I'm not a robot



Article written by Michael Chude B.Sc. degree in parasitology and entomology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. ‘Divergent’ is a story of how a sixteen-year-old is caught in the middle of an identity crisis, a power-hungry maniac, and teenage love. Veronica Roth’s ‘Divergent’ is a captivating young adult dystopian novel that catapults readers from the easy-go-lucky lifestyle of one faction to the chaotic, back-stabbing lifestyle of another, carefully meshed in young adult love, a search for meaning and identity, betrayal and community. ‘Divergent’ by Veronica Roth introduced readers to a dystopian city-state where society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to upholding a specific virtue: Abnegation (selflessness), Amity (peacefulness), Candor (honesty), Dauntless (bravery), and Erudite (intelligence). Beatrice Prior, a sixteen-year-old girl born into the selfless Abnegation faction, faces a life-changing decision when she takes her mandatory aptitude test. Instead of receiving a clear result indicating the faction she belongs to, Beatrice discovers she is Divergent, meaning she exhibits qualities of multiple factions. Forced to keep her divergence a secret, Beatrice makes a daring choice during the Choosing Ceremony and joins the fearless Dauntless faction. Renaming herself Tris, she begins her rigorous initiation process, where she faces physical and mental challenges that push her to her limits. Along the way, Tris develops deep friendships and potential romance, but she also uncovers dark secrets that threaten the very fabric of society. As tensions rise between the factions, Tris finds herself entangled in a dangerous web of political intrigue and power struggles. She must navigate this treacherous landscape while uncovering the truth about her identity and the world around her. Tris’ journey of self-discovery and resilience leads her to question the flawed society she once believed in and to challenge the status quo. Warning – This article contains important details and spoilers The novel begins with Beatrice Prior, a teenage girl living in Abnegation, preparing for her Choosing Ceremony. At the age of 16, every teenager in the city is made to take an aptitude test that determines which faction of their society they share dominant characteristics with. Afterward, the 16-year-olds attend a Choosing Ceremony, where they choose the faction to which they’ll belong for the rest of their lives. Beatrice worries that she’ll find out that she’s better suited for a faction other than Abnegation, thus disappointing her brother, Caleb Prior, and her parents, Andrew Prior and Natalie Prior. She is especially scared of disappointing her father, Andrew, an important government official, and Andrew’s friend Marcus, another influential government leader. During her aptitude test, Beatrice is given a hallucinogenic serum. She sees a series of visions: a dog attacking a child, a man who interrogates her about her knowledge of a ”brutal murderer,” etc. At the end of the test, Beatrice’s examiner, a woman named Tori, tells her that she is Divergent: a forbidden mental state that allows her to move between different factions. Tori makes Beatrice promise never to tell anyone about her Divergence and she warns her that the government wants to kill off all Divergent people. At the Choosing Ceremony, Beatrice sees her brother Caleb choose Erudite, instead of the usual Abnegation. Afterward, she chooses Dauntless. Although she’s excited and curious about Dauntless, she’s also worried that her parents will be devastated by the loss of their two children: after 16-year-olds choose their faction, they’re rarely allowed to visit other factions. Beatrice is taken to her new community in Dauntless. There, she meets the Dauntless leader, Max, as well as Eric, a young, frightening government official, and Four, a charismatic young man who trains new recruits. Beatrice renames herself “Tris,” and quickly makes friends with Dauntless recruits from other factions, such as Christina, Will, and Al. The recruits begin their training, competing for a small number of spots reserved for the most highly-ranked trainees. Four coaches Tris and her peers through combat exercises. Tris is a poor fighter as she’s no match for opponents like Peter, a huge, sadistic recruit. In her first fight with Peter, Peter sends her to the hospital. Afterward, she resolves to train even harder. Tris distinguishes herself in a citywide game of capture-the-flag that’s designed to measure recruits’ abilities. Tris climbs to the top of the Chicago Ferris Wheel, allowing her team to launch a surprise attack on its opponents. Tris’ bravery and quick thinking impress Four, as well as her fellow recruits. Four begins flirting with Tris, exciting her but also making her a little uncomfortable. Tris stands up for a weak-willed trainee named Al, offering to take his place in a sadistic punishment that Eric devises for him. At the same time, Tris begins to enjoy her combat training more and more, she doesn’t feel the same sense of mercy or caution that she was taught in Abnegation for so many years. Tris gets a visit from her mother, Natalie Prior, and Natalie tells Tris that she knows about her Divergence. Natalie also tells her to ask Caleb to research serum when Tris next sees him, but Tris has no idea why Natalie made this request. Eric releases a ranking of the recruits: Tris is ranked low, while Peter is ranked second. That night, Peter stabs the top-ranked recruit, a boy named Edward, in the eye. Afterward, Edward drops out of Dauntless. Then the recruits enter the second part of their training: psychological training. They’re injected with the hallucinogenic serum and forced to experience the things that frighten them most. Privately, Four conducts a “fear simulation” with Tris, and discovers that Tris is good at resisting the effects of the serum. Four recognizes that Tris is Divergent since they can resist mental manipulation. Tris asks Four how he knows so much about Divergence, but Four doesn’t reply. Reports begin to circulate about how Abnegation leaders, Andrew Prior and his friend Marcus in particular, have become corrupt. Although she’s infuriated by these reports, which she regards as propaganda, Tris concentrates on her training. She bonds with other recruits, such as Uriah and Marlene, who were born in Dauntless, rather than transferring from another faction. When the second round of rankings is released, Tris is at the top of her class. That night, Peter and a gang of followers try to kill Tris by throwing her into a chasm, but Four saves her life. Tris is shocked to discover that one of the people who tried to kill her was Al. Al, Tris realizes, has come to hate Tris for making him look weak. Tris angrily tells Al that she’ll kill him if he ever tries to talk to her again. Shortly after that, Al commits suicide by throwing himself into the chasm. Tris proceeds with her psychological training. Four allows her to witness his own “fear landscape.” Tris notices that Four has only four fears, which is where his nickname came from. One of Four’s fears is his father, Marcus, who abused him with a belt when he was a child. Four’s real name, Tris realizes, is Tobias, and he used to live in Abnegation. Following the fear simulation, Tobias kisses Tris, and she kisses him back. Tobias reveals that he knows Tris is Divergent, cementing their bond. Tris fails badly at her fear landscape despite the early promise she’d shown. Frustrated with herself, she goes to visit Caleb, who’s now living in Erudite. Caleb tells Tris that he’s tempted to believe the things that Jeanine, his leader, had been writing about their father and Abnegation. Tris and her peers prepare for their final challenge: a fear simulation. In her fear simulation, Tris performs very well, mastering her fears, including her fear of having sex with Tobias. As a result of her good performance, Tris graduates at the top of the rankings. She and her peers are injected with a chemical, supposedly to allow Eric and Max to track their movements. Afterwards, Tris and Tobias have sex. The next morning, Tris wakes up to find that her friends have been transformed into mindless soldiers, thanks to the tracking chemical. Tris is immune to this mind control, however, due to her Divergence. She pretends to be a “zombie” as Eric and Max send their new soldiers into Abnegation. In Abnegation, Tris joins with Tobias, who’s also revealed to be Divergent and therefore immune to the effects of the chemical. Soldiers capture Tris and Tobias and bring them to Jeanine, the mastermind behind the mind control scheme. Jeanine reveals her villainous plan, to use her new soldiers to conquer all of the city, then orders her soldiers to kill Tris and Tobias. Tris is taken to a tank, where she’s to be drowned. Before this can happen, however, her mother saves her. Natalie sneaks Tris out of the building and Natalie sends her to a secret compound where Andrew, Caleb, and Marcus are hiding out. Before she can leave with Tris, however, Natalie is shot and killed. Tris joins up with Andrew, Caleb, and Marcus. They plan to break into the Dauntless headquarters and shut down the computers used in controlling the soldiers. Together, they manage to infiltrate the compound and make their way to the computer room, but not before Andrew dies protecting Tris. In the control room, Tris finds herself facing Tobias, now under a new, stronger mind-control drug. Tobias raises a gun to Tris’ head, but Tris can convince Tobias to put the gun down. Freed from his mind control, Tobias switches off the computers, foiling Jeanine’s plot. The book ends with Tobias declaring his love for Tris. The Choosing Ceremony is a rite of passage where 16-year-olds from all the 5 factions choose the faction they want to belong to. Jeanine Matthews, the Erudite leader, believed that the Abnegation faction, which was tasked with governance, was holding back the other factions from progress. She believed the most intelligent people should lead to ensure the growth and development of the factions. The Erudites were considered to be the smartest of the factions. In ‘Divergent,’ Tris did not tell Christina that she had shot Will, even though Will was under the influence of the serum. The serum given to the Dauntless soldiers allowed them to be completely controlled by Jeanine. The soldiers could not differentiate between friend and foe. Though Four’s serum did not affect his decision decision-making, his perception of reality was distorted as he saw his friends as his enemies and his enemies as friends. This serum only worked on the Divergent. Jeanine developed the serum so she could take over the minds of the Dauntless soldiers, the only faction that receives military training, and then use them to take over their society. Join Book Analysis for Free! Exclusive to Members Get access now Home » Veronica Roth » Divergent » Summary B.Sc. degree in parasitology and entomology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Michael Chude has years of experience writing flash fiction and reviewing books with his book club members. He is also an avid reader who loves great stories and extensive world-building. Estimated read time: 5 min readIn a dystopian society, a young woman discovers she doesn't fit into any one faction, and uncovers a conspiracy that threatens the entire system."Divergent" is a captivating dystopian novel written by Veronica Roth. Set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago, the story follows a teenage girl, Beatrice "Tris" Prior, as she navigates a society divided into five factions, each representing a different virtue. The novel explores themes of identity, conformity, and the struggle for individuality in a world that demands uniformity.Brief SynopsisPlot Overview and SettingThe story is set in a future Chicago where society is divided into five factions: Abnegation (selflessness), Amity (peacefulness), Candor (honesty), Dauntless (bravery), and Erudite (intelligence). At the age of 16, every individual must choose a faction to which they will belong for the rest of their lives. The protagonist, Beatrice Prior, faces a difficult choice during the aptitude test that is supposed to help her decide. She discovers that she is Divergent, meaning she possesses qualities of multiple factions, which is dangerous in this society. Beatrice ultimately chooses Dauntless, leading her into a thrilling and dangerous adventure.Main CharactersCharacterDescriptionBeatrice "Tris" PriorThe protagonist, a brave and independent teenager who is Divergent and chooses to join the Dauntless faction.Tobias "Four" EatonTris's love interest, an enigmatic and strong-willed Dauntless instructor who helps Tris navigate the challenges of her new faction.Jeanine MatthewsThe leader of the Erudite faction, who plays a key role in the unfolding conflict and power struggles within the society.Caleb PriorTris's brother, who makes a surprising faction choice that challenges Tris's understanding of her family and the society they live in.Natalie PriorTris's mother, who has a mysterious past and provides crucial support and guidance to Tris as she navigates her new life in Dauntless.Summary of Different Story Points Over ChaptersChapters 1-5Tris grows up in Abnegation but feels like she doesn't fully belong. At the Choosing Ceremony, she selects Dauntless, surprising everyone. She meets her instructor, Four, and begins her intense initiation process.Chapters 6-10Tris faces various challenges during her initiation, including physical and mental tests. She forms friendships and rivalries within her new faction, all while hiding her Divergent status.Chapters 11-15As Tris's training progresses, she uncovers a plot by the Erudite faction to overthrow Abnegation. She struggles with her growing feelings for Four and faces betrayal from unexpected sources.Chapters 16-20The conflict between factions escalates, leading to a violent confrontation. Tris and Four work together to uncover the Erudite's plan and find a way to protect their loved ones and their society.Chapters 21-25Tris and Four, along with their allies, engage in a daring mission to thwart the Erudite's scheme. Tris's bravery and quick thinking are put to the test as she confronts her own fears and the dangers that threaten her world.Main EventsTris's aptitude test reveals her Divergent nature, setting the stage for her unconventional path.The initiation process in Dauntless challenges Tris physically and mentally, pushing her to her limits.The unveiling of the Erudite's plan to overthrow the ruling Abnegation faction sparks a dangerous conflict.Tris and Four work together to expose the Erudite's scheme and prevent a catastrophe.Tris's bravery and selflessness play a crucial role in the ultimate showdown between factions.Themes and InsightsIdentity and IndividualityThe concept of being Divergent challenges the society's insistence on fitting individuals into specific categories. Tris's journey highlights the importance of embracing one's unique qualities and resisting the pressure to conform.Power and ControlThe power struggles between the factions reveal the dangers of unchecked authority and the manipulation of knowledge for personal gain. The Erudite's quest for dominance raises questions about the ethical use of intelligence and influence.Fear and BraveryThe Dauntless faction's emphasis on conquering fear and embracing bravery serves as a backdrop for Tris's personal growth. The novel explores the complexities of fear and the courage required to defy oppressive forces.Reader's Takeaway"Divergent" offers readers a thrilling and thought-provoking exploration of a society where individuality is both cherished and feared. The dynamic characters, intense action, and compelling themes make for an engaging and memorable reading experience.ConclusionVeronica Roth's "Divergent" presents a riveting tale of self-discovery, courage, and the struggle against societal constraints. Through Tris's journey, the novel invites readers to ponder the value of individuality, the nature of power, and the complexities of human identity. With its richly developed world and compelling characters, "Divergent" has earned its place as a beloved and influential work in the dystopian fiction genre. 