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WELL WISHES
— *from* —
A PROMPT

A COLLECTION OF WRITING PROMPT ANSWERS
AND TIPS FOR AUTHORS

An Unusual Smoke

Navy blue smoke oozes slowly from the keyhole.

I'm hungry. Starving, actually.

But I'm ashamed to admit that to anyone. Beneath my shirt, my ribs show clearly against my skin. I'm dying, and so is everyone else within a thirty-mile radius of the transfer station I stand in. We're dying of sickness, of polluted air, of diseased animal meat.

Every year, our world rots. Every year, on the 23rd day of June, our world is restored for a month, only to begin slowly decaying again. Our town is hit hard. Most areas get more than a month of health. We need a Snatcher.

To be more precise, we need an Unusual Snatcher. Only an Unusual Snatcher can give life to everything within a thirty-mile radius. But just because we need an Unusual doesn't mean The Land Above will send one.

Three years ago, I made a big mistake. One that I'll never forgive myself for. I sacrificed my older brother to save my own life. I knew what the consequences would be for him, but I wanted to live. And now? Now I need him to save me again.

It was a Sunday, and we'd been smoking in and out of the key holes, or key ports, for hours. I was reckless. We turned our flesh to smoke and went into the key ports that littered our doors. In vapor form, our essences were two different colors. Mine was green, my brother's blue. The key ports linked us to anywhere we wanted to go: Home, school, The Land Above. We didn't want to go to The Land Above. No one intentionally goes to The Land Above except for Snatchers. They're the only ones who come back out alive.

That day, I'd been breaking a rule my mother and brother tried to instill in me.
Don't push against the portal.

I knew it wasn't safe, but I did it anyway. I pressed against the pliable vortex until I started to spill out into the Nothing.

My essence smoked back in as soon as I hit the Nothing. My skull solidified, and the bones were heavier than usual. My brain bounced around in my skull, like a small boulder, the fluid around it straining to stay liquid. My skin wrapped slowly around my muscles, and I'm pretty sure the only thing that melded my skin to me was the goosebumps from the cold. Agony shot through my nerves as my soft tissue hardened. Torture pulled at every piece of my face.

But the pain was eclipsed by the emptiness. The Nothing sucked at my emotions, ripping them straight from me.

Before I lost fear, I opened my mouth.

"Help me!" I screamed. I knew my brother could do something other people couldn't.

The Nothing continued to yank me out. My shoulders tore a large hole in the portal walls, and I spilled out faster.

Calm enveloped the upper half of my body, while my lower body twisted in terror. I grabbed some of the terror that radiated from my essence and attempted to call out again.

But by that time, I couldn't talk because I had no air left. My brother would save me. My brother would save me.

He always did. Inside the portal, my brother did something that was rare and something that no one else could do. He smoked-out his arm into a strong grip while in a portal. Rare. He smoked-out my legs. Unheard of. No one can control another person's smoke. With a grunt, he grabbed my legs and yanked me back in.

The portal closed quicker than it opened, and my arm fell down into the Nothing, concrete and no longer a part of me.

Later that same day, my brother was given The Land Above access. He would become a Snatcher. I had gotten him chosen. My mother knew he could smoke out while in a portal. She had hidden it since he was young. But she didn't know he had developed the ability to control other people's smoke. It was an unpleasant surprise.

My family accepted his choosing with well-concealed apprehension.

You see, there are mixed feelings when it comes to Snatchers. We need them to survive and yet...

Navy blue smoke oozes slowly from the keyhole. Because of it, the street empties. People push and shove to try and leave first. They turn to smoke, and in their panic, bump into each other, so less of them get out than they had hoped. Sickly animals groan, trees drop their final leaves and rotted fruit, and thick, polluted air chokes us.

Doors with dozens of key ports line the street. The one with the navy smoke is mine. I put a hand over the fog, and it pushes against my palm. I push in harder, and my hand starts to get warm. Tendrils of it creep through my fingers no matter how hard I try and keep them closed. Finally, when the pain gets too much, I grab my shirt and push it into the smoke. For a moment, it stops. Then it blows me back, and I crash onto the pebbled street. The hole disappears as the smoke streams out, making a noise like a thousand creaking floors.

And there he is.

My brother.

“Tryin’ to keep me out, little bro,” he says in a sing-song voice, as soon as the top half of his body smokes out into flesh.

“Yeah, you only bring bad news,” I say, standing back up.

“As usual, you’re imprecise. I don’t *bring* bad news; I am the bad news that people *bring*. But I’m also the good news, right?”

