

Ice Age

By Morpheus Shield

Adrian always took the stage. His band recitals, karate tournaments, and lacrosse games, dominated life. Everyone knew he'd be something special. I always wanted that attention. To feel all those eyes on me, to feel the hope.

But not that day. No, on that day he could have the stage. It must have been nerve-wracking to stand before that crowd, familiar faces drained of color. Their black suits were like whirlpools, swallowing up levity like a vortex pulling and pulling toward devastation. Everyone was a ghost that day, and it was no audience I wanted.

Matthias choked. Like china shattering on kitchen tile, it drew me from a trance to a frightening reality. Strong Matthias, stoic Matthias, powerful Matthias, had broken. The black tie was too strong a weight for him as it drew forth tears in quiet volumes. It was strange, it was real, and it felt like a dream. I remembered when he laughed at me when we heard the news, but I didn't say anything.

He had a strange way of laughing at terrible things. Maybe he was protecting something, swallowing up something awful, and spewing out a substitute. That day he forgot what he was protecting, though.

After the funeral, we went our separate ways. My brothers loaded up with their mom while I stowed away with Tremaine. She and I didn't talk on the way home, but we never talked much in the first place.

The apartment was cold, and no matter how many lights I flicked on it was darker somehow. Who knew one body could create so much heat, radiate so much energy that it lit up the room around them? But what else was I to expect? Dad had a knack for sticking out.

My reflection was older than I remembered. The face he had seen between a movie and that final rattling coughing fit was gone. The fear had worn into bags that dropped from my eyes and hung to the floor, threatening to pull me down with them. Their weight kept me up that night. No tossing or turning rewarded my search for comfort, and I knew not to cry. Only a storm would come if I did, now that its wrangler was gone.

The books he bought us were worn thin by a generation of hands. Preteen boys pulling at each page as they barreled through adventure after adventure. I could feel the ghosts of my older brothers, now far older than I thought we'd ever be, reading alongside me. It was always a comfort, but no longer could I understand the world of Percy or the safety of Hogwarts. Even the lives of R.L. Stein's tortured teens felt alien to me in the strangest way. In their worlds things worked out, safety was found and the people who needed saving got it. I didn't believe it anymore.

Between then and when Tremaine dragged me along to a new apartment I never read much. Those days were behind me. And even when the warmth of a new home set in, and daylight shone through my window in rays that were once perfect for flipping pages, I never cracked their covers. All of them sat still atop the highest shelf of my closet beside a book of poetry that would see no more entries.

I never knew what to expect after an ending. I thank my not-yet-developed frontal lobe for sparing me the conjuration of the worst outcomes. That ability was saved for later years. Instead, I simply waited. Like a mammoth, I waited as millennia passed me by.

One day, between school's end and beginning, I met someone who to me was a mirror whose reflection I recognized. He lived in a website older than I was, made by a weirdo named

Andrew Hussie, on a page I would later find out many were clueless to navigate. His name was John Egbert, and I met him on his thirteenth birthday.

Even though he was so impossibly older than me, I had never seen anyone like him, so like me. I followed him through the story of Homestuck, and it carried me from sixth to seventh grade, all the while blowing my mind and allowing me an escape from my home.

At school, the others didn't know me. I forgot how to speak unless spoken to, and it seemed everyone else forgot to speak to me. When they did, I always messed up. My tongue would tie itself in knots and when it didn't I spoke too fast for anyone to understand. Tremaine thought I had plenty of friends, but she knew only of the school I wished I had attended, the one where teachers were patient and the students knew starvation. Instead, every day I found myself antsy to abandon the white brick halls where everyone understood Percy Jackson and run off to Prospit or Derse alongside Dave Strider and Jade Harley. John introduced me to them, and they were my best friends in the world.

Through them, I found online forums populated with people just like me. Archives stretching back eternities filled with art, music, animations, and chat logs composed by millions who came and went, all of them ironically freed by a story about a boy stuck in his bedroom. Upon discovering these websites my evenings became endless. Four AM was walls of text built by broken hearts plastered together by roleplay and oversharing with strangers.

Tap tap tap. My fingers whittled away at keyboards, any I could get my hands on. My family had been shattered and all five brothers and one sister scattered to the ends of the Earth and back, and I was given a chance to cobble together a new one.

There was a girl from New York who never slept till I did. We wrote and wrote until our eyes burned and our necks creaked and our fingertips chaffed. They were stories far too

adolescent even for Homestuck's standards, but that's what made them fan fiction in the truest form. In the shadows between midnight and morning, we held still and lived like thunder rolling over the vast distance between us. Wifi was the house that housed our secret meetings. There, I learned her name, Deb, and she felt my loneliness.

Seventh grade became eighth, and twelve became thirteen. Three years removed from the funeral I found that John wasn't as old as I thought he was. Things made less sense than they ever did and the apartment had given way to a house bought with money I could never understand. The house had windows for walls that poured sunshine on me, finally melting that three-year permafrost from my bones. It plastered the halls of my body, a sign that my foundation had been set. Any further growth was an extension to the home I found, the one I could never leave.

The new school had kinder faces. They were kind enough that I forgot about my adventures with John and Debra. My life beyond the internet was taking shape, and high school came.

But "You can't fight the Homestuck" was the type of slogan that always made me wince despite its truth. It was inevitable that I would introduce Homestuck to Darren, the one guy who understood me when my thoughts ran faster than my words. He was indoctrinated into the long-dead cult, and I saw in his eyes the wonder I once felt. I was jealous for a moment that he had a body to share it with, but memories of Deb were only arm's length from forethought.

Rereading our stories on that dead website, I realized how I came to know her. It wasn't through our late-night conversations or the handful of video calls we had. Herself, her identity, was written in between the words of our fanfiction, and so was mine.

Dad used to say “The secrets of the universe were contained in books”, and it wasn’t till then that I understood what he meant. Writers never lie, no matter how hard they try. Even those who paint pictures larger than any that could exist still work on a canvas made up of the fibers of experience.

Just as Andrew Hussie had encoded the experiences of growing up into a story about teenagers becoming gods, Deb revealed her identity through the secrets her characters held. It was inspiring.

I was fifteen when I decided to tell the truth. Years in the ice let me hide from the world that was mine, and it was time to shed that cocoon. “Never stop doing this.” is what Dad told me, letting my book of poetry fall from his grasp. They were a demand, not words of encouragement. At the time all I could do was turn red and snatch the book away from him, but years after he was gone I decided to follow his orders.

I was fifteen when I decided to tie my empty years to the family I lost by transcribing every thought I wished he could hear. Every truth I wanted to tell him would fall between a million pages.

I was fifteen when I wondered who Hussie and Deb wrote for, or if they’d starve before they stopped writing.