0 294In any professional setting, the success of your career often... 0 29111 Science-Backed Ways to Naturally Boost Your Serotonin Levels Improve... 0 254The Lean Startup Summary: A Revolution in Entrepreneurship – A... 0 230Introduction: A River of Emotion and Survival Go as a... 0 263Queen of Shadows Summary – Throne of Glass Book 4... 0 231Love's Most Wanted Crenshaw Kings Summary: Secrets, Love & Redemption... 0 1127Hidden Potential Summary: The Science of Achieving Greater Things by... 0 273Top 10 Leadership Styles Every CEO Must Master for Success... 0 224Introduction: A Love Story That Cuts Close to the Bone... 0 246Introduction: Demon Copperhead Book Summary A Powerful Tale of Resilience... 0 196Introduction: Why This Wuthering Heights Summary Matters Wuthering Heights Summary... 0 328Introduction: The Love Haters A Smart Emotional Romance If you're... 0 205 Introduction: Who Was Marie-Madeleine Fourcade? The Mademoiselle Alliance Summary... 0 238Introduction In the world of modern romance fiction, few books... 0 2238 Clear Signs You're Fighting Imposter Syndrome and How to... 0 137We Were Liars by E. Lockhart: A Complete Summary &... 2 834Emotional Discipline Book Summary: The Power to Choose How You... 0 233Introduction: What Is Strangers in Time About? In this Strangers... 1 625A Court of Wings and Ruin Summary: A Court of... 0 617Killing the Rising Sun by Bill O’Reilly is a compelling... Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Table of Contents What is Divergent about? In ‘Divergent’, Veronica Roth introduces us to a dystopian Chicago. Society splits into five factions, each cultivating different virtues. At sixteen, Beatrice Prior must choose her faction. Her choice unlocks a journey filled with challenges, secrets, and heart. Book Details Title: Divergent Author: Veronica Roth Pages: 487 Published: April 25, 2011 Synopsis of DivergentIntroduction to Tris’ Dystopia In “Divergent,” Veronica Roth introduces readers to a future Chicago divided into five factions. Each faction represents a core human virtue: Candor (honesty), Abnegation (selflessness), Dauntless (bravery), Amity (peacefulness), and Erudite (intelligence). At sixteen, every child must choose a faction, thus determining their life’s path. The choice is life-altering, as it separates them from their families forever. Beatrice Prior, known as Tris, faces this pivotal decision. She feels torn between familial loyalty and personal identity. Tris’ initiation begins after her surprising choice to leave Abnegation for Dauntless. She must now prove herself among other initiates, many of whom relish the brutal competition. During this time, Tris adopts her new name and embraces her chosen identity. Her journey is filled with immense physical challenges and mentally taxing simulations. Each initiation test unveils her latent abilities, pushing her limits and forcing her to confront her fears. Tris and Her Secret As she navigates the Dauntless initiation, emphasis shifts to her friendships and a budding romance with the enigmatic Four. Tris struggles with trusting those around her because the initiation is fraught with dangers. Treachery lurks behind the brave exteriors of her fellow initiates. They are not just competitors; they are potential enemies. As the stakes elevate, Tris learns that some people may not reveal their true loyalties until it’s too late. However, Tris harbors a secret that can change everything: she is Divergent. This means she exhibits traits from multiple factions. This identity is both a gift and a curse, as it makes her a target among the Erudite faction, who wishes to control society through their manipulative doctrines. Tris faces the constant threat of exposure, knowing her Divergence could lead to death. Every decision weighs heavily on her, amplifying the risks involved in her initiation. Restlessness within the Factions As Tris becomes more entrenched in Dauntless culture, she uncovers corruption lurking within her supposed haven. The reaffirmed belief that the factions create harmony is increasingly called into question. Tensions grow beyond the simple faction rivalries, hinting at a broader unrest. The Erudite faction begins instigating chaos, aiming to overthrow the government’s power structure led by Abnegation. Tris’ courageous moments come at significant costs as she becomes entwined in this conflict. Fighting for her beliefs and the people she loves, Tris grapples with moral dilemmas that challenge her selflessness and bravery. Her relationship with Four deepens but is complicated by the unfolding political machinations. Their romance serves as an anchor amidst a crumbling society, adding depth to her struggles. Climactic Revelations and Consequences In the dramatic climax, Tris faces a choice that could alter society’s future. She discovers the extent of Erudite’s plan, which involves using mind control to enforce obedience. The war between factions erupts as Tris realizes that Divergence might be the key to saving her community. Yet this revelation comes with a heavy burden—her actions could lead to dire consequences for those she cares for. Tris’ emotional resilience is tested through devastating losses. Her character evolves from a fearful girl into a determined leader, but at great personal expense. With each loss, the reality of sacrifice weighs heavily upon her. Despite pain, hope remains as Tris rallies others to stand against corruption and fight for a future unfettered by the oppressive faction system. Conclusion: A Fight for Identity “***Divergent***” paints a portrait of bravery, loyalty, and the exploration of identity against societal constraints. Tris’ journey encapsulates the struggle between personal truth and the world’s expectations. Tris stands as a figure of rebellion, challenging the status quo while embracing her Divergence. As her story unfolds, readers are left craving more from Roth’s gripping narrative, beautifully blending action, romance, and an intricate look at humanity’s virtues and flaws. Through her trials, Tris becomes a mirror reflecting the deep complexities of choice, courage, and the fight for one’s individuality in a society that fears difference. Roth’s rich storytelling ensures that every twist and turn leaves an impact, making “Divergent” a compelling read that echoes long after the final page. From here you can jump to the Spoilers section right away. Below you can search for another book summary: Alternative Book CoverComing soon... Quotes “We believe in ordinary acts of bravery, in the courage that drives one person to stand up for another.”—Veronica Roth,Divergent “Becoming fearless isn’t the point. That’s impossible. It’s learning how to control your fear, and how to be free from it.”—Veronica Roth,Divergent “I might be in love with you.” He smiles a little. “I’m waiting until I’m sure to tell you, though.”—Veronica Roth,Divergent You want to give Divergent a try? Here you go! Characters Beatrice “Tris” Prior: A sixteen-year-old girl from Abnegation who chooses Dauntless. She is brave and resourceful. Tobias “Four” Eaton: Tris’s mentor and love interest. He has a difficult past and complex personality. Christina: A fellow initiate in Dauntless, she becomes a close friend to Tris. Peter: Competitive and ruthless Dauntless initiate who often clashes with Tris. Al: Another initiate whose tragic story highlights the harsh initiation process. Marc: Dauntless leader and Tris’s initial rival. Caleb Prior: Tris’s brother, who chooses Erudite during the faction ceremony. Erudite: A faction driven by intelligence and knowledge, representing a key conflict. Abnegation: Tris’s birth faction, emphasizing selflessness. Dauntless: The bold faction Tris chooses, focused on bravery and fearlessness. Key Takeaways Factions and Identity: The book explores identity through faction choices. The Nature of Fear: Tris faces fears in initiation tests, showcasing personal growth. Friendship and Loyalty: Relationships among initiates form a crucial theme. Conflict and Rebellion: Societal unrest forms the backdrop of Tris’s journey. Love and Sacrifice: Love complicates Tris’s choices, highlighting personal stakes. Spoilers Spoiler Alert! If you want to read the book, don’t click “Show more” and spoil your experience. Here is a link for you to get the book. Tris’s Divergence: Tris is rare for fitting into multiple factions, marking her as Divergent. The Truth about Erudite: Erudite plans to overthrow the government to seize power. Four’s Backstory: Four reveals his difficult upbringing and why he chose Dauntless. Will’s Fate: Tris is forced to kill Will, her friend, in a tragic turn. Family Conflict: Caleb chooses Erudite, causing a rift with Tris. Let us know what you think about this book and the summary in the comment section at the end of the page. FAQs about Divergent The primary themes include identity, choice, and sacrifice.Yes, it is the first book in a series that includes ‘Insurgent’ and ‘Allegiant’.It is targeted mainly towards young adults and teens.Her Divergence allows her to navigate multiple factions, making her adaptable.The story is set in a post-apocalyptic version of Chicago. Reviews In ‘Divergent’, readers are taken on an action-packed journey that explores crucial social questions. While the book presents thrilling scenarios, some critiques focus on its world-building and execution. However, many readers enjoy the captivating action, the emotional arcs, and the romance. Are you looking for a nice read that perfectly fits your current mood? Here is a free book suggestion tool. It gives you suggestions based on your taste. Also a likelihood rating for each recommended book. Would you like to find the book you will love later or now? Veronica Roth is a Chicago-based author known for the Divergent series and more. She has captivated readers with her unique storytelling style. Are you looking for a nice read that perfectly fits your current mood? Here is a free book suggestion tool. It gives you suggestions based on your taste. Also a likelihood rating for each recommended book. Would you like to find the book you will love later or now? Conclusion We hope you found this synopsis of ‘Divergent’ enjoyable. Remember, summaries only scratch the surface of the full story. Ready to explore Tris’s world? Grab a copy of ‘Divergent’ today! DISCLAIMER: This book summary is intended for informational purposes only and does not replace the original work. If you’re the author or hold rights and wish for removal, please contact us. Wondering whether to read Divergent by Veronica Roth? Check out my in-depth Divergent book review to help you decide! I’ve taken my time with getting to the Divergent series by Veronica Roth because I was afraid of all the hype surrounding it but boy do I regret it. I have just finished reading this book and I can’t believe that I put it off for so long! This book isn’t quite what I expected but it’s certainly action-packed and I never knew what was going to happen next. Divergent follows the story of Beatrice (Tris) Prior in a new dystopian world. In an attempt to prevent the outbreak of war, humankind broke into five different ‘factions’: Erudite, for the clever, Amity, for the peaceful, Candor, for the honest, Abnegation, for the selfless and Dauntless, for the brave. Children grow up in whichever faction their parents belong to, but at the age of 16, they go through an aptitude test to show them which faction they belong in and the following day, at the Choosing Ceremony, they must decide the path for the rest of their lives. Tris knows that she doesn’t belong in Abnegation like the rest of her family and so she makes the difficult decision to leave her family behind and join a new faction, Dauntless. A tough initiation process follows – one that not everyone will survive. As Tris tries to fit in among the Dauntless she struggles to figure out who she is and who her real friends are. As if finding herself in a new faction wasn’t difficult enough, Tris has a secret that she learned about herself during the aptitude test. A secret that she has been warned to never tell lest it destroy her. What I love about this story is how real the characters and the setting all feel, despite the dystopian setting, which is all down to Roth’s genius. Each character is flawed, some more than others, and this made it easy to relate to them as a reader and I found that I actually cared about what happened to the characters. When they felt sad, I felt sad; when they felt pain, I felt pain and when they felt happy, I felt happy. It is rare that you find a book in which you can truly share your emotions with the characters but Divergent is one of those gems. RELATED: 17 Best Dystopian Novels For Teens The book is written in the first person from the perspective of Tris herself. She often finds herself torn between what she thinks she should do and what she actually wants to do and isn’t afraid to admit that she is sometimes selfish. I really loved this about her because, let’s be honest, very few of us can say that we don’t often have selfish thoughts no matter how hard we try to be moral people. Tris isn’t afraid to admit it when she’s afraid or weak but she’s also strong-willed and determined not to be beaten. She is well aware of what her shortcomings are and that she hasn’t been blessed with the best physique for a member of Dauntless, but she tries her hardest and at the end of the day, that’s all that matters right? Four was also a really interesting character because his emotions were always veiled and you could never really tell what he was thinking. Four isn’t a difficult character to love but because he doesn’t show his true emotions very often, you’re also sort of frightened and unsure of him for a large part of the novel. I guess this is perfect because that’s pretty much how Tris feels about him for a large part of the story too so the reader and Tris really are as one on this adventure. I love that Roth didn’t make him the stereotypical ‘bad boy’ (I guess that’s what he is) but made him a real character that has much more to him than meets the eye. He does what he wants and he isn’t easily influenced by the opinions of others. Sometimes I felt like the characters seemed a little deadpan but I suppose that’s all part of the ‘dauntless’ act and it made the moments when the characters were happy and laughing all the more special. This certainly isn’t a happy story and it isn’t one that suddenly retreats in a world filled with fluffy clouds. There is an ever-present darkness lining this book, even when the story takes a more positive turn. It is evident that there is more going on in this story than meets the eye but Roth has carefully staged this story so that the reader has absolutely no idea what’s going on until it hits you in the face. The reader is on a level with Tris throughout the story – what she knows, we know, what she doesn’t know, we don’t know. At least, that will be the case if you have been completely unexposed to the spoilers that are just about all over the internet. I knew very little about Divergent before reading the story so I found all the twists and turns to be incredibly shocking and exciting. There’s no insta-love in this story! I think this book deserves a big fat hooray just for that. It’s hard to find YA books that aren’t centred on romance that still get the romance perfect but I think Veronica Roth may have done it. The chemistry between Tris and Four takes a backseat in this story, but it’s always there lurking in the background. RELATED: 22 Teen Romance Novels to Read There aren’t any PDAs, in fact, the romance is rather chaste, or at least, less prominent than in many other YA novels, which I guess can be put down to the factions in which the characters were brought up in and the ones they currently reside in. The story doesn’t exactly end on a cliffhanger so you could almost read Divergent as a standalone novel and be satisfied at the end. That said, this almost certainly won’t be the case because you’ll want to find out more about this phenomenally interesting world. I did find the ending to be a tad abrupt as I turned the page on my Kindle expecting to find more story when, in fact, it was already over. There were no clues whatsoever as to how this story will continue so you really are in the dark and I can’t wait to get my hands on a copy of Insurgent! This is, I think, one of the keys to this story’s success. This book wasn’t predictable in the slightest and never knowing what was coming next made me desperate to keep reading. All in all, Divergent is a fantastic and captivating read that I would highly recommend to all fans of YA dystopian novels. The combination of very real characters and an original plot make this an absolute must-read and I understand now why there is so much hype surrounding this series. If you’re looking for a YA book that stands out from the rest, then this is your book. I absolutely cannot wait to read Insurgent now and watch the Divergent film, which is actually better than the book, believe it or not! Now read my Divergent film review here. Buy Divergent:Amazon | Waterstones | Blackwells Pin now, read again later! If you liked this post, check out these:The Hunger Games Book ReviewCatching Fire Book ReviewMockingjay Book ReviewThe Maze Runner Book Review Founder & Editor of What’s Hot?Laura is an award-winning travel and book blogger based in London, UK. She has always been an avid reader and started her book blog way back in 2011 when she was just 15 years old. She then went on to study French literature at Oxford University where her love for literature, stories and other cultures deepened. She was named UK Book Blogger of the Year in 2019 and loves to combine her passion for books and travel with literary travel. She is also an intellectual property lawyer at one of the top law firms in the world. edited by Amanda Helms Content note (click for details) This story contains references to child endangerment. Beads of sweat trailed down Olaedo’s body, drenching the goat fodder where she lay sprawled. She had bitten hard into the pad of leather clenched between her teeth; her incisors now grazed against each other. Her goats just stared at her. Silent. Olaedo pushed, harder, her body quivering under the screams she was stifling. This was her third pregnancy. With the previous ones, she’d had the midwives dabbing her with a cold towel. This time, hidden away in a barn, a candle dying out beside her, all she had was her strength. With a deep inhale, she pushed again, and when she felt a head tearing through, she looked over, making sure the child slipped gently onto the fodder. And as she had feared, the other came pushing, too. Olaedo had felt it for months, writhing and kicking inside her. Every night, she had prayed to Ala, to her mothers, to take it away. They did not. The second child slipped out, wet and bloodied, next to its sibling. Sedated by the pinch of snakeweed she’d taken every day for the past week, the twins slept still as a lake. The little ones looked like Olaedo’s mother, and all her brothers, and all her sisters. If their eyes had been open, this is how Olaedo would describe them: owl eyes, bronze eyes, sailing eyes. Olaedo cut the children’s cords. With a cloth, she strapped them to her chest. At first, she staggered again and again. Then she ran. Outside the barn, the moon stole behind clouds, and the stars had forgotten what it meant to shine. For the darkness, Olaedo was thankful. She made for the main hut, the one she shared with Nnadi, and found him bent over a fire, breaking palm kernels. In the firelight, the man’s skin was the sheen of tarnished trinkets. He did not see her, not until the light from the flames caught her shadow. “I woke, and you were gone.” Nnadi stood, his eyes going to the bundle on her chest. Olaedo pulled at the cloth, revealing the faces of the little ones. “It is time.” Her voice was a thing unbowed. A river unparched in drought. “We must hurry.” “You should have woken me.” Nnadi’s eyes did not stray from the children. “There was no time.” Olaedo let her impatience bleed into the words. “You would have slowed me down.” Nnadi was one to cuddle, to linger. There was no room for it. There was no time. Olaedo unbundled one of the twins. She undid her woolen scarf and swaddled the infant in it. Then, she placed the child in Nnadi’s hands. The man just stared down at it. A tremble came finding his hands. This was the first of his children he had held. He did not touch the others. They did not let him. The infant nuzzled into him, and warmth found the corners of Nnadi’s body. It was like holding light. “We have to go.” Olaedo turned to leave, and in the darkness, she found Azuka. The woman was still--a shadow on an ill-lit street. “Azu—Azuka—” Nnadi stepped forward, shielding Olaedo with his towering frame. It was too late. Azuka had already seen. “I heard—I heard noises.” Azuka was a liar. Everyone knew this. She once spread word she’d seen Kalu, the pot maker, holding back rain. At the time, the village had been besieged by famine. The riverbeds broke and crackled under the sun. The leaves wilted down the trees. People were erratic with hunger, and Azuka’s lies had taken root with ease. Kalu was strung up that day. Olaedo and Nnadi lived on the outskirts of the village. No one could have heard a thing unless they wanted to. After Olaedo’s second pregnancy, they had moved there and steered clear of everyone. But Azuka was a mango fly, ever prying, ever hovering. Azuka’s eyes darted from the child in Nnadi’s arm before straining to catch the bundle strapped to Olaedo’s chest. “Gods. Not again!” She cupped the words as tears fled down her face. “Azuka!” Nnadi tried to hush the woman. It was pointless. The woman’s voice found the night wind and kited, higher, higher. Olaedo hated it. The crying, the mourning. She hated being treated like tragedy made an eternal abode of her home. For all her misfortunes, Olaedo had wept for herself. She had wept for days on end. It was enough. There would be no more weeping in her house. “I have to tell the elders.” Azuka wiped her running nose, nodding and agreeing with herself. “Azuka, please, listen to me.” Nnadi tried to reach for her. The woman drew back. “We—we are leaving the village. No one needs to know.” “Where are you going?” Azuka seemed to mellow. Nnadi trailed on as he explained the details of their departure. Once they completed the crossing ritual, they would all be safe, and the rest of the village would never know. Azuka became rather calm, listening with a sincerity. A keenness. Olaedo hated that too. When Nnadi was done, Azuka reached for him, gently squeezing his arm. She had initially gone for his hands, but the baby slept in them. “I can help—” This is how it happened: Azuka was standing. Azuka was falling. Azuka was breathing. Azuka was wrestling air. Nnadi did not see it happen. There was no seeing of it. Olaedo became night and befell her cousin like a curse. In her hand, a blade. And the blade came cutting. Blood splashed across Nnadi’s face. The man inhaled once. Blood splashed across Olaedo’s face. There was nothing to inhale. Olaedo slew her cousin with the blade that cut her children’s cords. Azuka did not die screaming. For that, Olaedo was thankful. The woman had collapsed to her knees, her hands reaching for the gash, her hands gathering her blood like harvest. Olaedo watched her--a child watching a grasshopper struggle in a puddle. In her dying, Azuka made to speak and failed, the words flooding back into her lungs. Whatever those words were, Olaedo knew they would be lies. “Olaedo.” Nnadi’s voice was afraid. “What—what have you done?” “I have lost…” Olaedo stopped, exhaling for the first time that night. “…I will not do it again.” “She had children too.” Olaedo said nothing. “She was your blood.” “And now she is dead.” She turned to face Nnadi. In her eyes, Nnadi found her. This was her, the woman she had always been, the woman he married. Ardent, true, raging. Nnadi made to kneel to the body. He was unsure where to begin, not with the child in his hands. “Leave it,” Olaedo called from behind him. “It will not be the first body I have buried.” And so they ran through the cornfields, past the giant Udala tree. When Olaedo was born, her mother buried her placenta at the foot of the Udala tree. Just as her grandmother had done. Just like all the mothers before her had done. Olaedo was never allowed to bury any of hers lest they curse the land. “Wait.” Olaedo went back to the tree, her breath falling in short gasps. She knelt to its roots, resting her head against its trunk. It was the first time in a long while she knew rest. Olaedo started to dig. She tore at the soil, debris stabbing her fingers. She clawed and clawed, stones bruising her knuckles. Nnadi knelt to help, balancing the child in one arm. Olaedo did not let him. This was her digging. “They never let me bury the others.” Olaedo stopped. From her clothes, she retrieved a bundle wrapped in pawpaw leaves. She had collected it right before she left the barn. “They called me sacrilege.” Gently, she placed the bundle in the hole and pushed the sand back over it. “Where are they to stop me now?” This time, when Nnadi helped her, she let him. His hands followed the motion of her hands like water finding water. Nnadi had always followed Olaedo everywhere. When they were children, he followed her to watch the spirits dance in the warm streams. He followed her to the neighboring village to steal a goat. He followed her to the heights of the Iroko trees to catch stars. And when she yelled and tried to wrestle him away, he would knock her to the ground, rather gently, again and again. So Olaedo let him wander after her. She soon found herself following him too. They got older, and she found she wanted to wrestle him in other ways. There was something about the curve of his buttocks. When Nnadi caught her watching him, Olaedo would not look away. Nnadi would kick sand in her direction, and she would lunge at him, mostly at his buttocks. When she came of age, they readied Olaedo to join the other girls in the maiden dance. The dance was a ceremony. Young men would gather in the village square. To watch the girls sway and twirl. To find brides. Olaedo’s mother had danced as her grandmother had done. As had all the mothers who came before her. Olaedo refused to dance. “Why don’t they dance for me, like the birds do?” This she had said. Then she went to her father’s farm and plucked the largest coconut. The next day, when the sun painted the waters, Olaedo found Nnadi and shoved the coconut into his hands. She betrothed him. The elders rebuked her. The elders scorned her. A woman does not betroth a man, they said. Olaedo did not care. But the fight in Olaedo waned with the birth of the first twins. From the moment she took in, Olaedo was certain the pregnancy would kill her. She was convinced of it when two of her molars came loose. She had been swallowing pounded yam, and they just came tumbling out. Her hair was next. It left in painful tufts until she was bald. One morning, Olaedo woke up, and it was pitch black. But she’d heard the cock crow and welcome morning. Not many things frightened Olaedo. This did. When the medicine man tried to line her eyes with rabbit feces, she slapped his hand away. “You will never see again!” he had cursed. “I will!” she spat back. When her sight returned, in gratitude, Olaedo poured daily libations to the ancestors for a month. Olaedo also spent the pregnancy hating Nnadi. She hated that he was happy and beautiful while she suffered. Her nose was the size of an avocado. The sight of him filled her with bile. She would stare daggers at the poor man until he fled from her sight. His scent physically made her nauseous too. Above all, she hated that she still wanted him to hold her each night. When she went into labor and the children came, Olaedo was relieved to be alive. Then the midwives gasped and scattered back. Some ran out of the room screaming. Her relief faded away. Worry took its place. In between battling pangs of labor pain and fearing for her life, Olaedo had forgotten what it meant to birth twins. When one of the midwives spat the word mmụọ ọjọọ, demon, only then did it dawn on her. Olaedo thought the children were ugly. Like the hairless sparrow hatchlings that nested in her mother’s mango tree. Their faces were red and puffy, like baby rodents hued together. They were ugly, but they were hers, and she would not part with a hair on their head. Not one strand. When they came for the children, they came with dirges and salt. Olaedo met them with bared teeth. The first priest who reached for the babies found a dagger in his shoulder. The second one found teeth where teeth should not be. But in the end, Olaedo was one woman. They took the children, and she screamed for ten days. It echoed through the village. Grief calling. The village folk thought the screaming would kill her. It did not. When the second birth came, Olaedo met it silent. She did not touch the children. She did not look at them. When they took the little ones, she did not fight. Olaedo was tired. People began to call her an adulterous witch. Like being just a witch was not enough. They said she had spawned with demons. The village had not seen the birth of twins in decades, so Olaedo was utterly alone in her misery. She did not speak for months. Her hair tangled and fallowed. She ate nothing, willing death to take her. And death came and found there was nothing to take. Olaedo’s family abandoned her.