He pokes my cheek, laughs, and then wipes some dirt from my shoulder. Done with me, he turns back towards the door.

I glare at his back.

An indigo spark flickers down his spine.

“Stop glaring at me,” he says. I glare at my feet.

He hovers at the key port, his lower body still smoked-in, then leans in, and looks back through the key port to Land Above for any signs of leftover essence. Blotches of honey color burst onto his skin, spread, and start taking over the swirling navy blue. He shrugs his shoulders and turns to me.

“You think I like this... honor?” His eyes flash turquoise, always the last to fade.

“Maybe,” I say, trying to figure out how to get around him so I can smoke into the key port above his and go home.

He chuckles, and I back up a step. “Truthfully, I’m startin’ to like it; it has its perks.”

He moves towards me, and whispers, “Don’t blink.”

And then he smokes in completely. Not in stages, like the rest of us, but so quickly I never see his flesh fade. Just poof, and he’s a cloud of blue smoke. I gasp and

stumble back, then blink, despite myself. When I open my eyes, his top half is already fully smoked-out, again. His natural complexion overtakes the blue. What have they done to him?

“You never listen,” he says and pushes me. Soft enough to show me he’s playing. Hard enough to show me he’s not.

“How—” I can’t think.

“How did I smoke in so fast? I just told you, perks.”

I take a breath, and say, “Are you an Unusual?”

“Yes.”

“When, how’d they choose you?”

“Because of you.”

No matter what their abilities are, not all Snatchers are chosen to be Unusual Snatchers. My brother has that certain something that qualifies him.

His eyes drain of the unnatural color, and the dark brown left makes my heart hurt. He looks like my brother, now, and I want to ask him more, but I’m afraid. He’ll be very precise.

He looks down the street, at people smoking into their doorways, transferring anywhere, except The Land Above.

He smokes out slow, so more of them can leave. His eyes settle on the forehead of a little girl staring at him. Her face is flat, her eyes curious. When he meets her gaze, though, she starts shrieking. Her father tries to get her to focus so she can smoke into a key port, but she’s inconsolable. He peeps at my brother, and his face pales. For a split second, his bravery falters, and he glances at the key port, wondering if he could

live with himself if he left her. But then his courage returns, and he hugs the little girl to him.

My brother's entire body is trembling. He looks down at his own smoke and grinds his teeth, willing the pain away. Not even an Unusual Snatcher can stay smoked-in forever. He lets go, and pelvis, leg, and feet bones crack into place. When he touches the ground, every key port locks.

With his back to the door, he stands tall with a wide stance. He surveys the pickings, looking for the ripest person.

People huddle on the ground, under dying trees and in corners. Some are a mile away. None of it matters; no one can hide. Each person has an aura. A light that differs by small gradients. He's looking for the brightest. I look down at him, my heartbeat thudding, and know that I'm lucky he's my brother, because he can't choose me.

Old memories of when we were young fill my mind. Playing in the portals, melding into each other, and then racing against time to disentangle our essences. Painting my arm honey and his leg cinnamon, then pretending to Mother that our essences had mixed. Talking long into the night about the transfers we'd make as soon as Mother lifted our ban.

I never thought I'd hate to see him coming.

I stare at him, staring at the little girl and her daddy. My brother looks tired, exhausted, like he doesn't remember what sleep is. His eyes never move from the father and child. He's made his choice.

He takes a step towards them, and I reach for his shoulder.

“Do you have to? She's—”

He shrugs me off, turns around, and puts his hand on my chest. I start panting, softly, then harder, as he slowly smokes-in one of my lungs. When he's done, it swirls around inside of me. Pain pounds in my chest. His eyes blaze an abnormal cobalt so intense my thoughts scatter.

I gasp, and the terror that I tried to hold in explodes onto my face. He smiles and laughs, and tickles the border of my other lung.

“You sure you want to question my decision?” he says, pleasantly.

A scream boils up inside of me at his lilting tone. It's an odd Snatcher trait that means he's angry. He laughs again, a twinkling sound, loud and hard and long, and I know he's right on the edge of rage. Everyone behind him cowers as the sound echoes through the transfer station.

I shake my head, and he puts my lung back slower than he removed it. The scream that I was too afraid to scream rips through the station, and then I go silent. I hoard air, gulping it down like it's trying to escape, and wipe my running nose. My lungs burn from the dirty air.

“Don't be reckless,” he says, and pulls out the rod.

It's intricately carved with navy blue Snatcher script and dipped in crystals, signifying an Unusual. Four feet long, the rod looks like nothing more than a thin pole. It glitters in the dim sunlight after he wipes it off. My brother heads in the girl's direction.

