

Dancing Among the Stars

By Kaylene Lugay, grade 8

“Seven days.”

“Alright, so one week.”

“Kas, write ‘seven days.’”

“I’m just trying to shorten it, simplify it a lit-”

“Well, don’t! The last thing we need to do is shorten it! ‘One week’ sounds too small for how long it’s felt. It hasn’t been a single week, it’s been seven agonizing days. But it’s felt like... like a year of winter without sunlight. Like a lemon you can’t juice into lemonade. Using a ‘one’ for how fast my life fell apart is more accurate, but the time since then and the time ahead of us, waiting for it to be reassembled... I could never describe that in a ‘one.’ All I need shortened is the time between now and Rae coming home.”

Dicea’s voice had gotten quieter and had begun to quiver as a blanket of uncomfortable silence came over the three teens.

She put her knees up to her chest and buried her face in them, apologizing profusely, “I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have blown up at you like that. It’s just-”

Kastor solemnly gazed down at his laptop. “No, Dee, *I’m* sorry. No doubt, this is excruciating for you.”

Eusichore jumped in. “But we’ll find her. She’ll be home safe and sound before you can say red velvet cake!”

“Red... velvet... cake,” Dicea whispered.

The keys on Kastor's keyboard clacked as he filled in the rest of the information.

“Uh, y-y’know what? You just pulled an all-nighter. You should change into some fresh new clothes. I’ll change out of my pyjamas, too!” Eusichore suggested.

The girls walked side-by-side through Eusichore's home, Dicea gazing at her friend, grateful for the shared shelter offered to her when her older sister and only guardian vanished.

The pink hallways were bathed in warm golden light from the noon sun and the soft white nylon carpet cushioned their feet with every step. The soothing environment seemed strange and ill-fitting for how the past week had gone and the emotions that had swirled around.

Eventually, they arrived at the hallway containing the bedrooms. Entering into the guest room that she had been staying at for the past seven days, Dicea reached into her suitcase and changed into a white, yellow-edged cable knit turtleneck sweater and black leggings. She tied her dark burgundy hair into a low bun.

Eusichore emerged from her room with a loose teal cropped shirt, pink box pleat skirt, and her waist-length dark brown hair loose.

When they had met back up with Kastor in the living room, he tilted his laptop screen towards them.

Missing Person:

Astraea Laodice, 22-year-old, 5'2 female. Dark burgundy hair, olive skin, brown eyes.

Last seen 7 days ago in the Strato neighbourhood, wearing a puffy gray cold-shoulder long sleeve blouse, denim shorts, and yellow sandals.

If you have any information regarding her disappearance and/or whereabouts, please inform the police by visiting the closest police station.

Upon Dicea's approval, Kastor sat up, brushing the breadcrumbs from their rushed breakfast off his white shirt and jeans.

"Well, I'm off to go print a bunch of copies. Be back soon," he excused himself.

He whizzed out of the room, his black satin varsity jacket trailing behind him, his red sneakers barely gripping the floor, and black hair bouncing off his forehead.

"He's really giving this his all," Eusichore remarked.

"He should be starting to live out his future right now, interning at that big-shot law firm in that glistening metropolis. He should be hopping on a plane and never looking back for the rest of the summer. But he sacrificed it all because of me. And I just snapped at him for it," Dicea sighed.

"Dee, we're both doing this because we care about you. And besides, Astraea's made such an impact on our lives. Kas credits her for helping him get the opportunity for that internship, and I don't have to worry about how much I can fill up my plate. This is the least we can do to give back."

"Thanks, Kore. Now, Kas is giving this his all because there's not a second to waste. Which is why we gotta catch up with him!"

Kastor had wasted no time plastering the posters onto almost every vertical flat surface in sight. As Dicea and Eusichore passed the short, two-decade-old, weathered *Cirrostratus Town Square* sign, they took in the usual sight for what was meant to be the busiest part of town. The dusty dilapidated stone pavement that served as a platform for a single wilting oak tree. In just a matter of days, the tree-planting project was launching. Astraea wouldn't have missed that project. She hadn't missed one in three years.

Soon enough, all three of them were engrossed in sticking posters to the walls. Place, plaster, move on, repeat. Their routine was only interrupted by a familiar figure. They could remember the short brown ponytail and beige business casual too well.

“Vice Principal Mayes?” Eusichore wondered.

As if reading each other’s minds, they approached her as she read one of the posters, a distraught look on her face.

“Dicea, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Thank you, but we haven’t given up hope yet. Which is why... I need to ask something of you,” Dicea replied.

