, whether or not they had colorful window shutters, and if there was a welcome mat at the door. And that was the most fun Mayada had ever had with her bladder.

But that was years ago, and now Mayada didn't have any games to play. She didn't even have dry bedsheets. And she wanted nothing more than to call for her grandfather.

She didn't, though. She got up and changed the sheets and wore a dry sweater. She still went back to bed, but this time she lay face-down into her pillow and screamed at the top of her lungs. She remembered what Cleo had said about Kyoo the day he escaped. *He's not ready*. She knew what he meant now. And she knew that she was somewhere very close to ready.

I need help.

And that was how Mayada ended up agreeing to go to Baybell without even being asked.

When the day of her new journey arrived, Cleo let her stay in bed as he packed her things into two small backpacks. He also let her stay in her PJs. Before they walked out of the front door, Cleo stopped Mayada and squeezed her as tightly as he could.

“I love you so much.”

Mayada squeezed back, so tightly that Cleo held her up in his arms and carried her all the way to the car, then kissed her forehead as he let her rest in the passenger seat and fastened her seatbelt. He hoped, harder than he had ever hoped for anything, that this would be the first and last time he would ever have to say goodbye to his beautiful granddaughter under such circumstances. He hoped that the next time they would be parting, it would be because Mayada had built herself a jet and was off to Alaska to befriend penguins – or something equally entertaining.

They were slowly approaching the peak of Presa Mountain. Baybell's red roof was coming into sight.

“Why does it have to be in the middle of nowhere?” Mayada asked.

“It's like your own little world,” Cleo said with a reassuring smile. “It'll be great.”

Mayada watched the red roof turn into a large building. The building was caramel-colored, and giant willow trees held their branches out and embraced the structure from all angles. The hospital was surrounded by vast gardens that stretched out beyond Mayada's sight. From where Cleo was parking the car, she could see that the place indeed had flowerpots at the entrance, bright red window shutters, and a large welcome mat at the wooden door.

Friendly.

Cleo took out Mayada's backpacks from the trunk and handed them to her. As soon as they approached the gate, someone dressed in a large polka-dot suit came rushing towards them from one of the benches scattered around the hospital grounds.

"Hello! You must be Mayada and Cleo. I'm Neem, the Baybell supervisor. Oh, let me help you with that," she said as she gestured towards Mayada's backpacks. Mayada hesitantly handed them over to the happy stranger.

"The supervisor?" she asked.

"I make sure everything is going swell around here. The word makes me sound far more important than I really am," she laughed.

Mayada couldn't help but smile. Neem's bright eyes seemed sincere.

They all stood in awkward silence for a few minutes as both Cleo and Mayada tried to drag on the inevitable: saying goodbye.

"I guess it's time for me to head off," Cleo said as he wrapped his arm around Mayada's shoulder, preparing to pull her in for what Mayada would call a fuzzleball hug. "Neem, everything we talked about on the phone is ready? The room, everything?"

"Don't you worry about a thing."

"That will be tough. I haven't been apart from this little bug for such a long time now."

Cleo tried hard not to tear up, but he couldn't help but let out a soft sob as he fuzzleball-hugged Mayada. "Please, take care," he whispered.

"I'll see you soon, Grandpa?" Mayada asked as she looked up at him from his soft belly.

"So soon, bug."

Cleo got into the car and blew Mayada a final kiss before he drove off. Neem then gently led Mayada through the garden and towards the entrance. Before stepping inside, Mayada wiped her feet over the welcome mat in hopes that some of the welcoming energy would rub off on her. It didn't work, though, because her hands were still shaking and her heart was still longing to be driving back home with Cleo.

Mayada stepped inside and was relieved to find that the hospital walls were all caramel-colored, too. She feared they would be white and plain as they so often were in hospitals, just making everything ever so colder than it already was. The downstairs floor had a vast living room that led to a beautiful brick kitchen. Baybell didn't really look much like a hospital at all; it instead looked like a large house that was completely taken over by children. There were blankets scattered all over, lamps in the shapes of rainbow clouds and sandcastles on every wall, and fairy lights wrapped around the railing that led upstairs. Glow-in-the-dark stars were taped to the ceiling and lovely threads of colored beads dangled from all the chandeliers.

Neem followed Mayada's gaze and smiled. "It's lovely, isn't it? I've never hired a decorator. The kids here just do a wonderful job themselves. If you ever feel like adding your own personal touch to the place, please don't hesitate."

Mayada nodded politely.

"Now, I do have a friend I'd like you to meet. But where on earth could she be? She was supposed to meet us here...Ah, there she is! Mayada, this is Yaz."

Yaz rushed down the stairs. She was wearing a large garbage bag over her clothes. Mayada tried to stop herself from giggling.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I got a bit carried away trimming my bangs. What do you think?"

Neem poked and prodded the uneven pieces of hair sticking out of Yaz's forehead. "How very creative. It's a bold look that can only be worn by the greats."

Yaz grinned proudly. She turned to Mayada and curtsied with her garbage bag.

"You must be Mayada. I'm going to show you around and let you know more about Baybell. While we're all admiring my bangs, I might as well tell you that sharp objects like scissors can only be used on very special occasions and with a lot of trust. Since I'm a barber, I get to use special safety scissors in the bathroom with Fozzy's help. Fozzy is our bear safety officer. But you'll know all about that soon enough."

Mayada noticed that her mouth had been open the whole time Yaz was talking. That was a lot of information to take in, and she was still barely through the front door. Why couldn't she use sharp objects without a safety officer? She was old enough.

Mayada simply didn't want to think of anything right now. Where was her smelly red robe? She just wanted to close her eyes and sleep.

Neem noticed Mayada's discomfort and gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Don't worry, dear. You'll have plenty of time to catch up with all of this. Yaz, why don't you make the tour a bit shorter than usual and then show Mayada to her bed?"

Yaz nodded and Neem gave Mayada a squeeze on the shoulder before she walked back out into the garden.

Yaz led Mayada to the living room and demonstrated which spots on the couches were the comfiest. There was a bear sleeping in the very comfiest spot, and Yaz explained that some bears were at Baybell to help children feel better while others were there for their own personal reasons. The bear sleeping on the couch was actually Fozzy herself. She had been so exhausted after watching Yaz pick at her hair for hours. Mayada noticed that she already felt a bit safer around Fozzy.

As Yaz bounced on what she called the *spot of poof* on the large green sofa facing the fireplace, she started explaining to Mayada what had brought her to Baybell.

Mayada learned that Yaz saw things; things like big floating cats that weren't really there in real life. As amusing as it sounded to Mayada, she quickly realized that it wasn't amusing at all to Yaz. None of the things she saw were ever friendly to her and they always told her horribly cruel things. She had been in Baybell for three weeks now.

"It's nice here. My parents used to yell at me for not trying hard enough to just *stop* seeing and hearing things. Here, Doctor Rhea really listens to everything I tell her about the world that exists in my own brain," she said as she pointed to her head. "She likes to listen to me talk about what I see and hear so she can help me understand where these things might be coming from. I cut my bangs so that my hair wouldn't get in the way of the process." She laughed hysterically at her own ridiculous idea, and Mayada found herself laughing, too.

"Most importantly, I have friends here. We help each other by just being there," Yaz said lovingly.

Yaz seemed to so openly talk about her troubles. While Mayada couldn't imagine herself doing that, she was glad to hear that Yaz was feeling better now. When Yaz sensed that the conversation was getting a bit too serious, she clapped her hands and playfully dragged Mayada to the staircase.

"Enough of this. Let's see your bed!"

Yaz told Mayada that each bedroom had two beds and a bathroom. There were six other children and two bears occupying the rooms at the moment.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you the best part. We're going to be roommates, and we have one of the best rooms in this place: a corner room."

Yaz opened one of the blue doors that were lined up in the upstairs corridor and Mayada gasped. The room was magnificent. Two of the corner walls were made of glass and revealed a spectacular view of the gardens and the mountain beyond. There was a willow tree that was extending its branches in through the open window. The two beds were on opposite sides of the room and each had a small nightstand to its side. Their bedsheets were the colors of soft clouds in a clear blue sky.