The other people watch and wait. Now that they know it isn't them, they chat without care or concern. Halfway there, the little girl runs up to him and pounds on him with her tiny fists. The rod makes a thin cut along her cheek.

Her father limps behind, yelling for her to stop. We both freeze when my brother raises the rod above her.

“No!” she screams, “Not m—!”

He grabs her by the collar and moves the rod to his other hand at nearly the same time, then lifts her up, and carries her to the man. She screams and kicks the entire way.

He shoves her into her father’s arms. They hug once, and she kisses the man’s dusty cheek. When she clings to his neck, my brother yanks her back to him.

“I love you, daddy.” She sobs.

He raises the rod and slices through the air. The little girl screams.

I hate myself.

The man’s face, full of love, slides apart. My brother releases his tight grip on the girl, wipes the rod, and turns away. Each movement is precise and blurs with speed. He laughs loudly. It’s so high-pitched it sounds like a scream.

He runs his hand down the length of the rod, and the crystals glow. With a flick, he whips the rod. It makes a cracking sound, flashes red with heat, and then stiffens. He turns back to the girl, sobbing in fetal position on the ground, and slices down. Silence. He turns towards me. His eyes are a whitish blue, like they’ve gone blind. Though his mouth is closed, I hear the high-pitched laugh screech through my head. It echoes, and I don’t know how to stop it. Bits and pieces of the man, full of love, fall around the girl.

She howls.

He wipes the rod again, then walks back to our door with a spring in his step. His skin is bright; his eyes are a sparkling sapphire. A natural side effect of a completed

assignment. He doesn't look at me, just touches my shoulder. His hand shakes. The phantom ache of my missing arm lessens. He won't look back.

She howls, grabbing for her missing limb.

The blue fades from his eyes, and I see it. A tear. It spills over his lid, right from his haunted dark brown eyes. He swipes it away, and then smokes into The Land Above.

Because of you, he'd said.

I wish I could take it back. I wish I hadn't been so reckless. I should have listened. If I hadn't pushed against the side of the portal. If I hadn't screamed for him to save me, they would've never discovered he could control other people's smokes. They would've never discovered he could smoke in and out, wherever he wanted. They would have never known he was unusual.

She howls. All alone. That's my fault, too.

The man's body begins to melt into the land. His pools of blood grow smaller and smaller. She screeches, and soaks up some with her shirt, but none of him can be kept. Though she hugs her shirt to her body, it goes back to its original color as her father's blood turns into essence and melds with the air. A cauterized hole, with crystals coating it, is all that's left of one of her legs. She'll have no lingering pain.

When her father's all gone, and her leg has sunk into the earth, the trees blossom and plump fruit weigh down their branches. The animals' sickly color recedes, and they graze on luscious green grass. Sunlight pours through the clean air. People, like living skeletons, flock to the trees, picking fruit, and taking huge bites. The farmers gather their milking pails and fruit baskets. People rejoice, the fear of their own sacrifices the only lasting memory of today.

She howls, and no one cares. I move towards her and then stop myself. I won't be reckless.

WRITING TIP

A great way to draw your reader in is to give your characters a dilemma. Not only do they have to hurt someone, but that person has to be their best friend, or their mother, or sister.

Your book should have at least one major conflict of interest that is built upon throughout the book. Subplots can add back story to this major conflict and/or introduce smaller struggles that are related.

Gloria After Jack

Gloria leaves her home in Seattle to find Jack in Italy. What is the relationship between Gloria and Jack?

Gloria pulls the last weeds from the cold ground. His name is etched into the gray stone: Damien Scott Masters. Her boyfriend. Dead at 23.

It wasn't sudden. He'd been dying before she met him five years ago. She kisses the cramped script on his headstone. It's his handwriting. He'd chiseled the letters into the gravestone when he was first diagnosed, knowing he wouldn't have the strength later. Gloria settles back on her haunches and stares at the epigraph, "I am yours."

He wrote this before they'd met, so everyone would know he'd always be with them. His mother, father. Her. The wind carries the wilted flower from her hand.

"Jack be nimble." Gloria hears.

The voice is young and not her older brother, Jack's. Is something wrong with him? She looks around the cemetery. A little boy's looping in and out of the gravestones. His straight black hair hangs to the middle of his back. He turns around, towards her, his skin redder in the sun, and says, "Jack be nimble." His shirt has a purple stain from a Popsicle. She smiles at him. He looks like Damien. Maybe a cousin?