“Anything.”

Soon, they had situated themselves in a coffee shop for a chat.

“My sister was at your academy six years before me. You must have noticed something, maybe some people she hung out with?” Dicea began.

“Mhm, yes, this was actually quite notable.”

Dicea nudged Kastor to get out his notepad. He quickly took the cue.

“I had already handed over the names and files to the police. Her junior year, she began spending time around a troublesome group. Heaven knows why. She eventually broke free of the group and cut them out of her life before graduation, a year before her- *your* parents...”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that time.”

“She was so involved, so kind and generous. Loved helping the community and participating in programs that worked to make it better. She was-”

“Please... refrain from using ‘was’, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. I was referring to during her school days, but she absolutely continues to demonstrate those attributes. She is a joy to the community. Which is why the group she chose to keep company with came as such a shock to the staff.”

Shortly after, they wrapped up the conversation with Vice Principal Mayes and began looking further.

A couple days later, the police had shared a piece of evidence with Dicea: her sister’s diary. They read through, some entries more notable than others.

November 29th

This Social Justice project may be our biggest one yet! Ending poverty in Cirrostratus for the Christmas season is perfect! Y’know, if our town’s name was something along the lines of ‘Sunshine Valley’, I’d be able to come up with some cheesy motto like, “Let’s make this town shine brighter and spread its rays of warmth!” but no, it had to be clouds.

Kastor opened up his notepad without any hesitation.

December 6th

It was the biggest project yet, and also the biggest flop. I can’t believe how low this town can stoop. Seriously, raiding our snack and bottled water supplies?! We’re trying to help those in need and people even take advantage of that. I need to pick up Dee’s Christmas present later, hopefully no one swipes that off of the ‘reserved’ section at the counter.

Dicea remembered that Christmas. She had received a plush of the mascot from the sisters’ favourite Disney movie. They had adored it but felt a deeper connection to it after the tragedy their family faced three years ago. Hugging each other a little tighter at *Aloha Oe*, feeling uncomfortable towards the last half hour of the film.

February 13th

I don't understand. There have been countless efforts, so much energy poured into making this town better. Has this all been for nothing? With every passing day, I still see crime. Hate. Darkness. How is it that, in shining a light, I've drawn in more shade? Well, my candle's burning out, under the rubble of this town. I've tried it all, so what will work?

That entry was among the later ones. They decided to flip back a bit, noting important lines and periods in her life.

The more I spend time around these five, the rougher parts of Cirrostratus I see. How can I reach out to these parts and make an impact there?

I'd never seen that area of town before. I've always held out hope for this town, and now is no different. But, to be honest, it's been a bit rocked today.

Even further back, they saw how it had all started out.

Another day, another project! I can already see improvements, this is gonna be great!

Eventually, they came across an entry from three years ago, around the time of the accident.

It's been... rough lately. I know, this is common for Cirrostratus. But I thought I was changing that. Sometimes I just wish I could rise above this place, escape to some utopia beyond stormy clouds.

"I... I've known for a while how bad this town can get. But Astraea held out hope for years despite everything saying otherwise," Dicea remarked, her voice low and solemn.

"But she improved so many lives. Mine and Kore's are only two examples; two bubbles in an ocean. She was only fixated on what she thought to be more negative aspects, merely focused on a few rotten apples in the harvest," Kastor pointed out.

“And put way too much on herself to make this town perfect,” Eusichore added.

“But can either of you prove her wrong? What makes you think that this town *isn't* terrible?” Dicea argued.

“Dee, look around-” Eusichore began.

“Then look with me. It's *so* worn down, and while, yes, the physical state of a location doesn't indicate anything about the people occupying it, have you not noticed anything wrong occurring around us? The 822 on the corner of 10th Avenue got robbed yesterday, there have been 20 car accidents in the past week, elementary schools have formed cruel social hierarchies, and not a- a twelfth of a day goes by that you can't hear sirens in the distance! Tell me, what normal, safe city has all those things?”

Days passed. There were barely any clues, and pursued leads yielded no results. Hope was spiralling quickly, and the familiar uncomfortable blanket of silence enveloping the three was present once again. They had returned to plastering posters in town square, yet, something was not the same as before. Eusichore held in tears as she pressed the poster to the wall. Kastor solemnly gazed down as he dipped the roller into the tub of plaster. Dicea hurriedly slapped the posters on the wall.

“Dee, it's approaching two w- 14 days since Astraea went missing. Around this time, police usually start embracing the possibility that-” Kastor began.