can you stay on a minute?” She waited until everyone else filed out of the room. “I wanted to touch base. The 501 really cares about accessibility. But with dues the way they are, we can’t afford to put in a ramp right now.” “But the ADA says—” “This building is old enough to be grandfathered in. Besides, if we built a ramp for you, we’d have to make adjustments for everybody. Backless chairs for Lizzardbeth so her tail would fit better, upgrade the bathroom plumbing for RockGal, you get the idea. The budget would explode! There’s even a rule in the union handbook, from about seven years ago, that says we don’t do accommodations when it’s for just one member.” Temporary ramps were pretty cheap, but I tried switching tactics. Maybe I could still get something else done. “Can we talk about traffic circles then?” “Unfortunately it’s not on our list of priorities for the year, so maybe some other time. And we’d rather you not bug all the other union members about it. But hopefully you can join us in person for the next meeting! You’re missing out on the networking,” she chirped, and hung up. I breathed deeply. Then lasered a hole in my living room wall. *** Throughout the next week, I waited for my union-issued superwatch to vibrate and call me into action. On Friday it finally did, telling me to come to HQ. Yet again, I hit the problem of the stairs, but it turned out not to matter. They wanted me for an outdoor photo shoot as the newest member of the team, together with an interview with a local journalist. During the interview, the PR rep held giant cue cards with what I was supposed to say to the journalist. The whole exercise seemed pretty meaningless. But then the journalist asked, “And RazorBeam, how do you feel about Doctor Croc getting away yesterday, after he smashed up the craft supplies store on Main Street?” The PR rep’s eyes widened. Probably the journalist hadn’t vetted this question with them. And I was taken aback too—I’d had no idea that there was a new Doctor Croc incident. “Uhhhh… I’m sure we’ll get him next time?” “What’s really important here,” jumped in the PR rep, “is that we have a wonderful new member of the team. Our diversity makes us stronger, and that lets us better serve the people of this city. Thank you for your time!” After the journalist was hurried out, I asked the rep what had happened. “Oh it’s just a craft store, don’t worry about it.” “Why wasn’t I called to help? I was free, and maybe if I was there he wouldn’t have gotten away.” “Oh well.” They looked me up and down. “We want to save your abilities for the projects that use them best. I’m sure the next time you’ll be called. See you then!” As they sauntered away, I lasered a patch of grass into a charred black splotch in frustration. But why a craft supplies store? What would a supervillain have against pipe cleaners and construction paper and rolls of fabric? A convention center was the center of big meetups and commerce, it was a big deal to a city to get that destroyed. But a little craft shop? I wasn’t a fan of that store, not that I needed a lot of craft supplies. But I’d gone once to get poster board and thick markers to make a sign for a rally, and the aisles of supplies were crammed so close together that I couldn’t really maneuver in there. Still, a craft store made no sense. *** Two weeks later, at the next union meeting (still via video), I came prepared with a proposal. If I could get help blocking traffic, I could sort of make traffic circles happen myself. I’d spent the last few weeks experimenting with asphalt and found that after I melted it I could sort of push it around with a shovel. It wasn’t the most efficient, but it could work. I never got to talk. There’d been another Doctor Croc attack that nobody had invited me to, and it was at a perfectly wheelchair-accessible gym. This time they put up some photos from the gym fight. (They’d brought the journalist! But not me!) I’d been to that gym. It was a crappy old place where the windows didn’t properly close and all the fluorescent lights flickered and there was a greasy sheen of something on all surfaces, so not that many people went to it anyway and I doubt many people were sad it was destroyed. What was Doctor Croc’s goal here, anyway? Nobody was trying to figure out what the pattern was, though. And it seemed like nobody could stop the guy. ExpandiRay was in the hospital with a shattered femur from some barbells Doctor Croc had thrown at him during the fight. And RockGal had some new epoxy-filled cracks on her face. I didn’t even try to bring up traffic circles. *** The attacks kept coming, and I kept not getting an invitation to come help. I did experiments in my own backyard on how far I could accurately laser things, and sent the results to Big Dig. It didn’t change anything, even though I was pretty sure I had the most reach out of any of the super-abled who had distance or projectile abilities. (I got an angry letter from my landlord who saw the charred remains of my experiments and I had to buy a fire extinguisher, so I guess one change. But that was it.) If I couldn’t help fight, perhaps I could help predict. I went to the library and read all I could about Doctor Croc, and found nothing that made sense. There was no obvious vendetta I could find, nothing about past grudges, or feuds, or specific needs for revenge. As a twentysomething he’d had an airboat accident in a swamp and had been bitten by a mutated crocodile. The toxic waste plant that had oozed its sludge into the swamp to affect the crocodiles had long since been dealt with. There’d been lawsuits, cleanup efforts, the works, and it hadn’t been in business in years. It looked like the site was now an ecology museum with exhibits about the dangers of pollution in wetlands. So I needed a new theory. I made one of those conspiracy boards at home, with the printed out pictures and thumbtacks and pieces of string connecting pieces of information. He’d destroyed the conference center, craft supplies store, and gym, and previously had demolished an ancient movie theater that showed old movies on a rattling old projector, and a little hardware store crammed full of tools and paints all the way to the ceiling, with really high checkout counters that displayed even more goods beneath them. After weeks of trying to put together the puzzle pieces, I still had nothing. *** Chez Louisette was the one fancy restaurant in town. And it was having a grand re-opening on Wednesday. It was no crappy gym or dusty craft store, but it was an opportunity with a lot of press so maybe, just maybe, Doctor Croc would be there? Maybe? So on Wednesday morning I sent a note to Big Dig about my theory, then went to stake the place out. Not only was I right, but Doctor Croc had beat me there. As soon as I got near I heard a big crash. And another. And then two green scaly fists burst through its wall, raining down bits of brick. Nobody else was here, but this was my chance! Maybe if I could take him down alone, the union would take me seriously, and we could get something done. I lasered a giant hole in the wall, which then tottered and fell forward, revealing a very angry crocodile man. He was about eight feet tall, mostly a torso on stubby green legs, and his arms were muscular, massive, and gearing up for another punch. “Hey!” I said. “Doctor Croc! Put your hands in the air!” I remembered protocol, and pushed the button on my new superwatch for the union to send backup to my location. He looked me up and down. “You?” he said. “YOU. Of all people. Are trying to stop ME.” I suppressed a scream. Why were people so difficult everywhere! “Disabled people can be super-abled too, you know. Now I can laser you dead from here in less time than it’d take you to throw a chunk of wall at me, so I suggest you put your hands up.” “You don’t get it. Do you know what this restaurant’s been doing?” “Uh, being snooty?” “They won’t reveal their ingredients, which is dangerous for people with allergies and Celiacs and whatnot.” He looked smug, as though this magically explained everything. “I mean, that’s awful, but that’s no reason to destroy the whole building. Or any of the other places you’ve been smashing up. Now, you’re under arrest, by the order of the Super-Abled 501 Local Union! Hands up!” He scoffed, but slowly raised his hands and stepped out towards me. Behind him were the twisted stainless steel remains of what had been a kitchen. “Still a believer, huh? Tell me, did the 501 ever add any outdoor handrails?” “What does that have to do with anything? No…” “I was a member seven years ago. Asked for some accommodations so my kid could join on Take Your Child to Work Day. They never added any. Each time it was ‘there’s no budget’ or ‘that decision was made by the previous leadership’ and nothing. Ever. Changed. Eventually they had a vote that said that any changes to the union of any kind, which benefit only one person, were out. Specifically to shut me up. Even though accessibility accommodations help loads of people, and they wouldn’t even know how many people weren’t applying in the first place because the building was inaccessible.” Sounded familiar. And enraging. “It’s crappy,” I said, “but still no reason to destroy everything.” “Oh yeah?” he asked, moving closer. “Have they built you a ramp yet?” “Um. No…” “Didn’t think so. They just can’t be bothered.” “OK so they suck, fine, but why destroy all these other buildings?” Doctor Croc continued, “Nobody can be bothered to make accommodations. The ADA’s only enforced when people bring lawsuits. I’m in a giant Facebook group of parents with disabled kids and basically nobody has the time and money to sue, ever. And even then most lawsuits fail. But when I destroy an inaccessible building, the insurance covers it, and when they rebuild, it’s no longer so old that it gets an accessibility exemption. Plus, it’s safe since everyone gets evacuated. No people get harmed, and we get the accessibility we need. There was nobody here this morning when I started smashing.” “That can’t be right,” I said, as his hands started floating downwards. “Hey, hands stay up! Look, I used to work for the city. There are plenty of avenues to ask for accommodations. And besides, what was so inaccessible about that gym? Or the other places?” He put his hands up again. “That gym had flickering lights, which can trigger migraines, seizures, or meltdowns. The movie theater never bothered to add closed captioning devices. The hardware store had high checkout counters and never let its cashiers sit even when one of them broke a leg.” “OK, that makes no sense. Why not just destroy the gym’s lights? Or the hardware store’s checkout counters? There’s no reason they couldn’t rebuild with the same exact problems. Plus I doubt anyone even knows that this is why stuff’s getting destroyed. You’re not exactly getting headlines that say ‘Doctor Croc Destroys Another Inaccessible Building’.” “Huh,” he said, lowering his hands briefly then thinking better of it and shoving them up again. “Yeah that’s a good point. Probably should’ve just smashed up those counters, and probably should’ve left a note or something. Hey you’re good at this! You should join me!” “I’m not going to start smashing up buildings! I’m one of the good guys.” “Oh yeah? Those good guys that can’t even get you a ramp? Those things cost what, like $200 at Home Depot?” He had a point. With the union taking a percentage of all sponsorships and deals, and members working with giant brands like Nike, they could absolutely find space in their budget for a measly $200. They could get a single backless stool for Lizzardbeth for cheap. They just weren’t bothering to take those two minutes to think of solutions to help. Even I hadn’t thought of the problems with flickering lights and old movie equipment. Most of all, nothing was getting done. The local 501 was so busy with its public image it wasn’t doing jack. Here I was, talking to their archenemy for a good five minutes, and nobody else was showing up. “This is ridiculous,” I muttered. “It is ridiculous! We’d make great partners, you and me, actually make some changes around here. What would you do about the movie theater?” “Huh? I don’t know, I guess I’d laser ‘GET CAPTIONING DEVICES OR ELSE’ on their walls. Or send a note to local insurance companies that says that their clients are at risk of expensive damages if they don’t shore up accessibility, and they have two weeks to fix things.” I shook my head. “But that’s irrelevant!” “See? Those are great ideas. You’re full of them. So join me, whaddaya think? No more smashing up buildings when you’ve got a better plan, I promise.” He gave me a crocodiley grin, showing all his teeth. “My garage is fully accessible and is a great place to meet. And I make a mean dairy-free hot chocolate.” Something inside me snapped. It had been years since someone thought about accessibility for me without me having to even ask. And maybe this way I could actually get something done, especially if Doctor Croc was willing to let me focus him. Get him laser-focused, if you will. And with a bit of time I could probably come up with some better plans that were less destructive and more effective. “Hell,” I said. “Only if we make some traffic circles too.” “Oh I read those things save a lot of lives! Great idea, let’s do that next. You in?” “Why