

# HEART OF FEAR

Student Number:

11515975

School Number:

8418

HIGH SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION ENGLISH EXTENSION COURSE 2 MAJOR WORK IDENTIFICATION TAG	
Student No.:	11515975
School No.:	8418 C536.
Number of Pieces:	3-3
Category and Description	SS - Short Story Major Work
ATTACH THIS CARD SECURELY TO EACH PART OF THE PROJECT. DO NOT LEND.	

I could hear their footsteps. They were so close.

I was crouched in the undergrowth, just a few metres from where the lantana stopped and grass opened up into an abrupt clearing less than twenty metres across.

Only metres from the two men pursuing us.

Ben shifted beside me. He was staring intently through the tangle of vines. His face was set in a fierce look of hatred and determination that distorted his usually soft, laughing eyes and facial features. Very slowly his hand reached down to where his knife was sheathed in his belt.

My heartbeat seemed to triple within a few seconds. I could feel it thudding in my chest and the sound of blood rushed through my ears. I was so deafened by my own fear that I didn't hear what he was saying. It took me a few seconds to realise the knife didn't mean danger to me but his words did.

"Run," he breathed so quietly I had to lean even closer to him to hear, "I can take them both. You have to tell Brian that they are coming. The village needs time to prepare a defence."

I stared at him, scared by his tone. He was predicting his own death. But without it the whole village would fall.

"Go. Now." Still he didn't turn to look at me. He just stared ahead with the intense gaze of a predator. The only difference was he knew he was really the prey.

I couldn't move. My body had frozen in position. Only my eyes were showing how frantic my mind was becoming.

His head snapped towards me, like he was a coil of wire rather than a person. His blank blue eyes chilled me. I shook my head at him pitifully.

His hand shot up and grabbed the back of my neck. His eyes caught me in his gaze and I was helpless.

"You have to go," his expression was angry but his tone was flat and dead.

He was mad. Or maybe I was. Maybe we both were.

I felt tears fill my eyes. My chest contracted and I wanted to sob. But if I did we were both dead.

Seeing my distress his eyes softened and the fiery expression slipped away like a discarded mask.

"Please, " his voice stabbed through me worse than the knife in his other hand would have. He leaned towards me until our foreheads touched.

"Do it for me and the life we once had."

I nodded slowly, fear seeping into my joints so I felt immobile.

He drew away from me and stared back at the men. Moments passed before I saw his hand reach out to a rock. In a swift, fluid movement he grabbed it and hurled it in the direction of thicker bush away to our right. Then he waited a few seconds.

"Now!" He jumped to his feet and launched himself over the last of the lantana barrier and on to the Tracker who had come so close to finding us.

I frantically jumped over the bushes that scratched my skin and tore at my clothes. I fell into the clearing and landed on my knees. I could hear the sounds of a struggle as I raced towards the other side of the clearing. I didn't look back but expected someone to grab me at any second. The clearing wasn't big but the bushland I was heading for seemed to be kilometres away.

My left foot landed unevenly on a rock only a metre from the nearest tree. I fell over heavily and scrambled to regain my footing.

I jumped from the edge of the clearing over the outer row of thick lantana into a lower patch that ripped my skin but slowed my fall so I didn't break any bones.

Only then did I look back.

There was one person in the clearing. It was Ben. He wasn't facing me, he was intent on the rest of the group pursuing us. He didn't have a chance.

I wanted to call out to him to come with me, run away from them but I knew it was an irrational hope. He was sacrificing himself for me and I could only watch.

It was an incredibly uneven contest. A boy of seventeen against four grown men.

With disturbing ease they wrestled the knife away from him. Two of them held him while another pressed a knife to his throat. The fourth scanned the clearing for anyone else. Looking for me.

"Tell me where the others are!" the voice of the man with the knife drowned out every other sound. The bush was cloaked in a deathly silence. I squeezed my eyes shut but didn't dare move.

Ben swore at the man and I heard the sound of him spitting at his captors.

Then silence reigned again.

I don't know how long I crouched there, eyes closed not daring to breath. It felt like hours. It was probably only a few seconds.

I heard a distant shout. The other men had found something. I relaxed slightly as I realised the shout had been too far away to be the discovery of the village.

Relief flooded through me as I saw the men lose interest in the clearing and walk away. When they were out of sight I slowly stood up. From that distance I could only see the general outline of Ben's body disguised by the long tan grass. Though I could make out the growing red stain across his neck.

Making sure I stayed low to the ground and as quiet as possible I turned and ran.

\*

\*

\*

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was running. Dazed, I tripped over rocks, bushes and anything else without comprehending my progress. I would just pick myself up and keep running but my mind was far away.

All I could see was Ben's blue eyes drilling through me. So cold and dead-looking those eyes. Blank and emotionless.

I realised wearily that my steps were half my usual stride. I didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore.

