

Disclaimer

These are my personal notes with my unfiltered opinion about each piece. I decided against commenting on each story to leave more polished critique because life's been pretty busy. It's easier to just write my actual thoughts. The point of sharing anyway is that it can be considered as helpful feedback if you're of the mindset to take it that way, but there's no tact in how it's written and nothing is sugarcoated. It's more destructive than constructive and as such, I suggest not reading if you find that kind of criticism discouraging.

In order to make a better weighted judgement on my votes, I went with a five point system: 1 being "needs a lot of work", 3 being "mediocre" (neither bad nor good) and 5 being "excellent". Additionally, I applied this across six categories that I find important in storytelling: Plot, pacing, characters, style, editing, and enjoyment. This makes the highest possible score 30, the lowest 6, and 18 right in the middle.

This is purely all my personal opinion, so take it as you will. I suggest opening the document outline (view > document outline) for easier navigation if you only want to read the notes on a particular entry.

Also, you might notice that my categories have nothing to do with the contest theme. I chose to do it this way because of the spirit of the writing prompts forum, which is to inspire new writing, not necessarily to follow the prompt. There's nothing in the contest to tell me I can't judge this way so... there it is.

Gods' Omens - 17/30

- Plot: 5/5

Jonah is just a guy trying to live some semblance of a normal life after a stint in a mental institution, only to find himself wrapped up in a larger, and very dark, conspiracy. A lot of mysteries are introduced for one chapter, such as Jonah mentioning he used to hear voices and see things without going into more detail, the murderer and his familiarity with Jonah, what the murderer has against the priest and the gods, what exactly is a "Holy Officer", and so on. But the fact they all seem closely related makes it work well.

- Pacing: 4/5

Overall, the pacing seems pretty good; not too slow and not too fast. My main problem with it is that it hits the ground running, starting with Jonah covered in blood at a police station, only to drop off into him doing normal janitor stuff. The overall pacing maintains itself through a series of back and forth between plot/high tension scenes and Jonah's interrogation/inner contemplation. Generally, I prefer gentle slopes rather than breakneck speed into slamming on the brakes, but this method itself didn't take much away from the story despite my aversion to it.

- Characters: 3/5

Though the characters are unique from each other, they're also all a bit flat.

Jonah, while understandably neurotic given his circumstances, seems to do things because the author demands it rather than it feeling like a natural decision a person would make. This is the most apparent with his nervous ticks, such as rubbing his eyes and face. Each of his ticks are forced in there as a break between dialogue and plot without feeling like a natural tick, especially when one has their hands cuffed to a table.

The priest doesn't have much time for development with him dying pretty much as soon as he's introduced, so he gets a pass. However, the killer is your run-of-the-mill bad guy personality and Officer Woolf is your typical cop personality. I'm made acutely aware that they are characters in fiction because of their cliché behavior, which takes away from the realism the story seems to be going for. Later chapters would give a chance for these to be developed further, but as a first impression, I'm not hopeful.

They're passable as is, but not particularly interesting.

- Style: 1/5

This was the main sticking point for me throughout. Despite plot, pacing, and characters all being passable or excellent, the word choices and sentence structure made it hard to digest.

The biggest offender was the frequent use of sentence fragments. Many of these could simply be combined with the sentence before it, but the author chose not to. My theory is it was to reduce occurrences of the word “and” since a simple “and” was all that was needed in most cases, but there were also times the author chose to extend sentences with “and”, such as: “The man in the mask stood so close, Jonah could smell plastic and cologne and copper and sweat.”

While extending things out with “and” like that is a stylistic choice that can work well, combined with the fragments, it came off more as an author still trying to figure out how to write.

Additionally, the story was delivered in a rather unexciting way. Much of the descriptions are superficial and mechanical. When trying to convey feelings beyond the surface level, we get repeated concepts such as Jonah’s stomach dropping or rubbing his eyes hard or his face hard.

The storytelling also relies heavily on flashbacks with hard breaks between “current” and “past” events. If an entire book was written this way, it would be dizzying and annoying, so seeing it in the first chapter puts me off from the rest.