not,” I said, and grinned back. And just for some much-needed catharsis, I lasered an already-wrecked piece of kitchen behind him. The metal melted into a ramp-like shape. © 2025 by Effie Seiberg 3479 words Author’s Note: In 2017 I became disabled with ME/CFS, turning me into an ambulatory wheelchair user. The transition from abled to disabled is a tough one, and one of the hardest things is seeing people refuse to make even super easy accommodations. I’ve seen every one of the excuses in this story—there’s no budget, but then we’d have to do things for everyone and that’s just too much, there’s no bandwidth to deal with this but maybe later, this is an old building with an ADA exception, etc. (Don’t get me started on a lack of Covid mitigation policies… even if nobody wears a mask, you can do cheap and easy things to help air filtration/circulation.) And this part really sucks, because it excludes people like me from stuff we otherwise could still do, effectively making our disabilities even more disabling. So this story is my frustration about the lack of easy-to-accomplish accessibility accommodations that still just don’t happen. Effie Seiberg is an ambulatory wheelchair user, and a fantasy and science fiction writer. Her stories can be found in Lightspeed, Galaxy’s Edge, Analog, Fantasy Magazine, and PodCastle, amongst others. Her stories include a finalist in the AnLab Awards, a nomination for the Subjective Chaos Kind Of Award, and an honorable mention in the Year’s Best YA Speculative Fiction. She encourages anyone who cares about US disability rights to call their elected representatives (it’s easy at 5calls.org) and ask them to reject cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, all services critical for disabled folks. If you enjoyed the story you might also want to visit our Support Page, or read the other story offerings. edited by David Steffen Summer had been unseasonably hot, rats taking refuge in the covered canals where the drunk and homeless hid, and the rat-catchers had unleashed schipperkes, dogs that hunted with flared noses and bared teeth, and then Nicolaas, who had only ruled for a year, abdicated as Rat King. It fell to Hannes to resume the throne he had so recently vacated in favor of his offspring. He was angry, his bodies hissing and clacking teeth, a promise of violence. Nicolaas was in hiding, so Hannes’s anger fell on Teodoer, for Teodoer was Nicolaas’s closest friend and Hannes had no better target for his outrage. Teodoer cowered, his bodies trying to hide behind each other. Hannes’s command to Teodoer was as simple as it was impossible: find Nicolaas. Return him to his ordained place. It is difficult to find a rat that does not wish to be found, even a rat king like Nicolaas with a surfeit of bodies linked by their tails. Teodoer roamed the city, careful to avoid the areas frequented by dogs or rat-catchers or, worse, the rat-baiter. He talked with other rats, singletons unaffiliated with any member of the rat court, but even they had heard of Teodoer’s unsolvable task and feared Hannes’s anger when Teodoer unavoidably failed and so would not speak to him. Teodoer too was afraid. If he failed to deliver Nicolaas to Hannes in a timely fashion, the King who was and now was again could demand his dissolution. His tails would be unlinked and individual bodies scattered, the awareness that was Teodoer fading like blood in rain, the water red, then pink, then clear. Desperate, Teodoer released some of his bodies so he could search the city more rapidly. His bodies squeaked protest, for to be alone was to be prey, but it was a necessary sacrifice. Teodoer felt himself dim as they left, carrying away enough of his awareness to remain part of him, but he had not risen in the court by shying away from what was necessary. The rumors Teodoer brought back to himself were mist and smoke. Rats across the city gossiped about Nicolaas; the machinations of the court were entertainment as well as news, the court dependent on the labor of singletons who in return received the court’s guidance and protection. But the gossip had no substance. None of the claimed sightings of Nicolaas had the ring of truth. Nevertheless, Teodoer investigated them, a fruitless endeavor. And then he heard of how the rat-baiter had died. Rat baiting was new, brought by Englishmen who had settled in the city and found it too lacking in cruelty. A pit was built; dogs were trained; rats were caught. After, the bodies were tossed behind the building, a furry pile of lives cut short in fear and pain. Rats had approached the court, and the courtiers and King Hannes had made a show of their concern. They wished to put an end to rat-baiting, of course, but feared the repercussions should they act against humans. In truth, they found in rat-baiting a useful method to keep singletons obedient. It forced them to seek the shelter of the court’s protection. The most promising rats were forcibly added to King Hannes and his courtiers. Teodoer had some among his bodies who had fled the rat-baiter. Other singleton rats worked to fulfill the court’s wishes. So it remained, even when Nicolaas ascended to the throne. But now the man who organized the fights was dead—rat poison, slipped into his nightly wine. He had been dead long enough for rats to chew his face, the humans said. A rumor, wispy as the others. But Teodoer scented Nicolaas’s involvement. Nicolaas had fought for the court to act against the rat-baiter, to no avail. Even a Rat King’s powers have limits. Eventually Nicolaas had given up the fight. But poison spoke to intelligence and intent, and the bites were an announcement meant for other rats. And so it was that Teodoer made his way under gloom of night to the rat-baiter’s home. The house was a hovel, tight and dark. Crumbs of food littered the floor. Teodoer took pleasure in scavenging them, feeding his bodies on the dead man’s spoils. He sniffed the discarded wine cup and ran twitching whiskers over the bed where the rat-baiter had thrashed out his life. Scents of Nicolaas, a musk he had grown up with. His friend had been here. As he followed Nicolaas’s winding trail along buildings and through corners of storerooms where rats had gnawed openings, excitement gave way to caution. Nicolaas would not welcome Teodoer’s presence, as close as they had been. Would their friendship keep Nicolaas from pulling apart Teodoer’s bodies and adding them, and aspects of Teodor’s mind, to his? It was a danger when a lesser displeased a greater, and though Nicolaas had fled the Kingship, he was still the greatest of them all. Teodoer reached the city’s outer fortifications, crumbling mason allowing passage into a cavernous space. He paused outside. He wanted to risk but one body, and argued with himself about which one and how much of his awareness to leave in that body. Too little and the body would no longer be him; too much and he might lose that part of himself to Nicolaas were he to take the body. Eventually he reached agreement. Teodoer poured himself into the quickest and sneakiest of them. She unwound her tail and scampered ahead. Teodoer bided his time, fears growing—would she be caught? Had he sent her to become part of Nicolaas?—until she returned, eyes bright, nose twitching, and rejoined her tail to the others, completing him again. Knowledge flowed into him. Nicolaas wished to talk. Teodoer’s shock grew upon seeing Nicolaas. His friend and one-time King was still groomed neatly, as befit royalty, but he’d grown more numerous, and several of his new bodies were unworthy of him. One’s eyes had a milky film. Another was so ancient that her black fur was patchy and thin. “My lord.” Nicolaas bruxed, the quiet grinding of teeth signaling contentment, as if he was relaxing in his royal crawlspace and not hiding in the city’s outer walls. “Hannes sent you, of course, and of course you could not refuse his command. But I will not return to the court.” “My lord,” Teodoer repeated, still reeling. He and Nicolaas had been close, spending so much time together after Hannes had made them that Hannes had laughed that they would become one, half a joke, half a warning. The Nicolaas he thought he knew would never have sullied himself with lesser bodies. A singleton limped through the masonry hole. His back foot dragged—bumblefoot, by the smell. He had the audacity to approach Nicolaas, head low, with soft squeaks of supplication. Teodoer recoiled to see Nicolaas allowing the rat to link tails. Nicolaas’s other bodies closed their eyes. “Fresh from a barge. Welcome to our city.” Multiple of Nicolaas’s bodies had spoken in unison, unsettling and wrong. “Stop it!” Teodoer snapped. “Stop this perversion, restore yourself, and take back up your throne and your duties.” “I continue my duties,” Nicolaas said with one voice. For the first time he sounded like the commanding King he had been. “Better than I could at court. You tracked me from the rat-baiter’s?” At Teodoer’s nod, Nicolaas continued, “In one night I did more to make rats’ lives better than I did in my entire year as King.” “Untrue!” Teodoer said, unwilling to hear his friend diminish his accomplishments. “You improved the court. With time you would have done more.” “With time.” Nicolaas sneezed as if scenting peppermint. “And debasing yourself will help?” Nicolaas reared up with a terrible scream. Teodoer flattened his bodies to the rough ground. He should have been more temperate. His lone hope was that Nicolaas would leave him enough bodies to remain himself. Three of Nicolaas’s bodies pulled their tails free and nipped at the remaining bodies’ necks to chide them. To Teodoer’s amazement, Nicolaas quieted. With remonstrative squeaks, the three bodies rejoined Nicolaas, who said, “I am sorry. Old habits.” Nicolaas had returned to speaking with multiple bodies. Teodoer squeaked in distress. His friend couldn’t even hold himself together. “You’re unwell. Please, let me help you.” “I am more myself than I have been since I became King.” Nicolaas drew close, bodies nestling against Teodoer’s, as they had done since they were young but had not since Nicolaas became King. It brought memories of happier times. “I will explain. If you cannot understand, then none can. After, you may decide if I am mad.” Nicolaas’s explanation, given as he led Teodoer by canals and along walls, made no sense. He had of late been issuing invitations to any singleton who would listen. They were free to join him for a time, and just as free to leave when they wished. A recipe for contagion and madness, Teodoer thought. It took careful balance to maintain yourself as new bodies joined. The court thoroughly examined rats to make sure only the most impressive ones joined a courtier. It was why duels between courtiers, though rare, often ended with the victor taking bodies from the loser, spoils from the fight. Another courtier was a fertile source of worthy bodies and, no matter how hard they tried to keep their mind out of those lost bodies, knowledge of that courtier’s schemes. The two of them sheltered beneath a cart near the port. The air smelled of the sea and carried on it the creak-slap of boats nestled tight together. “Most who join me are newcomers,” Nicolaas said. “Of course they are!” Teodoer squeaked. No city rat would debase themself so, and if they did, then the court would destroy them. At Teodoer’s distress, Nicolaas began to groom him, feet and blunt snouts moving over him, soothing and cleaning fur. Despite Teodoer’s fear for Nicolaas, the ministrations calmed him. “There is so much to be done to help rats—all rats. The court has lost sight of that, if indeed they ever knew it.” Nicolaas and Teodoer had long argued about how to change the court to better serve rats. Nicolaas had burned like a hot fire, ready to change the court or turn it to ashes. Teodoer had counseled a slower approach, one less likely to rally courtiers to resist them. Teodoer had been afraid for his friend when he became King, and whether the courtiers would rise in opposition. He needn’t have worried. Nicolaas had been constrained by the court, as well as the firm guidance of Hannes, who directed Nicolaas with words and, when needed, nips. Nicolaas had let his ambitious plans give way to the pragmatic and the possible, or so Teodoer had thought. Instead, he had run away to enact his most ambitious plan ever. When Nicolaas completed his grooming, content with the state of all of Teodoer’s fur, he pointed his noses towards the distant dock. “The world is so much larger than we knew, Teodoer. It goes on and on. I wonder if it has an end.” Half of Nicolaas’s faces turned to Teodoer. “I would show you for a moment, if you would let me.” By giving Teodoer one of his bodies. Tension ran through Teodoer, carried from tail to tail to tail. He was of too many minds. Some of him wished to flee Nicolaas’s invitation. Others wanted to attack. But more, deep down, were curious. Nicolaas had kept himself despite his new bodies. One could not hurt. Teodoer nodded, quickly, before his minds could change again. Nicolaas regarded himself in silent consultation, until the bumblefoot rat tugged free its tail and offered it to Teodoer. Teodoer held very still, as if a cat stalked him, as the rat wove its tail into his. Nicolaas saw the rat’s history. The scurry and leap onto a boat from a dock