I remembered Ben the way he used to be. Relaxed, funny and above all, happy. The wars, death and killing had changed him. And I still felt like the naive little girl from The Peaceful Times.

I felt like an animal was trying to tear itself out of my chest. A ripping pain seared my insides as I relived the expression of compassion he had shown me. Underneath his coldness he was still the boy I remembered.

The boy who was now dead. Because of me.

The party of nine had been my idea. If I had kept my mouth shut Ben would still be alive.

I had been running for nearly an hour and I just wanted to stop. Where was the village?

A shrill whistle pierced the air above me. I glanced up, scared. It didn't sound like a bird.

In a small patch of ground that was part of a dried up river-bed I saw a shadowy figure step forward. For one irrational moment I thought it was Ben. Then my heart nearly stopped with fear. The knife. The bow. It was a soldier.

My whole body seemed to freeze. My eyes were trained on the knife sheathed on his belt. My legs tensed up, preparing to run. Had he seen me?

"Nalia?" My name echoed softly through the thin bushland.

Relief enveloped me again. It was Brian, the leader of the village and one of the guys who had saved the lives of Ben and me nearly two years ago after a battle that had

killed everyone we knew.

His long strides reached me in a matter of seconds. His worried eyes were my undoing. I fell against his chest and burst into tears just as his hands reached out to catch me.

\* \* \*

I didn't remember falling asleep. I must have, and for a long time. The moon was casting its dim light down on the forest and the people hiding in it.

I recalled the day the group of nine, including Ben and I had been selected to go on a scouting mission. We had been instructed to try to find more people to join us. And, if possible, to discreetly find out if there were any other gangs in the area. Friend or not. Brian hadn't wanted us to go. He detested the idea of splitting our numbers, especially when a majority had agreed that he couldn't go. He was too important to the village as a whole.

We had thought it would be a step in the right direction.

I sat up and looked around the small tree-house platform I had been directed to earlier in the afternoon. I had been too upset to be comforted and Brian hadn't wanted to distress anyone else.

My rest was over. I was tired of our frustrating plight. For nearly two years we had hidden, building up our numbers and training with weapons. Guns and ammunition were so rare we didn't even have any. Knives and wooden poles were used. I used the bow and arrow.

The wind was refreshingly cold. I didn't have a bed but blankets had kept me warm. Any shelter larger than a platform in the trees could be seen from the ground. Even as small as it was the platform I was sitting on had plastic branches and leaves thickly wound around its edges to conceal it. From the ground it looked real, and cluttered

enough so no-one would want to climb it. We hoped.

I often worried about an attack from one of the other gangs. Not only of getting away but of constructing a new shelter network. The plastic foliage was irreplaceable.

I pushed away my blankets and turned to the pile of warm clothing and my knife someone had left for me. Even though the nights still retained the warmth of the day winter was fast approaching and it was the time of the year when our defences were at their weakest.

I swung open the trapdoor in one corner of the wooden platform. There was no ladder to attract suspicion but the branches and trunk were thick enough to allow me to climb down.

I reached the ground quickly and turned to see Kayla leaning against the trunk two metres away from me. She must have been asked to keep an eye on me. She was asleep.

Slowly I threaded my way across a small patch of soft ground covered by leaves. The soil was devoid of grass so I had to be careful not to step on any branches that would wake anyone up. From the vegetation around me I knew where I was. I was heading towards an area I remembered as a small cave. I wasn't as close to the main village as I had thought. This fig-tree, one of many, served as an outpost for extra warning if we were attacked. I had been away for only eight weeks and already I was forgetting details about my home.

I entered a small lantana tunnel that could have easily been a fox trail. It curved sharply to the left before broadening out so I could stand up comfortably. Almost. I still had to duck below the occasional low growing vine.

I was surprised to see a very dim light radiating from the cave. The soft, inaudible hum of voices reached me before I was noticed.

"Brian?" I called quietly as I approached the entrance. I didn't want to startle them.

They were all armed so it would be dangerous for me.

"Nalia?" Zac was standing in the doorway. He looked tense and his forehead creased from stress. He looked much older than the eighteen years he actually was. Even though the tunnel was dark I could still see the family resemblance to Kayla. She was his sister.

"It's me," I answered softly, "I didn't want to sneak up on you," I emerged from the shadows. His shoulders slumped at the sight of me. He stepped aside to allow me to enter and I found myself looking at a gathering of the oldest people in the village.

'Oldest' didn't describe it properly. They were all younger than Brian who was twenty. There were seven of them, including Brian and Zac.

"Sit down," Brian invited, "we were just talking about you actually,"

"We were hoping sleep would make you feel better," Dean commented softly, "we can only imagine what you've been through." Dean was nineteen and a quiet person even before the battles. I had known him and the others since they saved Ben and me more than two years ago.

From the back part of the cave I saw Max staring at me. The suspicious look on his face was so common to him that I ignored it.