"It's wonderful," Mayada said.

"I know," Yaz agreed. "Oh, and there's a phone on your nightstand. Neem left it for you in case you wanted to talk to anyone tonight."

Mayada paused in her tour of the room and looked at the phone. She wanted nothing more than to hear Cleo's voice, but she wasn't sure if she could handle it without breaking down.

Yaz noticed Mayada's hesitation and remembered how lonely she had felt on her first night at Baybell. Yaz didn't have anyone to call that night. She wondered if Mayada had someone whose voice would make her feel better.

"I'll give you some time," Yaz said as she walked out and quietly closed the door behind her.

Mayada sat on her bed. She had nothing to say to Cleo. Still, she found her fingers uncontrollably dialing his number. It was like her fingers knew what they wanted a lot more than she did. Cleo picked up before the phone finished ringing once.

“Hello? Mayada?”

“Grandpa.”

“Darling. I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“How is it? How are you doing, kid?”

“I’m tired.”

“You’ll feel better in no time, I promise you.”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Sleep, maybe.”

“Sleep tight, my Mayada.”

Mayada lay down in bed and couldn’t help but cry at the sound of Cleo’s voice. She knew that she wanted to get better, but wished she could skip this whole process and get to the end of it. She wished she could close her eyes and then when they opened, Cleo would come back and pick her up and she would be just wonderful, with nothing but love and delight in her mind and soul.

Yaz was still standing at the door and could hear Mayada crying inside. She walked back in and sat at the edge of Mayada’s bed. She wasn’t sure what to say, because she knew that whatever she said couldn’t really ease her friend’s deep pain.

“I know how you feel.”

Mayada looked up at Yaz as she sniffled. She moved over and made some room on the bed. Yaz lay down and rested her head on Mayada’s pillow. The two of them closed their eyes and before they knew it, they had fallen asleep.

And in their dreams that night they were just wonderful, with nothing but love and delight in their minds and souls.

The next morning, Mayada woke up to a little piece of paper with a smiley face on it in the place of where Yaz had slept. She also found a steaming cup of hot chocolate and marshmallows waiting at her bedside. It smelled lovely and she realized that she was actually in the mood for a sugary treat. She dipped a giant marshmallow in the hot chocolate and took a large, sticky bite. She smiled as she felt the foam stick to her nose. According to the cuckoo clock on the wall it was around eight in the morning. Normally, Mayada would have stayed in bed regardless of the hour, but she felt a tingle of curiosity that tempted her to get out. She wondered about the other children and bears that stayed in this house. She also wondered what was cooking for breakfast. The hot chocolate made her stomach gurgle in search for a complementary meal.

On her way downstairs, she met one of the bears staying in the room opposite from hers. She was pleasantly surprised to learn that it was Noona herself, the circus performer that Meesi had told her about on that awful wintry day. Apparently, as wonderful as it was to entertain children, the pressure of being a constant source of entertainment had gotten the best of Noona. It stressed her out that she couldn't control the effect she had on children when they were around her. Since the feelings she let out were ones of entertainment, children naturally felt giddier when they talked to her.

"I need to rest," Noona declared as she walked down with Mayada in her fuzzy slippers.

As they entered the living room, Mayada found someone curled up in front of the fireplace. The person was quite tall and seemed to be twisted in an uncomfortable way to maintain her position on the floor with her feet up against the fire, but she still looked content. Mayada was happy to see that there was someone else who enjoyed to warm their feet in front of the fire the same way she did. For a second, a happy thought crossed Mayada's mind: no matter how tall her legs were to grow, she could still enjoy some things the same way.

When the person spotted Mayada with her small black eyes, she immediately stood up in delight.

"Mayada! Hello. I'm Doctor Rhea, but a lot of my friends here call me Ree. How did you sleep?"

Mayada smiled and nodded as a silent answer. She felt shy; she wasn't expecting to meet the doctor that Yaz had told her about so soon.

"I know you would probably rather not speak to me right now, but I think it's important we get to know each other. Maybe we could just have a brief chat over breakfast – nothing serious. What do you say?"

Mayada nodded again and the two of them walked into the kitchen. There was a big display of freshly-baked pastries on the counter. Spinach pies, olive bread, even marble cakes and chocolate cookies. Right next to the pastries was a basket of fruits with chocolate dip. There was also a hot teapot whistling on the stove.

"Neem makes great food for us every day. She also makes a killer hot chocolate – which I bet you already know by now. She likes to leave treats for new children and bears after their first nights," Ree explained as she grabbed a plate.

Mayada thought of her morning snack and rubbed the remaining stickies off of her nose. She really enjoyed the hot chocolate, so she was looking forward to trying all the new foods on the counter. She was glad to find that she had a well enough appetite to enjoy such a breakfast. Back home, when things were at their worst for her, even the biggest and bestest breakfasts made by Cleo failed to make her flinch.

“Do you have any problems with eating? Sometimes, some of the children and bears who come here are uncomfortable around large quantities of food. I can help you if that’s the case,” Ree said.

Mayada shook her head as she held a plate and placed a few of the pastries on it. She then grabbed a handful of strawberries and walked with Ree to the kitchen table.

“I love strawberries. They’re my weakness,” Ree said dramatically as she dropped three pieces into their mouth while she sat down. Mayada felt encouraged to fill her mouth with a couple, too. Adults didn’t usually engage with her chipmunk behavior. She was excited to see that Ree didn’t daintily slice a single strawberry into tiny pieces before eating it, as her grandfather had once jokingly done.

“Alright, Mayada,” Ree said, “I’ll get straight to introducing myself. I’m going to be your doctor here, and that means a lot of things. I’m going to be here to listen to your thoughts and feelings, whatever they may be. I’ll also be here to make sure you’re doing well - both physically and mentally. Do you know what I mean when I say that?”

Mayada didn’t respond, so Ree pointed to her head. “I’m going to make sure this becomes your best friend, not your worst enemy.”

The two of them sat in silence for a bit while they ate some of their breakfast.

Ree then continued, “I’ll be seeing you once every morning throughout your stay here. We can talk about whatever you like. And if anything comes up while I’m not here, there’s a jar in your room with your name on it, and a notebook right next to it. Write your thoughts down, and you and I can go through them when I see you the following morning. Do you have any questions so far?”

The more Ree talked, the less Mayada felt like engaging with her. She felt like Ree was imposing herself onto her and ignoring the fact that she very apparently didn’t wish to talk about anything at the moment. All she wished to do was enjoy her strawberries. She hadn’t enjoyed a meal in so long.

While Mayada had these thoughts in her mind, it was much harder for her to voice them out loud. She was so used to keeping her thoughts and feelings silent, or nodding silently and going along with a situation no matter how uncomfortable it was. But, here Ree was, telling her that her feelings were meant to be heard. So, she opened her mouth and let the words shoot out of her like rainbow confetti:

“I don’t mind you eating with me, but I would rather not talk right now.”

Ree was surprised, but not offended. She was so glad that Mayada had mustered the courage to voice her thoughts. It took a lot of bravery to do so, especially in the presence of someone who was supposedly in a position of power. Ree didn’t initially

realize that she shouldn't have imposed her speech onto Mayada during her breakfast time.

"I'm very glad you expressed that. I will see you tomorrow morning and we can get to know each other then. I'm sorry I pushed you to talk," Ree said solemnly.

Mayada was grateful to Ree for respecting her feelings. She was still getting used to being at Baybell, in a whole new world and away from Cleo, so she was far from prepared to speak about her new relationship with her doctor. As Mayada and Ree then silently shared their food, more children and bears slowly joined them at the table till Mayada found herself surrounded by all of Baybell's dwellers. She met Jala, Adeeli, Hani, June, Inbar, Daw, Fozzy, and the other bear, Youbi. Yaz arrived, too, and sat next to Mayada, which made her heart light up. Yaz's face emitted a warmth and kindness that Mayada really needed at that moment.

Ree left the children to enjoy their meals in peace and waved a silent goodbye. As everyone shared small talk about their nights and the food, Mayada found herself comfortable enough to participate in the conversation with a few words here and there. She expressed how lovely the food was and how nice it made her feel. The marble cake reminded her of the ones she used to eat when she was younger.