He's just singing a song. Jack is fine and has been fine for a year and a half. The boy smiles back at her. A purple ring surrounds his mouth. He runs to the southern section, and she doesn't see him return. He's probably visiting other family members.

Gloria keeps all of the flowers, so she gets up to look for the wilted one. Twenty minutes later, she finds it trapped in a crevice of a tree.

When she picks it up, she hears the boy, again. "Jack be quick."

Gloria looks towards the southern section. When she turns towards the mausoleum, there he is. He stares up at her and wipes his mouth. The purple stain fades.

She screams, stumbles over a headstone hidden in overgrowth, and falls to the ground.

"Jack be quick," the boy says, standing over her. He has a light purple birthmark, shaped like a cobra's head, on his upper lip. Gloria shakes her head, crab walks backwards, and then whispers, "Damien?"

The boy disappears. She sobs.

Jack opened his eyes. Jack's covers were wrapped tightly around Jack. The nightmare swirled in Jack's head. Thimble, nimble, symbol. A nimble. Yes, Jack must find him.

Dame, Damsel, yes, Damien was out there. He'd make Gloria happy. Jack needed to stop the tears, or she'd drown.

Momma said lock her away, no, bard, card, no. NO! Guard, yes, guard her. Always protect the baby sister.

Jack got out of bed, turned right, and peeked out of the dark curtains of his apartment. The curtains hid Jack from the world. Hid Jack from the cameras. The Space Needle in the middle of Seattle loomed above Jack. It had three hundred cameras built into the three metal legs, and one hundred and fifty built into the illuminated mushroom-shaped top. People rode the elevator all day long, snapping pictures and taking videos. They tried to zoom into Jack's luxury studio.

Jack turned away from the window and stepped on the shards of glass from the mirrors. Each shard was turned face down, so the cameras couldn't catch Jack's reflection. Jack glanced once more towards the window, and shivered. THEY were watching Jack. THEY were always watching Jack.

Jack's bed was in the middle of his room. The pizza sat on Jack's bed, bubbling with white, squirming baby flies. Small pieces of Jack's cellphone sat next

to the pizza. Jack needed to leave his room. He needed to find the damsel, the Damien. The flies buzzed around the room, emitting that comforting noise Jack knew blocked out the camera's microphones. The door was across from the window. Jack headed for the door.

“Shoezzzz,” a fly said near Jack's ear.

From around the room, other flies started to repeat it, “Shoezzzz, shoezzzz, shoezzzz.”

Quickly, their nasally voices overlapped each other. Some of them shouted at Jack. He covered his ears with his hands and shushed them.

“Okay, okay,” Jack said and put on his shoes.

“Pizza,” the baby flies called, and Jack started toward his bed. But Jack hated this pizza. Jack walked out the door. Red dots from the camera's eyes littered the walls. Jack stepped back through the door and closed it. He took gasping breaths and tried to find a better idea somewhere in his brain.

“Okay, okay,” Jack said. Only some of the cameras have night vision. Jack would leave in the dark. Jack would find the damsel.

For Gloria.

Gloria sat at work. Her brain was numb with grief. She went through her everyday routine.

Smile. Type. Sell insurance.

Smile. Type. Sell insurance.

Though her job was demanding, she was the best at it. Loved it. But she had little enjoyment since Damien's death. Though she knew he was dying, not having him here hit her harder than she thought it would. He had prepared her, forced her to go to morgues and see autopsies. He was morbid, and she loved him for his acceptance of death. Truthfully, she just loved him.

She loved the way he wore a monocle, rather than glasses, because only one of his eyes was weak. She loved the way he always gave compliments. She loved his soft, tomato-colored skin against her own fudge-colored skin. She loved his undying spirit. She loved Damien Scott Masters. Maybe more now that he was gone. Reflecting on how much she loved him felt like she loved him more.

Even after six months of knowing he was never coming back, she still opened her email and typed his name into the recipient box, only to erase it and type someone else's. Someone who was alive and could receive her message.

Like Jack. Gloria got lucky with Jack. He took Damien's death well. He didn't relapse. He stayed on his meds. He had no paranoia and heard no voices. She called Jack at 8 a.m. every Saturday to check in. To make sure his engineering job wasn't too stressful. To make sure he was eating. To make sure he was still with her. Just like Momma and Daddy had done. She looked for small signs that the illness was coming back, but her brother was good at hiding the earlier symptoms. Especially from her. She hoped she hadn't missed any.

Small miracles. Right now, all Gloria asked for was small miracles. Her brother taking his medicine every day, on his own, was one of them.

It was Friday, and Gloria thought about Damien. She needed to think about someone else. She couldn't think about anyone else.