"I know it's been hard but we need to know what has happened over the last four weeks," Brian settled his gaze on me. New lines were etched around his eyes that I had not seen before.

"Four weeks? We sent one person to report back at the end of each week," my eyes were drawn to Adam who was half-concealed by shadow. His brother Scott had been one of the people who should have reported back.

"When?" Adam asked.



I knew what he was talking about, "Scott should have arrived here over two weeks ago."

He stared at the floor and the look on his face made a heavy weight of dread settle over me. Adam was sixteen but he looked closer to twenty. He was brave and the type of person who could be relied upon all the time. I didn't know why but he felt ashamed that he was younger than the other guys who led the village. It didn't make sense because he was only seven months younger than me.

"How many of them came back?" My voice rose above the dull muttering of conversation.

Only Dean met my eyes.

"We sent back seven," I persisted, "how many made it back?"

"Three," Dean answered finally.

My voice trailed off to a whisper, "Three? Out of seven?"

"The last two to come back reported seeing scouts from a different gang," Max added,

"They had dark blue markings on their arms."

"The Western Gang," I told them, "We spied on them a little over the last month.

They were heading in this general direction. We had wanted to get ahead of them to warn you." My thoughts rearranged themselves. Five of us had been killed by the rival gang and they were still looking for the village.

"Look," Brian had put together what had happened, just like the rest of us, "we just want to know what happened to you and Ben."

A stab of pain burned in my stomach just from hearing his name. Was it guilt, anger or sorrow? I could almost hear his voice in my head, "It's none of those things," he would say, "it's heartburn."

I returned my attention to the group. As quickly and unemotionally as possible I

described being followed by the men of the Western Gang. We had tried for more than three hours to lose them but we hadn't been able to. Ben had died so I could get word back about how close they were to the village.

"We'll have to consider moving," Dean commented thoughtfully, his green eyes incredibly dark in the dim light, "We really don't have a choice."

"We fight!" Max cried from the depths of the cave. I knew he'd been quiet for too long. "If we run they'll just keep chasing us!"

Most of the guys just mumbled to each other. Only Adam had the guts, or lack of common sense to say what they were thinking. "Get real Max, or you'll end up with your throat slit like Ben."

Something in me cracked. I just didn't want to be there anymore. I needed to get away, even from these people who had become like family to me.

"Nalia? Where are you going?" One of their voices reached out to me but I had already disappeared into the shadows.

I went back towards the fig tree but didn't want to climb it. I glanced at Kayla who was still sleeping and walked for a few minutes until I came to the edge of the small river that supplied us with water. I sat down on a round stable rock that I had passed quite often the last time Ben and I had been lookouts at the fig-tree. It was one of our defences that, overall, were too few in number.

The scattered trees were still and silent, casting shadows in the silver light. Clouds crossed the path of the moon so its light flickered, changing the shape of the landscape. A patch of darkness, the shadow of a cloud crept up on me and passed with stealthy speed. Something in me liked the darkness. I felt safe in it.

I heard soft footsteps a fair distance behind me. Someone was following me but I wasn't afraid. It was most likely one of the guys checking up on me. To most of them

I was like a sister.

"Did you see her eyes?" It was Max speaking. He was trying to be quiet but it wasn't something he did very often so he wasn't very good at it. Whoever he was talking to remained silent.

"I'm serious! They were so black! Like there was nothing there!" I listened without moving at all. For once I didn't care that I was eavesdropping.

"And when she was talking about what happened with Ben she didn't even care. Not a reaction at all!" His voice had grown louder and I wondered who he was talking to.

"You're completely blind as well as stupid," Dean's usually quiet voice sliced through the air, "she's just lost her best friend and is struggling to appear normal so we don't think she's weak. If you had any common sense you would realise that."

Max didn't reply.

I heard someone, presumably Dean approaching me. He knew exactly why I was acting so cold. Did he know me so well or was my facade too flimsy?

I heard him stop and I knew he was right behind me. I stared out at the still water.

Without turning around I knew I should say something to him. I owed him that much.

"Thanks for defending me," my voice was strained and to my embarrassment I sounded like I was going to cry.

Dean sat down beside me without saying a word. He stared out at the water too.

I had known Dean for so long. He was Brian's best friend and I understood why. He never seemed to be disturbed by anything. He had fought and killed just as much as anyone else in the village but he still retained enough kindness to seem unaffected by it.

The young men from the cave and myself were the unofficial leaders in our small group. Brian had brought us together but I believed Dean held us together. He was

like an older brother to the few dozen younger members of the village.

"We've all had a hard time over the past two years. I know you feel like you have to be made of stone to be accepted by the guys but we've all lost people to the battles.

We'll understand your pain." He was still staring at the river.

"Do you think I don't care?"