Yaz explained to Mayada that the children and bears often introduced themselves and the reasons behind their stay at Baybell whenever a new Baybeller joined them.

"Would that be okay?" she asked.

"Sure," Mayada answered. She was curious to know, and she figured it might be good for her. Maybe she would find someone who felt the way she did.

"Alright," Yaz smiled. "You know me. Jala?"

Jala had anxiety. She was always so anxious that she bit her lips furiously till they bled. She showed Mayada the inside of her mouth by pulling her lower lip downward.

Adeeli had learned from her mother to throw up after every meal she ate. She did that to get rid of the food that she had eaten before it was sucked up by her body and turned to fat (which was something that she had learned, thanks to Baybell, was extremely false. Her body used the food she ate to nourish her, and fat was wonderful for the body!)

Hani came from a horribly violent family and was unable to feel safe anywhere. She was always bundled in a blanket, ready to hide if she felt someone walk her way a little too fast.

June wondered if she would ever feel anything but miserable ever again. As Mayada nodded in understanding, June squeezed her hand and offered her some words of hope.

"You know, since I came here, these people have made me laugh a few times," she said as she pointed around the table and smiled.

Inbar was getting over a serious fear of socializing. She wouldn't have been able to sit at the table a couple of months ago. She was too worried she would be judged or called mean things like "stupid" or "ugly."

Daw harmed herself. She made little cuts in her arm when her feelings were too horrible to handle. She had a white cloth wrapped around her wrist. She was learning to draw on it when she felt like harming herself. It was covered with sketches of blue whales.

Youbi felt pointless because the child that created her had thrown her out of the house one day, refusing to let her back in. The child had offered no explanation. Youbi spent her time wondering what she could have done wrong, obsessing over every little thing she had ever said or done.

Mayada listened intently at what everyone had to say. She couldn't be certain at the moment, but she was starting to feel a huge weight being lifted off of her, like a rock was slowly being pulled off of her chest. She couldn't know for sure, but a sentence was starting to form in her mind:

I am not alone.

And it was at that table that Mayada's story started coming together. The little bits and pieces that had led her to where she was then, they all started to bloom like petals tugging at a shy flower's core, begging to grow and reach as far as they possibly could.

I want to get better. We can all get better because we deserve to be happy.

As Mayada's days at Baybell grew to weeks, she grew more and more comfortable expressing herself. Once, Adeeli came up to her as they selected a movie for the night and asked her what her favorite color was.

"Green," she said assuredly.

And her openness was rewarding. The following morning, Adeeli presented her with a beautiful green snowflake origami.

Sometimes, she didn't even need to be asked. She once went up to Daw and initiated a conversation with her about her beautiful name.

Since her first session with Ree, Mayada realized that she had a lot of words trapped inside of her.

"You have so many words in there that it probably feels like you've swallowed novels in whole. How are you feeling? What makes you angry? What makes you sad? All of the answers to these questions are on the pages of Mayada's *Marvelous Mumbles*," Ree declared.

Mayada learned that, before she had started living with Cleo, she was taught to stay silent and to occupy the least amount of space possible. She was told not to eat too much, not to grow too large, and not to sit with her legs too wide open. Any noise she made was always met with a *shhhh*.

She was also taught to focus less on her own desires and more on what people desired of her.

"This is what I want you to do right now, Mayada, and I don't care if you don't want it," the voices said.

Mayada learned that, in order to start feeling better, she needed to gain a true understanding and acceptance of herself. She needed to reach inside of her, grasp her soul, and release her wonder-filled palms into the wind.

It was difficult enough for Mayada to understand the steps she needed to take to feel better, let alone take the steps themselves. However, Ree constantly reminded her that even the smallest steps counted. Saying her favorite color out loud was like stepping over a mountain.

"You're building yourself up. It takes time."

As helpful as Ree was, the Baybellers were Mayada's main sources of friendship and solidarity. They understood one another's struggles even without speaking them. They were all filled with a beautiful sense of love and support that they shared with one another. The Baybellers created their own space within the hospital, a world separate from the professional team. It was a beautiful thing to watch them all grow separately yet simultaneously. Their petals were tugging at their cores, reaching further out, and spreading closer and closer to one another.

And there were days when Mayada cracked. Sometimes, she missed Cleo too much and she felt hopeless, like she could never find her way out of the darkness she was enveloped in. Some days, she would stay in bed and not even speak to Yaz.

Still, Yaz would lay with her and whisper soft words of encouragement into her dreams.

“It’s so hard. I know you’re tired. But you’re sparkly and magical.”

Mayada’s Marvelous Mumbles

I miss the little fruit shop we used to go to, before things got bad. I miss laughing with you. I miss the silly jokes you would crack in the middle of the night when we would both be really tired.

But I’m so mad at you. And you can never come back and make things better.

Yaz told me something she read somewhere:

This too shall pass. It might pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass.

I think you would have laughed at that. Yaz and I did, a lot.

June threw her head back laughing. “No!” she squealed, “That did not happen!”

Mayada giggled and nodded her head. “It did.”

Jala joined them at the front porch steps. “What’s so funny?”

“I once swapped my grandpa’s chair for a bucket of ice-cold water before he sat back down,” Mayada said casually as her eyes sparkled with mischief.

June was hysterical. Jala made a shocked face.

“You’re a ball of fun,” she said admiringly.

Ree poked her head out of the front door and smiled at the sight of the happy bunch. They looked so comfortable that they hated to interrupt them, but it was time for her session with Mayada.

They knocked at the door.

“Knock knock. You ready?” she asked as she pointed at Mayada.

Mayada nodded and swiftly jumped up off the steps. Jala pretended to quickly throw back an imaginary seat from under Mayada and replace it with something else. They were all hysterical again.

Mayada was still giggling to herself as she walked up with Ree to her room. She plopped down on the bed and Ree pulled a chair closer to her.

“You’re in a good mood,” Ree said brightly.

“I feel good. Everyone is so funny. And they like hearing about my pranks on Cleo,” Mayada said with a shrug.

“I’m so happy to hear that. It’s your third week here and I can already see so much more openness.”

“Openness?”

“Yes. You’re more open to talking to other people, especially talking about yourself.”

“It’s easy here. Everyone listens.”

“I know there are people who won’t listen to you out there. But it doesn’t make what you have to say any less important. You deserve to speak your mind, always. You deserve to express your thoughts and feelings, always.”

“Since I’ve been talking more, I’ve been thinking more about what happened.”

“What happened?”

“Before I started living with Cleo.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t know.”

Ree gave Mayada some space to think.

“I think I would like to talk to Yaz about it,” she finally said.

“Yaz?” Ree asked curiously.

“She told me about why she was here before she even knew who I was. I trust her.”

Ree leaned in closer to Mayada and looked her straight in the eyes.

“Mayada, I am so happy that you feel ready to talk about things that once silenced you. And it doesn’t matter who you tell it to. Just letting it out is so powerful, and I’m proud of you.”

There was suddenly a knock at the door and Neem’s head popped in through the crack.

“I hate to interrupt. I am so sorry, but this is quite urgent. Could you finish the session later? I need you, Rhea.”

Ree was surprised. Neem had never interrupted a session before. She hated to leave the session now, when Mayada was getting ready to do something huge. She apologized to her and promised that they would continue later in the day. She then rushed out and as she walked down the hallway with Neem, Mayada could hear them talking in a low, urgent tone.

She sat at the bed, thinking about what Ree had told her.

Mayada liked the word *powerful*. She liked having power.

Soon enough, Yaz popped in through the door with a bag of treats in her hand. She sat next to Mayada and opened the bag to share. They both sat there eating treats as Yaz hummed nonsensical tunes for quite some time before Mayada looked at her friend and spoke.

“Yaz?”

“Yes?”

PART 4 – BEARWITIKA

“We’ve got it.”

The Bear Hunters’ latest meeting came to a close. Pencils were thrown to the ground in relief and some hunters even shed tears of happiness. This was their tenth meeting over the course of two days. Everyone was exhausted, but they had finally mastered what they had been working on for years on end, generation after generation.