whose smells were so unlike the ones Teodoer had known that he could scarce believe they were real. Hiding below with others, having chewed a hole in a sack that carried food he had never before tasted. Traveling from city to city, each one more different and fantastic than the last. And now here. He also saw how rats lived on boats and in other cities. None had courts, or even rat kings. Instead, they scavenged and fought and loved and died in complex arrangements that were a plank thin enough to flex but thick enough to hold them all and keep them peaceful and safe. For the first time in Teodoer’s life, he wondered why the court existed. The bumblefoot rat withdrew his tail. It was like drawing out a splinter, relief that left an ache. Teodoer couldn’t speak. It was no small thing to have glimpsed the world. “That is why.” Nicolaas allowed the bumblefoot rat to re-join him. Teodoer found his voice. “I can’t tell them. About you. About what you are doing. About what I—” He stopped as if, by not speaking it aloud, his transgression would not exist. “You must. Not about what you did or what you saw, but about me. Hannes will have it out of you. And word is spreading. Not all of my rats have come from newly-arrived boats.” “You can hide!” But Nicolaas shook his many heads. “They will find me, unless I give up what I am doing, and I will not.” “Then we fight!” Teodoer said with the zeal of the newly-converted. “We would lose. And nothing would change.” It came to Teodoer that he had brought death to Nicolaas the moment he stepped into the rat-baiter’s home. His squeaks of distress were piercingly high. Nicolaas’s bodies enmeshed with Teodoer’s. “Friend, forgive me. I must ask one last, hardest thing. When Hannes orders my death, you must be the one. Do it swiftly, and do not stint on the victor’s spoils.” He could not take his friend’s bodies. “Nicolaas—” “It must be you. Only you will show me the mercy of a swift end.” That end could not be changed as long as Nicolaas held to his decisions, and though Teodoer argued and argued, Nicolaas was unmoved. He would not abandon his project. It fell to Teodoer to return to court and deliver testimony of what he witnessed regarding Nicolaas. His voice trembled and his tails pulled taut and then slack. The court took his distress to be for Nicolaas’s heresy, a mistake that Teodoer did not correct. From the throne mound, Hannes rendered implacable judgement just as Nicolaas had predicted: “Nicolaas must die.” “Let it be me who performs that duty.” Teodoer risked Hannes’s anger in speaking, and the court hissed in surprise, but he had promised Nicolaas. “He has shamed both this court and me. I, who was so close to him, could not make him give up this madness and return.” “As you say.” Hannes’s eyes glittered in the light that filtered through the boards of the house where the court had made its home. “But I will accompany. Lead me to him.” Teodoer’s hope that he would be sent alone died. Reprieve was impossible. He would have to kill his friend. Hannes was silent as guilt behind Teodoer as they crossed the city. Nicolaas waited for them in the fortifications. He dipped a bow as they entered. “Hannes. Teodoer.” “Dispatch him,” Hannes ordered. Teodoer trembled, but Nicolaas took the decision from Teodoer by rushing at him. Teodoer reacted without thinking, nipping at Nicolaas’s bodies, flipping them on their backs and putting teeth to their throats to force their submission. And like that, Nicolaas was gone, tails unwinding, leaving no trace of Teodoer’s friend beyond the now-singletons fleeing for their lives. He encircled two who, despite looking the strongest, had not run as the others had, and added them to his body. Hannes watched the other bodies scamper. “Are you sure you wish to add any of his to your own?” “I’m unchanged,” Teodoer said, answering the unspoken question. “Then come.” Hannes took the lead for the return journey. Before they entered the court, Hannes laid restraining paws on Teodoer. “We will need a new Rat King to continue the court. I am tired, and am ready to unlink tails for good once I have properly trained someone to follow me. I think that should be you.” Teodoer dipped his heads in humility. “If you think me worthy.” “We shall see.” Teodoer said no more, and allowed Hannes to tell the others what had transpired, all the while turning over in his mind how to show Hannes that he was indeed worthy. For he had lied to Hannes. He was changed. He had taken on more of Nicolaas than he had let Hannes see. Nicolaas, clever Nicolaas, had poured all he could into the two bodies that stayed behind. His friend was gone, but his ideas remained, waiting for Teodoer to return them to the city. Nicolaas had decisively won his argument with Teodoer. After Teodoer became Rat King, he would tear down the court entire. © 2025 by Stephen Granade 2847 words Author’s Note: I’ve been fascinated by rats since my youngest kid started keeping them as pets. I started musing about what a rat society organized around rat kings would look like, and what would happen if the Rat King wanted to abdicate. Those musing collided with me wanting to write a story in a more formal, archaic voice than I’d ever tried before, and before I knew it “The Rat King Who Wasn’t” popped out. Stephen Granade is a physicist and writer from Huntsville, Alabama, the city with a Saturn V rocket in its skyline. Their stories have appeared in Strange Horizons, Baffling Magazine, and Escape Pod. Their game, Professor of Magical Studies, is available from Choice of Games, and they co-edit Small Wonders, an SFF magazine for flash fiction and poetry. Find them on Bluesky (@granades.com), Mastodon (@sargent@wandering.shop), and their website ( ). If you enjoyed the story you might also want to visit our Support Page, or read the other story offerings. written by David Steffen In 2020, on April 1st, we’ve had a recurring gag on the site where we “rebrand” by replacing the banner from a list of joke banners that sound kindof like “The Grinder” but pick a different title, different subtitle, and different logo. There were nine banners created by our original banner artist M.S. Corley (with a little help from me with my mad MS Paint skills for a couple of them). See the previous April Fool’s Recap for those original 9 banners. In case you didn’t happen to be on the site that day or you didn’t have the time to try to see them all, you can see them all here right in this recap. We started it in that particular year because everyone was extremely stressed with the still-new pandemic, mass layoffs, social isolation, and we thought that if we could make someone laugh it would be a little something good. Since we had the banners we’ve been running the same recurring gag for the few years since then, and people still seem to enjoy them and there’s always someone new finding them. This year again we are super extra stressed with the *gestures wearily at the everything*, we thought it would be a good time to expand and add more all new banners. At the time of our last recap, the main logo on the site was a meat grinder: Title: “The Grinder”Subtitle: “Milling your submissions into something useful…” Logo: meat grinder with paper with unreadable writing feeding into it, and loose sheets flying through the air above the text Since the last recap we have actually changed our main banner a couple of times. We decided that maybe the meat grinder wasn’t the most welcoming image, especially for people who don’t eat meat. For a short while we actually had a logo that was a sandwich (you know, a grinder like a sub sandwich?): Title: The GrinderSubtitle: Munching your submissions into something useful… Logo: sub sandwich, with a toothpick and an olive on top, and sandwich ingredients are flying through the air above the text. This last for a few months, but we ended up changing the main logo again to a coffee grinder. While, yes, there are people and cultures that don’t drink coffee, coffee is often associated with writers toiling away at their work so the image seemed to fit: Title: “The Grinder”.Subtitle: “Brewing your submissions into something useful…”. Logo: old-fashioned manual coffee grinder, and coffee beans are flying through the air above the text. Although some of these might be funny, these were actual logos used on the site for a period of time. Again, see the previous April Fool’s Recap for the original nine joke banners. Those stayed in the rotation, but we added nine all-new banners for a total of 18 banners. Every time the page loaded after you took some action it would load one randomly from the 18. Title: The GrounderSubtitle: Fielding your submissions into something useful…Logo: A baseball mitt holding a baseball. This one is less silly than many others, but the word was actually so close that it made sense to include it. Title: The LingerSubtitle: Refreshing your submissions into something useful…Logo: a circular arrow shape, reminiscent of the logo used on most web browsers to refresh a page This was a joke about the site itself, and got responses from the users on social media like “called out!”. Users of the Submission Grinder track their own submissions on the site, but then each user can also see new anonymized (except for acceptances if the user chooses to show some name) responses from other writers. If writers are anxious about the results of a particular submission, they may refresh the page over and over again. This is something that we see writers talking about pretty often, how it’s hard not to just keep refreshing, so this banner was very relatable for people! Title: The MinderSubtitle: Caretaking your submissions into something useful…Logo: The silhouette of Mary Poppins, wearing a hat and an old fashioned dress, carrying a bag in one hand, and flying through the air using an umbrella in her other hand. Title: The PomanderSubtitle: Orange you glad we scent your submissions into something useful…?Logo: A pomander of the variety that is an orange studded with cloves. A slice of orange sits next to it, and loose cloves lie around it I did not know what a pomander was, though I had heard of them. They were meant to ward off bad smells that were thought at the time to be the cause of illnesses. But what really sold me on this one was the pair of terrible puns. (Yes the subtitle strays from the usual subtitle pattern, but I think that helps the comic effect by subverting expectations) Title: The FlindersSubtitle: Smashing your submissions into something useful…Logo: Based on the main coffee grinder image, but this one has been smashed to pieces, and coffee beans are lying all around. This one has been in my head since we did the first April Fool’s run as one that I wanted to do if we did another round. I just think the word “flinders” is funny. I don’t know why. Title: The Go Mind YerSubtitle: It’s none of your dang business!Logo: A closed door with cartoon sound lines that imply that the door has just been slammed shut. As in “Go Mind Yer Own Business”. I like this one in part because it reminds me of my grandmother-in-law who when in a mood would say “It’s none of your damned business” pretty often. Title: The GyrerSubtitle: Outgrabing your rembishuns into something extructful…Logo: The mock turtle from Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland, a sea turtle/cow chimera with the body and front flippers of a sea turtle and the head, back legs, and tail of a cow. I do love Alice in Wonderland, and the Jabberwocky in particular. “Gyrer” as in “gyre” from “’Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe”. And “outgrabing” as in “and the mome raths outgrabe”. The other two nonsense words were portmanteau words of my own devising. “rembishuns” as in “rejected submissions”. “extructful” as sort of a combination of “useful” and “instructive”, but “instructive” is reversed, because your submissions don’t instruct you, they instruct others, so since the instruction is outgoing instead of incoming, the “in” goes to “ex” and becomes “extructful”. Title: The NANDerSubtitle: Gotta not catch all them rejections!Logo: A sphere with a dark top half and a light bottom half, separating the two colors is an image of a NAND gate. This is a pretty niche geek joke, and my second favorite. I’m curious how many people got this one without me explaining it. What is a NAND gate? Logic gates are components in computer engineering and computer software that can be used to cause different behaviors. The easier ones to understand are the AND gate (which will activate if all of its inputs are on), the OR gate (which will activate if any of its inputs are on), and the NOT gat (which will activate if its input is not on). There are also the NOR gate (which is a combination of an OR and a NOT gate, and will activate if none of the inputs are on) and the NAND gate (which is a combination of an AND and a NOT gate, and will activate if not all of the inputs are on). I like the NAND gate best because you can technically build all the other gates if you only have a NAND gate. The image on the sphere is a NAND gate, the two lines on the left represent the inputs to the gate. The single line on the right represents the single output of the gate. The “D” shaped object is an AND gate, the circle immediately after it is a NOT gate, so combined they make a NAND gate. How does a NAND gate apply to this joke?Of course the sphere is meant to look like a Pokéball and the subtitle is meant to be a parody of the Pokémon catchphrase “Gotta catch ’em all!”