Dean turned his dark green eyes to me. I had always felt unnerved by the vague feeling that he knew me better than I knew myself. Now I just needed someone to understand what I was feeling because I feared I was falling apart. I missed Ben so much and that throbbing pain in my stomach refused to fade.

"Of course you care," Dean smiled at me but it was a brief, sad smile, "when it comes to Ben I fear you care too much."

In a way he was right. Ben had become more than my best friend. He had seemed like an extension of myself. I knew I could trust him more than I could trust myself. I don't know how long we sat there together. Possibly only a few minutes. I was thinking about how much I had left unsaid when it came to Ben. Our friendship had endured for a long time but we had never really known each other. Our communication had always been light and happy but later when the fighting and fear had dominated our lives, we had known that we could completely rely on each other. The foundation of this knowledge was a complete puzzle to me. We had been close but so distant. We had never discussed anything really seriously, not for more than a few moments anyway, but we had known each other's strengths and weaknesses intuitively.

And when the violence had reached its peak I had felt my strength falter but I knew Ben's wouldn't. He had an inner strength that I could rely on but never recognise in myself.

I was staring at the calm river, lost in thought. I was snapped out of my memories by Dean suddenly reaching out and grabbing my wrist. I looked up at him, startled.

He looked tense and worried but he was staring behind me. I was frightened by the expression on his face. He let go of my arm and slowly stood up, being careful not to make any noise that would attract attention.

For the first time as I stood up I realised what a stupid, vulnerable position we were in. We were too far away from the others to run and the only weapon we had was a knife each.

We stood side by side straining to hear something. I noticed a rustling sound that could have been an animal but I suspected it wasn't. It came from behind Dean. We were surrounded.

Dean turned to face the noise behind him. Instinctively I pressed my back against his and we both pulled out a knife. The only protection we had. Between us we had a full view of the area around us. On my left was the river but it was calm enough not to obscure our hearing.

The light bushland around us seemed still and silent. Within seconds we were surrounded by a dozen people, all with their weapons trained on us. Knives, bow and arrows and a gun, quite rare these days. Fear swept through me and I felt as though I was frozen on the spot.

"Well, hello." The oldest male of around nineteen spoke. It was like a signal. They attacked.

I fought desperately and could feel Dean doing the same but within seconds we were separated. I slashed a boy about fifteen across the upper arm before I was grabbed from two different directions and the knife was ripped away from me.

I was almost completely immobilised by three strong sets of hands. One guy had me in

a bear hug from behind. Another had my own knife pressed against my throat.

*Just like Ben, I realised, I'm going to die just like he did.*

I was forcefully turned to face where Dean was being held. He was stronger than me and they were having trouble keeping his shoulders still. They all looked younger than him.

I opened my mouth to yell for help, mentally cursing myself for not doing it sooner but a hand reached up and painfully clasped it shut. I kicked with my one free foot and bit the hand at the same time. The pressure at my throat doubled. I was sure I was bleeding.

The grip they had of me tightened further. The one who held me from behind rested his chin on my right shoulder. Just that contact made me feel twice as dirty as I already did.

The one in front of me the approximately nineteen year old began to speak, "if you scream he dies. If he screams you die. Understand?"

Dean suddenly stopped struggling.

A feeling of dread spread upwards from my stomach. I nodded slowly. I wanted to throw up or lash out at them somehow. Instead I remained motionless. My stubborn nature controlled the terror that was threatening to overcome me.

A couple of youths advanced towards Dean. I tensed up but immediately regretted it.

The boy holding me could feel my fear and I hated that.

"Tie them both up," the leader ordered, "and gag the boy."

I saw the fear in Dean's eyes as our gaze met. I didn't know what to do.

"Do we have to tie her up?" the boy holding me asked, "She's not as strong as-"

"She's smart. We've been told not to underestimate her so we're not risking her being able to escape and raise the alarm." As he finished speaking a younger boy handed him

some rope. He came towards me but I didn't want to see him. I looked back as Dean. I knew my expression was confused. That was how I felt. My fear was under control but I didn't know why. The one clear thought I had was that Ben couldn't save me this time.

"No!" Dean hissed, "Nalia!"

They shoved some sort of cloth into his mouth and secured it around his head. His words were muffled but in his desperation his voice was becoming louder, even through the material. A boy stood over him with a knife.

My hands were being tied but I hardly noticed. "Don't, Dean," I told him, my voice expressionless. I felt emotionally numb, "I need to know that some of my friends are still alive." I saw a tear roll down his cheek before I was dragged away.

All but two of them had disappeared into the vegetation. Brian would find them harder to follow that way. Even in that situation I had hope of being rescued.

The leader was walking behind me. The boy who had been holding me from the back was leading me by the rope that fastened my wrists together. We were walking rather quickly and I couldn't help but stumble. I expected to be shoved from behind or at least told not to be so clumsy.

They didn't say anything. The boy in front just slowed down so I could regain my footing.

This reaction confused me. Why would they be considerate if they were just going to rape and kill me anyway?