It was dark, and Jack didn't know what time it was. He just knew it was time to go. His cellphone reported his every move.

"Jack sat up in bed," the phone said.

"Jack put his right foot on the floor," the phone said.

On and on, all day, it tracked him. Told him it had a camera and was recording him. Jack tried not to break it, because he knew Gloria would call tomorrow, but it watched Jack and told everyone what he was doing. Where he was going. The phone threatened to call Gloria and tell her Jack wasn't doing well. It would lie to Gloria. It would make Gloria worry.

So, he broke it.

Jack *was* taking his medicine every day. He faced his headboard, picked up the first green pill bottle with the white cap, and then the second bottle. Jack dumped the pills onto his bed and counted. The first bottle had fifteen pills left of thirty and the second, which he had to take twice a day, had thirty yellow tablets. If Jack was gonna find the Damien, he needed to be well. He put both bottles in his book bag.

Even though Jack had ripped out all the phone's large pieces and thrown them in different parts of the room, static still crackled from the pieces. He turned to his right. Scuttling sounds came from the cage. Was it another camera?

"Wenndy," the flies said. "Wenndy." Right, Wendy. His pet rat.

Jack had run out of food for her, so he put a slice of pizza in her cage. Wendy nibbled on it for a while before Jack put her in his pocket and zipped her mostly in. She snuggled into a ball there.

Jack opened the door to his apartment with his cover over his head. The blanket was thick, expensive, and a gift from Gloria. Jack walked down the hallway, passing other apartment doors. He turned off the lights as he went. Jack would be safer in the dark. After getting through the hallway, and down the stairs, Jack removed the cover from his head. He walked outside with it clutched in his hands.

If Jack was going to get anywhere, he couldn't carry the heavy blanket with him. A homeless woman asked for some change, and he gave her the blanket and a few dollars from his pocket.

"Thank you. God is watching you, sweetie. He will send blessings your way," she said.

That's what Jack was afraid of. God watching him. The Damien, Gloria, THEM watching him.

The woman spoke like the other women from Jack's neighborhood. Formal and precise. Jack looked at her face. She wasn't much older than him. Why was she out here?

Maybe she was looking for someone like Jack was.

"Money, money." The little bird chirped below him, after it had eaten a few crumbs. "Money!" It whistled when it spoke. The bird sang about buying genuine breadcrumbs.

"Okay, okay," Jack said.

Why did birds sing so much?

Jack patted his pocket. There was a bulge of cash. He didn't remember putting the money there, but real money was a good idea. Cash was safe; cash didn't have a chip that could track him.

"Who are you talking to, sweetie?" the homeless woman asked.

“The bird. He’s helping Jack find the damsel.”

She stepped away from him an inch, then looked to the Heavens, and said, “God is watching you. I know He is. Stay safe, honey.” She left him alone.

Jack turned around, ready to run back inside, but then he saw his sister’s face in his mind.

She had cried a river of tears and fell in. Her nose dipped above and below the salty water. Her mouth gasped for air.

Jack must go back to where they’d gone as children. Jack must go to Italy. That’s where the Damsel was.

It was Saturday. 8 a.m. Gloria called Jack. He always picked up on the first ring. That’s one reason she loved her brother. When he could be, he was there when she needed him.

Brrngg!

She smiled, ready to hear his voice.

Brrngg!

Her smile fell. The second ring.

Gloria hung up the phone. Something was wrong. She must have missed the signs. How bad was he? Where was Jack?

He couldn’t have gotten that far. Maybe he hadn’t left...

She locked her doors, jumped in her car, and rushed over to his apartment.

Black curtains hung on the windows. This was the only sign she needed. Jack was

doing badly, and she hadn't seen any of the warnings. She'd been too wrapped up in Damien's death. She ran up the stairs, wanting to call Jack's name, but knowing this would freak him out. He'd think she'd been spying on him. She opened the door with the emergency key and crept in. The stench hit her first. Death. Oh God, no.

He hadn't, had he?

Sometimes, things in his mind got so much. He had tried once before...

She steeled herself and walked further in. Broken shards of glass littered the floor, all turned over. She ran into the bathroom, then the kitchen, calling his name, no longer afraid to scare him.

Where was he?

Gloria opened the curtains. Light poured in. Pieces of his cellphone were all over the place. He had tried to keep the phone. She knew he had tried.

She went to Wendy's cage. It was Wendy. The smell was coming from her. Jack's rat was dead in her cage. Skeletal and stinking. Gloria looked around. Where was Wendy's head? . . .



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