He was cut off by a group of young children racing past them, laughing with mile-wide smiles on their faces. They ran into the 822 on the corner, which was being restocked with the help of various volunteers.

Without a word, Dicea slowly walked over to the weathered oak tree. She noted the damp, glistening soil, and sat down next to it.

She stayed planted on that spot, underneath the old oak. It could have been half an hour or 12 hours. But she didn't know, nor care. She needed to see through her sister's eyes. Spot any potential this shamble of a town had.

Surprisingly, she didn't have to look very far.

The glowing sunshine warmed her face as she took in her surroundings. For once since that day, she sat still in calm silence. Children's faces lit up with joy, people offered cash and large meals to those who needed it the most, and made life-long memories despite being in a musty alley. Of course there were still imperfections. A police car here and a dispute there. And of course, the town square riddled with 'Missing Person' posters.

"Dee, are you alright?" Eusichore inquired.

"I can see what Rae saw in this place. I guess I gave up on it too quickly," she replied.

Kastor was correct. He usually was, or at least made it very plausible that he was. He was preparing for that internship for a reason, after all. The police contacted Dicea with that possibility, like he said.

"I've been holding out hope for the past 14 days. But... t- the future isn't looking so bright anymore," Dicea admitted.

All Eusichore and Kastor could do was gaze down in somber. Words weren't needed to express their agreement.

Whether intentionally or not, they didn't end up pulling an all-nighter that night.

Dicea opened her eyes expecting to go right back to investigating, but was met with pitch darkness, fog from her breath the only thing she could distinguish in her surroundings. She lay flat on some sort of smooth surface, but bolted up once she had oriented herself a bit more.

“Uh... Kore? Kas?” she called out.

“Dee?” she could hear Eusichore’s voice from somewhere to her left.

The surface on which they stood began to glisten and gleam, lighting up the darkness. Fine white glitter sprinkled the nearly transparent azure winding road beneath their feet, and seemed to be suspended in the air, above the clouds. The visibility had increased greatly.

“Wh-Wha- We’re in the sky?!” Eusichore exclaimed.

“This *must* be a dream. There’s no other logical explanation for it,” Kastor suggested.

Eusichore reached to pinch herself but was cut off by Dicea unexpectedly bolting off.

“Dee, wait! Where are you going?” they called after her.

I don’t understand where I am, how I got here, or if this is all even real. But I will take any chance I can get, she thought.

She barely stopped to catch her breath, but spotted the pathway ending shortly. The only way to reach *there* was leaping on the smaller suspended platforms. They resembled stars, but merely felt like hot sand on a desert.

Her heart nearly beat out of her chest, but she couldn’t tell why. All she could hear were *thumps*.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

“Rae!” she called out.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

She took a great leap and landed on the star her sister sat on.

“Rae, I- I can’t believe I found you,” she gasped, tears beginning to flow. “I- I mean I hoped I would, I *really* did, just- now that it’s real, I just-”

Astraea stood up and simply allowed Dicea to let it out on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry if I worried you. Truth is, I got here the same way you did,” she explained.

“You fell asleep and woke up in the sky?”

“Well, yes, technically. But, I mean, I... I couldn’t hold out hope for any longer, despite how much I wanted to. I guess you’d have read my diary by now, eh? Well... this is it.”

“The utopia...”

“The utopia beyond the clouds, yeah. This makes Cirrostratus look way worse than most places do, which is saying a lot.”

“Actually... I get why you thought all that.”

“Thought what?”

“Everything. But surprisingly, mostly where you thought you could make it better.”

“No way. Dicea Laodice thinks Cirrostratus can be a better place. The girl who expects the least from people, who barely flinches at bad news.”

“I’ve learned a lot from you. All my life, I saw the unpleasant parts of town while you worked to improve them. So I closed off the possibility that any part of it could be good. But it’s changed- *you*’ve changed it.”

“So explain why a dozen crimes happen everyday. Why our bullying statistics are through the roof. Why ambulances and police cars have to refuel constantly. These are your own arguments.”

“Then why do people take time out of their day to help fix the damage? Why do kids laugh and play? Why do some go out of their way to help others get through another day? I

won't deny that what you've said is absolutely true. But I've seen the opposite side of the coin with my own eyes, thanks to you helping me open them."

Astraea looked on with widened eyes.

"We've got a long way to go. But all you've done has paid off. So... so please. Don't give up on this. Come back, and- and... this time, I'll be the one to make an effort to better it. And if you ever decide to give it another go... I promise, we'll be in it together. You and I can change this place, make it into a utopia below the clouds."

She held out her hand.

"What do you say?"