

Annabelle, N. (2019). *Gambit's Game* [Unpublished Short Story]. St Joan of Arc High School.

Gambits Game

Gambit

noun

a device, action, or opening remark, typically one entailing a degree of risk, that is calculated to gain an advantage.

In a small, fear-filled town called Hazelbrook, Oregon, there is a coffee shop called Moonlight Cafe. Where I myself, a nineteen-year-old girl by the name of Persephone Blackwood, work my part-time job as a barista. "Table six," my manager handed me a plate of bacon and eggs. I take the plate and walk over to the table and place it in front of the little girl sitting with her father. A father-daughter dinner date reminds me of the time when my father made me his number one priority, right until he and my mother passed in a car crash. I glance at my watch. My shift is over, meaning my friends should be here any minute to pick me up. My manager woke me from my thoughts. "You're free to go, Seph," I gave her a final nod and headed to the back to change.

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I patiently wait on the porch of the café, in my gray sweater and black jogging sweatpants. The five of them finally pull up in Tyler's black pickup truck with, of course, Bandit riding tailgate. The cops in this town are lenient enough, to where we wouldn't get pulled over for this. Atom had shotgun, and Rena and Clary were in the back. I get up from my seat on the porch and run down the concrete steps. Clary opens the backseat door for me and scooches over to the middle seat. I close the door, and Tyler drives off. "So where are we going this time? Considering the last time we ran into the cops," I ask timidly but I can feel myself bursting with curiosity. I said the cops are lenient for small-town driving but not for trespassing. "Well, Bandit found this forest and cave system up north during a camping trip with these two," Rena points to the two boys in the front seats. They both look at each other and smirk. I must be missing the point here. "Okay, but what seemed so interesting about this place?" I prod. "We have been

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wanting to come back up here and investigate it for the last three weeks as a group, but all of you were too damn busy to even pick up the phone” Atom bursts. “And well, Bandit did more of the exploration than we did, but from what he told us,” there was a pause in Tyler's voice, “Seems strange and unusual.” “But isn't the entire town already strange and unusual?” I counter. “Yes, but this seemed different from the ghost stories and folktales we have all been told as a kid.” “Fair enough” I conclude my thoughts. “I wouldn't worry about what would happen, you've got us,” Atom says, referring to the boys, “and I brought you a gift,” Tyler kindly smiles at me through the rearview mirror. I turn my face towards the window and blush, looking out at the passing greenery, it is an admirable scene. Going north this will be my view for the next few hours. I put in my earbuds and pressed play on The 1975, drowning out the Misfit's silly banter.

I am lost in thought as I continue to look out the window. I recollect the dumb yet fun and exciting things we have done around town. After getting carried away with spray paints under the bridge, Clary's dad, the Sheriff of the town, sniffed us out. The majority of the things we got penalized for were sticking our noses in things we shouldn't, and Clary being the daughter of Sheriff Jefferson, we wanted in on the investigations. We were labelled as the Town Misfits, it started as a joke, but we ended up taking a liking to the name, so we ended up calling ourselves Misfits of Hazelbrook. I'd say we've lived up to the name so far. As of right now, Mr. Jefferson thinks we went camping for 3 days. It's not a complete lie, but it's not a complete truth, either.

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The time reads 7:24 pm on my activewear watch. We have finally made it to the campsite. The sun is just starting to set, and it makes the evening eerier than it needs to be. I jump out of the truck. I look around at what I can in the dimly lit campsite. The forest is very thick, making everything more exciting. Bandit grabs the exploration gear from the back of the truck. “The cave system is just about a mile out north from here,” Bandit points. I am thoroughly glad that my gut was right, in making me wear cargo

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joggers and doc martens boots, although I probably should have brought something more than a sweater.

Tyler had the right idea layering up, I didn't care to think it would be so cold on a summer night. I must have missed the memo. Tyler opens up the tailgate once again and retrieves the weapons, handing the others a knife for protection. Then he walks up to me and hands me a bow and steel arrows. "Since I know how much you love archery and how good you are at it, thought I'd get you a little something," "You didn't have to do that but thank you," I sling the quiver on my back and the bow over my head.