After half an hour of monotonous walking the boy ahead of me turned to look over his shoulder at me. I met his gaze quickly. He looked away. Something about his expression disturbed me. I couldn't help but feel defensive.

Despite the cool night I felt a prickly heat spread across my body. My heart was

beating rapidly. I felt so vulnerable, again. My unease continued to grow as memories resurfaced. When Ben and I had first met Brian he and the other guys had saved us from men of a rival gang who had been trying to rape me and kill both of us. That was the first time Ben had nearly been killed while trying to protect me.

"Do you remember me, Nalia?" The boy glanced at me as he spoke but turned back to make sure he wouldn't trip. My fear was replaced by bewilderment.

"This is not the time Liam," the guy behind me growled.

"Liam?" I felt suddenly apprehensive. I did remember him but what difference did it make?

He smiled over his shoulder at me. I glared at him. A look of indecision flickered across his face before he turned away again.

Ben. He and Liam had been friends. Did he know that Ben was dead?

Slowly it dawned on me where we were. The clearing where Ben had been killed. I stopped so abruptly that Liam nearly pulled me off balance because he didn't realise.

He swivelled to face me but that pitying look on his face betrayed him. He knew.

How else could he know?

"You killed him." Rage filled me so quickly I was shocked by it. If I was as strong as my anger I could have ripped his eyes out of his sockets.

"No!" his voice seemed so loud compared to the way they had tried to stay quiet before, "Don't even think that. We distracted the Western Gang so you could get away."

I remembered the shout from one of the men hunting me. It was conceivable that Liam was telling the truth.

"I felt terrible that we couldn't save Ben," his eyes were shining with unshed tears and his voice had started to tremble, "He was my friend too."



"I hear something," the guy behind me spoke up, slicing the silent glare I had locked onto Liam.

My first thought was Brian. He had found out what had happened and had come after us.

"How many?" Liam whispered.

"At least one, maybe two."

My heart thumped in my chest like it was trying to escape. We were in the clearing where Ben had been killed. The men who had been hunting us would obviously wait to see if they could spot any more of their targets. They were waiting for us.

A dark figure began to emerge from the trees.

The moon was bright but the shadows were spread out and immovable. An entire army could have been hidden behind those trees.

But there wasn't. Only two men stood there.

Their knives glinted as they raised them. Cold terror paralysed me. Whoever lived after this confrontation would have me at their mercy.

The guy behind me moved towards them. They split up, one going for him and the other advanced on Liam.

I was released. The ropes still bound my wrists but the rope Liam had been holding fell to the ground. I backed away automatically.

Liam's attacker moved so fast he appeared to fly across the clearing and land on him.

They seemed to just fall over but I knew what sort of struggle was taking place. The man had a knife. Liam didn't.

I felt like they were so far away from me. I was watching them like I remembered watching movies in the time of peace, before the battles. They were just characters, actors.

Liam's agonised though muffled cry of pain brought me back into focus. The knife was flung away from them.

An image of Ben's face flashed in front of my eyes. Anger surged through me.

I leapt forward and grabbed the knife. There was blood on it already. My stomach churned.

The man had his hands around Liam's throat.

I felt physically sick. I hesitated only for a second. Before I could lose my anger and my momentum I slashed at the man. I didn't know if I could kill him fast enough. All I wanted was to get him off Liam. And I had succeeded.

The man rolled away from me and lay on the ground, gasping for breath. His heels ploughed at the dirt.

I didn't even want to look at him.

Liam groaned in pain. Awkwardly, because I was still tied I knelt down beside him.

The wound was bleeding profusely. I grabbed a shred of his shirt and put it over the long but narrow wound just below his ribcage. I knew I was going to hurt him but I didn't have a choice. I pressed both of my hands against it.

Liam cried out but quickly silenced himself.

"Don't die Liam," I begged, more to myself than to him, "Not here. Not like Ben. Not again."

His eyes focused on me, "Nalia." It wasn't a question, more of a sigh.

I didn't take my eyes off him. He tried to smile but failed.

"Thanks," he whispered.

"Don't you dare die!"

His hand reached up to grip my shoulder. I could feel his blood soaking through the material and touching my hands.

"Get her!" A male voice barked.

I was grabbed from behind and hauled to my feet. Liam grunted from the pain that the movement had caused him.

I noticed dimly that my hands were soaked with blood. "Liam?"

I was being carried away. He struggled to sit up but other teenagers were holding him down as they tried to treat his wound. "Nalia!"

I could only think of one thing to say, "Don't die."

\* \* \*

I was taken to a van. The back was opened and I was deposited on an old dilapidated seat. The person who had been carrying me left quickly, shutting the doors behind him. The vehicle was turned on and rumbling loudly. It seemed they were going to make a quick escape.

I sat there in silence, my hands held up from my body. The bloodstains felt like they were burning into my skin. I felt dirty and scarred somewhere deeper than my flesh.