What they had proudly created, with the help of years of research and failed experimentation, was a serum. A nightmarish serum.

The serum, when given to children, induced intense feelings of pain, panic, anger, sadness, and everything unpleasant a child could possibly feel. Due to the power of these feelings, a bear was created within a few minutes of taking the serum. The bear was released to numb the child’s feelings and relieve them of their pain.

However, since the creation of the bear was an unnatural process that was not initiated by the child himself, something remains...off. The bear lacked any form of sentiment. They numbed the child and did so with no feeling being projected. The child was then numbed down and left with no feeling as well.

It was horrible.

“Show me the ads again,” one of the hunters said while grinning proudly.

An assistant brought forward a few large pieces of paper. On all of them was a huge headline:

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE GOLDEN DAYS? Wonder no more with Bearwitika.

They had a masterplan.

They planned to sell the numbed/numbing bears at very high prices. In order to convince people to buy them, the release of these bears would be accompanied by a large campaign. Firstly, they came up with the name *Bearwitika*.

A hunter was once pacing back and forth in the office, repeating the words “bear with a cause” over and over again, trying to think of a new ingredient for the serum. As she kept repeating the words faster and faster, one of the other hunters in the room pointed out that it sounded like she was saying “bearwitika.” And in that moment, they realized that they had found their product’s name. It was short, catchy, and it drew people’s attention.

The hunters planned on targeting parents and older generations. They wanted to remind them of a time when children were not allowed to feel and when they were constantly distracted. They wanted to remind parents of how much calmer their worlds would be without the constant rumble of their children. They wanted to bring back the way the world was before Neya and Fos met. By choosing a catchy name and spreading advertisements all over the place, they were on the right track.

They built one giant factory in which they produced the bears. The land on which they built the factory belonged to families that had lived in tents there for years and years. They released thick smoke to force the people off the land, but kept their children for labor. They lined up the children within the factory walls and injected serum into them. After producing their first bear, the bear would be taken away. The child’s numbness would slowly disappear with the absence of the bear, and then they would be given serum once more. This dragged on endlessly.

And these were the ways of the world’s first corporation: Bearwitika.

The hunters shipped the bears everywhere. They shipped them from the factory straight to shops and even created shops of their own all over the world. They also advertised the bears to mental health hospitals because they claimed they could cure the children of their problems in the easiest and most efficient way possible.

“The ads are great. Is the shipment ready?” the hunter asked.

“Yes,” another replied. “Could you just check the address?”

“Straight to Baybell,” she replied as she read over the packages.

Everyone sat in a circle around Ree and Neem. It was late at night and the two of them had been talking alone in the kitchen all day long. When Daw unknowingly opened the door to grab a snack, Neem hurriedly called out, “Look away, dear! Nothing to see here. Come back in a bit.”

When Ree and Neem finally came out of their seclusion, they called for an emergency meeting in the living room. None of the children and bears knew what this was about so they were all incredibly anxious. Ree and Neem seemed anxious, as well. Mayada and Yaz held each other’s hands.

“I know you’re all worried, but nothing bad is happening,” Neem said. She paused as if to think of what to say next.

All the children and bears felt the unease and they shared that energy without even talking. Just by looking at one another they were able to communicate the one question on everyone’s mind: *what is happening?* Even Noona and her entertaining presence could not do much to lift the tension in the air.

“A big change is about to happen at Baybell. You’re all going to take part in something historical,” Neem finally announced.

Ree realized that everyone was just looking more confused the more Neem talked, so she gestured to Neem to slow down and start from the beginning.

“A new...form of treatment has been discovered. A treatment that will help you all feel so much better, so much faster,” Neem said.

Everyone stared back at her blankly.

“Bears. Well...” Neem once again struggled with her words.

Noona interjected. “Bears? Like us?”

“No, not like you. Factory-made bears.”

“What’s a factory?” asked Hani.

“It’s a large place where lots and lots of the same thing can be created to be shipped all around the world. In that way, everyone everywhere can enjoy this new product that makes children feel better.”

“Bears are the product?” asked Fozzy. Though she was part of the Baybell’s professional team, no one had told her about what was happening.

“No, no. Well, yes. But these bears aren’t like you. They will help in a very different way.” Neem turned to look at the children. “Children in factories create them out of very strong feelings, so these bears are very special and powerful. Being around them will make your very bad feelings disappear instantly.”

“How are they made?” asked Jala.

Neem wasn't expecting so many questions. She looked to Ree for help.

“This is a big change, I understand that,” Ree said in a soft voice. “And you have many questions, as you should. But let's take it one step at a time. Let's meet these bears first when they come in tomorrow, and then we'll talk.”

“Tomorrow?” Mayada was shocked. She didn't quite understand what was happening, but she could tell that something was about to change drastically. Tomorrow seemed too soon for such a change to take place. What about all their unanswered questions?

“I hope it's for the best,” Ree said quietly.

“But how do the children make them? What bad feelings?” Noona repeated Yaz's question worriedly.

“It's a special technique that can only be mastered in a factory. There's no need to get into those details. It's quite late, we should talk tomorrow.” Neem was eager to close the conversation now. She didn't realize that the children and bears would want to know so much.

“Don't you worry, all is well.”

Yaz and Mayada pushed their beds together that night and stared out at the willow tree.

“What do you think is going to happen to us?” Yaz asked. “It didn't sound good.”

“For children to make bears that would make us feel better, they would need to feel bad,” Mayada said as she tried to think about these new “bear” products.

“So much is happening.”

“And why is it happening so fast?”

They all woke up to the sounds of boxes being opened the next morning.

“If they’re bears, why are they packed?” Yaz asked as she peeked at the people that were taking over Baybell that day. They were all dressed in uniforms, unpacking the bears two at a time out of big cardboard boxes.

“And why do the bears look like that?” Mayada asked. The bears looked...blank. They had no expressions on their faces. Something didn’t feel right.

All the Baybellers slowly started to gather downstairs, their curiosities getting the best of them. They found Neem helping the uniformed people line up the bears in the living room. The bears didn’t seem to be able to move by themselves.

Neem lit up when she saw everyone gathering in the living room. “Hello, hello! You’re all in for quite the treat.”

The uniformed people had the initials BH on their front pockets. They stood in the back as they gathered the empty boxes and got ready to leave.

“Children, these are our new Bearwitikas. They are very, very special. That’s why they can help you in special ways.”

“What about us?” Youbi asked worriedly. Bears couldn’t help other bears the way they helped children.

“Don’t worry, dear. You will be escorted safely by our friends back to the bearhouse where your rest will be ensured.”

Noona’s face crumbled in concern. “I can’t go back.”

Fozzy was shaken. “I’m a team member here. I can’t just leave.”

“I’m afraid there’s no place for your kind at Baybell anymore, not with the new system in place. I’m terribly sorry. I know this is sudden, but the world is witnessing a sudden change and we need to keep up,” she said enthusiastically.

Everyone was shocked. How could the bears be told to leave Baybell? And what did Neem mean, *your kind*?

The people in the back gently came forward and led Noona, Youbi, and Fozzy towards the front door. All the children rushed towards them and gave them giant hugs.

“We’ll figure out what’s going on. Don’t worry,” Yaz whispered to them.

As Baybell was rapidly left bearless, they turned back to whatever creatures were meant to replace the love of their dear bear friends.

“Children, I would like you to officially meet our new friends,” Neem said as she pulled everyone closer towards the bears.

“What are their names?” asked June.

“There’s no need for that. Now, instead of having one another as roommates, we will be opening more rooms so that you will each share your room with your very own bearwitika.”

Mayada was starting to sweat with anxiousness. Something didn’t feel right at all. So much was changing and she didn’t like it.

“The world is changing fast. It’s an urgent change. It’s so exciting, isn’t it?” Neem asked, not really expecting an answer. “It’s okay. Come closer.”

Neem stood behind them and walked them all closer to the bears.

There is no way to perfectly describe what happened to the children the closer they walked to the bears.

Their fires were put out.

Their warmth turned ice-cold.

Their buzzing minds made no sound.

They didn’t feel good, in fact they felt close to nothing at all, and they could sense something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“I don’t feel good,” Hani said. But she said it with such a soft, monotone voice that didn’t seem like she was going to do anything about it.