- **Editing: 3/5**

There are a handful of repeat words and at least one word that I got hung up on because it was used incorrectly; namely “garroted”. “Garroted” seemed like a typical case of picking a word out of the thesaurus without looking up its proper definition (which is bad editing). There were also a few places that could have used commas but didn’t have them as well as places with commas that didn’t need them. Even so, the editing was overall passable.

- **Enjoyment: 1/5**

I wanted to like this because the plot was interesting, but I didn’t. Through both read throughs, I was constantly checking to see how much I had left to endure. The style is really what bogs it down more than anything. I can usually overlook something being bad in one category if the rest makes up for it or something else is particularly exceptional, but with the rest of the categories scoring mostly mediocre, the poor delivery just killed it entirely.

The Merchant of Misfortune - 19/30

- Plot: 4/5

Gus, who's had everything go wrong for him throughout his life, accidentally breaks an ancient mirror that bestows upon him the power to dish out bad luck to others. I liked the twist on the concept of having seven years bad luck meaning to possess it like a magical ability. However, even if there was another twist later on, this comes off to me as a revenge power trip story; cathartic to some, but not my cup of tea. Still, it deserves credit for concept.

- Pacing: 4/5

The story progresses at a decent, even pace for the most part, but gets slowed down in a few places with unnecessary description, such as mentioning the exhibits Gus is passing by or introducing other guards that have nothing to do with what's going on in the moment. There's even a brief recap of the story so far in the bathroom scene. Since none of these segments drag overlong, it doesn't take too much away, but still could definitely do without.

- Characters: 3/5

Gus, Frank, and the reflection are all very animated characters which almost makes me want to bump the score up a notch, but the author lays on the victim protag a little too thick. So while Frank has a distinct personality, him and everyone else that has wronged Gus is painted in the most negative light possible to beat it over the reader's head that we need to hate these people as much as Gus does.

Since the overall story has a more whimsical feel to it, this polarizing of the characters isn't entirely out of place, as plenty of classic fictional pieces do just that. But it also isn't something new, unique, or interesting.

- Style: 3/5

There's a few sentence fragments here and there that feel out of place. I'm not sure if they were editing errors or a stylistic choice, but either way, they don't sit well.

There's also a lot of similes and metaphors that I don't think the author put much thought into, such as: "...when his black boot touched down beside the sign it immediately kicked up like a Nazi goose step." While this physically describes the motion in a way people can picture, part of the point of similes and metaphors is to convey a deeper meaning. Were this foreshadowing of the kind of man Gus becomes from his powers, I would change my tune and say it's genius, but I highly doubt that was the author's intent.

There's also a number of hard breaks for scene transitions. This seems to be common in a lot of entries, but it's not a good practice. In the case of this piece, the transitions could have been handled a lot more smoothly given how close together they occur.

What partially makes up for these shortcomings is the tone. It's cartoony and relaxed with steady plot delivery, successfully holding enough of my interest that I wasn't continuously praying it would be over soon. However, it didn't garner enough to leave me wanting more either.

- **Editing: 2/5**

The self censoring was rather distracting, but the author says they had a hard time submitting it without. Still, there's a section where the writing slips from third person to first person, which should have been caught in a proofread. The sentence structure could use more variety and, as stated in the style section, there are fragments that stick out awkwardly.

Possessive form of a name that ends with "s" would be Gus', not Gus's.

Obsidian, despite what the term "volcanic glass" might conjure images of, is pretty sturdy, not to mention obsidian mirrors in particular are made rather thick. I don't deny the mirror would still break into large pieces, but I don't think it would shatter into tiny ones. I can chalk this up to the cartoony style suspending reality, however, as the son of an auto-mechanic, I can't overlook the offense of classifying a Chevy Camaro as a Cadillac. Author did not do their due diligence in researching the details of their story before submitting.

- **Enjoyment: 3/5**

I liked the tone more than anything, but the only passable level of everything else makes the overall story no more than passable. It's not a book I would necessarily toss aside immediately from how it's written, though it would be easily backburnered in favor of a whole slew of other things.

Chaun - 20/30

- Plot: 4/5

Farhan is a modern day leprechaun, trying to live a semi-normal life by hiding his identity and gold through money laundering. Somehow, someone found out about him and is trying to hunt him down and ruin his luck? They also want his gold... how they intend to get it by killing him first is beyond me. Truth be told, the overarching plot is a little unclear. I can tell there is one, but once I found out how hard it was to put into words, I realized how muddled it is.