The blood. I stared at it. From two people. One I had helped kill. The other I had helped save.

I felt so alone. I didn't cry. I probably should have. I stared through a small dirty window into the shadowy night.

\* \* \*

I jumped when the door was opened. I had been thinking of how lonely my best friend must have felt as I left him there to die.

Liam was helped into the van but insisted on sitting down across from me unaided.

His wound was bandaged. It didn't seem as serious as it had before. The others left when he ordered them to, even as he grimaced in pain.

"Nalia,"

I looked up from my bloodstained hands. As he slowly pulled out a knife I sank back against the chair. I had felt so much fear since the afternoon I seemed incapable of it now.

As he moved towards me I instinctively raised my hands up. Briefly, I wondered what the effect of a well-aimed kick would be.

In a careful movement he cut through one of the coils of rope holding me.

"Don't be scared," I could tell by the strained expression of his face that he knew words weren't enough. He lowered himself back into his seat.

"Leave me alone."

The unfaltering gaze that held mine made me uneasy. I still felt like a mouse in a trap, waiting for the spring to be triggered. The van slowly started moving.

"Thank you for saving me."

I wasn't fooled. "Let me go."

His eyes dropped, "I can't," he leaned back against his seat, "I wish I could."

"Yeah, right. Where are we going?"

He didn't answer.

I looked back out the small window. I remembered when I was fifteen. Ben and I had been saved then taken prisoner by Brian and the rest of the guys. I had been so distraught after coming so close to death. Ben had comforted me and we had survived. He had protected me that night.

But he was gone.

\*

\*

\*

It was at least an hour before the vehicle reached its destination. We got out of the van and Liam stood listening for a few moments. He hadn't forgotten to keep a tight

grip on my left wrist with his right hand.

I felt strangely empty as he led me to a dark building that looked completely deserted.

I didn't know if I even cared that I was a prisoner anymore. His free hand alternated between opening doors and covering his wound which was also on the left side of his body.

The last set of doors we passed through were large and well worn. A warm fire glowed on one side of the large room.

I should have been petrified but all the emotion had drained out of me. At least a dozen teenagers, around eighteen years old were in that room. They turned to face Liam and I. A few of them stood up and stared at me.

I met the gaze of the young man closest to me with an empty stare and blank expression. He looked confused, then his gaze shifted to a part of the room I couldn't see.

Liam misjudged the width of the door. It swung slowly but was solid enough to cause him considerably pain when it brushed against his wound.

He stumbled slightly and struggled for air.

Swifter than I thought I was capable at that moment I moved so he could lean on me.

His arm landed heavily around my shoulders and he was concentrating on controlling the pain.

"Help him," a clear, sharp voice pierced through the dreary room. It was a female voice and I was a little surprised to see two tall guys move forward to help Liam right away.

He was quickly lifted off me and onto a small makeshift bed that looked about as comfortable as a block of wood.

The girl previously hidden stepped into my eyesight. She was slimmer than me with long, light brown hair tied back loosely. She was nearly as tall as me, just under six

foot and her clothes, though neat looked well worn. Her stance was one of casual confidence. She drew the respectful eyes of a majority of people in the room. They obviously admired her, which struck me as odd. Was she their leader?

Her hands rested lightly on her hips. Her face gave nothing away.

"Nalia, it's been so long," she smiled easily, banishing that bored, yet somehow harsh expression that had masked her. Her eyes held mine effortlessly.

Yes. She was the leader of all these people, even if they were older and stronger than her. She had the brains for it. She had always been something of a leader. I remembered her well.

From school. My best friend over two years ago. My heartbeat was out of control but I felt strangely calm.

"Melinda." The rest of the room could have disappeared for all I cared. All I could focus on was the girl who I had thought must have been dead but had reappeared in my life. So soon after Ben had left it.

The frozen moment was interrupted by Liam's groan of pain. I felt guilty and somehow responsible for his injury. If I had acted sooner could I have prevented it? Melinda's unwavering gaze still enveloped me. I stared back at her. Anger made me bolder than I would have been otherwise. I strode towards her, ignoring the guys near her who tensed up and moved towards me. She waved them away with a commanding hand but her eyes never left mine.

When we were separated by a mere step I stopped. "Tell me about Ben." My voice sounded strong but the flash of pity on her face told me my eyes had betrayed me.

Her hands reached up to grip my shoulders. I looked at the floor for a moment. What did she expect me to do? Cry? I wasn't the person she remembered anymore.

I jerked my head up to meet her gaze. I knew my eyes were filled with all the anger

and frustration that I was feeling. She let go of me and stepped back as though I had seared her.

"Why did you kidnap me? What did you do to Dean?" My voice boomed through the barren room. I was startled by the sheer volume of it but I didn't let myself react.