“Close your eyes. Don’t your thoughts feel tamer? Your hearts in less of a flurry?”

Ree watched from the back. It was her last week at Baybell. Neem had announced to Ree yesterday that she would no longer be needed. The bearwitikas were going to replace her “services.” She didn’t know how to feel. She wanted to help the children, but she wasn’t sure how. She felt tied up, but she also felt like she was silently witnessing one of the cruelest acts ever committed against children.

The phone rang. Neem was busy in her frenzy with the children, so Ree picked up.

“Hello?”

“It’s Cleo, Mayada’s grandfather. Where is she?”

Cleo sounded furious. He had heard from the local newspaper that Baybell was to be the first mental health hospital that would adopt bearwitikas as a form of treatment.

“She’s here,” Ree answered.

“I’m coming to get her. This is madness. How could you let it into Baybell? A safe space for children? Mayada?”

“I…”

“Put her on the phone. No, forget it. I’m coming.” Cleo hung up.

Ree could sense that a lot was changing in the world in one day. History was being made. She had never witnessed a change happening so fast and so hard before. As she watched the children, standing like cardboard cutouts of themselves and feeling nothing but bafflement and confusion, she covered her mouth and wondered about what could be done.

Neem walked over to Ree.

“It’s working,” she said hopefully.

“It’s wrong,” Ree said with determination.

“We were offered to be the first hospital to put the new system in place. We can’t turn that down, not with the excitement bearwitikas are causing. Everyone will want to work with us.”

“It feels wrong.”

Neem looked at Ree in anger. She was just as nervous as Ree was, but she knew that she would gain a lot of power by forming connections with the Bearwitika corporation. She couldn’t have anyone get in the way of that.

“Well, you’re gone,” she said as she walked away.

Cleo stroked Mayada's soft cheek. She was coming back to her senses.

"Grandpa?"

"My beautiful Mayada. You're home now. Nothing to fear."

Cleo had rushed to Baybell the second he heard of the news. He grabbed Mayada without paying notice to anyone or anything and drove straight home. Mayada had passed out on the way, exhausted and confused. As her eyes fluttered now, safely tucked into her bed, Cleo sighed a huge sigh of relief.

"I was so scared," Mayada said with a quivering voice.

"I know, bug."

"Where is everyone? What happened?"

"Everyone is still at Baybell. I just had to get you away."

Mayada sat up. "I need to go back. Yaz...everyone. They're not okay."

"I know. But you can't go back. You won't function in there, not around those bearwitikas. It's horrible. We'll figure something out, don't worry."

"I..."

"Get some rest. You're safe and sound and not a soul can touch you. Not inside these walls, just like I've always promised."

"I know."

Cleo kissed her forehead.

"I will go try to see if I can get a hold of people that are authorized to get those kids out of Baybell. I'll think of something, don't you worry, bug."

"Okay. I know."

But she didn't know anything. As Cleo closed the door behind him, Mayada was left with nothing but her thoughts.

What on earth just happened?

It was like it was just yesterday that Cleo had driven her to Baybell. It was just yesterday that she had met Yaz. It was just yesterday that she had found her voice, that she had learned that she loved being listened to. And then everything changed. She was back in her bed. It was dark and it was all going to go back to the way it was.

No.

It couldn't.

She couldn't go back, and she couldn't leave her friends around those horrible creatures. She needed to do something, and she wasn't going to wait for Cleo to figure it out.

She jumped out of bed and paced around her room, thinking. She suddenly remembered something.

She had thrown whatever Meesi had given her that day – it seemed so long ago - behind her nightstand. It came back to her mind like a vision peeking through a fog. She rushed and pushed her nightstand aside. She knelt to the floor to get a closer look.

It was a pendant. A beautiful gold pendant. It was in the shape of a hand and a paw holding one another, and from their joint palms emerged a raised fist.

She stared at the pendant.

She knew what she had to do, but she had to plan it well.

A week had passed. It was like the world was flipping upside down, turning inside out.

It was unbelievable how popular Bearwitikas became in such a short amount of time. Everyone wanted them. Everyone longed for the golden days of silenced children and relieved adults taking over the streets.

Mayada and Cleo watched the events unfold before them like a horrible storybook with endless pages that wouldn't stop flipping, no matter how hard they tried to hold them back. The advertisements were everywhere. The possibilities that grew from Bearwitika were endless. People were talking about all the other factories that could be created. Everyone wanted a taste of Bearwitika's fame and success.

Everyone, of course, but the children who were left hushed.

PART 5 – THE FIGHT

You stumble through thorn bushes and emerge broken and bruised. Still, you keep going, pushing through the darkness, following whatever ounce of starlight you can find. Though you can't really see your way, you put your trust in your legs. It's because the place where you're going doesn't really *physically* exist like a restaurant or an old swing set does. It's a place that exists nonetheless, but in a whole different world. In that sense, it's not really a place, it's a space; places can be found on a map, spaces can be felt.

Spaces can exist everywhere and anywhere. So many spaces probably exist around you right now, ones you'll never be aware of. Spaces created by people around you, ones they run to when the place they're in no longer feels safe.

Let's say you're taking in words of hatred from all angles. Everywhere you turn, a word hits you. So, you close your eyes, and in your mind, you levitate to a space that not one word of hatred could ever touch. It's your own space. It could be anything from a cloud to a whole planet made just for you.

“You're weak.”

That's what some people might say. To them, all they see is a child sitting with their eyes closed, not knowing the power you hold in your mind.

“You're living in an imaginary world.”

To them, all they see is a dirty child shoveling through dirt in pitch blackness, speaking of a beautiful world that will offer you all the light and warmth you need.

They see a child seemingly running in circles when really, you know exactly where your feet are leading you.

You're hurt, cold, hungry, and scared, but you keep going.

Wait.

What's that sound in the background?

Legs are trudging around you. Feet are hitting the ground at rapid paces.

There are others like you, and you're all stumbling in the same direction.

“This is madness. What do they think they're doing?”

The observers are anxious. The earth is quaking and the places they've grown to know are now being taken over by what they deemed imaginary: a space they never thought they would have to deal with.

And what a beautiful space it is.

It is like a fortress raising from behind tree branches, fists held up like flags waving in the midnight breeze. Voices and eyes and skin colors no one wanted are now emerging in front of them, popping from the soil like a lucrative crop.

Their places, their comfort zones, their realities...what do they do now that they are crumbling around them?

Mayada tiptoed down the stairs. Cleo was fast asleep and she didn't want to wake him. She left him a small note at the breakfast table.

I thought of something faster, Big Bug.

She quietly turned the front doorknob and was greeted by the harsh midnight air. She could have gone back to get a scarf, but she didn't feel like taking any steps backwards. She walked through the cold towards the cyclists' trail through the forest.

She had an idea of how to get to Baybell. She remembered a hiking trip she had once took up Presa Mountain when she was much younger. It was very cold then, too, but Mayada had a big, furry jacket that she packed so many homemade snacks in. This time, she had no time for snacks or warm jackets. She walked steadily down the trail, feeling her way around the darkness so that she wouldn't bump into anything.

As she abruptly felt multiple stings on her legs, she let out a little yelp and pulled away from the thorn bush she had walked into. She stopped and tried to wipe away the blood with a tree leaf. She wished she had at least changed out of her pajama shorts. *Impulsive* is what Cleo would have called her in this moment. She didn't care. She wasn't going to have a peaceful slumber when the world was falling apart before her eyes.

She started running as the adrenaline kicked in. The more she thought about what she had seen on the news for the past week, the angrier she felt, and the harder she wanted to fight against it. She also suddenly felt scared of all the invisible monsters her mind began to cook up. These monsters surrounded her from all around, reaching their hands out to her, their long fingers tightly clutching a serum in a dark bottle.

"It will make you feel better," they said gently and convincingly.

They couldn't fool her.

The monsters tried to lure her in by whispering a beautiful word into her matted hair:

Bearwitika.

"No!" she shouted. She hated to hear the purest word she could think of hissing through their wild fangs. Bears were full of love and light; they weren't meant to make anyone feel awful. She covered her ears and ran faster.