However, I liked the concept of what it was going for, even if I couldn't quite grasp a definitive picture of what the actual story at its heart is.

- Pacing: 1/5

This is roughly 50% lore, 30% description, and 20% plot. I suspect that's why finding out how to put the plot into words was so difficult. Rather than getting into the story itself, the author spends the majority of their words telling the reader about the world and Farhan rather than illustrating through the course of the plot what he is and what he does.

This reads mostly like a rough draft where someone is plotting out the details of their story before writing it rather than a first chapter. The lore slows it down considerably. For instance, the first nine paragraphs are pure lore that could be cut entirely and nothing would be lost plot-wise, then the next six paragraphs after the establishing shot of the "present" are also more lore.

The author favors telling the reader about things that happened in the past over showing what's happening currently.

- Characters: 4/5

Characters all have distinct personalities and feel like they could actually exist. Although, it could do without the introduction of Elizabeth and Connor, who aren't even coming into play yet nor hold any sort of relevance to the first chapter.

Author's penchant for explaining the history of everything also hinders the character development a bit.

- Style: 3/5

Word choice and sentence structure are good. The prose reads nicely with enough variation to keep interest. It could have done without the hard break, and the decision to focus on lore instead of plot also reduces the score in this category. Being told the

backstory of things when you're trying to get invested in the plot is tedious to read through and reminds me of bad fanfiction, where the author can't stop going into the backstory of their self insert character for pages and pages because they think it's important. It really isn't.

However, being that this reads better than bad fanfiction, mediocre seems like a fair score. If it weren't for the lore obsession, I'd give style a 4 or 5.

- **Editing: 3/5**

If your plain coffee fresh out of the pot is viscous, there's something wrong with it. For something to be viscous, its consistency would be like that of syrup or oil. Espresso is viscous because it's concentrated. Lattes are questionably viscous because of milk and espresso. Drip coffee is not viscous. All liquids have *viscosity* but that's different from being viscous, which specifically indicates *high viscosity*.

There's also a handful of minor typos and repeated words. The last third or so has more redundancy than the rest; probably from rushing to meet the deadline. Overall, not terrible with the editing, but could have been better.

- **Enjoyment: 5/5**

Despite how grating I found the endless paragraphs upon paragraphs of lore with minimal plot, a lot of this lore was rather interesting. I would still rather it be cut out/reorganized to be more smoothly and gradually disseminated throughout a longer story instead of front loaded into the first chapter, but it was an interesting concept with compelling characters and decent writing.

The Veil of Ice - 23/30

- Plot: 3/5

Collin, an aspiring novelist, encounters his old childhood friend Mac while staying with his grandmother for the summer. Mac invites him over to dinner. While at her house, they poke around in the attic and discover a mysterious book, allegedly written by her great grandfather, that, when shown to a mirror, reveals an alternate landscape. When they see footsteps approaching them from this alternate landscape, Mac shatters the mirror in fear, only to find that the landscape outside the house has changed to match what was in the mirror.

There's a lot of plot here in the first chapter, which will get it more points in the pacing and style categories. But the premise itself isn't that outstanding to me. It's not terrible, but it's not amazing either. Usually, I have a soft spot for these "other world" type of transitions (like Alice in Wonderland or isekai) but there isn't enough teaser as to what the characters are actually getting into.

I would at least give a second chapter a read rather than putting it down immediately.

- Pacing: 5/5

Excellent pacing; plot focused without being slowed down by description or lore. There are details in there, but they're integrated with the plot progression smoothly in a way that enhances it rather than taking away. Were I more of an asshole, I would show this as an example to some of the other authors to tell them this is how pacing SHOULD be done. Being able to easily write an entire paragraph just summarizing the plot without guesswork and/or sarcasm shows that a lot of relevant things happened in the first chapter, which is what people like me look for in a story.

- Characters: 3/5

It's uncertain if the author intentionally made Collin unlikeable or if they were aiming at making him a loveable narcissist. If it's the latter, they failed miserably. He's almost unbearable, and coming from a narcissist, that's saying something. I usually relate to narcissistic characters, but this guy reminds me of every art and writing snob I've ever encountered in my life.