"Dean is fine. He was tied up so he wouldn't raise the alarm too soon. A note was left on him saying you will be returned at dusk tomorrow night."

"Why?"

"I need to explain what we're trying to do. Plus I haven't seen you in so long, we need time to catch up." That smile I remembered appeared again, "Will you at least listen?"

Her blue eyes were almost challenging.

I glanced over at Liam. They were re-bandaging his wound. It must have started bleeding again.

"He will be taken care of," Melinda assured me, "Come, let me wash that blood off you."

"And Ben? You didn't take care of him."

Her eyes softened and her hand reached out to me, "It is because of Ben that we have to act quickly. If we don't he will be just the start of a massacre. Please Nalia. I need your help."

\*

\*

\*

The next afternoon we were back at the place that I was originally taken from.

I reached down and gripped Melinda's hand. She looked across at me with eyes that could only be described as terrified.

"Are you ready?" I whispered.

Even as I spoke I saw the mask of calm determination slip down over her face. "I am.

The sun is down. Let's go."

I knew we would be watched. Unlike Melinda I knew Brian well enough to realise the danger he was in, not only from the front but from behind.

We stood up and moved slowly to the centre of the small clearing. We were so close to the outpost that Melinda's gang couldn't safely observe our progress.

Brian would have killed them too easily.

I was taking a risk bringing Melinda with me. If I had been able to take my time I would have come alone but we didn't have that luxury. The Western Gang, Ben's killers had raided Melinda's back-up headquarters the night before. If much more time passed her entire group could be caught by surprise and killed.

"Where are they?" Melinda was scanning the bushland around us. She couldn't see them because only a few people were on the ground.

"They're in the trees," I didn't know exactly where they would be but I knew they would have us surrounded by now.

"I feel so exposed. Unarmed," she stared at the trees as she spoke.

"Say 'naked' and maybe Brian *will* appear."

She glanced across at me. She looked indecisive. Probably wondering if I was brave or crazy.

"You're not scared?"

That I couldn't agree with, "I know Brian. By now he would have realised that we are alone. He will be considering whether to kill us or not."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, "Even you? But you're-"

"With a possible enemy, as far as he knows."

"What do we do then?"

That had a simple answer, "Don't run away. No matter what. I have to talk to Brian."

"How?" She wasn't even looking for the people from my village any more.



"Brian!" I yelled into the deceptively empty clearing.

"Oh, like that." She gripped my hand harder. If I wasn't so nervous I would have prised her off and restored circulation to it.

"We have an offer for you! Alliance!"

After a few tense moments a tall figure stepped out from behind some trees.

My heart nearly stopped. I was flooded with unexpected joy.

"Dean!"

\*

\*

\*

Melinda thumped her hand down on the small table between the two leaders and leapt to her feet. "Are you just going to wait out here until the Western Gang comes to kill you?!"

Brian's head fell forward into his hands. After a moment he looked back up at her.

"We can't fight!" he insisted, "Less than a dozen of us are above eighteen. How could we possibly win?"

"Scott!" Melinda cried suddenly, "When we saved him he said he knew you!"

Adam shoved me out of the way and grabbed her shoulder. With a firm hand she pushed it away. She glared at him with eyes like ice.

"Scott," Adam pleaded, "he's my brother. He-"

"Is alive," her eyes softened, "You are Adam?"

I felt strangely empty. I began to walk away from the gathering of people without realising. The last thing I saw through the knot of people was Melinda and Brian shaking hands.

"Send Dean and Max to the tree. Call the password and Melinda's people will come to you."

It was organised. The alliance had been formed.

All I could think of was Ben.

Once again I found myself alone in the darkness. Not the river, it was too far away. I went to a young tree that Ben and I had planted months ago. More constructive than carving our names in an existing tree. When had I last seen him alive? Just over a day ago.

I knelt down beside the tree. To me it stood like a gravestone, the only marker Ben had left behind. Brian would probably organise someone to search for Ben's body but I doubted it would be found.

"I miss you Ben," I whispered.

## Reflection Statement

Proposed:

Story 1: A world where the big cats (mainly lions, leopards, jaguars) rule and humans are almost extinct. One young leopard can communicate with people.

Story 2: Two girls are close friends. One is killed by a leopard and her consciousness is transported into it. The second girl eventually realises what has happened before she is killed by a lion where she too lives on in the mind of the animal. They both have a preview of the world coming to an end in the near future.

Story 3: A girl meets the ghost of a boy that only she can see when she goes camping with her family. The boy is in a coma nearby and she has to help him wake up.

Story 4: The shadow of a shark that can move through the ground like a normal shark moves through water. It stalks a girl but only kills people around her.

The two stories I actually completed were story 2 and another that I thought of, and was inspired by well after I wrote my proposal.