Her quickened pace couldn't stop her thoughts from going wild. If she shoved one thought into a dark room and locked the door, another door would be torn open and out would come another. She missed Yaz. She wondered if she had managed to fall asleep with that bear in Mayada's bed. Was she thinking of Mayada? Or was she unable to think at all? And how was everyone else? Where was Ree? Were they helping anyone or were they still silently watching?

With the thoughts and the monsters coming at her at once, she was happy to see that she was getting closer. She didn't know how much longer she could endure being alone with her racing mind. She was at the base of Presa, and all she had to do was climb

upwards from there. She thought of all the times Cleo would call her a monkey whenever she climbed up to the roof of their house. It was so nice up there. She felt like she could just reach out the sky, grab one star, and run. The rest of the stars would trail behind her like a thread of fairy lights. In those little fantasies, she held all the power in the world. She had the stars in her hands.

To push herself to climb with all her might, she imagined that she was climbing up to reach the trail of stars. This time, she was going to get so much closer than she would get at her rooftop. She was going to grab the stars and wrap them all around every child that was now trapped with a bearwitika. She was surprised to see how much strength she mustered as she grabbed at the rocks and pushed her body upwards. She was so grateful for the large meal Cleo had cooked her that night. It gave her so much energy she desperately needed.

Baybell started to come into sight. Her heart dropped when she saw the red roof sticking out from beyond the mountaintop. She was almost there. It was only upon seeing Baybell fully manifested in the distance that she realized how angry she was at it. Was it silly to be angry at a building? She was angry that it was once her safest space. It was once a space where she found laughter and support. And then it opened its doors to evil and took it all away from her and all her friends. Baybell, Neem, those uniformed people...they thought they could control something that helped children to help themselves. They were trying to turn children's faces away from their own bodies and hearts.

Mayada had spent too long secluding herself from the world to have the world be taken from her when she was finally ready to gobble it all up.

She was angry.

She stood in front of Baybell now. She was covered in dirt, blood, and sweat. She had never been so determined before in her life. Her eyes were raging. She stared at the welcome mat and the flowerpots. No, Baybell was just a building. A building she was determined to take back.

She went to the back, to where the window of her room was, and saw that the light was off. Maybe Yaz was sleeping after all. She certainly hoped so, because she was sure sleeping was better than being awake for her. She pounced onto the tree that curled around the window and started climbing. She peeked inside the window. The beds were no longer pushed together, and she was thankful for that. She wanted Yaz as far away from the bearwitika as possible. The bearwitika was sitting up in Mayada's bed, her eyes were wide open, staring at nothing in particular. Yaz was sleeping, but she had a big frown on her face, her eyebrows were in a knot, and she looked anything but comfortable.

Mayada closed her eyes and prepared herself for what she needed to do. She needed to pull Yaz out of there fast enough and far enough before Mayada was affected by the bearwitika herself. That awful numbness that the bear would ignite in her would mess up her entire plan. Just being so close to all those bears was already taking its toll on her.

She carefully slid the window open and climbed in. The bear didn't seem to notice she was there at first. She crawled towards Yaz's bed and shook her gently.

"Yaz."

Yaz didn't budge at first, but she slowly started to stretch. Mayada shook her a bit more.

"Yaz, wake up."

Mayada tried to shake her while making the least amount of noise possible. She kept looking back at the bearwitika to make sure she hadn't grabbed her attention. She was so scared she might feel a strong clutch at her shoulder if she looked away for too long.

"Yaz, come on, let's go," Mayada whispered as she tried to drag her friend by her sweater. She pulled a little too hard and stumbled backwards, falling with her back to the floor. As she struggled to get back up, she turned back to the bearwitika to make sure the sound of her fall hadn't alarmed her. To Mayada's horror, the bearwitika's neck had turned, and she was now looking straight into her eyes.

"No..."

Yaz woke up, but didn't seem to react to the sight of Mayada. Mayada was now in her own silent frenzy, completely lost for words. She didn't know what to do or say. She was screaming somewhere in her body, but that somewhere was so hard to reach into. She sat there, at Yaz's bedside, and neither of them were able to outwardly react to anything that was going on.

Mayada felt like she was trapped in a nightmare. Like those times she would dream of a really fast car coming her way while she stood in the middle of the street. Although she knew she needed to move, she couldn't. Her feet were stuck to the ground. She couldn't move an inch of her body.

Mayada closed her eyes.

Sometimes, she knew it was just a dream. She knew nothing could really hurt her in her own mind. But that didn't make anything less scary.

She continued to envision the speeding car dream in her mind while she sat there with Yaz. She didn't know anything else she could do in that moment. Her thoughts felt weak and faded. Her feelings were going from excruciating to numbing in a heartbeat. There she was, trapped with her feet stuck to the ground.

But something was changing.

She was being shifted off the road. Something was pulling her towards safety. It was a tug at the side of her body. It felt soft. Was it a rope? Where did it come from? Mayada didn't understand what was happening. Was she still in the dream? She opened her eyes.

"Meesi."

“Not today you won’t turn into a tree trunk.”

“How?”

“You were running through the forest. You ran past the bearhouse, and I could see that pendant’s shimmer even in the darkest night.”

Meesi quickly got up, walked up to the bear, and dragged her out the room. She dragged her all the way downstairs and out the door. This was so terribly out of character for Meesi, but even the fanciest of tea parties could be raided by unwanted guests that needed to be taught some manners.

“I know you don’t mean any harm,” she told the bearwitika, “but right now, you’re a real bummer.”

Meesi rushed back up the stairs. Mayada and Yaz still appeared shaken, but they were now holding hands and letting out small, stifled sobs. Meesi realized that it would be a while for them to fully regain their ability to move and talk, so she decided to get all the bears out herself for a start.

“Stay here,” she told them as she headed towards the room opposite from theirs.

One by one, Meesi went into the rooms, shook the children awake, and dragged the bearwitikas outside. The children slowly snapped out of their slumbers and realized what was going on. They filed out of their rooms and gathered at the staircase. They were mentally and physically beat, like they had been shouting at the top of their lungs non-stop for an entire week.

Once they had all gathered and were joined by Yaz and Mayada, they all silently agreed that they couldn’t wait around for long. Neem was still in her room at the top floor.

“Let’s talk outside,” Inbar said. They tiptoed down the stairs and towards the front door. Meesi pulled all the children to stand behind her so that she would open the door herself. Since she wasn’t affected by the bearwitikas, she preferred to keep the children as far away as she could till they were out of their sight.

As she turned the doorknob, every inch of her being froze at the sound of a voice behind her.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Everyone turned around and was shocked to see that it was Ree. She stood there in the dark looking exhausted. It was her last night at Baybell and she had fallen asleep while packing her notes.

Everyone stared, but no one knew what to say. They didn’t know if they should run or stay or yell. Ree never posed a threat to them, and she had always helped them. But in the time when they needed her most, when adults were the ones with the power, when she could open her mouth and yell and break things when they couldn’t, she stayed in the shadows.

Ree could read their eyes.

“I tried to stop it. I tried talking to Neem. There’s nothing I could have done.”

It was Daw who finally spoke, echoing the words Neem had told her that day when she walked into her and Ree casually discussing the terrors that were to be committed against children all around the world.

“Just look away. There’s nothing to see here.”

Daw called for everyone to follow her out the door.

Ree stepped back as the children walked out of the building and into the twilight. She didn’t say a word.

The Baybellers ran into the forest, deep enough till they were sure no one could follow them, and no bearwitika could produce even an ounce of discomfort.

“Now what?” Hani asked.

Mayada told them about how Cleo had taken her home the first day the bearwitikas were brought to Baybell. She told them about everything she saw on the news, and everything that was happening to the factory children and children all over the world.

“Where’s the Bearwitika factory?” asked Inbar. “We need to go there. It’s what’s causing all this madness.”

“What would we go do?” asked Hani.

“Without Baybell, I have nowhere to go,” said Adeeli with despair, “It was my safe space, and they took it from me.”

“We need to be seen. I think they would be scared of us,” Inbar told them as she pulled Adeeli close to her and stroked her hair.