The point deduction isn't for him, though. He's a pretty solid character, even if I don't like him.

Rather, Mac, her parents, and Collin's grandmother all seem to exist solely for Collin to make snarky comments about. Having gotten similar feedback on my own entry, you'd think I'd be more forgiving, but I agree that it's not a good practice, and it makes the other characters flat and uninteresting. Granted, being that the story is told from the lense of Collin, he'd see everyone else as flat and uninteresting, but that doesn't exactly give the reader much to be excited about when it comes to characterization.

However, they do have some development. They could be worse, but they could also be better.

- **Style: 4/5**

I favor plot over frills, and this piece does just that. Additionally, the sentences and word choice flow with an air of sophistication that matches Collin's pretentious personality without being overbearingly so. However, the hard breaks for scene transitions were unnecessary and ugly. Including phrases like "later that evening", or "shortly after" in the next scene would have been fine and fit much better with the rest of it instead of inserting lines. What novelist actually does that? Almost every entry seems to have it, but I still don't like it.

- **Editing: 5/5**

No stand out typos nor misused and/or repeated words that I noticed in any of my read throughs. There was maybe one unnecessary comma, but it was one that could also be considered subjective. Overall, it looks like the author combed through this pretty thoroughly before submitting it rather than typing it out last minute and handing it in without so much as a proofread.

- **Enjoyment: 3/5**

Point deduction mostly for Collin just being so unlikeable. It's hard to want to continue to read about a character that I want to punch in the face. A part of me feels like I would find his attitude easier to swallow were this written in the style of it being his personal journal rather than regular first person, past tense.

And while I really liked the style and plot focus, there wasn't much within the plot to put this up in my mind as a memorable story. Were I just picking it up, I would probably continue it, but after the first read through, I completely forgot what this one was about other than a snobby writer saying snobby writer things.

Evil Eyes - 9/30

- Plot: 1/5

Jae-Yong is (given? sold?) to a pirate at the age of ten and returns to his village two years later, only to find it burned down. A man with blue eyes approaches him, says some environmentalist stuff, and now Jae-Yong magically has blue eyes which are considered evil for some reason.

I have no idea what's going on here. Why did his eyes change color? What's the story behind the superstition other than a very confusing and unbalanced poem? Who is this other guy? Why should I care about any of this?

- Pacing: 1/5

Author does a lot of wandering around, talking about little details and describing things without really getting to a story. A lot of time is crammed into one chapter (a span of two years), but nothing really happens in that time. Jae-Yong meets the captain and the cook, mostly works for the cook, and gets homesick. That's just about it.

Jae-Yong's introduction to Sang-Ha could have gone more smoothly as well. He suddenly goes, "wait a minute, you're a girl!" without any sort of tip off to the audience that this connection was made.

Usually, I would have an idea of what could improve the overall pacing (cutting things, starting in a different place, adding more plot), but being that I don't even know what this story was supposed to be about in the first place, it's hard to say what went wrong other than the author might not have had a solid foundation when they started.

It reads very much like a rough first draft that was never revised.

- Characters: 3/5

We don't really get to know much about any of the characters, including the protagonist, in the entire chapter. The author spends most of their words with describing things and what people did rather than showing them interact with each other and the world around them.

However, they're not bad characters. They could use more development, but they do have some personality that shows, albeit minimally.

- Style: 2/5

Sentences feel choppy and short, even though they appear to have varying lengths at a glance. I suspect this is because most of these are very straight forward statements with little to no stylistic flair. Some of the word choices felt odd, and the two sections of poetry don't have a consistent rhyme scheme nor rhythm.

The poetry is the hardest part to read, honestly. No matter how many times I went over those sections, I couldn't for the life of me figure out what kind of pattern the author was trying to make with it. It's said to sound like a sea shanty, but again, I can't find any sort of rhythmic pattern with the high variance of syllables that was used from line to line.

It also contains several hard breaks for scene changes. This makes it read like fragments of an overall story the author is trying to plan, but not an actual story that's enjoyable from a reader's perspective.

I will say that the dialogue was (for the most part) excellent, though. If the author relied a little more on dialogue, that would improve their marks on characterization and may even force them to rethink their structure to accommodate more dialogue, thus getting rid of the frequent scene switches.