"Alright, let's head out," Tyler takes the lead. I lower my head, making my hair fall, hiding my blushing face. We are about 10 minutes away from the entrance to the cave when we hear howling in the distance. This time the howl was too abnormal. It did not sound like it came from a regular wolf or coyote. But frankly, we didn't want to find out. "Yeah, I'd rather not find out whatever that was. Let's pick up the pace a little bit," Tyler then proceeds to let everyone go ahead, and walk beside me. "You alright, Seph?" he asks. "Yeah, just a little chilly and curious, I guess." I offer a smile. "Alright. And we are here," Bandit reveals the entrance beside a tree. "Woah, that's a steep drop," Rena points out. "Yeah, but that's why we brought rope," Atom begins tying the thick rope around the nearest tree. He then hands the rope to Bandit, who takes the lead, slowly inching down the cave as if he was on a playground slide. The rest of us begin to follow before it is just Tyler and I leave. "You go first," his stance is protective as he looks at me and then at our surroundings. I nod and grab a hold of the rope and start slowly edging my way down the cave entrance. I get down to the base, and Atom reaches for me to help me down. I thank him and dust off my pants, and wait for Tyler. Bandit continues to lead the way. "Does anyone else think that this wasn't a good idea?" Rena begins. "Why? Getting scared?" Bandit challenges. "No, just thinking about the possibilities of what could happen," She defends. "You're overthinking, Rena. Relax," Bandit tells her. "No, *Hunter*, I won't relax, because I don't want to be dead from your inconsiderate thinking!" Uh oh. She used his real name. He stops his walking and turns around, he's now in her face. "Don't you *EVER* call me that again," His voice shifted with a fit of deep anger that sent a chill from my spine. "I will

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call you whatever--" a deep, low growl cuts through their echoing conversation. Everyone went silent and still as a statue. "What was that?" I whispered so quietly I wasn't sure if I even spoke. "I have no clue, but I don't really wanna find out," Tyler heard me and stood closer to the group. "Look, it's coming from there," Clary points to a small grate on the side of the cave wall. I get closer, and Clary shines her flashlight in the grate. I'm surprised at the find in the cubby. "It looks like there is a speaker behind the grate," I quietly told the group. "Why would there be a speaker?" Clary asks. We're all confused, unable to come up with an answer. "I don't know, but I want to know why false sounds are playing from it," "Should we keep going?" Atom questions. "I think so, 'cause now things are getting fishy," I reply sternly. "What do you mean?" Renas face developed a scared and curious look. "Have you guys not noticed what's been going on in this town? The abnormal amount of wolf howls, the unsolvable deaths, and people missing from their own beds! And let's not forget the incredibly disturbing noises we have heard," I couldn't believe none of them had noticed. "Seph's right. The town has been abnormally strange this year," At least Tyler's brain is working. "Okay, then what are we gonna do about it?" Clary's mood all of a sudden changes, and she becomes more fed up and confident. "We're gonna continue on through the cave and see what we find. I got a feeling we might actually find something," Bandit turns around and proceeds to lead the way with his flashlight. "What Bandit said," I tell Clary and begin to follow.

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Walking through the cave tunnel, we spotted several other grates, along with cameras in the ceiling. Things started to become fishy. After about a 2-mile-long tunnel, we came to a large open room. There were torches lining the stone walls revealing symbols of satanic nature, and a large steel door on the other side. "Should we all be worried?" Rena shakes as she looks around the room. "Probably," Atom shines his light on the ceiling, revealing what looks to be bats, only augmented. Three-headed hydra bats, dozens of them. "Let's not provoke them," I urgently say with a whisper. I look around and notice spikes in the holes on both sides of the wall and follow down to a tripwire in the middle of the room. "Nobody

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moves!” They all look at me, concerned. And I point to the middle of the room. Bandit shines his light on the tripwire and follows it up the wall. “That would have ended very bloody,” He sarcastically says. We avoid the wire and try to find a way through the only door on the other side. I notice a small ruby knob in the right corner. To investigate, I step over the wire, and Tyler follows. Pulling the knob, a small drawer appears and inside is a steel emerald key. Tyler looks over my shoulder, “What is that?” “I think it might be the key for the door,” I look at him, and he takes the key from my hand and walks over to the door. He briefly looks at me and sticks the key in the keyhole. The lock clicks, and the key turns to ash. Tyler backs up as the door slowly begins to open itself. “Guys,” I get the other four’s attention. They look at me and then at the door. “No way,” Bandit smiles with curiosity. *Curiosity killed the cat*. They carefully step over the wire, and we shine our wires through. Through the door was an empty lab with flickering ceiling lights and papers scattered all over the floor. Along with several deceased, bloody bodies in white lab coats. “What the hell is this lab?” Clary exclaims. I ignore her question and walk over to a board coated in mug shots. On the sheets were their name, birth dates, death dates, and causes of death. I began to recognize some of the faces, and then it came to me. These are the people that have mysteriously gone missing and died. There is a number in the middle, a death count of Hazelbrook. To my right was Tyler looking in filing cabinets. I walk over and look inside the drawers. File folders with hundreds of names. They were organized alphabetically, and for my sanity, I made sure that my name was not included, but I was wrong. There it was, a file on BLACKWOOD, PERSEPHONE JOY. I open it up, and over the photo of me is a red CHOSEN stamp in bold letters. I look over at Tyler’s file, and he has the same. We look for the other files, and they all have the same thing. The description of our files reads, “Chosen for simulation, proceed run through. Not qualified for brain alteration,” I put my file down and picked a random one. It was the local baker's wife, and their description read, “Brain alteration successful” Above the cabinet was a long list of names under the title “Successful Brainwash.” I look at Tyler. “These simulations have been going on the last 200 years, but reoccur every 75 years,” “We gotta stop this.”