. Writers who are using the site and trying to get published, it can serve them well if they enthusiastically send submissions out in an ongoing basis, you could look at it as a sort of Pokémon creature collection scenario. You expect to collect many many rejections in the course of submissions, which is a normal part of the submission process as frustrating as that can be. The actual catchphrase “Gotta catch ’em all!” could be represented by an AND gate, because you have not met your goal unless all the inputs are activated (if you see “collecting a creature” as a yes/no input). When submitting, you should be prepared to collect many rejections but of course you don’t want them all to always be rejections, so you don’t want to catch all rejections. In the end, a writer can be seen as successful if they get some acceptances, no matter how many rejections they had to get to get there. So, a NAND gate seemed appropriate for this scenario, to have a chance of success you have to be ready to get a lot of rejections but with the goal of not getting only rejections, hence the modified phrase. I thought about simply negating the original catchphrase as “Gotta not catch ’em all!” but I thought it was unclear what “’em” I was referring to, so a slight rearrangement makes it more explicit, with “Gotta not catch all them rejections!” and yes the modified phrase is a little clunky, but in this case I thought it was clunky in a funny way so it was perfect. Title: The PanderSubtitle: Panding your submissions into something useful…Logo: A panda bear sitting on its butt, holding a frying pan in one front paw. This is my favorite one. I laugh whenever this one comes up again. It’s a pander bear! And it’s holding a frying pan! It’s such a terrible joke, and I love it entirely too much, and I hope you either love this terrible joke, or groan at how terrible it is (which just makes me laugh more). edited by David Steffen Content note (click for details) Addiction, suicidal ideation, body horror The octopus comes into Shun’s bedroom on a brisk winter morning. It squeezes through the open window and onto her desk, where Shun is filling out an application for a job she doesn’t want just so her day doesn’t feel entirely wasted. Shun stares at the octopus, and the octopus stares back. It has tentacles as thick as her wrists, which coil and uncoil in constant motion. Plum-dark skin, wet and molten and pulsing. A glinting yellow eye, rectangular-pupiled, watches her in the soft light. She’s not sure how the octopus got here. Her apartment complex is miles away from the ocean, and even further from the aquarium. But it feels rude to ask where it came from. What are you doing here? she says instead. I want to borrow your body, says the octopus. Why? To find out what it’s like to be a person. But it’s my body, says Shun. I’m using it. So? says the octopus. What are you using it for that’s so important, anyway? It’s true that Shun has no plans for the rest of the afternoon. It’s been four months since she was laid off from her corporate job, and her last Hinge date ended alone in her bedroom with her vibrator. She doesn’t even have close friends in the area, just acquaintances she occasionally meets for dinner or drinks. No one will miss her if she lends her body to an octopus for a few hours. And the octopus seems so hopeful, so expectant. Like she could make all its dreams come true, just by acquiescing to this one thing. Why me? says Shun. Because look at you. You’re perfect. Shun hasn’t heard anyone say that to her in a long time. Blushing, she says, how does this work, exactly? It’s easy, says the octopus. Just say ahh and let me in. Shun opens her mouth. Headfirst, membrane-slick, the octopus injects itself between her teeth and burrows down her throat. *** Shun wakes up in a fetal position under her desk, her cheek pressed against the cold floorboards. The octopus is nowhere to be seen. The window is still open, the world outside wet-whisked and gray. Her skin goosebumps in protest. There’s no central heating in her two-bedroom apartment, and she and her roommate Olivia have to take turns using their space heaters so they don’t burn out the power. She must have missed her turn to have the space heater on. She checks her phone. It’s 4 p.m. The octopus must have occupied her body for almost five hours. She doesn’t remember those five hours, but they left her with a pleasant aftertaste: like she had no control, and by extension no responsibilities. There’s a spate of notifications on her lockscreen. She has a form rejection letter from a job she applied to last week: Thank you for considering us, but we’ve selected other candidates to move forward with. Four new matches on Hinge, a girl and three guys, people reduced to profiles; she doesn’t even remember swiping right on them. Two missed calls from her mother, who still lives in the sunny California suburb where Shun grew up. She calls her mother back. Did you see the pictures I sent you on WeChat? says her mother. What pictures? Your cousin Matthew just got a promotion. He’s a manager now, so exciting. To celebrate, he took us all out to that new Beijing restaurant I told you about last week. That’s great, Mom. The restaurant was disappointing, her mother goes on. I don’t know where the owners were from, but I bet they weren’t even real Beijingers. The youtiao didn’t taste didao at all. But that’s not Matthew’s fault. Shun makes the appropriate noises of sympathy and appreciation. She’s only half paying attention. Mostly she’s thinking about the octopus, about how easily she was able to satisfy its request. Anyway, says her mother, have you gotten any job interviews yet? I’m trying. Trying, trying, says her mother. You’ve been trying for so long. Why did we spend so much on your college tuition, if you can’t even get a job with it? Maybe you can ask Matthew for a referral. Matthew’s a software engineer, Mom. I’m a graphic designer. So what? You can learn how to do his job. You’re smart. Shun zones out and thinks about the octopus again. Her purpose in life used to feel so clear. She was her parents’ only child, and she always knew they were proud of her. Success was measurable. Report cards and gold stars and gymnastics trophies. How devastating it had been, to grow up and find herself lost; to realize that all those things she’d devoted so much effort to had nothing to do with real life at all. With

where the only readings are from glowing bodies in the deep. I've observed the flashing organisms myself down there, more times than I once dreamed. With the Navy scrambling to find the Challenger's star-worthy remains as they rust away underwater, it's a damn good time to look down. My automated reel drags the photometers from the deep, links of heavy chain breaching the surface one by one. I strain to maneuver the rods of complicated sensors and dripping metal. The Navy wants to explore the possibility of spotting Soviet subs by tracking the light levels of disturbed creatures, those that flash blue to confuse and hide and hunt and speak. To the right eyes, a Typhoon Class sub is subtle as Liberace at the Radio City Music Hall. The Navy wants those eyes. And I'll do anything to get below. *** If anyone is dumb enough to think the ocean is ours, they should see the shit we've got to wear to go down deep. The WASP is a tomb of bright yellow with a fortified glass head and heavy claw arms that require a strict weight-lifting regime for me to maneuver (to the pleasure of the ladies at Maud's). Jim Fletcher, one of my colleagues in Atchley's lab, has to help me in. Though the supervisor will have checked the whole thing twice over, he and I catalog each vital control one more time. You can never be too careful. The WASP is no fancy submersible. I'm an extra heavy photometer with arms, dangling from a chain. They lower me slow, all the way to the seafloor. I've learned from these trips that anticipation sours to anxiety to panic in sweet seconds, so I breathe calm and easy and don't allow any drumming of fingers. Once touched down, I switch off the WASP's lights. Step one to being welcomed into this world is relinquishing your sight. This is the place the sun doesn't go. Act like it. The disturbed seawater is bright around me. Patterns differ down under. Some creatures flash; others trail light in bright lines behind them. Blue is the color of choice, and it comes in neon, though tiny organisms sparkle like snow caught in lamplight. Surface checks in on my radio, and I talk back, but my focus is on the luminous deep. I laugh as I document it, camera shutter clicking. NASA may have spent the past few years asking who's brave enough to touch the stars, but the stars don't know shit about this impossible lightshow, far below the edge of their sight. The Navy, obsessed as they are with my sensors, knows even less of the life that glows, life that's boneless, aliens of the crushing dark. The question isn't whether there are unexplained phenomena down here: it's who will discover them. The right answer is me. With time, the lights fade away. The beings living here have accepted me, their translator come to study a language of light. In the utter darkness that remains, I draw my first full breaths since landing. Here, I am limitless, mobile and flowing, edges uncertain. Free as in the moments after a dream, when you have forgotten the shape of the skin that confines you. Something heavy thumps against the glass of the WASP. The whole body rocks. I slam my crushable shoulder against the hard exoskeleton keeping me alive, spit out a swear, switch the lights on. Going around banging the WASP off shit is a good way to die. But my headlights don't snag on debris or rock. Instead, two eyes press against the WASP's glass. Puffy things, with pinprick pupils and blue irises hardly distinguishable from the surrounding white. She hovers, and I count fingers and arms amid a cloud of long hair. Everywhere there is skin, there are also cracks, gorges that slice through her but don't bleed. A broken porcelain doll of the water. She opens her mouth, and I lean forward, as though she's about to speak, and I'm about to hear through glass and metal many times reinforced. But just as quick, she abandons my metal shell and vanishes from my intruding headlights. Sense knocks me hard, and I lurch forward. My finger jams against the controls and plunges me into darkness. My breaths are ragged. I force my chest out, my lungs open, even as I curse myself to high heavens. If my physical reactions fail me now, it'll be a twenty-minute lift while I hyperventilate. I know the rules of the deep sea, and yet I broke them. That thing—that organism—no, that girl, for it had been a girl, too humanoid for anything evolved for the aphotic zone—came to me, and I stole her only way to speak. My disruption brought the lights back. Though my stowed finger throbs, I clench my hands to fists. The woman is among them. Now unsilenced, she's a shattered goddess of the sea, each fissure of her skin lined with blue, a mosaic of light and woman. Though eyes won't matter to her down here, not like on land, I'm certain she can see me. I'm certain this is on purpose. A great reveal, rather than an accidental meeting. A human body at these depths breaks all we know of bone and pressure, blood and air. But she exists. She wants me to know of her. I take a photo. Then she's gone, disappeared somewhere the WASP is too clunky to follow. On the ride up, I leave my thoughts with her in the dark. *** In the lab, I colorize my photos and find I've captured a viperfish, an elusive and haunting predator. First ever clear shot of one. It's a great victory; a popular article in the bag. Yet I barely care, because in another photo is the woman, light sparkling down her hair, her arms, her torso. She's not a 'what' but a 'who,' the owner of a story even more complex than the organisms whose lives and lights I've spent years pursuing. The discovery of my career, no doubt, and yet I show no one and lock her away in my drawer. When alone in the lab, I run my fingers over her like she's a lover. My fingertips tingle each time I do, little electrical signals I can explain no better than my hiding her away. *** The night after Reagan walks out on Gorbachev's offer to disarm, I stare down a glass of bourbon, unsure whether I'm celebrating or in mourning. News that the Navy wants me to continue pursuing my research due to the continued chance of war comes the next morning. I'm back out at sea a week later with ever more sensitive photometers, a hydrophone, and a radio that tells me through static that a world without nuclear weapons is a Soviet dream. The girls at Maud's wave their cigarettes and cackle at anyone who thought Reagan would put us over the biggest weapon he could make; I shut my mouth and accept any new funding the Navy sluices my way as a positive of the continued threat of destruction. I wish we could just go back to dancing, so Pattie Smith can tell us all how "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine." It's a new feeling, to have solid edges in the dark. At least I still have my research. This time, a hydrophone will record audio as my photometers