- **Editing: 1/5**

There's a couple of sentence fragments, odd capitalization and commas, and it's unclear if the author proofread it to consider if what they wrote makes sense. As said in the pacing section, it reads like a rough draft that was put together and never revisited. For a contest, one should check their work more carefully before submitting.

If they did check their work and this was the result, then I'd say the author needs to read more and study up on story structure.

Also, I question if the author knows how pregnancy works for the protagonist to have had two siblings in the course of (at most) eight months, assuming the first was born right at the beginning of summer and the second at the very end of winter. Pregnancy is roughly nine months, though premature by a month or two isn't unheard of. However, getting pregnant again immediately after having a child is inadvisable and uncommon. If Jae-Yong's parents reproduced that eagerly, you'd think there wouldn't have been so large a ten year gap between him and his sister.

- **Enjoyment: 1/5**

I couldn't get into this at all. It was at least short, but the poetry was an immediate turn off. I like poetry when it's done well. However, with no clear rhythm and an inconsistent rhyming scheme, it feels like pulling teeth trying to figure out how to read it. And to make matters worse, the plot was unclear, the editing wasn't very good, and a whole lot of nothing happened through most of it.

Last Light - 20/30

- Plot: 4/5

Olivia lives on an island where a mysterious force, known as the Shroud, comes out at night and... eats people? Citizens gather into Lighthouse to take shelter from it, but no one knows anything about it except that light keeps it away. And they sacrifice people to it for some reason as well, not that it's done them any good but hey, human sacrifice because why not? Olivia's parents were such sacrifices and her good friend Kian is also slated to be one, so she convinces him to come with her to the thirteenth floor to look at it so that he might feel bad about having to be sacrificed instead of honored, because she's such a good friend. The light fails to come on that night and they get attacked by the Shroud. Locked in, because they seemed to have went deaf for a few seconds and couldn't hear a giant metal hatch above them being closed, they discover a blocked off room with a recording about astronauts? Also, there's magic, apparently.

Despite my snark, I actually find it pretty interesting, but point deduction for the numerous plot holes right in the first chapter. "They'll be fixed in later chapters" doesn't excuse how many of them there are.

- Pacing: 3/5

Roughly 50% lore, 25% description, and 25% plot. The lore (or at least most of it) is relevant to the current plot, though, so I'm more forgiving of it than most stories that are endless lore, but that still only bumps it up to a neutral score. I would have liked to see more actually happening in the chapter instead of most of it spent telling me the backstory of the world.

- Characters: 4/5

Olivia and Kian are pretty well developed personality wise, but their ages are uncertain. Age of a character isn't always vital to know, but I assumed they were teens/young adults by their interactions until the author referred to them as children, which made everything confusing. Granted, I call teenagers "kids" myself, but I don't know what ages the author considers "children".

- Style: 3/5

The word choice and sentence structure are noticeably different in the first half than the second, as though the author disregarded style and rushed through the second half to make the deadline.

It wasn't immediately noticeable in the first read because the staccato starts around when things get tense, which, when done well, can actually help bring out the sense of imminent danger. However, in subsequent reads, the repeated structure and short sentences became painfully obvious.

Overall, it reads okay, but would read better if the second half was given as much care and attention as the first.

- **Editing: 2/5**

There's a lot of unnecessary commas, at least one instance of Olivia's name being spelled wrong, and an instance where Olivia was holding the metal sheet over the window, but Kian is the one that dropped it.

Olivia is pretty violent with her pockets when reaching for that Omna, which is understandable when she's being attacked, but very odd when she's just standing there safely, thinking to herself at the beginning. I don't generally shove my hands into my pockets when retrieving something unless it's in a hurry.

A few places also have repeated words, typos, and sentence fragments that don't quite fit. Author seems to have skimmed during their proofreading rather than reading, again, primarily in the second half.

- **Enjoyment: 4/5**

Even with its flaws, I found this rather enjoyable, though admittedly, forgettable for not being particularly outstanding in any category. The better structure of the first half kept me going through the less well written second half because I was invested by then, even if the writing had gone downhill. Still, the premise has potential, and given more time and care, I think it can be polished up into something much better.