“Why would they be scared?” asked Yaz.

“Why would they try to turn us into silenced haystacks if they weren’t?” asked Mayada.

“We have too much power. It scares them.”

“It’s not like we’ll be trespassing. It’s public property outside the factory walls. We’ll just...exist,” Inbar said.

She saw some hesitated glances thrown her way, so she extended her arm to Adeeli. Adeeli held Inbar’s hand and extended hers towards Jala.

They all held hands and started walking, huddled together, following the directions Mayada had learned from the news. Though no one particularly felt like talking, they were all feeding off of their mutual energies. They had all been violated, their friends had been violated, and they were all very, very angry. They were angry for the children

who had been making the bears, angry for the bears, angry for themselves, and angry for anyone who was caught in the nets of the Bear Hunters.

The anger they shared grew the more they mulled over these thoughts in their minds, and their steps grew heavier. They eventually started marching. Hands held, feet stomping. It was like with every stomp, they shook the sun in the sky a little higher. By the time the sun was up and brushing beams of light across their tired faces, they found themselves staring at the dreadful entity that was the Bearwitika factory.

It was a ghastly cement structure. Its walls were sharp and pointy and it had long zig-zagged pipes extending smog towards the sky. The land surrounding it was barren and dead. It was horrifying to look at. As Mayada stood before the factory, she remembered the times that she had wished her eyes could be stuck in a permanent eye roll so that she would never look at anything boringly again. Her eyes weren't rolling in her head at that moment, but she could swear that she was seeing things in a way she had never experienced before. It was like she was watching live action unfold before her very eyes.

The land before her was a battlefield. She could see swords tossed and buildings climbed and feet kicked up into the air. She could see the Baybellers fighting terrifying monsters with nothing but clenched fists. She could see the battle won, the factory taken over, and the land returned to its rightful owners.

It was going to happen, and Mayada was more determined than ever to get her way.

“Let’s sit, everyone,” Mayada said.

“I’m hungry,” Hani said she grabbed at her stomach.

“We’ll find you food,” Adeeli said sympathetically. “But I was thinking - for those of us who can, I mean - I think we should have a hunger strike.”

“What’s that?” Mayada asked.

“We refuse to eat until we get what we want. It’s a protest.”

“That sounds intense,” Yaz said. “What if we never get what we want?”

“We will,” Mayada assured her friend as she replayed the battle over and over again in her mind. In whichever way the battle was fought, it was going to be won.

The Baybellers all agreed that a hunger strike was the best way to go. Most of their stomachs were in a knot anyway, just thinking about what was going on inside those factory walls.

They settled down on a little plot of land just outside the factory gates. They gathered some hay and branches from the forest around them to make themselves little nests to keep themselves bundled when it got cold. They all agreed that they would do everything they could to be heard loud and clear, but not at the expense of anyone’s health. If anyone got sick, too tired, or was unable to stay at the protest anymore for whatever reason, they needed to take care of themselves first and foremost.

And there they were with their stomachs gurgling, eyebrows tied in knots of determination that could turn solid mountains into piles of crumbled sand. They were there to stay.

They gathered some attention that first day. Bear Hunters stood at the factory's windows with their feet tapping nervously against the marble floors. They were worried. Granted, it was just a small group of harmless children and bears, but if they received any form of attention, it could possibly affect their sales.

“We should have taken them in when we had the chance,” a hunter said as she slammed the window shut and turned away from the sight, grimacing like she was walking straight into a burning flame.

Mayada looked around her as the moon lit the sky that night. She felt safe with her friends. She wondered if Cleo was mad at her, but decided that he would understand. He had always understood. She rested her head against Yaz's shoulder and closed her eyes.

She heard the hoot of an owl in the distance.

For a minute, she wished she could have been born an owl. She would be soaring through the forest, nestled from one tree branch to the next as she crossed miles, hooting wildly while her feathers fluttered in the wind. She would use her beak to poke at anyone who dared come near her with harmful glares. She would have had the whole forest to call her home. Where was her home now? What was going to happen when all this was over?

She decided not to think about it. Ree had helped her find ways to stop her anxious thoughts when they began creeping in by trying to focus on the *now*. She closed her eyes and went back to being an owl, diving gracefully over and under branches as she flew through the forest.

But suddenly, as she was flying, she found herself plunging headfirst towards a whole bundle of branches that were so leafy and tangled that she couldn't figure out a way to avoid them. She panicked, trying to fly around all angles to find a way out. She couldn't slow down, either. She smashed into the leaves.

She was relieved to find that the leaves caught her in a warm embrace. They wrapped around her and swarmed all over her soft feathers. She felt so comfortable. In fact, she felt *too* comfortable, like this all wasn't just a vision in her mind. She opened her eyes and found herself caught in a tight embrace. The arms wrapped around her felt like two rolled up carpets. She knew those layers all too well.

"Grandpa," Mayada whispered gratefully as she dug her face into his woolly scarves.

"I knew you would be here. I looked all over, and when I saw the state of Baybell, I just knew where you would be."

He wrapped her with his big coat and a whole bunch of different scarves. Mayada looked behind him and saw a small crowd of people.

"I spread the word. A lot of our good friends from the neighborhood are furious. We're here to show our support. I also came across someone stumbling in the forest," he said as he pointed to someone standing shyly behind him.

It was Ree. She was hovering behind Cleo.

"I'm finally speaking up," she said softly.

Mayada was so happy to see them.

The crowd that gathered sat a bit further from where the Baybellers were. They didn't want to take away from their light. It was their fight, and they were only there to support them. The people that had originally lived on the factory's land did join the Baybellers in the front, though. They shared nests and cried for their locked-up children. They went from shouting and demanding their release to sobbing softly into one another's arms.

Cleo had to fight the urge to go and scoop Mayada up as he watched her from his spot next to Ree. But he knew that Mayada was strong enough to do this on her own.

As a whole week of protest passed, more heads were turning towards the protesters. The people in the crowd were reporting to local newspapers. The word was spreading.

The children were in bad shape. Though they drank water and ate small bites that kept them functional, they were still starving, exhausted, and frustrated. They weren't sure if they were changing anything. Sometimes they talked about giving up.

“But people are talking now. We stopped so many people from buying the bears. We have a voice.”

The bears - mostly Noona, Youbi, and Fozzy – kept the children company as they did everything they could to lift their spirits up. Since they were able to sustain themselves with no food and water, they kept themselves close make sure their energies were rubbing off on the children as much as they possibly could.

By the end of the week, Mayada began to be enveloped by her dark thoughts once more. She found herself sitting a little farther than everyone else as she tried to fight the darkness that was starting to take over. She was taken back to the way she felt when she was in bed with the shutters closed. She wasn't sure why she had begun to feel this way again, but she also didn't know if she had the strength to battle through it. When things would get too difficult she would cry, rocking herself back and forth till her thoughts were silenced by a peaceful slumber.

“This will pass,” her lips whispered to her mind, but she wasn't sure if her mind was listening.

On the tenth day of their protest, Yaz got up from her spot on the ground to grab a glass of water from Ree. She was feeling very faint and didn't know how much longer she could go with no nourishment. She was so tired that she thought she was moving forwards when, in fact, her body was pulling her backwards. She wobbled as she stretched her arms out to grab something to catch her fall, and she found herself laid back against the factory fence. The second she touched the fence, a loud alarm sounded. It shook the ground with such urgency that everyone started to gather around Yaz to see what had happened.

A group of guards came out of the building. They were dressed in dark uniforms and black glass masks that covered their faces.

"No trespassing!" one of them yelled as they grabbed Yaz and started to drag her inside.

"No! Stop!" yelled June as she struggled to set Yaz free. She was also held by another guard and dragged inside alongside Yaz.

"Stay back or they'll take us all in," Inbar warned the others as they were about to pounce in to help their friends. She had to physically hold Mayada back as she screamed.

The arrest sparked even more outrage with the crowds. They shouted and demanded that Yaz and June be released from their detention.

Cleo held Mayada close that night as she cried. She didn't know what was going to happen to Yaz and June in there.

"Hang in there, my darling. You're all doing great and this will all be over soon."

“What are we going to do?” the question opened the Hunters’ meeting that night.