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I heard Rena scream. I run over to her, and there she is, staring at two dead, gutted scientists under a console command desk. This didn't look like a human attack. This was more like some animal attack. I looked up, and there were TVs above the command desk. Some were blank, but I could tell what they were capturing. Our Town. I couldn't tell what was going on here. It was all getting overwhelming. My nervous adrenaline was pumping, and I was determined to find out what this place was.

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I look around the room for any more clues, and I spot a door to the left. I burst through the door, and there were cages, surgery tables, and freezers. On a whiteboard was a note, "If successful, release into town," in red scribble. Release into town? The worst part about this is the cylinders in the corner and what's in the freezer. Over in the corner, the cylinders held augmented humans with different parts of animal limbs and pale deadly skeletons covered in only shrivelled skin. I walk over to the freezer, and right inside is different organs, limbs, blood types and severed heads. They were the heads of the missing. And among the heads on the freezer shelf was Bandit's little sister, Lexa, who went missing four years ago. I let out a scream and a cry. The door behind me swings open, and Bandit and Tyler walk in. Bandit looks around, and Tyler comes beside me to make sure I'm okay. "What happened? Are you okay?" Tyler asks. I wipe my tears and point to the fridge. "Shit," He mutters. Bandit walks over to us, and Tyler tries to block his view of the fridge but fails. Bandit starts screaming and fighting against Tyler's restraint. "No, No, NO," he wails. My heart aches, and I begin to cry. Atom, Rena, and Clary come running in to see Bandit on the ground on his knees, rocking back and forth, while Tyler comforts him. I just stand there crying and in shock as the others look in through the glass fridge. Gasps come from the three. I backed away from the group to go collect myself. I walk over to Tyler and Bandit, and I hold Bandit's face to look at me. "Hey, you're going to be okay. We can leave if you want, or we can find whoever did this," I say to him in a soft voice. His eyes darken. "I'm going to kill whoever did this." I get him up and look at everyone. "We're gonna find who is behind all this, and we're going to kill him," I sternly say.

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I walk out of the room, and I spot a bright red file over on the console command desk. The bodies are now covered in a white sheet. To the right side of the desk lay a big red "CLASSIFIED" file. I picked up the file, and inside was a copy of our files and a note.

"These six individuals have been chosen for the trial, meaning they are worth enough. They each have their own physical skills.

Hunter Jace "Bandit" Bandito, possess speed.

Clary Jefferson, possesses wit

Rena Brightwater, possesses flexibility

Atom Lightfoot, possesses endurance

Tyler Stevens, possesses strength

Persephone Joy Blackwood, possesses agility and wisdom

With each of their gifts, they will be given a trial on Friday, October 13th @ 2200. If they pass, then they become supreme beings they will become. Through successful tests, they will be invincible with brain augmentation and alteration. Do not fail. You are under orders that they will not die.

- *President Sage*

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I look at my watch, and it's almost 10 pm. We have to put a stop to it quickly, but how? I found a sticky note in the file. "MANDATORY! *Check the surge room in my office by the bookshelf before shift rotation*" Well, that's a clue. What could be so urgent for a surge room? I close the file and place it back on the console desk. I observe the room and I see one bookshelf but no other door. I walked over to see if it was blended in with the drywall, but it was not. I then glance at the bookshelf for any other clue. I then get an idea and start pulling at the books. The only bright red book on the shelf does the trick. "Typical," I mutter. It's just like the movies. The shelf begins to swing open, and an office is revealed before me. "Hey guys, over here," I wave them over. Bandit comes speeding over and walks in before me. We all walk into