The Hidden Folk - 22/30

- Plot: 4/5

Henry Garcia investigates a call he got from an Escape Room business (called "Captivity Challenge" for this piece. I don't think Escape Room is copyrighted, but whatever.). While there, he discovers a broken mirror, which is apparently a big crime in this world, and the business owner tries to give him the slip. Henry tells his partner to call for backup and a wendigo swoops in to stop the criminal. Also, Henry is a shaman.

There's a lot of world building needed to fully get into and understand the significance of what's happening, which tends to be a turn off for me. But the concept was still pretty interesting.

- Pacing: 3/5

Lots of info dumps, lore, and explaining. I'm of the mindset of do the thing now and explain it later so you're not slowing down your plot right when it's picking up. Let the audience be confused for a bit why finding a broken mirror is a big deal until the guy is arrested and he's being read his rights or whatever. Not every little detail needs to be known immediately.

Aside from that, the plot progresses somewhat decently. The backstory is relevant to the current action, but could be better implemented.

- Characters: 3/5

Though the characters are colorful and animated, they're not that distinct from each other. I don't "hear" them in different "voices" as I'm reading. They're all kind of the same guy with the same personality, just on different days under different circumstances. Henry is the baseline, Tony is Henry after a few years on the force and becoming jaded, Stan is Henry if he'd chosen a different life path, and the wendigo is Henry if he was a wendigo.

At least Henry is likeable.

- Style: 4/5

There's a underlying tone of humor throughout, which I really like. It could have done without the hard breaks for scene transitions. The dialogue flows pretty naturally for the most part. However, the sentence structure breaks down to being repetitive in a few places.

- **Editing: 4/5**

No stand out typos nor misused/repeated words that I noticed. The author does repeat names more than necessary, though. This would be fixed with some sentence restructuring, or in some cases, "he" would have sufficed. It can be confusing when there's multiple male characters in a scene to use vague pronouns, but they could have been used more often than they were.

I also questioned to decision to drop contractions in a few areas in my third read, but didn't notice it in my first and second reads.

- **Enjoyment: 4/5**

Good dialogue, interesting concept, humorous tone. I would have liked it more if so many parts hadn't been interrupted by lore and the author was more vigilant about their structure to eliminate the need to repeat characters' names as often as they do.

The Best You Can is Good Enough - 9/30

- Plot: 1/5

Karen is a mother of two kids. Her husband had an accident and is addicted to oxycontin. He goes missing. The end.

There isn't... really anything here. There's a lot of words. Lots of description and background, but not really any sort of central plot aside from Karen trying to keep it together as she realizes her life is pretty shitty. And truth be told, by the end of it, I still didn't care that her life was shitty nor that her husband went missing. I wasn't given a reason to care.

Author just described a bad situation and expected the audience to sympathize automatically, potentially because opiate addiction is currently a hot topic. But there is no real substance here.

- Pacing: 1/5

95% description and worldbuilding, 5% plot, if you can even call it plot. I get that the goal here is likely reality fiction, which doesn't have the dramatic highs that other genre work has, but there's no real hook. Reading through, trying desperately to find a point to it all feels like wading waist deep through molasses.

- Characters: 3/5

A lot of time is spent in Karen's head, but I still walk away feeling she's a rather empty character, dispassionately reciting lines the author gave her to read. And the other characters mostly just exist as objects for Karen to interact with. None of them feel particularly real but rather an author's attempt at being real.

They're not overly terrible, but they're not good either.

- Style: 1/5

The sentence structure is very repetitive throughout. "Karen said this. Karen did that. Karen thought some thoughts." And when it wasn't Karen, it was another character or "she" (referring to Karen, typically). There's a bit of stylistic flair tucked away between the monotonous structure that's decent, but so buried that it may as well not exist when it comes to the overall impression left after reading.

There's also a certain level of detachment there. I don't feel what Karen is supposedly feeling because the author describes her emotions through ambiguous terms like heat and pressure.

The best I can describe the style is numb. Things are happening, but they don't register on the emotional scale. While this could be utilized as a clever device in relation to the subject matter, I don't think it was the author's intention. And if it was, it would work better if it was told from the addict's perspective.

- **Editing: 2/5**

Missing punctuation in a few places, unnecessary commas in others, some typos, and repeat words throughout. Author appears to have skimmed during their proofreading instead of doing a thorough proofread. They're all simple mistakes that should have been caught if you're actually reading instead of skimming.