“Those kids, they’re being too loud. People aren’t responding to our ads the same way anymore.”

“They’re on newspapers. They’re making too much commotion.”

“We didn’t work this long and this hard to be stopped by a group of children.”

“We need to tempt them inside.”

“Where are the chemists? We could release a scent.”

“What do kids like? Cookies?”

“Let’s let out the smell of cookies from the factory. They can’t resist that.”

So they did.

It was Adeeli whose nose first scrunched up when she caught the strong whiff of cookie dough coming from the factory’s chimneys. The whiff was followed by a loud voice on the speakerphone:

“Come in, children, we have cookies. You must be starving; let’s eat and have a chat.”

“They’re taunting us,” Hani said in disbelief.

The scent started to grow, curling around their noses and knocking at their stomachs’ walls. They were all starving, and the cruelty of the hunters’ gesture caused Inbar to fall to the ground as the scent grew stronger and stronger.

Mayada could feel the smell creeping in through her nostrils and trickling into her brain. It slithered through the rooms and closets of her mind, where she hid every dark and bright memory she had ever lived. Baby Mayada came crawling out of one of the rooms, following the scent through the twists and turns of her skull. She was giggling; she didn’t know that it was dangerous to follow something so beautiful. Mayada wanted to warn her but she couldn’t. Baby Mayada was crawling faster and giggling harder.

No.

But Baby Mayada would not stop.

How could she warn her? She needed to grab her attention. She needed to put an end to it. All of it. All of it...

She let out a shriek.

“No!” she yelled at the top of her lungs. She alerted the protesters who at first looked at her in wonder as her face turned as red as a cherry. No one knew what she was saying no to, but it didn’t really matter. Her voice was cracking and her fists were in the air as

she shouted. She could not control her anger, and everyone slowly felt their anger rise up within them as well.

The protesters felt the anger lifting their bodies off the ground. They went to stand next to Mayada to try to calm her down, but they found themselves shouting as well.

They were now walking towards the factory's gates. Their ferocity was moving their limbs. They wanted to get in. They had had enough and in that moment, they truly believed that they were unstoppable. The alarms were sounding and the guards were starting to rush outside. It was a battlefield.

A cloud of some sort was gathering overhead. It was furiously swirling over their heads like a storm about to erupt. The cloud slowly started to take shape with every scream released and soon enough, a giant aura in the shape of a bear formed above them. As the children realized what was emerging out of their mouths, a lot of them stared up in shock, but no one stopped moving. They kept going.

The aura took a plunge towards the factory and broke down its doors. It stopped the machines and broke the serum bottles into thousands of pieces that fell like rain from the ceiling. It scared the guards and hunters to the other side of the walls. The children hurried inside as all the doors and windows were busted open. The whole scene was absolutely chaotic.

Mayada hurried through the dark and twisted corridors of the factory to find Yaz and June. The families were rushing to their children, helping them off their feet and unhooking them from the serum machines. The factory was made of so many dark hallways, it seemed so wildly built that Mayada imagined that the hunters really were monsters to know their way through the cold, dark pathways. She imagined them with red eyes, racing hungrily through the dark as they robotically hooked and unhooked the children from their machines. She shuddered at the thought but stopped to a halt when she heard a very familiar sobbing.

She started walking very slowly, unsure of what exactly stopped her from rushing at her highest speed to follow the sound. It was like she was suddenly in a trance, lost in thought. She had heard those sobs so many times before, back when Yaz had finished a particularly difficult session with Ree. As she slowly walked to the dark chamber from which the sobbing was emerging, she thought about how people could be recognized by their laughs. She could pick up Cleo's laugh from miles away, but she had never wondered about the sounds of his sadness. It was a beautiful thing, to cry. Mayada realized that it was just as beautiful as laughing. Why do strangers so comfortably laugh around one another, but never cry? The sobbing grew louder and louder, and she began to recognize her friend's gasps for breath as well. Those gasps that reminded her that she was still alive and that she needed to breathe even though her feelings felt like they were drowning her whole. Mayada's mind was buzzing as she followed the beautifully relieving sound of her friend being so utterly alive. Was Yaz in pain? Was she confused? Did she have any idea that someone that loved her was just around the corner?

As entrancing as these thoughts were, Mayada realized that Yaz could possibly be sobbing with her very last breaths, so she snapped out of her trance and quickened her

pace. She turned one last corner and found Yaz, shaken to the core and tied up with June at her side. Youbi quickly rushed inside after Mayada and began to untie June. Mayada stayed on the ground with Yaz, rocking her back and forth, whispering just how sparkly and magical she was in that very instant because her heart was beating and that was all that mattered.

That very night, Cleo decided that it was safest for all the children and bears to stay with him until they figured out an alternate living situation. They were cramped up in Cleo's car on the drive home, sitting atop one another to fit. The big bundle of warm bodies offered nothing but safety and comfort. They leaned against one another, their soft bellies rising and falling as they breathed in relief. Ree was on the phone with Neem the whole way, listening to her declare that she was putting Baybell up for sale. She had had enough of all of the nonsense and wanted to retreat to a hut somewhere sunny and far, far away.

What also happened on that very night was that the state of the factories and their labor conditions were studied by the authorities. They pulled out their notebooks and took notes, listened, and took photographs. Some handcuffs were secured against clenched fists, but many hunters were long gone before anyone had a chance to catch them. They were racing through the dark forests, chasing the wind back to their underground lairs. Soon enough, they became last week's news, and the hunters reemerged with their eyes shimmering in the white lights of their laboratories.

PART 6 – VICTORY

Daw emptied the last pack of seeds in the huge flowerpot at Baybell’s entrance. Ree came up to her from behind and pinched her shoulder.

“I can’t wait to see how big they’ll grow.”

Daw was now Baybell’s gardener. She researched all the flowers that could possibly be planted and chose the best ones based on their traits. The flowers she was now planting were yellow daffodils because they looked like trumpets. Being loud was something Baybell encouraged (for those who wanted to be loud, of course.)

The children and bears were running Baybell with Ree’s help. They welcomed new children and offered a space of love and comfort, and a large part of the healing process was sharing their experiences with one another.

Not only were the children managing Baybell, they also took over the Bearwitika factory. Cleo helped with a lot of the technicalities, but they had managed to use the factory’s structure for their own cause and eliminate any traces of the evil that once lurked the halls. The families that had originally stayed on that land built tents again in the factory’s large yards.

The factory’s machinery was now used to print books. They stirred and whirred while they printed the beautifully colored creations of all the young writers. The books were then distributed all over the world, free of charge. Some books included:

Mayada’s Marvelous Mumbles: How I Found Peace

Luna’s Book of Eating Whatever

Adeeli’s Crafts

The children also produced empty books that were printed out and sent to any child that wished to fill their thoughts on blank pages. After filling them in, the books were sent back, printed, and redistributed.

Books for children, by children. The Bearwitika Books were a huge success.

“Did you ever imagine we would come this far?” Yaz asked Mayada as she colored the cover art for her new book on funky haircuts.

“It doesn’t feel real sometimes,” Mayada said as she drank a big, steaming cup of tea. They were sitting at Baybell’s benches, waiting for the new patch of children to come in to welcome them with Ree.

“Sometimes I wish we had thought of all this sooner. That we hadn’t wasted those years being sad.”

“None of this could have happened any sooner. Everything around us is because of what we went through. I don’t think we wasted any time.”

“So much positivity from you,” she smiled, “I like it.”

“Well, it is easier with this new haircut. The sunbeams hit my head and warm up my mind, they don’t get caught in my hair.” Mayada grinned as she ruffled her newly-cut bob.

“That’s what I always say! Hair gets in the way of your mind,” she giggled.

Mayada reached out and dipped her fingers in the cup of water Yaz was using for her watercolors. She sprinkled Yaz’s nose with some drips of water. Yaz gasped and quickly emptied the whole cup in Mayada’s face.

Mayada rushed outside into the garden, laughing and splattering droplets of life from her eyelashes onto Daw’s seeds. Yaz ran after her, chasing her like a butterfly.

And while the hunters’ minds were still buzzing below them, they were still thumping from above.