work their magic. It'll record the roar of boats, the songs of whales, the vibrations of undersea volcanoes. Most of what I care about doesn't make noise, but I put some pretty words in my proposal about how far the sounds of Soviet subs can carry, and Jim will appreciate the data. Truth is, it feels like civic duty to eat what funds I'm offered. *** In October, my research makes Popular Science, my picture of the viperfish in full color. My name's under the photo but not in the article. Instead, the work is prescribed to Dr. Tedd Atchley, and though they interviewed both of us, all I get is a brief mention as a "student," my skills a testament of Tedd's brilliant tutelage. I know better than to complain. The article's predictable anyway, and my photo isn't even on the cover, which is instead dedicated to the completed retrieval of material from the Challenger. That's the most exciting news they've got, the remains of a dead starship dragged from the sea. I buy the magazine because it makes me laugh. They have no idea what's down there. When I retrieve my new photometers, they tell the story of light and darkness, disruption and calm. At times, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of organisms aglow. Flaring, pulsing, the flashes of light a thousand meters under the sea. If the Navy wants to search out Soviets, I've got their launchpad. It'll keep me good and funded for a long while, able to pursue my own research, to return to the depths. I even feel satisfied, until I listen to the hydrophone recording, and amid the whales and motors and volcanoes, I hear a human voice. She's a crackle, a hiss, a prickle on the back of my neck and a chill like a finger down my spine. Though I listen a thousand times, I catch only a single word: "witch." But there's more. She says more, and I simply can't understand it. That doesn't stop me from trying, though. I wade through the cool, dry air of the university archives, unsure of what I'm looking for in the records of murdered women until I find the names of those drowned rather than burned. I hear the harsh whisper of her carrying voice—again defying logic, again defying biology—does this mean she's got lungs?—as I run my finger along the names of drowned witches and grasp that I may have the picture of one in my drawer. To reach me, she must have traversed riverways and floodwaters, careful movements obscured by the cover of water and darkness, until she'd found a place so teeming with both that she no longer needed to fear unwanted discovery. In those depths, she lived and changed and, eventually, called to me. The only time the deep sea provides an answer like this is when it knows it'll create a thousand more questions. They're ablaze within me, ravenous and demanding and infinite. Like the witch's photo, I don't share these results with my lab. *** I've got a new supervisor for my next trip down in the WASP. This will be my last: the Navy's grown quite fond of us by now, and we'll acquire a submersible soon. It's not so much a step up as a giant leap. "You ever done this before?" I ask. The supervisor is a rugged man with uneven, freckled skin, toasted by the sun. His beard twitches whenever he speaks, which it does a whole lot now, as he takes offense to my question. Jim and I exchange looks. Arrogance is idiocy when it comes to the deep sea. But the suit is already dangling from its crane, and I get in the same way as always. We start running through safety checks—once, twice, and then we're in constant communication as the WASP lowers, lowers, lowers. I'm down 200 meters when I notice the water around my boots. It's an immediate violation, this touch of cold seawater within my metal haven. "WASP to surface," I gasp. Panic squeezes my lungs. Something slips along my fingers, and I've no way to check if it's water or fear. If too much gets inside, the whole suit will collapse. 200 meters has nothing on the planned 1,500, but we're not talking negligible pressure. The lift is a slow reckoning. Water climbs, climbs, climbs, like it too is rising to the heavens. It's calf-height by the time I break surface, and streams plummet from the WASP as I emerge into air, raised by hook and cord and crane and gaping like a netted fish. I give the supervisor a solid smack to the jaw once I'm out. It takes Jim holding me back to stop, arms looped around my shoulders until I'm finished struggling. The soaked bottom of my pants slaps against my numb legs. "He could've killed me," I snarl. I'm trembling. Jim stares like I'm a rabid thing who's played possum until this moment. Later that night, when I discover a crack running from my ankle up my calf, I'm not so certain he's wrong. It's a canyon, wide as my index finger, healed over like an ancient scar and yet new. I run my finger along it, this way the seawater has changed me. A man damn near drowned me, and I cracked like a witch. Alone in my corner of the lab, I stare into where the woman's eyes should be and wonder just how deep she'd gotten before she began to glow. *** In the darkness of Maud's, where music booms and ladies come out to dance, we don't speak with words. Our language is simply that of gleaming eyes; a flash of a grin; a slow, deliberate touch. We're nothing fancy in this place, accepting of all from heels to sneakers. Myself, I've got dress shoes on, with a nice leather jacket. It was the right choice to come here tonight, to bask in the familiar darkness when I'm at my most unsettled. I've just clucked my tongue at a poor song choice and kept on dancing anyway when the shouting begins. Male voices. We scatter by instinct, no more than bioluminescent shrimp under a scientist's prickling gaze. But understanding dogs my heels. For all the threat of submarines and death stars, the Soviets have never been the country's closest enemy. Girls scream. Cops raise their voices ever louder. I've long lost the woman I was dancing with, thrown by the white-water tide of bodies. None of us are stupid enough to come here without a planned escape route. We won't all make it out. The street outside wails with blue and red and white. Dark-adjusted eyes stinging, I scramble into the road only for a honking car to send me sprawling back toward the sidewalk. My pants tear against the asphalt, and then I'm running, running, running, as blood spills down my leg. My feet carry me to my lab. I take the stairs two at once and burst through the door only to stumble when I find the lights are on inside. Jim Fletcher lifts his eyes from his microscope. Dammit. He abandons his work to approach me, though I'm more stupid dyke than clever colleague right now, bleeding all over the damn floor. He asks me something like '"What happened?" or "Are you okay?" but I'm breathing too hard to hear him. If I told him, he'd believe me. About everything, maybe. Women who glow in the dark; worlds destroyed by garish headlights and strobing red and blue. The way I'm one of them. The way sucking up to the military of a country that attacks its own people tastes like blood. Instead, I only say, "Don't," and to his credit, he doesn't. In my corner, I open the drawer with her inside. Her picture. Her voice. I'm shaking too hard to touch her without destroying her. I'd always evaded questions about my work at Maud's. Even admitting the most tangential of aid to a system the girls mocked would have earned me choice words. For a while now, I've known that I deserve them. I have seen the things that exist in darkness, their wonders and terrors. I have loved those women. Those who crack but will not shatter, who prefer life in shadow over selling their souls to a country trying so damn hard to fly too close to the sun. There are so few places for us anymore. I've discovered the path to another, and until now all I've done is invite the Navy to follow me inside. Blood from my knee crusts the edges of my torn pant leg. Down lower is the crack I obtained in the WASP, the one that may glow if I go where sunlight cannot follow. Even now, in the haze of fading adrenaline, the insatiable urge for answers thrums within me. I have accomplished so much because of that drive. I have pretended to be so many things. It's not enough this time. Not the occasional dive when the Navy likes us, not photos in magazines, attributed to the wrong damn name. I don't want those anymore. I'm uninterested in exposing the mysteries of that which I love to those who seek to destroy them. By now I'm limping, the results of my recent experiments boxed in my arms. My gritty scrape burns, but I don't stop until I reach the dock. I collapse to my knees; several months of intensive effort clatters down with me. The lapping surface water fakes true blackness, but it's not deep enough, not yet. It's no small feat to get answers from the place the stars don't see. You need focus, dedication, sacrifice. My unpublished photos and recordings slip into the water without even a splash. No matter. I intend to speak with light. A thousand meters beneath the sea, a witch calls. © 2025 by R.J. Becks 3080 words Author's Note: I have loved bioluminescence for a long time, and reading Edith Widder's memoir Below the Edge of Darkness cinched my desire to write about it, as well as provided many of the technical details necessary. However, the heart of this story comes from my grappling with how scientific research broadens perspectives, yet the need for research funding can push scientists toward military applications and/or corporate incentives. The main character in this story doesn't discover a monster in the deep but instead learns more about herself there, and when she returns to the surface, finds that she is no longer willing to sell herself to a system that harms those she loves. R.J. Becks is a writer and scientist who has studied endangered species, participated in 24-hour birding competitions, and lived on the road that inspired Stephen King's Pet Sematary. She writes to capture the complexity of ecosystems and usually needs magic to do it. You can occasionally find her at @rjbecks.bsky.social on Bluesky. If you enjoyed the story you might also want to visit our Support Page, or read the other story offerings. written by David Steffen Divergent is a 2011 dystopic science fiction novel by Veronica Roth, the first of a trilogy of books. The story takes place in an isolated city-state that used to be Chicago in the future, where it is walled off from the rest of the world where no one seems to know what is happening outside of it. Almost all of society is split into five factions, each of which values certain human traits above all others. At the age of sixteen, every person must decide which faction they will belong to for the rest of their lives or risk falling into the huddled masses of the factionless who are barely acknowledged by the society. The Abnegation values selflessness, and expect its members to never think of themselves. Dauntless values courage, its members are like a trained military force, expected to take on dangerous challenges without hesitation. Candor values honesty, and its members are expected to always tell the truth in all situations. Amity values harmony, and wants everyone to get along peacefully. Erudite value intelligence, they're the inventors of the society. Every person is expected to be a clear fit for one of the factions or they are an outcast, but there are whispers that some people are "divergent" who have tendencies toward several factions at once, these people are considered dangerous to their social order. Beatrice Prior is born and raised as Abnegation, but although she sees the worth in Abnegation's values, she feels like an impostor because she can't seem to hold to those values. On her Choosing Day she has to choose between staying with her family in Abnegation or leaving them behind to join one of the other factions. The basis of this society is ludicrous (but of course it is a dystopia, not a proposal for a new social order, so I'm not saying it's a bad idea for a book!). The people in this society have been raised with these ideals since birth so they take them for granted. It can be a difficult task for an author to build this world in a way that the reader can understand it without killing the pacing with an infodump, but this book does a very nice job of it, letting us see what it's like to live in Abnegation day to day, then meet members of other factions and see how their behavior is different, Beatrice goes through the testing to see her faction leanings and etc. If there is value in such a segregated society, the worst part of it is that you have to choose for life at the age of sixteen with very little information. People change! What if someone is very like Erudite as a teenager, but tends more toward Amity as they age? Well, too bad, you can either stick with your faction or you can go starve in the factionless. Beatrice is in her head a lot, examining each angle of the situation, so I related to that a lot, as I am always examining every angle of situation before I make a choice about it, whenever I can. There are a lot of strong conflicts between Beatrice and the other initiates who have just chosen their new faction as they compete with each for entry. The book is full of action and worldbuilding and well written, a great start to a trilogy.

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