The attempt at integrating multiple of the superstition themes also read very awkwardly, the flickering lamp at the beginning most especially, which I say counts against both style and editing.

- **Enjoyment: 1/5**

This was another one that I continued to scroll through, wondering how much more I had to endure before it was finally over. There's no hook, the characters are plain, the style is repetitive to the point of grating, and it looks like the author themselves didn't even find it interesting enough to read through carefully to properly edit. Granted, I could give them the benefit of last minute syndrome for their skimming, but there were far better edited entries on the list that they're competing against.

Devils of the Deep - 27/30

- Plot: 5/5

A small school of mermaids encounter an abandoned ship. Two break off to inform the rest of the school while five of them explore it. They find the skeleton of the captain in the cabin below and take his stuff. He's not too happy about that and attacks one of them. The other four gang up to free their sister and then retreat back into the water, only to find the ship gone when they resurface. Confused, but excited to share the tale, they swim off to rejoin their school. All six of them.

It's a mermaid ghost story, basically. And I love me some ghost stories.

- Pacing: 4/5

The piece is front loaded with a lot of description and in-character worldbuilding. While a good portion of that is required to fully appreciate the narrative, it does slow down the progression noticeably. It doesn't feel like it's dragging overlong at any point, but it could do with a little more focus.

- Characters: 4/5

She-of-blue-fin and She-of-no-fear are the most developed and distinct from each other while the other three are faceless no-names along for the ride. This would usually count as a deeper point deduction for most pieces, but this is not a character driven piece. Judging it in the same manner as a character driven piece or a story that relies heavily on the characters for plot development would be doing this a disservice.

It's more atmospheric than anything.

As such, the author does an excellent job in establishing a unique personality in the writing itself to show the characters' personalities. Even so, I do feel there is a bit more that could have been added.

- Style: 5/5

Ten out of five if I wasn't limiting it. It has a unique feel with tasteful staccato and intentional repetition, making it flow like music. A siren's song, perhaps? It would make sense. I'd no doubt be drowning right now were this reaching me on the open sea.

- Editing: 4/5

So close to a perfect score and it feels harsh to deduct a whole point for one unintentionally repeated phrase ("sighing in relief" appears two sentences in a row right

at the denouement) but the only perfect score I was willing to give was for flawless editing. This was damn near close to it, though. Good structure, no noticeable typos, and the only repeat words are done for style (and done well). Author seems to have proofread pretty thoroughly.

- **Enjoyment: 5/5**

I enjoyed this so much, I was looking forward to every read through. When it came time to come back to it for note taking, I actually got excited. If I was using how I feel about this story as the metric for gauging enjoyment for all the other entries, none of them would have even come close. The author does an amazing job at establishing an unsettling atmosphere with a distinct voice you won't find just anywhere.

The Lean - 20/30

- Plot: 3/5

College kid gets into some deep shit. What that shit is, no one knows, but he needs a lot of money fast. He gets recruited for a heist by Sam, who's very particular about rules. During a meeting with him and the other two guys in on the job, college boy (now known as Lean) spills some salt and Sam looks like he's gonna murder someone over it. And he does, but it isn't Lean.

Plotwise, not a whole lot happens here. It's a passable set up for a longer story, but it's missing some details so we know why this is Lean's only option and why it's worth sticking his neck out so much for it. It's not uninteresting, but I wasn't given a reason to be invested in it either.

- Pacing: 3/5

It starts out at a medium pace and doesn't really pick up at any point. It feels slow at first because you question why the narrator is so focused on this infomercial, but it doesn't linger on it for more than the opening paragraph.

What keeps the plot from progressing faster is the flashback section. It's brief, but enough to slow everything down. Storywise, that section could be cut and nothing of value to the chapter would be lost. If the author felt that information important, there are better ways it could be implemented that wouldn't take away from the plot progression.

- Characters: 3/5

Lean is a bit of a neutral mask. Despite being the voice in control of the narrative, he doesn't seem to have much personality. Sam is decently developed, but typical of how I'd picture an Italian mobster, which isn't bad, but isn't unique and attention grabbing either. Slick and Rash don't get much chance for development before the chapter is over, so they get a pass, especially since Rash dies anyway.