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the great big office and stand in front of a desk inspecting the room. The squeaking of a chair alerts me, and I look over behind the desk, and there is a woman, dishevelled, with a glass of whiskey in her hand. "Well, if it isn't the six." she drunkenly says. The group snaps their heads toward her. "Who are you?" Rena asks. "President Sage," I said softly. "Hahaha, someone got it correct. You really are the bright one, aren't you, Seph?" she smiles menacingly. "How do you know her name?" Tyler's voice raises. "Oh Tyler, you have always been the protective and strong one, Bandit always the quick one, Clary the quick-witted one, and Rena the flexible one, and let us not forget our little Persephone and her wisdom," She looks at each and every one of us. "Answer the question!" He's practically yelling at this point. "Don't you know? We have been watching you all your lives, studying you, guiding you. All up until a failed experiment was too strong to contain and ran loose, killing my men. The plans of the simulation have been ruined. You were all supposed to die." She's drunkenly ranting at this point. "But in the file, it said that if we all survived, we would be augmented?" I question the intoxicated woman. "And you think that's any better than death? Having different limbs and missing eyes? All purposely ripped out?... Yeah, I didn't think so either," She's crazy. "You were all going to die one way or another, and there's only one way to stop it, good like finding the energy source. Now, I guess I will just have to take matters into my own hands," She pulls out a pistol from under her desk, and Bandit is quick to throw a knife right at the center of her chest, killing her instantly. I let out a breath that I didn't know I was holding and held onto Tyler's hand until he looked at me, and I immediately let go. "Who was that woman, and why did she know who we were?!" Clary practically screams at me. "She was the president, the one who was behind this whole operation. The whole operation that was supposed to put us on a trial to see who was best fit to be the supreme being," I'm stressed. You can hear it in my voice. "What energy source was she talking about?" Atom looks at me with hope in his eyes. "I don't know, I'm sorry," My voice cracks and tears glaze over my eyes. Rena catches our attention by knocking over a marble statue. I hear rubble grinding behind me, and the stone wall behind us is parting. This place just doesn't end. I decided to take the lead on this one and



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walk through the small stone tunnel. There is a bright blue light coming from the end. We walk out onto a great metal balcony. Down below us is something I never thought I would see before. There is a cube and an energy source it looks like. "This is what must have been supplying the energy and resources for the simulation and augmentations. It looks like the energy can't contain itself anymore" I have to yell due to the high wavelengths of the surging energy through carbon fibre tubes. "How do we stop it?" Tyler yells back. I just shake my head, unsure of an answer. "Seph, shoot it!" Clary shouts at me. "What?"

"Remember when we were kids, and you shot that arrow with perfect aim from outside that triggered the sprinklers in a burning building?!" I remember that memory. I saved them from that building combusting. I take in that shooting an energy source is extremely dangerous, but it seems to be worth a shot. I looked back at the energy cube and contemplated our safety. I decided to give it a try. I look at everyone, and they take a step back. I hold my bow up and take an arrow from my quiver, and knock the arrow. The cube's energy is rising by the second, and I am running out of time. I breathe in and pull back. I breathe out and release the arrow and watch it fly into a crack in the cube. The cube exploded, and the shockwave sent us flying back through the tunnel. It takes us a few minutes to recover, but I finally get up. There is now a huge crater where the cube and dozens of carbon fibre tubes used to be, and everything disintegrated.

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We're back on the surface now. It's now 1 in the morning. We all throw out gear and weapons into the back of the truck, and Bandit hops in. During the drive back home, there is dead silence. No one dares to utter a single word. The look of defeat and sadness is across all our faces. I look back at him, and he's got his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. My heart aches for him. I look out the window and replay the last 7 hours of our lives.

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Driving by the *Welcome to Hazelbrook* sign made me nervous about being back here. Passing the tree line reveals our small town, what we had called home. Tyler pulls into the local park parking lot.

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There is not a single soul wandering. We all get out, and in a circle, we all look at each other silently. "I'm leaving. I can't stay here after knowing that everything here is a lie, that my whole life has been a lie. I am probably going to go live with my cousin for a while." Clary begins. "I think I'll go live with my grandmother, haven't seen her in a while," Atom looks to the ground and kicks around a pebble. "Guess this is it?" Rena sheds a tear. "I guess so," Bandit confirms. I go to hug Rena, then feel multiple pairs of arms around us. We all pull away, and each of us goes our separate ways.

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I step up to my porch and grab the key from under the mat, and stick it in the keyhole. Binx, my black cat greets me at the door. I walk around my house admiring everything, knowing that this will be the last time I will ever see it. I have to leave. I can't stay here in this ghost town. I have to get out of Oregon. Maybe I'll go to New Orleans, California, or maybe New York. Who knows? All I know right now is that I have got to get the hell out of this town. I begin to unload my closet and my dresser and throw everything on my bed and get boxes from the basement. I lock up the house and load up the boxes into the trunk and backseat, leaving the front seat for Binx to lie down. I pick up Binx from the front porch and place him in the front seat as he curls into himself in a ball. I started the car and pulled out of the driveway, and relief came over me as I passed the *Now leaving Hazelbrook* road sign. Coincidentally all six of our cars were shuffled in line on the two-lane road, each taking different directions at the crossroad.