Story 2:

This was intended to indulge my imagination. I wondered what a world without people would be like. My attitude in general is that animals have as much, if not more of a right to exist than people do. They don't obliterate entire species just because they have the power to. I also wanted to show how cruel people could be by including many references to nature documentaries I have seen over the past few years. I watched one such program called "Man-eaters of India" about a wolf pack who began preying on children when their cubs were killed and taken back to a village by a group of children.

Many references to different forms of animal cruelty have been collected by watching

nature programs over the course of many years. I would not be able to mention any because I saw them so long ago and can only remember small parts of them. This is a problem because these documentaries were the focal part of my independent investigation.

During the development of the story I didn't really do any independent investigation. I knew right from the start roughly what the ending was going to be. My information gathering phase was my general interest in animals over the previous eight years.

The concept I wanted to explore right from the start was how animals are viewed as evil because of things they do that are purely from instinct - like hunting for food. I wanted to show that it is people who regard humans so highly but this is a false belief perpetuated by the arrogance of the species as a whole.

The only independent investigation not directly linked to Story 2 or the major work is the series from the ABC that we watched in class. "Writers on Writing" was filmed at the Adelaide Festival of Arts. One of my favourite authors, Isobelle Carmody was interviewed. Many authors shared their experiences on everything from writing style to being published. From this I learnt that a writing style develops naturally and the best thing to do is harness it rather than trying to change it. I was also relieved to learn that some authors do base the main character on themselves, which I can't help but do most of the time unless I make a conscious effort to change it.

As I have mentioned in my journal I have a habit of writing for people of my own age. I believe this may be because I know how I think but I don't know how people older than me, or younger than me view the world.

I don't plan to write stories. I get inspired by a particular theme or idea and become completely engrossed in it. This usually lasts a couple of days.

In my Major Work I had to stretch my motivation out into five months. It was very

frustrating at times.

Writing my journal was the worst part of the entire process. I would be motivated and happy writing my story but I would always have to pause after a few days to write in my journal. The main problem was I found it pointless. It didn't help me to write the story at all. I considered it to be proof that the story was original work and nothing more.

The major problem with the completed story was the large section of writing that seemed to slow down the pace of the rest of the text. I agreed that the tone of the writing was different but I thought it was incredibly necessary to show readers the full scale of cruelty and kindness that people are capable of. I found that this small point was the basis of the message I had wanted to put across for the entire course of the story. Since more than one of the teachers that read my work felt the sections of writing had to go I had to accept that the story was better off without them. Since I thought they were central to what I wanted to say the story as a whole seemed pointless without them.

As well as knowing I could keep the first story or write another I realised I needed all of the 6-8 thousand words to lead in and create the characters the way I wanted to. I decided about March that I would only do one story so I wouldn't have to detract from my writing style by compacting my work.

Even then, I floundered. I knew I had to choose one story but I wasn't really enthusiastic about any of my original ideas.

I was thinking I could use my proposed story number 1, a sequel to the one I had already finished but I wasn't sure how to start it. Also, it sounded a lot like the completed story and I found I didn't like either idea.

### Major Work:

My original idea for the story that is my major work is connected to story number 1. I imagined a leopard running from something chasing her, or just from the knowledge that she was the only one who could talk to humans.

The idea of the main character so shocked and even scared by her own thoughts is one that I use quite often. I don't know much about external turmoil, grief or tragedy so inner conflict is easier for me to write about. Combining them both seemed to be a natural step in my writing.

I found that I didn't want to write from the point of view of a leopard again because I found it quite hard. I changed the image of the character into a person in my own mind to make it easier to write about.

While I was thinking about this character I could see her hiding behind a thicket of lantana while people searched for her. I could see this picture so clearly in my mind that I had to start writing about it as soon as I got home. I wrote over a thousand words in less than an hour then had no idea where the rest of it was going to take me.

Writing the bulk of the story just took time but I was concerned by the ending. Other people thought it was completed but I felt like I needed something more. I added the last paragraph, just for closure and to clarify how much time had passed.

I love the series by John Marsden "Tomorrow, When the War Began" and the idea of teenagers fighting and killing to survive away from the presence of adults worked its way into my major work.

The "Obernewyton Chronicles" written by Isobelle Carmody made an impact on me because it was set over a thousand years after a chemical disaster that destroyed a

majority of the world.

One of the authors in the "Writers on Writing" said imitating favourite authors is a natural way of developing your own style. I don't copy anything from Marsden or Carmody but their books do influence my work. From Marsden I learned how captivating suspense can be and how realistic characters can make the book. I loved Carmody's post-holocaust scenario though mine is very different, being set only a couple of years into the future and caused by numerous earthquakes that disrupted the entire world.

The books written by these two people make up all of the independent investigation for this story. Even the place where it is set is part of the property I live on so I didn't have to go out of my way to learn about it.

I really am happy with my major work because I wrote exactly what I wanted, I was inspired by the idea and no major changes were needed. I am even interested in writing a prequel and maybe a sequel to it if I find the time.