Had Rash been given more personality before being thrown away, that would have made his death more of a shock. A character you just met and don't care about dying doesn't mean anything.

- Style: 4/5

The opening sets up the tone of sardonic, light humor that persists throughout. It's subtle, but enjoyable, though more personality from the narrator would be nice.

The word choice seems good as well for the most part. Sentence structure on the surface is passable, but could be improved with more variety. It could also do without the ever popular with r/writingprompts tactic of hard breaks between scene transitions.

Overall, it's a distinct style and tone that I think is appealing; it just needs some refinement.

- **Editing: 3/5**

No stand out typos or misused words that I noticed. The section where the salt is spilled repeats "salt" way too many times, though. Punctuation needs some work. Author uses a colon where a comma or a semicolon should be used. There's also some sections of dialogue that end with periods that should be ended with commas, such as: "It's me." I said, finally.

Overall, it seems like the author took the time to edit, but doesn't necessarily understand all the rules of punctuation.

- **Enjoyment: 4/5**

The story itself doesn't really speak to me, but the tone helps hold my attention. With better plot organization and progression, refinement of the characterization, and more details about the central conflict, this could be a compelling story.

A Matter of Luck - 21/30

- Plot: 3/5

Amrina Morgan, an apparent badass, treks across a desert, kills some dudes because one of them smiled at her, and then goes into a thing called The Crucible to retrieve her daughter. There's also a cat. It talks, but only in The Crucible. There's also apparently really bad luck in and around it, but only factors in for plot convenience.

There's a lot of details missing here. I don't even know what The Crucible looks like other than black and there's ladders around it. It is described like the hilt of a sword, but given the writing, it's hard to tell if that's literally its shape since it's written as a simile.

The audience doesn't know who Morgan is or what she's done to be wanted. Her reaction to being recognized seems unwarranted because we have no idea why she does it, even after the brief "explanation" of reading the letter, which wasn't an explanation at all.

And if The Crucible had such a reputation, why couldn't she have just gone straight for it instead of killing everyone first? It's not like they were going to follow her in.

Still, it's an interesting concept. There's just too much that I think the author thought was better to reveal in later chapters, which I strongly disagree with. There's nothing wrong with putting more cards on the table to get the reader invested. Too little, and it reads like you're just making it up as you go. Granted, that's literally how writing works, but you don't want your audience to be made aware of that as they're reading it.

- Pacing: 3/5

There's a lot of action, but not a lot of story. Author favors making their character look badass over letting the audience in on what all this is even about. She mows down a bunch of dudes in seconds, but why? What did they ever do to her or were going to do? At least one of them was unarmed and ready to surrender, even. The character herself even says these guys were just a bunch of untrained nobodies with a shitty job.

On its face, it looks fast paced because of the action, but there's hardly any plot progression. It's just description and action. The main reason the score isn't lower is because the action helps stave off the boredom that otherwise would have settled in from such a severe lack of story.

- Characters: 3/5

Morgan is a generic badass, the guards are disposable nobodies, and the cat is mostly a cat, but also it has a few lines near the end. They're fine, but not particularly unique or interesting.

- **Style: 4/5**

Word choice and sentence structure seem good. There's a decent variation in how the sentences are built to make everything flow mostly smoothly. The writing also has a casual, humorous tone that's a little cartoony, which I like.

However, it also gives off wish fulfillment vibes. I don't have anything wrong with obvious wish fulfillment stories, but when the main character is a little too badass right from the start, it doesn't give me much confidence in there being any sort of meaningful character development from them through the course of the rest of the story.

Moreover, I'm not overly fond of some of the stream of consciousness moments scattered throughout. It's not as bad as some I've struggled to choke down, but it can be distracting.

Overall, I liked the style. But I didn't love it.

- **Editing: 4/5**

There's a couple of typos and some repeated words here and there, as well as missing commas. Author might have skimmed when proofreading, but the editing is still pretty decent.

- **Enjoyment: 4/5**

I wanted to like it more because it had a tone I'm partial to, but the plot holes and mindless action made me roll my eyes rather than hooking me. It's the kind of thing I would continue to read just to see how cheesey it gets, but might tire of if the author kept introducing more questions and not enough answers. Although, I think it would work as is were it a comic instead of purely written word with how action focused it is.